

***Ninna-nanna-nonsense?*  
Fears, Dreams, and Falling  
in the Italian Lullaby**

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(for Elena)**

The language and style of the *ninna nanna*,<sup>1</sup> or Italian lullaby, often suggest that the rhyme has no reason and that, like the *filastrocca*, or nursery rhyme, it ought to be classified as a *nonsense* rhyme. While some *ninne nanne* may, indeed, defy semanticization, there are nonetheless borderline cases which serve to illuminate their internal organizational principles and reveal something of the reason in the rhyme.

While the primary function of the lullaby is indubitably putting the infant to sleep through melodic, rhythmic movement, lullabies in many traditional societies have other no less important—that is, not secondary—functions. They may commence inculturation of the infant in musical as well as conceptual terms, and simultaneously, they may provide the mother or other female custodian such as grandmother, aunt, older sister, an outlet for the expression of emotions, anxieties, desires, and generally her world view:

L'infanzia nell'Italia e nella Spagna meridionali stabilisce il suo primo contatto con la musica attraverso la madre e la parentela femminile. Queste voci, che lo cullano per farlo addormentare e girano per la casa mentre le donne sono intente al lavoro, accompagnano il bimbo nella veglia e nel sonno. E ciò che ode è una voce acuta, una melodic gemebonda, espressione della tragedia del vivere nell'Italia Meridionale, della sua povertà, delle sue tradizioni sessuali, fonte di insoddisfazione e di amarezza.

(Lomax 1956:128ff)<sup>2</sup>

[In southern Italy and southern Spain, infancy establishes the first contact with music through the mother and female relatives. These voices which lull him to sleep and are heard around the house while the women are intent on their work, accompany the child in waking and sleeping. And what he hears is an acute voice, a lamentful melody, expression of the tragedy of life in southern Italy, of its poverty, of its sexual mores, source of dissatisfaction and bitterness. (trans. mine)]

If these brief comments give an incomplete assessment of the southern Italian lullaby tradition (and imply by contrast that its northern counterpart is rosy and optimistic),<sup>3</sup> we should bear in mind that they were made in the 1950's and hence in a war-ravaged pre-Boom Italy. Nonetheless, they contain enough truth to make them still now a meaningful point of departure. Even today there is no denying that a profound cultural rift continues to divide northern and southern Italy. A child's first contacts with music as with life more generally occur primarily through female agencies—although not only in southern Italy and in Spain but the world over. The lullaby therefore provides a unique opportunity for analysis both of the first elements of culture imparted to children and of life as experienced by females. It is primarily on this latter aspect that I shall focus here: i.e., upon the lullaby as a vehicle for expressing—consciously or not—a feminine worldview.

Sanga (1979:41) classifies lullabies into three types: 1) *magical*, in which Sleep is directly invoked; 2) *erotic*, a more or sometimes less explicit love song; and 3) "*di sfogo*" (literally, "outlet," "venting"), in which the woman laments her condition or the human condition. While this classification is basic and useful, it does not account for all lullabies; for example, the expression of anxieties and fears need not become explicitly a lament, but may instead surface more obliquely in metaphorical language, say as a "love song." If lullabies indeed do provide the opportunity for "venting" anxieties, such personal expression entails generative mechanisms (ordering of formal elements) or metaphoric strategies which may be far from transparent. Factors such as the "oneiric" process or a subconscious metaphoric displacement of anxieties and desires, patterns of "falling" mimicking the descent into sleep, genre-crossover which widens the lullaby's semantic "zones"; all these account for the structure and content of more than a few Italian lullabies.

By way of initial example, consider the following *ninna nanna* which was collected in Tuscany from Mrs. Pia Calamai, a former elementary school teacher, in Barberino Val d'Elsa in 1965.<sup>4</sup>

- v. 1      Ninna nanna il mio ciocione  
            e di pane non ce n'è un boccone  
            né del crudo e né del cotto  
            né del macinato troppo.
- 5            Il mugnaio non è venuto  
            lo potesse mangiare il lupo  
            e il lupo e la lupaia  
            li venisse l'anguinaia.
- 9            L'anguinaia l'è mala cosa  
            e più su ci sta una sposa

e più giù ce ne sta un'altra  
una fila e una l'annaspa.

13 Una fa il cappellino di paglia  
per portarlo alla battaglia  
la battaglia e 'l battaglino  
dettero foco a Barberino.

17 Barberino corri corri  
dette foco a quelle torri  
una torre la si spezzò  
il bambino s'addormentò.

(Bueno 1976)

This lullaby is translated literally below, ignoring the (yet crucial) rhyme scheme, while favoring word order, particularly the replication of words in final position:

1 Rock-a-bye, my suckling  
and of bread there's not a morsel  
neither dry, nor cooked  
nor much [that is] ground.

5 The miller<sup>5</sup> has not come  
may he be eaten by a wolf  
and the wolf and the wolf's lair  
may he be struck by the plague.

9 The plague is a terrible  
thing and up above there is a bride  
and down below there is another  
one weaves and the other winds.

13 One makes a little hat of straw<sup>6</sup>  
to take to battle  
the battle and the small battalion  
set fire to Barberino.

17 Barberino, run, run!  
did set fire to those towers,  
a tower fell asunder  
and the baby fell asleep.

Essentially two techniques move the “narrative” forward in this lullaby: *coblas capfinidas* (or *enjambement*) whereby the final word of one verse is repeated at the start of the following verse, producing through this repetition a chain effect, or concatenation; and the rapid progression through rhyming couplets. It is significant that the two devices do not occur simultaneously. If concatenation links two verses, these verses do not share the same rhyme or

assonance, such as those instances occurring at 6-7 (*lupo*), 8-9 (*anguinaia*), 14-15 (*battaglia*), 16-17 (*Barberino*), 18-19 (*torre*), as against the remainder which either rhyme (*ciocione/boccone* 1-2, *lupaia/anguinaia* 7-8, *cosa/sposa* 9-10, *paglia/battaglia* 13-14, *corri/torri* 17-18,) or are assonant (*cotto/troppo* 3-4, *venuto/lupo* 5-6, *altra/annaspa* 11-12, *battaglino/Barberino* 15-16, *spezzò/addormentò* 19-20).

This short composition—yet rather long by *ninna nanna* standards<sup>7</sup>—is nonetheless dense with images of death and disaster, the one leading to the next in quick succession: hunger/poverty (there is no bread); two cruel curses directed at the miller (that he be devoured by a wolf and that the plague might strike him); death through allusion to the three Fates, weavers of man's destiny and end (“una fila e una l’annaspa/una fa il cappellino di paglia” 12-13); war; destruction by fire (*Barberino* and its towers are set afire); flight from danger (or running to the attack—it is unclear): “*Barberino, corri, corri,*” 17); potential risk from a falling tower (“una torre la si spezzò” 19).

The ordering of images in this lullaby is achieved not through strict logical progression but rather through something akin to the free association of ideas and images (or “stream of consciousness”) typical of the “oneiric,” or dream, process. The dream dimension is particularly congruous with sleep induced through lulling or rocking in the lullaby and the peculiar ordering of images here present is indeed proper to dreams. The unravelling or semanticization (i.e., interpretation) of a mass of conscious/semi-conscious/unconscious expressions of anxieties, fears, desires, and so on, often quasi-chaotic and bordering on nonsense, is required of dreams. One mechanism typical of the dream process is displacement through metonymy or metaphor. Metonymic displacement has some affinities with the chain effect achieved through the *coblas capfinidas* and the concatenation of images. For example, the miller, processor and purveyor of the staff of life, bread, both causes (through his absence) the child's hunger and, through displacement, becomes himself food for the wolf. The wolf, who in many cultures represents physical or social dominance (sexually “devouring” the female, or in lullabies and tales, defenseless infants and children—that is, all weaker elements of a hierarchical society) in turn, causes tenor and death.<sup>8</sup> The tenor caused by the wolf is not unlike that caused by the plague—two scourges which strike unexpectedly. Like Death, one day they appear at the door and there is no choice but to succumb. The flow of images, however tenuously linked, guides us ever farther away from the initial state until soon, the baby is forgotten and the mother is contemplating disease, death, and battle scenes. It is the worrying over the lack of nourishment for the child, however, which motivates this projection in phases of disaster on a larger, all-encompassing scale. It is this serpentine presence of negative images which links beginning to end and gives this *ninna nanna* semantic unity. The confusion or simultaneity of chronologic and metaphysical planes, characteristic of the oneiric

dimension, is also here reflected: present reality—the child’s hunger and the family’s general poverty; mythic representation (if, indeed, we might follow Bueno 1976 in viewing the allusion to the weavers as a reference to the Fates); historic memory—the battle apparently fought between Barberino and the tower city by *antonomasia*, San Gimignano.<sup>9</sup> All three levels speak of death: physical (through starvation), existential (the thread of life), communal (the town’s destruction through war).

The very nature of the lullaby “event” provides the natural context for the oneiric process. The rocking movement, the melodic voice often induce a state of *rêverie* in the mother herself, intimate moments of reflection in which profound fears and desires may surface in consciousness. Is it not the case, for instance, that often mother *and* child, or mother *rather than* child fall asleep as a result of the lulling effort (or due to sheer exhaustion on the part of the mother)? One humorous text records such a role reversal:

Fai la nanna, fai la nanna  
 Il bambino addormenta la mamma;  
 E la mamma dormirà,  
 Se il bambino la nanna farà.  
 (Bacci 1891:25)

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Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye;  
 The child puts mother to sleep;  
 And mother shall sleep  
 If baby will sleep.

Although it may seem unlikely that a lullaby produced under such circumstances might have survived intact from a dream state, still such a scenario may have contributed to the creation of this type of lullaby.

It should also be remembered that the prolonging of song through the accumulation of images and formulas may be practically motivated: the mother grasps at what first comes to mind, ransacking her imagination in order to keep the soothing succession of sounds (certainly not of images!)<sup>10</sup> flowing (cf. Lomax-Hawes 1974:141ff). In her effort, however, a thread of psychic motivation (in this instance, underlying insecurities regarding health and wellbeing), gives reason to the apparent nonsense (cf. Lord on “tension of essences” [1956, 1960]).

Frequently the language of the *ninna nanna* is far from pampering. The death-*wish* may be as frequent, if oblique, as the fear of death, such as in the following lullaby, where its final abrupt reversal encapsulates this ambivalence:<sup>11</sup>

Fai la nanna, che tu crepi  
 Ti portassino via i preti  
 Ti portassino al camposanto  
 Fa' la nanna, angiolo santo  
 (Bacci 1891:21)

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Rock-a-bye, may you croak  
 May the priests take you away  
 May they take you to the grave  
 Rock-a-bye, holy angel.

In a variant of the Lazio lullaby (cf. infra.), Di Prospero<sup>12</sup> accounts for the expressed cruelty on the mother's part as self-irony, a deliberate undermining of the silly and sentimental sweetness of "official" maternal culture:<sup>13</sup>

Ninna oh ninna oh  
 che pacenza che ce vò  
 mo te sbatto pe' gli comò  
 ohò! ohò! ohò!

\* \* \* \* \*

Rock-a-bye rock-a-bye  
 what patience it takes  
 I'm going to knock you against the dresser  
 ohò! ohò! ohò!

Negative imagery abounds in lullabies, as it does in much of children's folklore, often serving as cruel intimidation of the child in order to subdue it. A rather extreme instance follows as found in an English lullaby:

Baby, baby, naughty baby,  
 Hush, you squalling thing, I say.  
 Peace this moment, peace, or maybe  
 Bonaparte will pass this way.

Baby, baby, he's a giant  
 Tall and black as Rouen steeple,  
 And he breakfasts, dines, rely on't,  
 Every day on naughty people.

Baby, baby, if he hears you,  
 As he gallops past the house,  
 Limb from limb at once he'll tear you  
 Just as pussy tears a mouse.

And he'll beat you, beat you, beat you,  
 And he'll beat you all to pap,  
 And he'll eat you, eat you, eat you,  
 Every morsel snap, snap, snap.

(Opie 1951, 1969:59)

Why death by a famished predator ought to be so universal a form of intimidation is a question which merits investigation. The image of the wolf devouring the sheep, a widely-used topos, particularly in southern Italian lullabies, is a forceful one:

Sùennë nghênnêtòèrë, nghênnêggénd' òh  
 e nghênn'a ccussë figghjë assoléménd' òh ...  
 Ninnênennë e nninnênennë  
 u lupë s'ha mmêngiàtë la pecoréll' òh ...  
 Pecoréllê mië, comë facièst' òh  
 quènnë mmòcch'o lupë tē vèdistë? òh ...

O Pecoréllê mië, com'ha da fà  
 quènnë mmòcch'o lupë t'ha d'acchjà? òh ...  
 U lupë tradètòèrë e mmêgnêròèné  
 la pecoréllë tòttë sè l'ha mmêngiàt' òh ...  
 la pecoréllë l'av'arrêmêsë soléméndë  
 la péddë e rrë ccómë e nnur'alt' òh ...

(de Santis 1979:35ff)

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Sleep, you Trickster, trickster of men,  
 trick this child only. o-o ...  
 Rock-a-bye and rock-a-bye,  
 the wolf has eaten the sheep. o-o ...  
 My little lamb, what did you do  
 when you found yourself in the wolf's mouth? o-o ...

O my little lamb, what will you do  
 when you find yourself in the wolf's mouth? o-o ...  
 The wolf, traitor and devourer  
 has eaten all of the lamb, o-o ...  
 of the lamb only  
 the skin and horns and nothing else remain. o-o ...

The encounter with the wolf (the formula is: “il lupo si è mangiato la pecorella”) is often followed by the question: what did you do [how did you manage] when you were in the wolf's chops? The question might also be formulated as: what *will* [future tense] you do? or, what will *I* [as your guardian] do? The presence of the wolf in central and southern Italian song, perhaps due to the more persistent pastoral culture, may indeed provide the opportunity to introduce the child to the harsh realities of life and to prepare and counsel him in its ways.

Human predicament with analogues in the animal world is extremely common in children's folklore, where the hierarchy of predation is made accessible to the child. A widely diffused child's iterative rhyme, *La mosca dal moscaio* (Settimelli 1972) plays on this long chain of predation: the elephant captures the lion who captures the tiger who captures the wolf, dog, cat, mouse, grasshopper, spider, fly, blackberry. Of course, *filastrocche* of this sort not only exercise the memory and the tongue—as tongue-twisters, such as this one, do—but teach certain fundamental laws of nature and of the social order. Other animal/human analogies found especially in lullabies are, for example, the image of the hen dying while hatching her eggs (Noviello 1976:655): “Tè morta la gallina sop’a l’ove,” expressing the very real fear of the mother dying in childbirth and leaving her child defenseless. The dying hen in this song is followed by the wolf devouring the lamb and then, revealingly, by the statement: “iè piccininn’ e nu’ canosce amore:” (“[the child] is very young and doesn’t know [what] love [is]”), thereby equating the wolf with a sexual predator. Fears over the mother’s or the child’s untimely death are rarely so explicitly stated as in the following English lullaby, where the mother feels guilt over the baby’s fate:

Bye, O my baby  
 When I was a lady,  
 O then my baby didn’t cry;  
 But my baby is weeping  
 For want of good keeping  
 O I fear my poor baby will die.

(Opie 1951, 1969:59)

The theme of hunger is ubiquitous in a large part of Italian “popular” literature from Boccaccio’s time forth, from the image of the starving servant/jester or famished dependent, Arlecchino or Bertoldo, to the ill-starred, impoverished peasant, Ruzante, to the euphoria of gastronomic utopias envisioned in *Il paese di Cuccagna*—neat counterpoints to the frequent descriptions of sumptuous banquet scenes of courtly Italian literature. Giulio Cesare Croce, a seventeenth-century street performer (*cantastorie*) in the Bologna area, made a career, marginal though it was (for he was constantly forced back to work as a smith to make ends meet), by composing and performing short recitations largely on the theme of hunger.<sup>14</sup> Hunger is a natural theme in lullabies, since one of the prime functions of caring for babies is to appease their hunger; hence the provision for nourishment, and its obverse, the fear of want, find constant expression in Italian lullabies.

The songs called to serve as lullabies, needless to say, are not always lullabies *sensu stricto*, but ballads, nursery rhymes, satirical songs, even vendor’s cries, dance tunes, and so forth. While this has often been noted, it

may not be as readily apparent that the lullaby itself, that is, the song which purports to be a lullaby, often subsumes several other genres, e.g., amorous serenade or love song, prayer, funeral lament, fairy tale.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, while expressions of views and anxieties may be explicit in the text of the *ninna nanna* proper, they may instead only be implied through the choice itself of the song to be used as a lullaby.

Ballads, by their length, simplicity, and the repetitiveness of their tunes, serve the lullaby function well. Conati (1976:48), for instance, records *Donna Lombarda* (Nigra 1), as having been used as a lullaby. The fact that this ballad may serve to vent the woman's protest against her husband, whom she attempts to poison, and the presence of the child in the cradle warning its father of the mother's scheme (i.e., recalling the mother to her maternal-cum-wifely duties), grants its use as a lullaby certain social resonances. Conati (1976:65) records that *Il padre impiccato* ("the hanged father") has also been sung as a lullaby, again, perhaps, expressing the mother's frustrations and secret wish. The use, instead, of the ballad *L'infanticida* (Nigra 10), as a *ninna nanna* (cf. Sanga 1979:40), presents a cruel paradox and may again point to the ambivalence of the singer's attitude toward the child, secretly harboring murderous fantasies both toward the child and, as above, toward the father. On the other hand, to bring before herself a tragic tale of an uncaring mother merely as a desperate and extreme dilemma may serve only as a negative *exemplum* on which to reflect and may actually reinforce her bond toward her child. A mother's lament over her lost and carefree youth may even find open expression (Sanga 1979:45). In the following lullaby a mother warns her child to enjoy its present state of innocence and to sleep soundly, for it will never again enjoy that possibility (n.b. the gender of the child addressed):<sup>16</sup>

Dormi, mia bela dormi,  
Dormi e fa la nana,  
chè quando sarai mama  
non dormirai così.

Dormi mia bela dormi,  
dormi e fa la nana,  
chè quando avrai lo sposo  
non dormirai così.

Dormi mia bela dormi  
nel tuo leto di gigli,  
chè quando avrai dei figli,  
non dormirai così.

(Leydi/Paiola 1975:54)

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Sleep, my beauty, sleep,  
 Sleep and rock-a-bye,  
 because when you become a mother  
 you won't sleep like this.

Sleep, my beauty, sleep,  
 Sleep and rock-a-bye,  
 because when you have a husband  
 you won't sleep like this.

Sleep, my beauty, sleep,  
 in your bed of lilies  
 because when you have children  
 you won't sleep like this.

This lullaby is widely diffused throughout the Lombardy-Veneto regions (for a variant from 1953, cf. Bermanni/Uggeri 1974:20), and, as an inverse functional crossover, is sometimes sung as a bride's farewell serenade. To complete the cycle of inversions, personal experience has taught me that the use of the serenade as a lullaby sung to a female infant seems particularly natural, notwithstanding that serenades normally beckon the loved one to awaken and come to the window, rather than to sleep.

The pluri-functionality of expressive topoi in folklore is well documented. As far as lullabies are concerned, the image of the wolf provides a point of convergence between childlore and erotic expression. A curious example is provided by the text of a street vendor's cry, or song, known as "Cilentana" (Biagiola 1979), heavily laced with erotic fantasy and erotic topoi: the fountain, water, hen, which later give way to more explicit invitations to make love by a secret haystack. Following this sexual invitation are typical *ninna nanna* verses or formulas (cf. sup.):

nonnè nonnè nonna uè nunnarella  
 e o lupe s'ha magnate la pucurella

e pucurella mi comme faciva  
 i quanno mmocc'a a lupe nonna nonna to le veriva  
 (Biagiola 1979)

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Rock rock rock-a-bye, heh lightly rock-a-bye<sup>17</sup>  
 the wolf has eaten the little lamb

and little lamb, how did you manage  
 when you found yourself in the wolf's mouth?

The topos of the wolf here represents eros expressed as violence and dominance. Might the fact that the mother also makes recourse to this image so frequently in lullabies represent an expression of her own constant reflection on her sexual predator, her husband? She might indeed see herself as a defenseless child—which often she in fact was—bonding her even more to her child and at the same time prompting her to warn and protect it.<sup>18</sup>

The love song, on the other hand, might also be expressed in the most conventional of poetic language with the medieval *Dolce stil novo* or even the Sicilian School and its Provençal antecedents as its ultimate source. The beauty of the child sometimes evokes language reminiscent of the Italian lyrical tradition in which hair is compared to golden ringlets and threads, eyes to stars, the mouth to roses or paradise, and so forth (Naselli 1948:44ff).

Ballads, vendors' cries, and dance tunes, such as *La girometta* (Sanga 1979:41), have all been used to lull children to sleep. Serenades, prayers, and funeral laments, on the other hand, have actually been assimilated by many lullabies. A Lazio lullaby, as typical of central and southern Italian *ninne nanne*, puts in relief one of the religious elements:

Ninna nanna ninna nonna<sup>19</sup>  
fatte la ninna cu la Madonna,  
fatte la ninna alla cunnula d'oro  
fatte la ninna cu sant'Insidoro.

Fatte la ninna, fatte la nanna  
dint'a la cunnula d'argento  
addò fu cunnulato san Vincenzo.

Fatte la ninna, fatte la nanna  
dint'a la cunnula de raso  
addò fu cunnulato san Gervaso.

Fatte la ninna fattela pristo  
dint'a la cunnula de zippo  
addò fu cunnulato Gesù Cristo.

(Di Prospero 1975)

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Ninna nanna ninna nonna  
rock-a-bye with the Madonna  
rock-a-bye in the cradle of gold  
rock-a-bye with Saint Isidore.

Rock-a-bye rock-a-bye  
in the cradle of silver  
where cradled was Saint Vincent.

Rock-a-bye rock-a-bye  
 in the cradle of satin  
 where cradled was Saint Jarvis.

Rock-a-bye rock-a-bye quickly  
 in the cradle of straw  
 where cradled was Jesus Christ.

The other invokes divine guardians, the Madonna, the saints,” and Christ himself in the religious/magical fantasy.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, many a *ninna nanna* is nothing more than a prayer for safekeeping and success in his future, uttered over the child before surrendering him over to sleep (cf. n. 7), since the child is unable (as it will be taught to do in early years) to pray for itself. As one *ninna nanna* of the Basilicata regione aptly puts it: “Sante Nicole nu’ vulia canzune,/Vulia paternustre e ’raziune” (“Saint Nicolas did not want songs/He wanted paternosters and orations” [Noviello 1976:655]). These mothers know well the psyche of the saints to which they pray!

The almost monotonous repetition of a given formula, *fatte la ninna*, shows a preference for tryads: the formula is repeated three times to three different saints (Isidore, Vincent, Jarvis). Like magic spells, they are recited both to ward off evil and invoke divine help,<sup>21</sup> as well as, in this case, to induce sleep through the hypnotic effect of repetition. The saints themselves are magical and, like the princes and princesses of tales, they sleep in precious beds: of gold (*oro/I[n]sidoro*), of silver (*argento/Vincenzo*), of satin (*raso/Gervaso*)—the saints having been chosen to rhyme with the various precious materials. The topos of the embellished bed is particularly common in central and southern lullabies,<sup>22</sup> such as in the following lyrical passage:

[...] Fatte la ninna, fiju meu gentile  
 lo letto to l’ho fatto de viole,  
 e pe’ coperta lo cielo sereno  
 e pe’ cuscino te dò er core mio  
 nanna-o

(Leydi/Montobbio)

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Rock-a-bye, my dear son  
 I have made your bed of violets  
 and for a blanket the tranquil sky  
 and for a pillow I’ll give you my heart  
 nanna-o

The musical matrix of many southern *ninne nanne* is indistinguishable from the funeral lament proper (Lomax 1956:128). It is in fact common belief that sleep is a temporary form of death and something in itself to be feared (Sanga/Ferrari 1979:93-94). It nonetheless casts the lulling in a mournful

tone<sup>23</sup> and suggests that the presence of and responsibility for children is as lamentable a fact of life as is the death of a loved one. Indeed the lament is frequently explicit in central and southern lullabies, as in this Lazio lullaby.

Ninna oh ninna oh  
 che pacenza che ce vò  
 co' 'sto figlio nun c'è pace  
 la pappetta nun je piace.

Ninna nanna ninna nonna  
 mamma è fori e mo areturna  
 mo ca radduce l'areporta  
 le zinnotte piene piene.

Ninna core ninna core  
 fatte la ninna donne secure  
 ca nònnetta è guardiana de le mura.

(Di Prospero 1975)

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Ninna oh ninna oh  
 what patience is needed  
 with this child there is no peace  
 his pap he doesn't like.

Ninna nanna ninna nonna  
 mother's out [working] and soon will return  
 when she returns she'll bring  
 breasts, full, full [of milk].

Rock [my] heart rock [my] heart  
 rock-a-bye sleep securely [sure]  
 'cause your grandma is guardian of the walls.

In this lullaby the child is seen as a burden: it will not be still, will not eat, and taxes the patience of the grandmother who, typically, has been charged with the baby's care. Anxiety over the fate of the defenseless child expresses itself through the grandmother's reference to herself as guardian of the walls and the child's protector. The invocation of divine guardians, the Madonna, the saints, and Christ himself, functions similarly. The (southern) Italian mother often focuses on the paradigmatic Mother and Child, Mary and Christ, identifying herself with that saintly figure of womanhood and depicting the Madonna in the act of cradling the child.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes other saintly mothers are also invoked in empathy, such as St. Anne lulling the child Mary to sleep. There seems little doubt that the mother casts herself—and is cast by her society—in the role of the pious, self-sacrificing Madonna, alone in her intimacy with her child, coping with the poverty all around her.

While genre crossover may account for some lullabies and the oneiric process for the internal organization of others, these do not, by any means, even account for the majority of them.

The ideal conclusion to any lullaby, of course, is that the child fall asleep. It is this *falling* asleep which allows us to identify yet another pattern internal to many lullabies, reflected in a variety of stylistic and rhythmic devices. The Tuscan lullaby cited at the outset, for example, employs an explicit reference to falling. After the rapid build-up rhythmically and stylistically (through the many disturbing images), there is an abrupt *chûte* in the image of the falling tower, immediately followed by the reference to the baby's sleep. The assonance of verse-final "spezzò" (literally "broke" and hence also "fell") with "s'addormentò" ("fell asleep") reinforce their close connection, even unity, perhaps simultaneity. The falling of objects is likely a cross-cultural, widely used technique, to designate the end of the lullaby. One classic example is found in *the* lullaby of Anglo-America:

Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock;  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,  
Down will come baby, cradle, and all.<sup>25</sup>

This lullaby yet more explicitly associates falling with the baby itself in the cradle. The *breaking* and *falling* (of the tower, of the cradle) in lullabies metaphorically replicates the "falling" from consciousness into unconsciousness, that is, literally the *falling* asleep. English idiom clearly illumines this aspect of the process.

While the reference to falling may be more or less explicit as in the above examples, it may also appear in other, more oblique modes. The downward movement in the Lazio lullaby cited above is both gradual and abrupt. The gradual descent is reflected in the order of cradles, with reference to their quality, beginning with the most precious (gold), the less so (silver) and from a precious metal to textile (satin), and finally to the worthless and most common, straw basket or cradle. From riches and finery to humble poverty—the poverty which both the infant and Christ share. This final recall to reality is rather abrupt: the fantastic heights of elegance and wealth, where even the relatively perfect rhymes induce partial "hypnosis," to the poverty of Madonna and child, where the rhyme scheme changes and the expected assonance is somewhat discordant (*pristo/zippo/Cristo*). A similar procedure of descent and abrupt return to reality is found in a fragment of the following Veneto lullaby:

Nana bambin, nana bambin,  
 e dormi dormi più di una contesa;  
 to mama la regina,  
 to padre il conte;  
 to madre la regina dela tera,  
 to padre il conte dela primavera

(Lomax/Carpitella)

\*\*\*\*\*

Sleep child, sleep child,  
 and sleep sleep more than a countess;  
 your mother the queen,  
 your father the count;  
 your mother the queen of the earth,  
 your father the count of spring.

The fall is not always abrupt. In the highly lyrical lullabies of the south, sleep is often a winged creature wafting and floating. Flying through the air is yet another example of the spatial metaphor of sleep. Sleep personified is seen as a figure in flight—sometimes a trickster, sometimes an ange<sup>126</sup>— who finally alights and induces sleep in the child who lies below (cf. Naselli 1948:25; e.g., in a lullaby refrain from Basilicata: “O suonno ca pi l’aria fai la strada [...] O suonno ca pi l’aria fai la via” (“O Sleep who through the air make your road [...] O Sleep who through the air make your way” Noviello 1976:947-48). Sleep may also be a knight swiftly riding high upon a fine horse, elegantly bedecked.<sup>27</sup> Flight and sensations of weightlessness may indeed replicate the early phases of falling asleep, while the fall from on high is the end result. Consider a perfect example of this metaphor of sleep and waking furnished by the American classic, *The Wizard of Oz*. In the film version, Dorothy imagines the house in which she has taken refuge from the tornado, as being hurled through the sky and finally landing with a thud in the Land of Oz (Oz=doze or, the Land of Sleep?). It is in this state of unconsciousness (we later learn that she had been hit in the head by a falling window shutter), after having *fallen*, that the dreams of Oz unfold. The *psychomachia* between the forces of good and evil, the struggle to return home, i.e., the struggle to regain consciousness, ought to take the form of a flight *upward* in the wizard’s helium balloon. The magical wizard, like the knight on horseback, or Sleep personified, flies through the air.

The devices conveying descending or fading or falling vary in efficacy. While the falling of a tower or cradle may seem particularly clear, there are other images of fading: night falling, a lamp extinguishing itself, or, as in the following lullaby, green wood slowly burning and petering out: “La se indormenza a poco o poco/come la legna verde col foco” (“She falls asleep,

little by little/like green wood while it burns,” Leydi 1973:53). This image is shared with songs of the love repertoire:

In cima all'aia c'è un camino che fuma  
l'amore del mio bene che si consuma  
che si consuma a poco a poco  
come la legna verde sopra al fuoco

\*\*\*\*\*

At the top of the threshing floor there is a smoking hearth  
the love for my darling being consumed  
that is consumed little by little  
like green wood on the fire

This lullaby is actually composed of a series of amorous *strambotti* (Sanga 1979:42).

A lovely *filastrocca*, or nursery rhyme, in which the turning of the pages in a book stands as a metaphor for life, also conveys the process of fading (cf. Bueno 1976). The first page sees a woman sowing seeds of grain, then the refrain *volta la carta*<sup>28</sup> “turn the page” is followed by the *villano* “peasant” tilling the soil. We again “turn the page” and see war; many soldiers; the sick who suffer; the doctor giving prescriptions; Concetta closing the door; death. The passing of life from birth—seeds sown—to death is seen through this descending chain of causality.

The essential Italian lullaby sound-pattern is, of course, *ninna-nanna*, that is, the repetition of nasal [N] + vowel [A, E, I, O, U—regionally determined]. This pattern is cross-regional. At the phonic level it provides soft and soothing sounds which through repetition induce sleep. Semantically, in its various forms, concepts essential to the child's experience are expressed: sleep, food, rocking, baby, grandmother [cf. n. 1, 17, 30].<sup>29</sup> A descent or fall at the phonetic level in the lullaby may occur when the iterative *ninna-nanna* is reduced to the repetition of the mere “ninna oh, ninna oh” or yet further to the rhythmic lulling and repetition of “oooh-òh, oooh-òh.” In my Lazio experience, there is rising intonation on each final “òh,” which is also rapidly enunciated and accentuated [cf. sup. Lazio lullaby] and corresponds kinetically to the completion of a movement forward and back, the wave pattern of intonation favoring the rapid descent by prolonging the rise to a maximum. Eventually the lullaby “trails off” into pure vocalization with no consonantal closure. The other main Italian family of sounds for “rocking” [yet rarely used in lullabies] is also based upon a reduplicative nucleus: *din don* or *don don*, e.g., Lombard *dondonà*, Italian *dondolare*, or with the same repetitive contour, Italian *gongolare*, Venetian *gondolar*, *gongolar*, etc. A lovely Venetian lullaby (Lomax/Carpitella:4, 14) curiously breaks the melismatic quality of the first part, with a more hypnotic string of baby words

coinciding with the two-beat *nin/na nan/na* lulling paradigm: “Na-na bo-bò, pe-pe co-cò/e tutti putei fa’ nanna/La Maria Teresa no!/Na-na, na-na ....” In these infantile “words” may be discerned concepts basic to the child’s well-being: *nana* “sleep”; *bobò* (possibly) “treat,” “horse, ox” (cf. *nar a bobò* “to go for a piggyback ride”), *cocò* “egg.” Baby-talk, it ought to be noted, is as dialectal as adult speech and ubiquitous phonic units such as *bobò*, *cocò*, and even *nannà*<sup>30</sup> vary in meaning. Even within a relatively small area, such as Sicily, *bbobbò* may mean “sleep,” “doggy,” “pain,” *cocò* besides “egg,” means “confetti,” “candy,” “turkey,” “credulous, dull-witted person.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus by phonic strategy, moving in tandem with body movement, the lullaby emphasizes the fall: the descent into sleep and, I believe, after examining a few, but a representative few, lullabies, into the semi-conscious. In performative terms, the intimacy or privacy of the recitation makes it a functional soliloquy. Catharsis or satisfaction for the performer (i.e., the mother or her surrogate) seems twofold: the infant is delivered to sleep, momentarily releasing her from immediate pressures and responsibilities; and the singer has given voice to love, stress, and *angst*. It is not surprising therefore that images of sweetness and light are found together with others of a darker sort. Naselli may have been hesitant to grant these latter images equal consideration (assigning them to the joking or ironic vein), given the national ideal of motherhood which prevailed while she wrote. Lomax clearly had his finger on the pulse, but his enlightened sympathy for socially oppressed and sexually repressed southern Italian womanhood led him to link his findings to Mezzogiorno backwardness alone. Female anxiety and frustration know no such boundary. Analogous apprehensions and elements of protest surface cross-culturally—to the north of the Apennines no less than to the south and is proper to the lullaby genre.

Inducing sleep through the use of lullabies affords the mother an opportunity for reflection and self-expression, often directly related to the child’s wellbeing and future promise, but on occasion also venting unacknowledged private grievances in a form of unheard confession. Inasmuch as the defenseless child is totally dependent on its mother for nourishment and protection, expressions of such anxieties over these responsibilities abound in lullabies, and may restore the singer through catharsis. Patterns of free association (in which images and worries flow together in a quasi-nonsensical way) typical of dreaming, precede the eventual “fading out” or “falling into” sleep—the logical end to any lullaby.

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## NOTES

I wish to thank Eleanor Long, Glauco Sanga, and my husband, Edward Tuttle, for their helpful suggestions in modifying this paper.

<sup>1</sup>*Ninna nanna* (*ninna-nanna* or *ninnananna*) is a reduplicative formation, since both *ninna* and *nanna* used independently, can mean “sleep” in baby-talk (cf. *ninnare* “to lull a child to sleep,” infantile equivalent to Italian *addormentare*, *dormire*), as well as “baby” (obs. and dial. Tusc. [Buonarroti il Giovane], cf. Neap. [m.] *ninnë*/ [f.] *nenna*). While the standard Italian term is shared by many dialects (cf. *AIS* I:62), not to mention other Romance languages, e.g. Portuguese *nana nina nina-nana* “cradle song,” whence *nanar* (*fazer nana*) *ninar* “to rock to sleep, to sleep,” nonetheless others conserve alternate indigenous terms, e.g., Sicilian *canzuni di naca* or *vo*’ (suggested by *vogare/vocari* “to row” or, rocking motion of a boat on the waves; for the lullaby’s use of maritime imagery, particularly in the Sicilian tradition, cf. Naselli 1948:14-15, 17-20).

<sup>2</sup>On the concept of inculturation in the lullaby, cf. Leydi 1973:38ff.

<sup>3</sup>Lomax, of course, makes much of this “venting” function, especially for the southern Italian woman who lives in a more repressed society, which gives few opportunities for self-expression. Her deepest anxieties, laments, and flights of fantasy therefore often find their way into her *ninne nanne*, which appear harsher and more cruel and give a bleaker vision of life than those of her northern sister. Leydi (Leydi/Sanga 1978:481 n. 6) rightly cautions against accepting this division uncritically since, he argues, women may have been less than eager to divulge this most intimate and personal part of their repertoire to a stranger—and foreigner as well.

<sup>4</sup>While sung by a folk revivalist, Caterina Bueno, there is no reason to doubt its authenticity since, besides singing traditional music, Bueno belonged to that group of young intellectuals of the late 60’s and 70’s who collected materials directly in the field.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Opie (1951, 1969:58) “Hush thee, my babby./Lie still with thy daddy./Thy mammy has gone to the mill./To grind thee some wheat/To make thee some meat./Oh, my dear babby, lie still.”

<sup>6</sup>The “little straw hat” occurs in many children’s songs (e.g. Leydi/Paiola 1975:53; Borgatti 1968:1), yet it is unclear what may be its ultimate source. Another Tuscan variant (Bacci 1891:18) instead ends with one of the weavers weaving not a straw hat, but *la treccia d’oro* (“the golden braid”).

<sup>7</sup>Long *ninne nanne* may be found in Noviello 1976 and may be attributed to the fact that they are, in substance, prayers, wherein many saints and divine protectors are invoked, formulas (like spells) repeated, and the projection of the child’s rosy future described (wishful thinking). Noviello’s rich, well-transcribed anthology is marred only by the lack of indices to make the material accessible.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. the American English expression “to keep the wolf from the door” (= “to avert hunger and poverty”).

<sup>9</sup>This historic note was provided Bueno 1976 by the informant herself, who learned of the remote battle between Barberino and San Gimignano as a child.

<sup>10</sup>Infants or very young children of course do not likely understand what mother is saying. It is the rhythm, soothing sounds, warmth, and security in the mother's arms which ultimately induce sleep. As one of my clever students, Nadja Brost, pointed out: if the child could understand these terrible images, it would never fall asleep!

<sup>11</sup>The juxtaposition of cruel imagery and the soft romantic melody with which it is expressed may serve to remove the child (through the melody) from the harsh realities of the world just as bedtime stories are used to put the child in an imaginary world in order to ease its fears. The melodic "intermezzo" serves both child and mother, since the lullaby is a "dyadic event" (Caspi/Blessing 1988:ch. 2).

<sup>12</sup>Grazielli Di Prospero and her husband Giorgio Pedrazzi have directly collected and Di Prospero scrupulously reproduced traditional southern Lazio song-types and vocal style in dialect on three Cetra recordings. The variant which follows is unedited and was kindly provided by Pedrazzi and Di Prospero from their private collection.

<sup>13</sup>Naselli 1948:37ff concurs with La Sorsa 1939:499, 545, and par. xiv, 169-80: "Ninne nanne di contenuto scherzoso," that even when the death of the child is invoked, these apparently non-maternal feelings are spoken only in jest. However, given that in many traditional societies infanticide is by no means unknown, perhaps such ambivalent expressions need not all be taken lightly. For analogous broaching of taboos, cf. Ercolani (1975:133, 139, 153), where a mother comments instead on her own infidelity toward her husband and questions the paternity of the child (the father is often a cleric!). The effect may be ironic or even masochistic as in the instance the mother calls herself a *put[t]ana* "prostitute." On the other hand, such a lullaby may even serve as a moment of confession.

<sup>14</sup>On this most fundamental question of hunger in literature, from a historical perspective as well as philosophical, see Campoesi (1978, 1983) while Cocchiara (1952, 1980 rpt.) limits his investigation to a historical cataloguing of the occurrences of the topos.

<sup>15</sup>On elements of fairy tales and legends in Sicilian lullabies, cf. Naselli 1948:64ff.

<sup>16</sup>The gender of the child addressed in lullabies is significant, and may account for the tone and the radically different messages and themes reserved for the two sexes. For instance, while dowry and marriage might be mentioned where reference to a girl is made, the wish for intelligence, good looks, and good fortune might be reserved for a boy (e.g., Noviello 1976:701, 709, 990-92). Naselli (1948:47) notes that in Sicilian lullabies, the mother often speaks of a carriage for the boy in order that he might learn to walk (and hence make way in the world) and a loom for the girl in order that she might learn to weave (and hence be wedded to the domestic hearth). Curiously, the Sicilian mother often expressed that both her boy or girl might become clerics ("monachella" and "monachello"), which either makes reference to the custom of dressing small children in the habit of one's favorite saint, or may actually express the fulfillment of a vow to give one's child to a religious order. Having a priest for a son was one of the ideals of the peasant class for centuries. Sometimes the mother instead warns her daughter that her fate will be similar to her mother's, as in this lullaby. A survey of the frequency of references to a male child as opposed to a female child could well prove significant, since, unlike English, gender in Italian must be specified. I do not believe the argument for the likely higher frequency of the unmarked term (i.e. "bambino" or "figlio" instead of "bambina" or "figlia") would be relevant, since a mother would hardly be speaking in abstract or general terms when the infant in her arms is before her and its gender cannot be avoided. Further documentation is necessary. For instance, a mother might be asked whether she substitutes "questo figlio" with "questa figlia" (syllabically equal and since they often occur in non-final position,

would not interfere with the rhyme) with her various children. A recent collection of lullabies however, *does* make frequent reference to the female child (Ercolani 1975:121-63).

<sup>17</sup>*Nonna* is here merely a variant of *nanna* or *ninna* (“sleep” in baby-talk) or, as used in lullabies (cf. infra. Lazio lullaby), also means “grandmother” (*nonno* “grandfather”) in standard Italian. In the Lazio lullaby its presence is particularly interesting, since it is the grandmother who is rocking the child to sleep while the mother of the child is out working in the fields.

<sup>18</sup>For the wide use of erotic imagery in vendor’s cries, see Sanga 1979:78ff. Besides seeing the itinerant vendor who travels from town to town selling his “wares” (and this does represent a substantial metaphoric area for lovemaking) as sexual opportunity for the women of the community, one might also consider the sexual *double entendre* in vending calls to be a pre-industrial use of sex in advertising, so prevalent today. The device assured sales then as it does today. Cf. also Del Giudice 1989.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. n. 17.

<sup>20</sup>Sacred legends and apocrypha can also be found in lullabies (Naselli 1948:54f), such as those details concerning the childhood of Christ: his first tooth, the games he played, his caprices.

<sup>21</sup>For the presence of magical elements in lullabies, see Cocchiara 1939: ch. 2.

<sup>22</sup>Naselli (1948:pp. 15ff.; 16, n. 1 for other occurrences) sees historic accuracy in this detail which reflects the princely (and not so princely) custom of lavishly embellishing their cradles with rich fabrics of silk and damask and golden chains—some remnants of which remain. A sumptuary law of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries attempted to curtail such expenses in cradles and clothing for newborns. The law seems to have been harsher toward female infants. It forbade: “[di] fare culle o nache dorate o inargentate, nè letti, trabacche, cortinaggi, nè padiglioni d’alcuna sorta alle bambine, nè ornar essi bambini con perle, nè con oro, argento, di martello o tirato filato, nè tener sopra essi bambini cerchi d’argento” (Pitre 1879:42). For a northern example, cf. sup. *leto di gli*.

<sup>23</sup>Cf., for example, the term *nenia* (lat. *nenia[m]*, of onomatopoeic origin) (phonetically similar to *ninna* or *nanna*) = lugubrious song accompanied by flute and sung while burying the dead, extended to mean any monotonous song. Cf., as applied to Di Prospero sup., for example.

<sup>24</sup>In at least one lullaby Mary is credited with having made the first cradle with her veil and placed her child outdoors under the trees surrounded by singing birds (cf. Naselli 1948:13).

<sup>25</sup>Lomax-Hawes (1974:147), somewhat inexplicably, interprets the fall thus: “Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that the moment of high spatial drama that concludes the most popular of all English-language lullabies simply presages, for the modern American baby, the closing of the bedroom door. There are not many other societies in the world besides ours that hold to the belief that babies should sleep alone.” The article is otherwise extremely useful. For the various interpretations given to the fall in this lullaby (e.g., warning to the proud and ambitious, Amerindian custom of hanging a birchbark cradle on the branch of a tree, and so on), see Opie 1951, 1969:61-62.

<sup>26</sup>It is a common belief that when a child smiles in its sleep that it is smiling at or communing with the angels (cf. Naselli 1948:29)

<sup>27</sup>While Lomax (1956) gave an unequivocally negative judgement of the southern lullaby which is full of brooding over life's miseries, he failed, it seems, to identify the same repertoire as highly lyrical as well and full of magical imagery of the most powerful and beautiful sort.

<sup>28</sup>The *carta* may also mean a card, as in tarot cards, or, as Bueno speculates, the various faces to a folded page in a child's game.

<sup>29</sup>On sound-patterning, as it contributes to the creation of the formula (a fusion of sound, idea, and form), the "building block" of orally-composed song, cf. especially Lord 1956, 1960:52-58, but also Creed 1980 and 1981, Foley 1979, Peabody 1975:182-84.

<sup>30</sup>In my Lazio dialect (Terracinese) for example, *nannà* means "to eat" (from *magnà*, It. *mangiare*), and *mimmi* instead means "to sleep" (It. *dormire*).

<sup>31</sup>Lomax-Hawes (1974:144ff.) distinguishes the "chatting" phase from the "lulling" in lullabies and deduces, on the basis of this ratio, illuminating cultural differences in American vs. Japanese methods of mothering. Referring to the work of Alan Lomax and the linguist Edith Crowell Trager (Lomax/Trager 1964), Lomax-Hawes recalls the hypothesis that folksong areas can be partly defined in terms of vowel preference patterns and that "these basic patterns of assonance seem particularly evident in the texts of lullabies" (1974:142-43).

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