

eScholarship

California Italian Studies

Title

In Defense of Moral Contagion: Annie Vivanti's Naja Tripudians and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nn60825>

Journal

California Italian Studies, 11(1)

Author

Albaum, Gianna

Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/C311154434

Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

In Defense of Moral Contagion: Annie Vivanti's *Naja Tripudians* and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

Gianna Albaum

1. Introduction

When the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 claimed its first victims, British-Italian writer Annie Vivanti was living in her villa in Pecetto Torinese, a small town in the hills above Turin. Born to an Italian father and a British mother, Vivanti wrote in both Italian and English, often translating her own works from one language to the other.¹ Since the success of her debut novel in Italy, *I divoratori* (*The Devourers*, 1911), she had published several more novels, and was quickly making a name for herself as one of the most popular writers in Italy. As a writer, Vivanti had always drawn material from the headlines, as well as from her own life, and it is hardly surprising that her writing from this period should bear traces of this pandemic. Turin was one of the cities hardest hit by the mysterious disease—referred to by contemporaries as the “influenza spagnola,” or the “Spanish flu”—and was one of the first Italian cities to go into lockdown: schools, churches, cinemas, and theaters shut down, and citizens were instructed to avoid major gatherings.² It was common to see people wearing protective masks to guard against contagion. Despite these measures, the disease continued to devastate the Piedmontese capital: by fall, the death toll reportedly reached as high as 400 deaths per day.³

Vivanti's novel *Naja Tripudians*, written during the years of pandemic and published in 1920, is haunted by plague. The narrative focuses on Dr. Harding and his two daughters, Myosotis and Leslie, who live in a remote village called Wild-Forest in northern England.⁴ Dr. Harding, withdrawn and reclusive, spends his days studying obsessively in the hopes of discovering a cure for leprosy. His knowledge of contagious diseases, however, is useless when it comes to protecting his family from the plague that infests London—and to which he will lose, in the final pages of the novel, young Leslie. The reader soon learns that the plague is not physiological but moral, yet the metaphor is striking: “[N]el nostro paese, qui, nelle nostre città, infierisce un morbo psichico, dilaga una infezione morale che contamina e corrompe tutto ciò che ci sta intorno. [...] [N]oi viviamo oggi in mezzo a questa lebbra morale e non ne temiamo il contagio” (“In our country, here, in our cities, a psychological disease is raging, a moral infection is spreading that contaminates and corrupts everything around us. We live today in the

¹ On Vivanti's translations of her own work, see Anna Laura Lepschy, “Annie Vivanti as self-translator: the case of *The Devourers* and *Circe*,” *The Italianist* 30, no. 2 (2010): 182–190.

² Eugenia Tognotti, *La spagnola in Italia. Storia dell'influenza che fece temere la fine del mondo* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002), 83–85. On the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in Italy, see also, more recently, Francesco Cutolo, *L'influenza spagnola del 1918–1919. La dimensione globale, il quadro nazionale e un caso locale* (Pistoia: ISRPT Editore, 2020).

³ Tognotti, *La spagnola in Italia*, 181.

⁴ Though the novel was set in a fictional town in England, Vivanti's friend and colleague Barbara Allason has suggested that it bore a close resemblance to Vivanti's own neighborhood. On this point, see Noemi Crain Merz, “‘The Great Devourer’: Annie Vivanti's Friendship with Barbara Allason (1917–1921),” in *Annie Chartres Vivanti: Transnational Politics, Identity, and Culture*, edited by Sharon Wood and Erica Moretti (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2016), 164.

midst of this moral leprosy and we do not fear its contagion”).⁵ Among the *untori* spreading this moral contagion are Lady Miranda Randolph Gray and her entourage—her young lover Totò and their friend Neversol—who dazzle the inhabitants of Wild-Forest with their fancy cars, fashionable wardrobes, and aristocratic manners. Despite Lady Randolph's well-to-do appearance, she is in fact in charge of a ring of human traffickers that kidnaps young girls for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Lady Randolph will select as her victims the candid and ingenuous sisters Myosotis and Leslie Harding, eventually succeeding in convincing their skeptical but weak-willed father to permit them to come to London for an extended vacation. Though Myosotis eventually realizes the danger that the two girls are in, and is able to escape the clutches of their keepers, she is forced to abandon young Leslie to her horrible fate.

Critics, well aware of Vivanti's tendency to draw her narratives from the headlines, have often speculated about the real-life events that served as inspiration for *Naja Tripudians*. Interestingly, this criticism has made no mention of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. This omission can be explained, at least in part, by what Susan Sontag has called the “near total historical amnesia” regarding this pandemic, which has affected the study of literature as much as that of history.⁶ Jane Elizabeth Fisher observes that it took over a half century for literary criticism to give serious attention to the cultural production that emerged from the pandemic.⁷ Fisher explores numerous motives for this delay, among which she includes the “difficulty of conceptualizing many of the most basic questions about the virus itself” as well as the necessity of achieving a certain sense of distance before historical trauma can re-emerge in the collective consciousness.⁸ Fisher argues that the rediscovery and re-examination of these texts has an important social function: by returning to these narratives, critics contribute to a larger process of cultural healing.⁹ Though Fisher is working specifically in the context of British literature, she suggests that this neglect of pandemic narratives has characterized literature more broadly, across national and cultural lines. This article thus participates in a broader critical project of recovering the traces that the 1918 Influenza Pandemic left on modern literature. Such a project seems all the more important now, as we find ourselves once more in the midst of pandemic.

Still, cultural amnesia cannot be the whole story. After all, *Naja Tripudians* has hardly been forgotten. Vivanti was among the most popular writers of her generation, praised by critics and readers alike. In Italy, the average first printing in those years ran about 3,000 copies; the first printing of *Naja Tripudians* was 100,000 copies.¹⁰ The novel proved successful not only in its time, but also long after Vivanti's death, with over 15 editions, including several that are quite recent.¹¹ In the Italian context, it is arguably her best-known work.¹² Why, then, has all this

⁵ Annie Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians* (Florence: Bemporad, [1920] 1921), 4. All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

⁶ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 71. Ryan Davis discusses the strange “forgettability” of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in the introduction to *The Spanish Flu: Narrative and Cultural Identity in Spain, 1918* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–26.

⁷ Jane Elizabeth Fisher, *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women's Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Giocondi, *I best seller italiani*, 141. See also Carlo Caporossi, “Bibliografia,” in *Tutte le poesie. Edizione critica con antologia di testi tradotti*, by Annie Vivanti, 413–425 (Florence: Olschki, 2006).

¹¹ Giocondi, *I best seller italiani*, 141; Pischedda, *Dieci nel novecento*, 40. On the critical reception of Vivanti's works in her own life, see Bruno Pischedda, *Dieci nel Novecento: il romanzo italiano di largo pubblico dal Liberty alla fine del secolo* (Rome: Carocci, 2019), 40–42. Sharon Wood, Marianna Deganutti, and Erica Moretti offer a slightly more positive assessment in their introduction to *Annie Chartres Vivanti: Transnational Politics, Identity,*

critical attention produced no discussion of the novel's prominent themes of disease and contagion? Why has there been no mention of the novel's pandemic origins?

We might attribute the lack of attention to these themes to a critical tradition that has long read the novel as a morality tale condemning the degenerate habits of the urban elite, a reading that has led critics to present the narrative in the context of contemporary anxieties about drug use and human trafficking. Anne Urbancic has traced the story of the kidnapping of two young sisters by human traffickers to an anecdote that had caused a stir in feminist and activist circles in London at least a decade earlier.¹³ Though the original source of the anecdote is unknown, there is no doubt that Vivanti's narrative clearly evokes the rhetoric and images characteristic of contemporary debates over human trafficking, known by contemporaries as the "white slave trade." As this term suggests, this discourse was rife with xenophobic and racist tropes, and often played on anxieties about immigration. Moreover, stories and anecdotes about human trafficking (though apparently in support of women) often seemed to give ammunition to those who opposed women's emancipation, by warning against the dangers lurking in wait for women who strayed from the consecrated terrain of family and hearth.¹⁴ This association with the xenophobic, racist, and anti-feminist taint of popular human trafficking narratives has been one of several factors that has led critics to see in the novel a conservative agenda.

Critics have also emphasized the novel's engagement with contemporary concerns about drug use. Annie Vivanti was the first Italian writer to capitalize on contemporary anxieties about drugs and addiction that descended on Italy during the postwar period, anticipating Pitigrilli's best-selling *Cocaina* (Cocaine, 1921) by over a year.¹⁵ Though drugs do not have much influence on the plot, the final scenes of the novel depict the consumption of morphine and cocaine. A recent publication on Vivanti incorrectly suggested that Vivanti likely took inspiration from Pitigrilli, though the opposite is probably true; Pitigrilli proposed a novel on cocaine to his publisher in late spring 1920, an idea that may well have come from publicity materials hyping the then-imminent publication of Vivanti's *Naja Tripudians*. Novels featuring drug use, at least during this period, tended toward the conservative, and Vivanti's treatment of drug use is undeniably negative. As a result, many scholars have seen the novel as a morality tale warning against the dangers of drugs.¹⁶

Whether locating human trafficking or drugs as the key to reading the novel's politics, critical interpretations of *Naja Tripudians* have generally emphasized what they see as the narrative's fundamentally moralizing character, reading the text as a denunciation of urban vice. Such works were popular in the postwar period, and many have assumed that Vivanti was

and Culture, eds. Sharon Wood and Erica Moretti (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), ix–xxii.

¹² Pischedda, *Dieci nel novecento*, 40–42. This is in part because *Naja Tripudians* was one of the few novels easily accessible to critics, thanks to a 1970 edition of the text.

¹³ See Anne Urbancic, "Plagiarism or Fantasy: Examining *Naja Tripudians* by Annie Vivanti," *Quaderni d'italianistica* 24, no. 2 (2003): 23–35. Urbancic traces the origins of the narrative in order to evaluate claims of plagiarism that surfaced following the novel's publication.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

¹⁵ On the history of drugs in Italy, see Paolo Nencini, *La minaccia stupefacente: Storia politica della droga in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017.

¹⁶ See e.g. Julie Dashwood, "From *Circe* to *Fosca*: Annie Vivanti and the Femme Fatale," in *Annie Chartres Vivanti: Transnational Politics, Identity, and Culture*, eds. Sharon Wood and Erica Moretti (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2016), 41. Dashwood emphasizes the potential influence of the highly publicized cocaine overdose of Billie Carleton, and cites as additional support for her reading an anti-drug article that Vivanti had written for the women's magazine *La Donna* a year earlier as evidence of Vivanti's personal stance on this issue.

catering to the tastes of the market. Bruno Pischedda, in his recent interpretation of the novel, writes that “Vivanti [...] blandiva il largo pubblico con le morbidezze della fiaba mentre ne solleticava le inquietudini più oscure e incontrollabili” (“Vivanti beguiled the general public with the charms of the fairytale while arousing their darkest and most irrepressible fears”).¹⁷ Laura Lise's discussion of *Naja Tripudians*, though by now fairly dated, is nonetheless characteristic of much Italian scholarship focused on this work. Criticizing what she views as the novel's rigidly “Manichean” staging of the struggle between good and evil (“visione manichea della vita come continua lotta tra il bene e il male” [“Manichean vision of life as a continual struggle between good and evil”]), Lise characterizes the conclusion as a reassuring and socially conservative finale (“fine consolatorio e di conservazione sociale” [“a consolatory ending about social conservation”]) that ultimately encourages readers to be content with their lot (“rinunciare a qualsiasi tipo di scalata sociale” [“to renounce any kind of social climbing”]).¹⁸ Despite the wide range of interpretations regarding specific elements of the text, critics have been largely united in identifying *Naja Tripudians* as a morality tale aimed at denouncing social deviance.¹⁹

These interpretations have typically been put forward without much concern for the profound gap that separated Vivanti's life and political views from the conservative and conformist agenda of morality tales published in those years. Annie Vivanti's profile was in fact anything but conservative.²⁰ Not only was she well known as a feminist activist and an outspoken critic of British colonialism, her personal life was marked by scandal.²¹ In the introduction to a recent edited volume focused on Vivanti's life and writings, Sharon Wood, Marianna Deganutti, and Erica Moretti emphasize her resistance to the cultural norms that characterized her time: “Multi-lingual, multicultural, questioning notions of gender and sexuality, Vivanti scorned both decorum and social respectability, not to mention the seaminess expected of women writers of the day.”²² A bold, independent, and adventurous woman, Vivanti has often been compared to the lively and daring femmes fatales of her novels.²³ Scholars have often speculated about her unconventional marriage, which apparently granted her sufficient freedom to explore a number of romantic relationships with both women and men. Her literary

¹⁷ Pischedda, *Dieci nel novecento*, 60. Overall, Pischedda's interpretation is unusually generous, compared with most criticism published on the novel.

¹⁸ Laura Lise, “Protagonisti e comprimari,” in *Dame, droga, e gallina: romanzo popolare e romanzo di consumo tra Ottocento e Novecento*, ed. Antonia Arslan (Milan: CLEUP, 1977), 413–14. Lise's critique is strongly marked by her conviction that popular literature is inevitably characterized by a strongly conservative ideology. See, for example, her dismissive characterization of the novel's “moral” as “quella, fortemente demagogica, di tutta la letteratura di questo tipo” (414; “strongly demagogic like all of the literature of this kind”).

¹⁹ In addition to Lise and Pischedda, see also Andrea Molesini-Spada, “Idillio e tragico: verifica di uno schema,” in *Dame, droga, e gallina: romanzo popolare e romanzo di consumo tra Ottocento e Novecento*, ed. Antonia Arslan (Milan: CLEUP, 1977), 417–440.; Gianni Venturi, “Serpenti e dismisura: la narrativa di Annie Vivanti da Circe a Naja Tripudians,” in *Les femmes - écrivains en Italie (1870–1920): ordres et libertés*, ed. Emanuelle Genevois (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1994), 292–309. Molesini-Spada's critique is similarly dismissive, wondering whether the open ending of the novel should be attributed to Vivanti's “inesperienza” (“inexperience”) and her “istinto dispersivo” (“dispersive instinct”). Anna Laura Lepschy has pointed to the limitations of these critiques, in her chapter on popular literature in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, eds. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 180–184.

²⁰ For an excellent overview of Vivanti's life and writings, with particular attention to her political views, see the introduction, written by Sharon Wood, Marianna Deganutti, and Erica Moretti, to *Annie Chartres Vivanti: Transnational Politics, Identity, and Culture*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xviii–xix.

²² *Ibid.*, ix.

²³ Julie Dashwood, “From *Circe* to *Fosca*,” 35.

career was equally scandalous; she often took controversial positions on politically sensitive topics and her novels frequently dealt with taboo subjects like incest. Pischedda, describing her as “[u]na donna ribelle per impulsi vitalistici” (“a rebellious woman for her lively impulses”) claims that already in her earliest writings, “dà segni di anticonformismo trasgressivo. Di qui in poi la sua sarà letteratura invereconda per eccellenza, biasimevole, sconsigliata con cura alle ragazze di buona famiglia” (“she gives signs of transgressive nonconformity. From then on, her literature will be a sort of unseemly literature *par excellence*, blameworthy, strongly discouraged to girls of good family”).²⁴ Xenophobia and racism, finally, seem hardly to line up with the experiences and values of a woman whose extensive global travel and cosmopolitan background led her once to declare, “Non ho paese: è mia tutta la terra!” (“I have no country: all the earth is mine!”).²⁵ This biographical sketch would seem hard to square with a conservative morality tale warning about the dangers of drugs and sexual deviance.

In this article, I argue that to read the novel attuned to the discourse of plague is to discover a narrative that bears little resemblance to the moralizing “tale of horrors” that Vivanti’s critics have often described. By attending to the figures of quarantine, contagion, and disease that recur throughout the text, I demonstrate that *Naja Tripudians*, far from a critique of social deviance, points rather to the limitations of an excessively moralizing culture that insists on protecting young women from evil by shrouding them in ignorance.

2. Immunity

In *Naja Tripudians*, the cloistered existence of Dr. Harding’s daughters not only fails to protect them but, in the end, makes them far more vulnerable to the moral contagion that threatens them. Vivanti’s novel thus appears to anticipate in important respects Roberto Esposito’s discussion of the “immunitary paradigm,” in particular his important insight that immunity, beyond a certain threshold, ceases to protect the body politic and rather constitutes a threat. Immunity, he writes,

while necessary to protect our life, ends up negating it when taken beyond a certain threshold. [...] What protects the body—be it the individual, the social, or the political body—is at the same time also what hampers its development, and better still what, beyond a certain point, risks destroying it. But we need to point out that such a contradiction, manifest in the connection between preservation and destruction of life, is implicit in the very procedure of medical immunization: when we vaccinate a patient against a disease, what we do is introduce a controlled and bearable amount of that disease into the organism. Hence, in this instance, medicine is the very poison from which medicine ought to protect us. It is almost as if, in order to keep someone alive, it were necessary to make them taste death, injecting them with the very illness from which we want to protect them.²⁶

Vivanti’s narrative, as I demonstrate in this article, appears not so much a condemnation of vice as a plea for the immunitary value of education. I argue that the novel ultimately presents readers

²⁴ Pischedda, *Dieci nel Novecento*, 47.

²⁵ Cited in Pischedda, *Dieci nel Novecento*, 46.

²⁶ Roberto Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 29 (2011): 209–210.

with the bold suggestion that the preservation of a young girl's virtue may depend not only on exposing her to immorality, but perhaps even on her learning to behave badly herself.

That the paradigm of immunity should have been on Vivanti's mind is unsurprising. Vivanti lived in an era during which immunizing technologies had transformed modern medicine. Following the introduction of variolation as a means of immunizing individuals against smallpox, the late 19th century saw the rise of new vaccination technologies that protected against diphtheria, tetanus, rabies, and many other afflictions.²⁷ These developments seemed to augur a new era of human health, perhaps even a future free of disease. Yet this future would ultimately prove elusive. The Influenza Pandemic of 1918 was perceived by many as a spectacular defeat for modern medicine, as doctors failed to even identify the organism causing the disease, let alone develop a vaccine to protect against it.²⁸ Already in 1918, William Welch, considered one of the most distinguished medical professionals in the United States at the time, described the pandemic as a "great shadow cast upon the medical profession."²⁹ As the pandemic raged on, those who had believed that modern medicine was on the verge of eliminating disease were forced to reckon with the limitations of scientific knowledge.

The intense hopes and anxieties associated with medicine in the late nineteenth century likely played a key role in fueling the significant preoccupation with medicine that characterizes literature from this period. Vivanti's novel is no exception, and begins with the death of Dr. Harding's wife in childbirth, which the reader suspects might have been prevented with more attentive care. Dr. Harding, though himself a medical professional, finds his expertise useless in protecting his wife, as it will later prove useless in protecting his daughters. "[A] che cosa serve ch'io sia dottore, se non posso assistere nell'ora del suo spasimo la creatura a me più cara? Se non posso lenire le sue sofferenze?" Dr. Harding asks himself. "Che dottore inutile e grottesco!" ("What use is it to me to be a doctor if I cannot assist the creature most dear to me in the hour of her distress? If I cannot soothe her suffering? What a useless, absurd doctor!").³⁰ The bitter irony with which the narrative contrasts the aspirations of modern medicine with its real limitations, even in the face of ordinary situations such as childbirth, reflects the disillusionment that many experienced during the pandemic.

Dreams of a future free of disease were often accompanied, following the widespread use of anesthesia, by dreams of a future free of pain and suffering. The episodes in the novel featuring drug use engage directly with this fantasy. Myosotis, observing a young man taking opium, asks ingenuously if he is being treated for some sort of illness. Neversol's ironic response suggests that drugs are a remedy for the pain and suffering that inevitably attend the human experience. "Siamo tutti ammalati, piccola Myosotis, tutti ammalati!" ("We are all ill, little Myosotis, all of us ill").³¹ He continues, "Il fumatore d'oppio, il morfinomane, il mangiatore di coca e di haschish [...] ha spezzato ogni ceppo. Il vero non lo trattiene; la realtà non lo intralcia; tutto a lui è possibile: la frenesia di fantastici amori, il parossismo di non sognate estasi.... Egli è rimosso da ogni miseria umana, liberato da ogni vincolo umano. Egli ha vinto Dio e la natura!..." ("The opium smoker, the morphine addict, the coca and hashish eater [...] has overcome every

²⁷ For a general history of immunity theory and the development of immunizing technologies in the late 19th century, see Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 275–276, 428–461.

²⁸ On this point, see Fisher, *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War*, 17–8. See also Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, 1997, 483–484.

²⁹ Cited in Fisher, *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War*, 18.

³⁰ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

constraint. The truth does not hold him back; reality does not hinder him; for him, everything is possible: the frenzy of incredible passions, the paroxysm of unimaginable ecstasies.... He has subtracted himself from all human misery, he is freed from all human restraint. He has conquered God and nature!”).³² Freedom from pain and suffering, however, turns out to be achieved through the subtraction of the drug user from life itself. In fact, it seems significant that the use of drugs in the novel appears to lead in every instance to a sort of a catatonic state, even in the case of stimulants like cocaine.³³ This connection between drugs and sleep is made explicit in a verse sung by one of the young addicts: “Dormiam! Di gioia la vita è avara / E sol ne’ sogni felicità!” (“Let’s sleep! Life is short on joy / And only dreams bring happiness!”). If the narrator presents Dr. Harding’s desire to rid the world of leprosy as hubris, here we find a slightly different critique. The eradication of pain and suffering comes only at the cost of life itself. “What do we hold against the drug addict?” asks Derrida. “That he cuts himself off from the world [...]; that he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction.”³⁴ Derrida’s key insight in this passage is that it is not the pleasure of the addict *per se* that is called into question, but more precisely the fact that it is a “pleasure taken in an experience without truth.”³⁵ The drug addict’s bargain brings us back to Esposito’s account of the logic of immunity, according to which life can be prolonged, “but only by continuously giving it a taste of death.”³⁶ Ultimately, the novel’s recognition of pain and suffering as inevitable and necessary parts of life thus helps us to see a common thread running through the narrative: namely, that the overzealous protection of life from pain, suffering, infection, and other evils—more specifically the attempt to cut life off from such threats—ultimately poses a threat to life itself.

One of Esposito’s main insights has to do with the way he reads immunity across law, politics, and medicine, emphasizing the extent to which discourses of immunity inevitably raise questions about relations between the individual and the common. As Esposito has observed, paradigms of immunity are invoked when there is a concern about boundaries, particularly one that calls for a “protective response.” The kind of risk that is most associated with such paradigms, he specifies, is that which “has to do with trespassing borders,” or which involves “the border between the inside and the outside, between the self and other.”³⁷ It is perhaps no coincidence that the years during and immediately following the First World War were marked by a rise in nationalist rhetoric as well as an intense preoccupation with hygiene that manifested in a desire for purity, on the one hand, and the fear of contagion or contamination on the other.³⁸ Vivanti was writing in a moment that was marked by a political rhetoric that sought protection in

³² Ibid.

³³ See, for example, the final scene of the novel, when Myosotis discovers that Lady Randolph and the others have “tranquilized” her sister with cocaine. “Era appoggiata indietro tra i cuscini e aveva gli occhi socchiusi. La piccola bocca rosea era semiaperta, e il suo viso non esprimeva né terrore né angoscia. Myosotis vide che intorno alle narici e sulle labbra aveva qualche traccia di polvere bianca” (Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 205; “She was leaning back between the pillows and her eyes were half-closed. The small rosy mouth was half-open, and her face expressed neither terror nor anguish. Myosotis saw that around her nostrils and on her lips were a few traces of white powder”).

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” in *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity*, eds. Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 25.

³⁵ Derrida, “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” 26.

³⁶ Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).15.

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁸ On the significant role of figures of purity and contamination that characterized European discourse from this period, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 1, Women, floods, bodies, history*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), in particular 384–407.

turning inward, in closing borders, and in putting up walls. In this context, the valorization of interdependence and shared vulnerability that characterizes *Naja Tripudians* constitutes a courageous plea for the immunitary value of porous borders and heterogeneous communities. To read Vivanti's novel in this context is to understand it, finally, as a poignant and powerful tribute to openness and vulnerability in an age of fear and pandemic.

3. Quarantine

In the opening scene of the novel, Dr. Harding anxiously awaits news from Dr. Williams of his young wife, who is suffering a difficult labor in the next room. Though Dr. Williams assures him that there is no danger, Dr. Harding, hearing his wife's cries of pain through the door, makes as if to turn back. "No, no!" Dr. Williams says. "Non fareste che disturbarla. [...] Fuori, fuori..." ("You would only disturb her. [...] Out, out...").³⁹ Taking the distraught husband by the arm, Dr. Williams insists that the best thing is to keep his distance and let nature take its course.⁴⁰ Dr. Harding timidly obeys and decides to visit his daughter, whom he had sent away to stay with the village *maestra* during the labor, with the explanation that her mother had gone to the "giardino delle Esperidi a prenderti un fratellino" ("garden of the Hesperides to get you a little brother").⁴¹ This scene presents two overlapping quarantines. Just as Dr. Williams separates husband from wife, so too Dr. Harding separates wife from daughter. As medical practitioners, they are no doubt accustomed to prescribing confinement and isolation and to carefully limiting access to people as well as to information. Yet their prescriptions are ineffective: Mrs. Harding will die in childbirth just a few hours later, and Myosotis, strong-willed and anxious for news of her mother, will sneak out of the *maestra's* house at dawn. As we shall see, Dr. Harding's attempts to shield his daughters from the horrors of the world will prove equally ineffective.

The impossibility of perfect quarantine is a key theme in the novel. Wild-Forest's isolation from the outside world is repeatedly emphasized, which is why some critics have seen the novel as staging a contrast between the country idyll and the corrupt city. Yet, as Pischedda observes, the ironic tone of the narrative leads readers to perceive a certain gap between the villagers' perception of Wild-Forest and its reality.⁴² Though the villagers see their community as a safe haven far from the unsettling changes sweeping modern society⁴³—a place where "i tumultuosi eventi di un mondo lontano non giungevano a scuotere i calmi silenzi di quei patriarcali focolari" ("the turbulent events of a distant world could never reach out to disturb the tranquil peace of

³⁹ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

⁴² Pischedda, *Dieci nel Novecento*, 56. Critics have often observed the significant role that humor and irony play in Vivanti's writing. On this subject, see Sabrina Cavallucci, "Annie's Laugh: Humor, Satire, and Irony in Annie Vivanti's Works," in *Annie Chartres Vivanti: Transnational Politics, Identity, and Culture*, eds. Sharon Wood and Erica Moretti (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2016).

⁴³ On the significant theme of moral dissolution and the corruption of modern society in popular Italian literature, see Antonia Arslan, introduction to *Dame, droga e galline: Romanzo popolare e romanzo di consumo tra Ottocento e Novecento*, ed. Antonia Arslan (Milan: Unicopli, 1986), 43–48. Vivanti would have expected her readers to be well aware of the supposed threat of such a contagion. Understood in this light, her insistence of the inevitability of this contagion penetrating the "patriarcali focolari" ("traditional hearths") of the countryside has a specific political charge. Even as she speaks the language of her readers, she also makes the case that the changes sweeping modern culture be confronted, understood, and taken seriously, rather than merely ignored or dismissed as something happening "somewhere else."

those traditional hearths”)⁴⁴—the isolation of the village is presented in terms that are far from comforting, almost claustrophobic, and rather emphasize its insularity. Dr. Harding’s home, a half mile from the town, is more isolated still, so that “nessuna si scomodava mai per andarvi a fare visita” (“no one ever bothered to go visit”).⁴⁵

Significantly, this isolation serves merely to *reduce* the villagers’ exposure to, and therefore their knowledge of, the outside world: it is hardly enough to protect them from the “contamination” of foreign influence. Indeed, the reader cannot fail to notice that the town is in fact characterized by a fairly regular flow of people and goods, both in and out. Young Miss Smith, the local *maestra*, marries and moves to Leeds; she is replaced by Miss Jones, who arrives from London. Leeds is also the origin of many of the things that surround the Harding family, including their piano, clothes, seeds, and so on. Dr. Harding, though born and raised in Wild-Forest, spent his youth and early adulthood in the colonies, and since his return, engages in a fairly constant exchange of letters, books, and articles with other doctors and specialists in his field, which reach their tiny village from across the world, at times accompanied by invitations to participate in international scientific meetings and congresses. All this exchange with the outside world belies the initial presentation of the town as isolated and remote. The inhabitants’ false perception of their own isolation in fact proves to be a subtle yet important aspect of the narrative, as it is precisely their misplaced belief that they are beyond the reach of the “turbulent events” that characterize modern life elsewhere that makes them vulnerable. The village’s lack of exposure does not protect them from contagion, but it does prevent them from recognizing the threat posed by Lady Randolph and her entourage.

The impossibility of quarantine is a theme that would have been familiar to Vivanti’s readers. To live in the midst of pandemic is to recognize how deeply we are intermeshed. The threat of contagion reveals our shared vulnerability, forcing us to reckon with the reality that the risk of contamination is always present, despite our most rigorous attempts to limit our exposure. Lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing: these measures reveal the interdependence that binds communities together precisely because they demand the dismantling of the commons, which proves not only painful but surprisingly difficult. Ultimately, the impossibility of perfect quarantine—the impossibility of subtracting ourselves entirely from the risk of contagion—is a reminder that life cannot exist, in a very literal sense, in isolation. Exchange and interaction not only with the external environment but with other organic bodies is a necessary condition for life. We are built, in short, not for keeping things out but for letting things in. Quarantine is thus best understood as a sort of utopian concept, in the sense that it can only ever be partially approximated: the boundaries of the *lazaretto* inevitably allow for gaps and porosities which leave us exposed.

The impossibility of quarantine emerges again, although in a different key, in Vivanti’s children’s book *Sua Altezza!* (His Highness, 1924), published just a few years after *Naja Tripudians*. Vivanti, apparently annoyed by editorial dictates that she exclude references to romantic love, includes a humorous passage in the text that playfully critiques not only the desirability but also the feasibility of such censorship. Maria Truglio argues that Vivanti includes the episode in order to “critique the notion that love can be censured out of children’s experiences. The ridiculous and artificial strategy of keeping two separate stacks of paper in order to keep Eros out of the story implies that adults who attempt to sterilize experience and

⁴⁴ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

protect children from ‘Amore’ are engaging in a similarly artificial (and fruitless) endeavor.”⁴⁶ Truglio's metaphor of censorship as an attempt to “sterilize” life is suggestive. Ultimately, I argue that Vivanti underscores the futility of such attempts not to lament their inefficacy but to urge a different approach. We might glimpse here a certain affinity between Vivanti and those who advocate for the importance of sex education by pointing to statistics about teen pregnancy. Pointing to the impossibility of quarantine sidesteps the question of morality in order to insist, more simply, that the “contagion” cannot simply be ignored; it must be in some way confronted. Ultimately, careful attention to the figures of failed quarantines in *Naja Tripudians* reveals that, far from moralizing, Vivanti is interested rather in refuting any fantasy of perfect quarantine and insisting that the sources of moral “contagion” circulating in the body politic cannot be protected against through isolation alone. As we shall see in the following section, the impossibility of quarantine is in fact developed within a larger discourse of immunity that warns not only against the futility of such measures, but also to the potential dangers of excessive isolation.

4. Exposure

Just as Vivanti's editors sought to guarantee the innocence of their young readers by excluding Eros from the text, so too the inhabitants of Wild-Forest see the isolation in which they live as a guarantee of their innocence. This kind of innocence, however, depends on a lack of exposure to sources of evil or contamination, which therefore turns out to constitute a kind of ignorance that proves capable of endangering as well as protecting. The slippage between innocence and ignorance is revealed in a striking passage, toward the climax of the novel, when Myosotis finally becomes aware of the danger the two sisters are in.

D'un tratto, portentosa e trasecolante, come un velo strappato da mano violenta, ella ebbe la rivelazione fulminea della propria ignoranza. Come un cieco-nato a cui una folgore istantanea dia la percezione della sua cecità, così un lampo di chiaroveggenza squarciò improvviso la tenebra in cui lo spirito della fanciulla era sommerso.

Fino a quest'istante ella aveva ignorato che ignorasse qualcosa: innocente di essere innocente, ignara della sua inconsapevolezza. [...] [E]lla percepì di essere chiusa nel suo candore come in una prigione, avvolta dalla sua ingenuità come da una fitta nube, in cui disperatamente il suo spirito si dibatteva. L'istinto—folgore illuminatrice—aveva squarciato la sua notte, per rivelarle.... che cosa?

L'oscurità!⁴⁷

(Suddenly, portentous and shocking, like a veil ripped away by a violent hand, she experienced the dazzling revelation of her own ignorance. Just as a sudden flash of lightning reveals to the blind man his own blindness, so too a flash of clairvoyance suddenly pierced the darkness in which the girl's spirit was submerged.

Until this moment she had been unaware that she was ignorant of something: innocent of being innocent, ignorant of her ignorance [...]. [S]he realized that she

⁴⁶ Maria Truglio, “Annie in Wonderland: Vivanti's *Sua Altezza!* and Children's Literature During Fascism,” *Quaderni d'italianistica* 25, no. 1 (2004): 121–142, 136.

⁴⁷ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 197–198.

was enclosed in her candor as though in a prison, wrapped in her naiveté as in a thick cloud, in which her spirit was struggling. Instinct—enlightening lightning!—had torn through her night, to reveal to her....what?

The darkness!)

The isolation in which Myosotis has lived proves not to have protected her at all. Rather, it has "imprisoned" her in a "thick cloud" of ignorance that has prevented her from recognizing the danger surrounding her until it is too late.

The initial passages of the novel are dedicated to the young girls' education, which is characterized by a great deal of book learning and very little exposure to the world outside the Harding residence. Much of the irony of the early chapters plays on the irrelevance of what the girls are taught: Dr. Harding's stern instructions regarding the identification and treatment of tropical maladies are even more useless than the lessons they learn at school.⁴⁸ The sisters' one opportunity to gain experience of the world beyond Wild-Forest comes in the form of an invitation from a neighbor, Signora Russell, who proposes that the girls accompany her family on a brief holiday by the sea. Dr. Harding declines: his daughters, he protests, do not know how to swim. Neither Leslie's quite sensible objections ("E dove vuoi che impariamo a nuotare? Per istrada? nel prato?" ["And where do you want us to learn how to swim? On the street? In a field?"]⁴⁹) nor Signora Russell's arguments for the educational value of such a trip ("Solo così le nostre ragazze possono imparare a stare al mondo, a conoscere gente, a non trovarsi timide ed impacciate quando vanno in società" ["This is the only way our girls can learn how to be in the world, to meet people, and not find themselves shy and awkward when they enter into society"]⁵⁰) convince him to reconsider. Signora Russell's argument, like Leslie's point about learning to swim, emphasizes the fact that certain things cannot be learned in advance and must rather be acquired through direct experience. Still, Dr. Harding stubbornly refuses to give his consent, and the girls remain within the isolated bubble of their small village.

The juxtaposition of Signora Russell's invitation with the sisters' actual first venture into the world beyond Wild-Forest—an unaccompanied trip to London, then one of the largest and most dangerous cities in the world, to stay in the home of a casual acquaintance—is key to setting up the novel's interrogation of isolation and ignorance as strategies for protecting young women. Signora Russell's invitation represents an opportunity to gain experience of the world that might have then helped them to navigate the far more dangerous situation in which they later found themselves. The immunitary logic is implicit: just as one might protect or "innoculate"

⁴⁸ "E da lui appresero altre cose ugualmente utili per affrontare l'esistenza. Appresero quali sono i mezzi che si adoperano a Rio Janeiro e nell'Isola di Sumatra per neutralizzare il veleno dei serpenti; impararono a distinguere la *Naja Tripudians* — la funesta e terribile cobra egiziana — da altri rettili, quale il *Crotalus horridus* e il *Cerastes cornutus*; impararono a conoscere i sintomi determinati dalla puntura degli scorpioni di Columbia e quelli dei ragni del Capo di Buona Speranza; e conobbero la distribuzione geografica, la eziologia e la patogenesi della lebbra e del beri-beri. Così, preparate ed agguerrite alla vita, si affacciarono le due bionde sorelline alla soglia della giovinezza" (Ibid., 26; "And from him they learned other things just as useful in facing the world. They learned how in Rio Janeiro [sic] and in hte island of Sumatra they are able to neutralize the venom of snakes; they learned to distinguish the *Naja Tripudians*—the deadly and terrible Egyptian cobra—from other reptiles, such as *Crotalus horridus* and *Cerastes cornutus*; they learned to recognize the symptoms caused by the sting of the scorpions of Columbia and by the [bites of the] spiders of Colombia; and they learned the geographical distribution, etiology and pathogenesis of leprosy and beriberi. And this is how, trained and armed for life, the two blonde sisters approached the threshold of adolescence").

⁴⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48.

individuals against certain dangers by exposing them to the threat first in an attenuated form, so too Signora Russell seeks to provide the girls with a relatively safe environment in which to “expose” themselves to the world beyond Wild-Forest. As we shall see, there are in fact a number of clues that should have led the sisters to view Lady Randolph with some suspicion, both before and after the two girls arrive in London. Unfortunately, their “innocence,” or lack of exposure to the world, prevents them from recognizing the imminent presence of danger until it has nearly consumed them.

The importance of recognizing danger is thematized in a significant episode involving a flashback to Dr. Harding’s early years practicing medicine in the colonies. One of the doctor’s close friends was a man named Jean Vital, a “sensuale libertino francese” (“sensual French libertine”) known for his hot-blooded temperament.⁵¹ One evening, following an unsuccessful attempt to seduce his colleague’s wife, he is approached by a veiled figure who gives him instructions to meet her later that night. Assuming his colleague’s wife had changed her mind, he eagerly meets the woman at the appointed time and place. All seems well, until at dawn, he wakes up to find, to his horror, that she is not his colleague’s wife but a victim of leprosy. The moral here is clear: when you act in the dark, you cannot always see what you are doing.

Myosotis will eventually learn this lesson—but not until she has paid a steep price. Like Jean Vidal, she will accept an invitation from a strange woman, only to discover later that the woman is not who she claims to be. Most significantly, she fails to read the signs of danger that should warn her that things are not as they seem. For example, when the girls arrive at the station in London, they find Lady Randolph’s driver and a mysterious woman there to meet them. When Myosotis affirms that they have come alone, the woman promptly goes away, muttering to the driver that she hopes “Gaby” knows what she is doing. Myosotis is perplexed by this response, yet she is unable to make sense of it.⁵² Vivanti’s readers, however, may have gleaned something more: as Molesini-Spada points out, the name Gaby, “di natura palesemente gergale” (“of an overtly colloquial register”) should have been a clear hint to Vivanti’s readers that Lady Randolph was not an aristocrat but belonged to a lower social class.⁵³ Similarly, when Myosotis politely asks when the maid of honor to the Queen of Holland will arrive, the woman rudely laughs in her face: “Ma che! Quella era una storiella a tutto beneficio di vostro padre!” (“What nonsense! That was a little story for your father’s benefit!”).⁵⁴ Myosotis’ confusion, rather than putting her on guard, is quickly suppressed, thanks to a British education that would have placed a high premium on reserve, even in the face of extreme confusion or discomfort. As a result, hour by hour, rather than growing more cognizant of the danger that they are in, they instead seem to retreat into themselves, until the sisters appear almost paralyzed by their lack of understanding: “Immobili e attonite come due bambole, le due fanciulle sedevano sul divano assistendo ad uno spettacolo che non comprendevano, udendo delle parole che non intendevano” (“Motionless and stunned like two dolls, the two girls sat on the couch watching a show they did not comprehend, hearing words they did not understand”).⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid., 33.

⁵² “Myosotis si domandava perchè mai quella signora quando aveva saputo ch’erano sole, se ne era andata. Le pareva una ragione di più perchè restasse con loro e le accompagnasse. Vagamente si domandò anche chi poteva essere ‘Gaby,’ e in che sorta di pasticci stava per mettersi...” (Ibid., 85; “Myosotis wondered why the lady had left when she learned they were alone. It seemed to her all the more reason why she should stay and accompany them. She also vaguely wondered who ‘Gaby’ might be, and what kind of trouble she was about to get herself into...”).

⁵³ Molesini-Spada, “Idillio e tragico: verifica di uno schema,” 493.

⁵⁴ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 110

The gap between the reader's understanding and that of the two girls allows Vivanti to play a sort of game with the reader in the final chapters of the novel, which depict the girls' time in London. Lady Randolph's home proves to be a den of vice, and these pages contain fairly graphic depictions of drug use, sexual deviance, and violence, including the sadistic abuse of animals. Despite this dark backdrop, however, it is not immediately obvious what Lady Randolph intends to do with the two girls, and because Myosotis and Leslie prove oblivious to what is happening around them, the reader is forced to work out for themselves what exactly is going on. As Vivanti gradually furnishes more and more clues about the nature of Lady Randolph's intentions for the two girls, the reader eventually is able to determine the precise nature of the threat. The novel thus has a significant didactic function: not only does it warn readers about the dangers that might threaten a young girl alone in the city, it perhaps more importantly trains them to interpret the signs of danger around them.⁵⁶

This aspect of the novel raises interesting questions about the role of *Jane Eyre*, a work that enchants Myosotis and Leslie. The sisters pass many long afternoons discussing the story and characters, which seem so different from the ordinariness of their own lives. Though the novel depicts in no uncertain terms the danger that can befall a young woman alone, it is useless in helping Myosotis and Leslie to recognize the danger that surrounds them. On the contrary, it seems to lead Myosotis astray. When one of the men attempts to grab Myosotis and pins her hands behind her back, she remains stubbornly convinced that there is no danger, in part because she is looking for the wrong signs: "Non erano forse persone come tutte le altre? Persone ricche, persone vestite bene, persone affabili e sorridenti? Non erano già dei ladri che s'incontrano di notte per la strada, non già dei criminali feroci, o dei malati il cui contatto è letale..." ("Were they not people like all the others? Rich people, well-dressed people, agreeable and smiling people? They were not thieves that you meet in the street at night, nor vicious criminals, nor sick people whose contact is lethal").⁵⁷ Myosotis' reasoning bears the unmistakable stamp of one who has read too many gothic romances. Her view that there is no danger is based on the absence of literary motifs that characterized the gothic tales of horror that circulated in that period. No dark hallways, no mysterious rooms—and yet the danger is terribly real. Far from teaching young girls to recognize sources of danger, *Jane Eyre* seems to provide them with a false confidence: the signs of danger in novels do not necessarily coincide with the signs of danger that appear in real life.

In the end, neither reason nor experience will save Myosotis. If she makes it out of the situation alive, it is because fear will help her to reach an unexpected revelation. What is revealed to her is not the nature of the danger that she is in, but the fact that she has lived in ignorance. She realizes that she has been "innocente di essere innocente, ignara della sua inconsapevolezza" ("innocent of being innocent, ignorant of her own ignorance") and that she has lived not in light but in darkness, "chiusa nel suo candore come in una prigione" ("enclosed in her candor as though in a prison"). The novel thus reveals the paradoxical threat of being "too" innocent, in the sense of being untouched, pure, uncontaminated. In other words, innocence is revealed as a kind of *ignorance* of evil that endangers Myosotis: it is precisely her lack of "exposure" that renders her vulnerable to moral contagion. Vivanti's novel thus points to

⁵⁶ Vivanti certainly believed in the didactic potential of her novels, and it is telling that she insisted that her children's book be labeled a "favola" rather than a "fiaba," a difference which, as Maria Truglio explains, turns on whether the story has a pedagogical thrust and, specifically, if it contains an "ammaestramento morale" ("moral teaching"). On this point, see Truglio, "Annie in Wonderland," 126.

⁵⁷ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 118.

the way in which strategies of isolation, censorship, and containment fail to protect young girls from evil, and rather shroud them in an ignorance that renders them terribly vulnerable. The moral of the story, then, seems to be that young girls ought to be not isolated from evil but exposed to it, through an educational approach that includes not merely book knowledge but that also recognizes the value of first-hand experience.

5. Pharmakon

Myosotis' recognition of her own ignorance proves insufficient, taken alone, to get her out of trouble. In order to escape the clutches of these villains, as we shall see, she will need not merely to expose herself to the source of contagion, but to incorporate it within herself. Here, again, we recognize the immunity paradigm. Esposito, in his reflections on early modern medicine and the *pharmakon*, describes a new framework that emerges with Paracelsus, according to which

even [...] potentially destructive elements can be used productively to strengthen the whole of which they are a part [...]. Just as governments often make legitimate use of agent provocateurs or encourage sedition to ferret out potential conspirators, disease can also produce good and therefore be artificially reproduced for this purpose, at least if there is someone who is able "to make even poisons medicinal" as Forset expresses it.⁵⁸

Myosotis' ability to save herself depends, as we shall see, not only on her recognition of her own ignorance, but on her ability to "make even poisons medicinal." In the end, Myosotis preserves her own moral virtue only after she realizes that doing so will require that she incorporate that which she is attempting to defend against and compromise that which she seeks to protect.

The climax of the novel occurs in the final pages, when one of the young men, Neversol, grabs Myosotis by the arm, intending to rape her; she wriggles out of his grasp, only to find another man coaxing her younger sister to inhale a line of cocaine. Her weak attempt to extricate herself and her sister from the situation is absurd, and her timidity and good manners are revealed as almost farcically out of place in this den of vice:

[S]i avvicinò a Milady. [...]

L'istinto della sincerità non le permise di mentire. —Signora,—disse timidamente—mia sorella ed io siamo stanche dal viaggio. Se permettete, ci vorremmo ritirare...⁵⁹

([S]he approached Milady. [...])

The instinct of sincerity did not allow her to lie. 'Ma'am,' she said shyly. 'My sister and I are tired from the journey. If you please, we would like to retire...')

Myosotis' refusal to lie in this situation—her unwillingness to compromise her own moral code—places her in grave danger.

It is just following this incident that she experiences the "revelation" of her own ignorance, which leads her to realize that her salvation may well depend not on choosing the path of virtue

⁵⁸ Esposito, *Immunitas*, 142.

⁵⁹ Vivanti, *Naja Tripudians*, 193–194.

but on choosing between two evils: “Fuggite! fuggite, — urlava il cieco Istinto — [...] Gettatevi entrambe dall'alto di quel ponte sopra le nere acque del Tamigi.... Questo è ancora salvarvi!” (“Flee! flee!” cried blind Instinct. ‘Throw yourselves both from the top of that bridge over the black waters of the Thames... that is still saving yourself!’).⁶⁰ Desperately seeking an escape, she runs through the house only to encounter Neversol once more. Still intent on raping her, he pulls her by the arm again, but this time she violently resists: “Myosotis parve ubbidire, indi con uno strappo subitaneo che sembrava doverle rompere il braccio, si svincolò da lui e balzò giù per la scalinata” (“Myosotis seemed to obey, then with a sudden jerk that nearly broke her arm, she freed herself from him and leapt down the stairs”).⁶¹ Myosotis then returns to the main room in a last-ditch attempt to save her sister, whom she finds immobile in the clutches of Lady Randolph, with traces of cocaine still on her lips. It is Myosotis’ desperation at this sight that leads her to take a further step, not merely an act of resistance or disobedience but a willful and knowing act of deceit:

Allora nacque in lei l’astuzia, l’astuzia femminile. Fissando lo sguardo su Neversol, tornò rapida e tremante a lui e gli toccò la mano con una lieve carezza della sua piccola mano diaccia.

—Chiamate Lady Randolph! —Sussurrò.

— Allontanatela da mia sorella.... Ch’io possa parlarle...

Neversol le affondò negli occhi le sue cupe pupille.

—E poi?... Sarete buona?...

Myosotis rispose a quello sguardo col vergine sguardo celeste.

—E poi.... Sarò buona, —disse.⁶²

(Then was born in her guile, feminine guile. Fixing her gaze on Neversol, she returned swiftly and tremblingly to him, and touched his hand with gentle caress of her cold little hand.

‘Call Lady Randolph!’ she whispered. ‘Get her away from my sister.... so that I may speak to her...’

Neversol sunk his dark eyes into her. ‘And then?.... Will you be good?...’

Myosotis returned his look with a celestial and innocent gaze. ‘And then.... I will be good,’ she said.)

In this remarkable passage, Vivanti offers a feminist reclamation of “astuzia femminile” (“feminine guile”): rather than signifying immoral or deceitful behavior, “astuzia” is presented as a means of resisting the immoral actions of others and of protecting her own virtue. Myosotis’ escape, and the preservation of her virtue and self, therefore depends on her recognition of the necessity of exposing herself to and incorporating a certain kind of immoral behavior.

The immunitary logic of this conclusion offers a compelling way of understanding how Vivanti links the immunitary discourse to a plea for women’s education and the importance of allowing women to leave home and hearth and to enter fully into the world, despite the potential dangers that might await them. As Esposito reminds us, “When we vaccinate a patient against a disease, what we do is introduce a controlled and bearable amount of that disease into the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 199.

⁶¹ Ibid., 204.

⁶² Ibid., 206.

organism. Hence, in this instance, medicine is the very poison from which medicine ought to protect us.”⁶³ This introduces a slippage between medicine and poison, so that ultimately what becomes important is the knowledge of how to measure the dose.

Vivanti’s *Naja Tripudians* is a strange tale. Rather than a morality tale, I read it as constituting a sort of “anti-morality tale,” in which the “moral” of the story warns against the immoral things that can result from resisting immoral things. I have traced, across my analysis of the text, a series of complex and interwoven ideas having to do with quarantine, isolation, and immunity, that move fluidly between the discourse of medicine and morality—and that do so in a way that, I argue, seeks not to collapse the two but rather to tease apart that ancient association of sin and disease, health and righteousness, purity and cleanliness, and so on. It is a story about the importance of education—but it is also about using that knowledge in order to act, and about the importance of knowing how to deploy that knowledge in a practical way, so as to “make even Poisons medicinal.” It is also a story that warns against the danger of excessive isolation, of closing off contact and retreating behind walls. In *Naja Tripudians* Vivanti goes beyond good and evil: rather than setting up rigid boundaries between righteousness and sin, emphasizing the importance of resisting temptation and choosing the path of virtue, she predicates her moral message, paradoxically, on the collapse of those same boundaries. To be a good woman, as it turns out, you may have to know how to be a little bad.

⁶³ Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics,” 211.