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### From *Transvestite Text* to *Militant Camp*: A Comparison Between A. Corteau's *The Book Of Katerina* and K. Taktsis' *The Third Wedding Wreath*

Francesca Zaccone

Sapienza Università di Roma

**Abstract** – The article provides a close reading of the novel *To Βιβλίο της Κατερίνας* [The Book of Katerina] by Auguste Corteau, highlighting its connections and divergences from *To τρίτο Στεφάνι* [The Third Wedding Wreath] by Kostas Taktsis. It explores issues of social gender, family, and autobiography through the lens of *camp* discourse. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis builds on Fabio Cleto's considerations of queer readings of camp discourse.

**Keywords** – Auguste Corteau; *The Book of Katerina*; Kostas Taktsis; *The Third Wedding Wreath*; Militant Literature; Camp Literature.

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# From *Transvestite Text* to Militant Camp: A Comparison Between A. Corteau's *The Book Of Katerina* and K. Taktsis' *The Third Wedding Wreath*<sup>1</sup>

Francesca Zaccone

Sapienza Università di Roma

## Introduction

Auguste Corteau (pseudonym of Petros Chatzopoulos, 1979) is one of the foremost writers on the contemporary Greek literary landscape; his prolific production spans fiction, children's books, poetry, translation, theatre and cinema,<sup>2</sup> often characterised by humour. His most renowned work, *The Book of Katerina* (2013), achieved great success and was a best-seller, translated abroad.<sup>3</sup> It inspired the theatre play *Katerina*, performed by Lena Papaligoura and directed by Giorgos Nanoures, appreciated by public and critics; and was followed in 2022 by Corteau's novel *H ἄλλη Κατερίνα* [The other Katerina].

*The Book of Katerina* is an explicitly biographical novel focusing on bipolar disorder and mental health. The book is part family saga, part biography of the author's mother, who committed suicide a few years before its publication. Katerina's first-person narrative, delivered from the afterlife, recounts her ancestors' lives, her childhood, youth, wedding, the birth of her son, and her eventual suicide.

Kostas Taktsis (1927-1988), a notable figure in 20th-century Greek literature, is occasionally mentioned in critiques of Corteau's work,<sup>4</sup> particularly in relation to his work *To τρίτο στεφάνι* [The Third Wedding Wreath], considered a milestone in the history of Modern Greek novel. (Kourtovik) The book follows Nina, a middle-aged woman in 1950s Athens, as she reflects on her three tumultuous marriages amid societal and personal upheavals. Her life story, marked by infidelity, war, and an uneasy third marriage, highlights the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. The novel paints a vivid portrait of post-war Greek life and the enduring resilience of its characters.

<sup>1</sup> The idea for this paper was inspired by concepts discussed in *Κάτι τρέχει με την οικογένεια. Έθνος, πόθος και συγγένεια την εποχή της κρίσης* [There's something about the family. Nation, desire and kinship in the time of the crisis] (2020) by Dimitris Papanikolaou; specifically, I refer to the reflections on Auguste Corteau (208-9). I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments and valuable suggestions, which have significantly improved the quality of this manuscript. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Richard Davies from Parthian, for providing early access to Claire Pamamichail's translation of the *Book of Katerina* prior to its publication.

<sup>2</sup> The author's personal website ("Books") puts together a substantial although not updated list of his works; more can be found on the literary website *Biblionet* ("Auguste Corteau").

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, *To βιβλίο της Κατερίνας* was translated in Italian (*Il libro di Katerina*, translated by Michela Corvino), in English (*The Book of Katerina*, translated by Claire Pamamichail) and in Spanish (*El libro de Katerina*, translated by Ersi Samarà).

<sup>4</sup> By means of example, see Kolokoures; Tsagkarake.

*The Book of Katerina* engages in an intertextual dialogue with *The Third Wedding Wreath*, paralleling setting, character personalities, themes, and language,<sup>5</sup> exploring issues central to both writers. The conversation between the two novels revolves around three key pillars, close in different ways to the two authors: social gender and homosexuality; family as the context in which crucial dynamics for personal development are created; the intertwining of autobiography and identity, subject and author, fiction and non-fiction. Corteau's work appears to pick up the threads left loose decades prior by Taktsis, transforming them into a form I would call militant. In the following sections, I will compare the two texts to better highlight the involved, and socially and politically aware nature of *The Book of Katerina*.

## 1. Theatricality and Gender Roles in Taktsis' *The Third Wedding Wreath*

Christopher Robinson described *The Third Wedding Wreath* «A transvestite text, a text which stages a debate about the literary representation of gender stereotypes in the mask and costume of a realist reflection of those stereotypes» (213). Robinson's extensive study is among the first to read Taktsis' work through the lens of sexuality and gender; he argues that *The Third Wedding Wreath* offers a close connection between textuality and sexuality, behind which lies a metatextual conversation between author and reader. Robinson bases his argument on the 'theatricality' of the novel, a frequent feature in the author's work: firstly, the author has to take on the aspect, the clothes of a woman – Nina – to lead the narrative; Nina in turn wears the mask of Ekavi, by reporting her friend's words, and in so doing lends a dialogic nature to her first person monologue; finally, the characters' names – Hecuba, Helen, Polyxena – along with Homeric echoes in the plot, create a network of intertextual references with Euripidean texts, in particular in *Hecuba* and *The Trojans*, a connection made explicit by Taktsis in a 1983 interview<sup>6</sup> (Taktsis, “Δεν θεωρώ τον εαυτό μου ερωτικό συγγραφέα” 169). Euripides' dramatic plays, Robinson states, represent the exemplification of gender stereotypes in a patriarchal society, and they form its foremost literary authority; read alongside them, *The Third Wedding Wreath* reveals a reflection of said stereotypes in contemporary Greek culture and comments on their representation in its coeval literary tradition. According to Robinson, Taktsis «undermines our sense of gender certainties and shows that in literature gender roles are the product of a discourse and not a reflection of reality» (213). What stereotypes exactly, however, does Taktsis deconstruct? The author's operation, as Robinson also notes, is one of subversion of the traditional understanding of power dynamics between genders, and, within the male gender more specifically, between homosexuality and heterosexuality; he portrays, then, a reality in which gay characters, and not patriarchs, are the hegemonic role in both family and society, while also recasting the notion of woman as victim and suffering mother. If Ekavi initially seems to be channelling Hecuba, as the plot develops, Nina's scathing remarks align her character with that of someone who harms her own children. Furthermore, Nina, as a woman narrating in the first person, disrupts the equivalence between masculinity and discourse: as French feminists of the school of écriture féminine demonstrated approximately a decade after the *Third Wedding Wreath*'s publication, literature is mainly phallogocentric; (see Irigaray, Cixous) even when a narrator is ostensibly presented as neutral, they still convey a masculine perspective and position. Under this point of view then, by steering the narrative Nina certainly attempts a challenge to the association of 'phallos' with 'logos'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The first to notice the proximities of the two books and, as far as I am able to tell, the only to write about them extensively is Elias Kolokoures (Kolokoures).

<sup>6</sup> Corinne Jouanno reads a reflection of the couple Clytemnestra/Electra in the relationship between Nina and her daughter (Jouanno).

<sup>7</sup> An in-depth analysis of Taktsis's style is carried out by Valkanou and Kourouni.

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Taktsis, then, highlights the role that tragedy's archetypal system, culturally patriarchal, has played in the formation of contemporary Greek thought regarding gender and its literary representation; he seems to want to criticise, by so doing, this influence as instrumental to the construction of a narrative that obfuscates an entirely different familial reality, one in which, as Peter Mackridge notes:

Women compete with one another for possession of their menfolk and children, and their actions – enticing, duping, wheedling, and punishing – are dictated by this desire of control. The determination to keep the family under her control leads to the mother's "worship" or "pathological love" for her son [...], whom she makes dependent upon her by waiting on him hand and foot indulging his every whim as long as it keeps him tied to his apron-strings. (176)

If Taktsis' *transvestite text* is meant to reveal gender roles as social and cultural constructs, it does not do so in order to entirely deny the existence of roles and qualities dependent and tied to a biological sex, but rather to offer a new framing of said roles; this new framing, mystified by an ancient cultural discourse, can only really be understood by closely observing events taking place within domestic walls.<sup>8</sup> Biological sex does lead to specific behaviours and roles, according to Taktsis, who confirms this belief during an interview which was released approximately two decades after the publication of the book. In the interview, the author states that *The Third Wedding Wreath* had been «an exercise in identifying as a woman»<sup>9</sup> and he claimed he had been convinced to be able to perfectly understand women in the past, but to no longer believed to be able to do so because:

– let's face it – whatever tricks a man can use, it is impossible by nature for him to understand not only how, but most of all why a woman thinks the way she thinks, feels the way she feels, acts the way she acts. [...] The barrier of the *biological* difference is impenetrable, and its destined and unavoidable consequence is the existence of a huge gap between the mentalities of the two genders, a gap that nothing, nothing in the world, much less a surgical intervention, will ever be able to mitigate or bridge over.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The short story collection *Ta ρέστα* [The Small Change], published in 1972, does contain similar observations: the sequence of texts in the collection reveal a narrative which explores the various, suffocating declensions of gender; gender itself emerges as a more or less direct and controllable product of a cross-section of social forces and relations. The texts also accuse family as the primary context in which these declensions are imposed. For a reading of the body as the main field on which gender norms are imposed and/or negotiated, see Zaccone. Alongside this exploration is a «parallel conquest of the narrative and sexual "I" headed in a decidedly homoerotic direction. This complex journey into maturity, however, finds its conclusion in the final story of the collection *H πρώτη εικόνα* [The First Picture], as a «rough Freudian analysis» (Papanikolaou, "Δέκα χρόνια κομμάτια. Τα Ρέστα, ο Ταχτής και η εποχή τους" 183). The conclusion is, in fact, an argument attacking the power that women held in his family: they would have allegedly prevented him from identifying with the male figures in his life, and unwillingly led him to seek pleasure with people of his same sex. As Dimitris Papanikolaou acutely observes, there is a clear contradiction between this story and all those preceding it, marking his work as liminal, open, providing proof in support of the fluid nature of categorisation of social gender and the erosive effect of sexuality upon them.

<sup>9</sup> «μια άσκηση ταύτισης με μια γυναίκα». (Taktsis, *Από τη χαμηλή σκοπιά* 151)

<sup>10</sup> «— κακά τα φέματα – ό,τι κόλπα και αν χρησιμοποιήσει ένας άντρας, είναι απ' τη φύση αδύνατο να καταλάβει, όχι μόνο πως, αλλά κυρίως γιατί σκέπτεται όπως σκέπτεται, νιώθει όπως νιώθει, ενεργεί όπως ενεργεί μια γυναίκα. [...] Το φράγμα της βιολογικής διαφοράς είναι αδιαπέραστο, η μοιραία κι αναπόφευκτη συνέπεια την ύπαρξη ενός τεράστιου χάσματος στην ψυχοσύνθεση των δύο φύλων, που τίποτα, μα τίποτα στον κόσμο, και λιγότερο απ' όλα μια χειρουργική επέμβαση, δεν είναι ικανό να αμβλύνει ή να γεφυρώσει». (Taktsis, *Από τη χαμηλή σκοπιά*, 49)

The reference to biology as an impenetrable barrier between genders leaves very few doubts as to the essentialist nature of Taktsis thought in this interview; further, resorting to nature as criteria to evaluate the possibility of an identification with a different gender may be confounding, coming from an author who regularly deals with cross-dressing and is very open about his homosexuality. This position however also reflects an acknowledgement of Taktsis' controversial public persona, and especially his public statements regarding the political value of homosexuality and the various gay liberation movements which saw their birth in the latter part of the 1970s: on the one hand, he had cultivated, throughout the 1960s and further, the image of an openly gay man, who enjoyed cross-dressing and sex-work, and of someone whose politics were potentially radical; on the other, he repeatedly denied on multiple occasions to support the then newly born AKOE,<sup>11</sup> which he felt did not represent him, amongst others because of its identitarian agenda.

## 2. Family Dynamics and Autobiography in Corteau's *The Book of Katerina*

On a macro level, the most recognisable shared element between *The Book of Katerina* and *The Third Wedding Wreath* is undoubtedly that of 'cross-dressing', i.e. the female mask worn by the male, gay author, in order to develop a discourse which includes a complex reflection on gender construction and homosexuality. Taktsis, however, centred this discourse around the issue of *fictionality* through the numerous references to the literariness or theatricality of people's behaviour and language, the use of proper names which belong to a specific literary context or tradition, the motif of tale spinning and self-mythologizing; and finally the device of «turning real writers into literature» (Robinson 208). Corteau, on the contrary, does not retell a myth, but rather deconstructs it and moves towards reality.

### 2.1 Blending Reality and Fiction, Engaging the Reader

*The Book of Katerina* has always been described by its author, in interviews and events, as a reconstruction of his mother's family history and as a biography of his mother; the author's explicit statements on the matter seem confirmed by paratextual elements: the cover features a black and white photograph of a child who might indeed be Katerina herself; among the various characters, we find Petros Chatzopoulos, Auguste Corteau's legal name, and the book opens with a visual representation of the main character's family tree, in which Chatzopoulos is visibly placed separately from every other family member.<sup>12</sup> The caption under the image reads «Τα κύρια πρόσωπα αυτής της αφήγησης» (The main characters of the narration), choosing the somehow neutral term *αφήγηση* to describe the text as a whole; although this term can potentially refer to both fiction and non-fiction, it is not amongst the most frequently used

<sup>11</sup> Acronym of *Απελευθερωτικό Κίνημα Ομοφυλοφίλων Ελλάδας*, i.e. Greek Movement for the Liberation of Homosexuals, founded in 1977.

<sup>12</sup> An objection might be that the name of P.Ch. appears separated from all the others, relegated to a lower line, only because he belongs to the last generation of characters; we must remember though that Katerina's siblings' children are also mentioned in the novel, i.e. Chatzopoulos's cousins, who could easily have been included in the same position as him; they were not, however, included at all in the visual representation of the family genealogy.

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expressions to highlight the non-documentary but rather fictional nature of a narrative (which are usually described by the words μυθιστόρημα or διήγημα).<sup>13</sup>

This attempt to convince the reader of the historical accuracy of the events and the characters they are about to encounter is counterbalanced by an opening that immediately leads them into the realms of imagination and of the incredible:

My story begins at the end – both the story's end and my own.

My son found me. Crack of dawn on Friday, five days before he turned twenty-four. He knew right away I was dead, although nothing had changed around the house; maybe because, even in death, I greeted him at the door as always. (Corteau, *The Book of Katerina* 1)

In the first chapter, the reader discovers that Katerina, who has passed away, is speaking her monologue from the afterlife and is telling her story starting from the finding of her own corpse. These first words kickstart two mechanisms whose importance is fundamental to the development of the narrative: first of all, and precisely because it is preceded by a series of reassurances as to the veracity of the events in the book, the narrative convention is not established implicitly – as a silent pact between author and reader – but rather explicitly. Because of this, the reader's active participation in the narrative game is demanded; since the reader has been warned that they are about to read a true story, the fantastic opening prevents them from maintaining a passive position, and pushes them to *engage* in order to accept the speculative narrative lens.

Secondly, the extreme suspension of disbelief required of the reader in order to accept that the story is being told by a dead person speaking from the afterlife overshadows the author's cross-dressing, i.e. narrative through a female instead of male mask; in other words, a reader previously convinced to be reading a biography, is now called to accept a narrative mode that belongs to a fantastical *genre*, and is therefore encouraged to recognise how *gender* can also be mere convention.

This explicit blend of reality and fiction continues in another form within the novel itself, especially in the second part of the book; I would like, however, to focus on the first part right after the reader has been persuaded to *engage* and accept a convention regarding the narrator's gender in the opening sentences. The novel could ideally be split into two sections, the watershed being the birth of the main character's son Petros. The first part includes the history of Katerina's family and her childhood, her youth, and her marriage; it is characterised by a style I would define as 'alternating', as the sombre approach to more dramatic aspects of her family history and Katerina's mental suffering is immediately followed by comedic passages. The second part of the novel, which focuses on the failing of Katerina's married life and her symbiotic relationship with Petros, sees the main character's monologue turn into a dual narrative while still maintaining its single voice.

### 2.2 Alternating Style and Camp Discourse

The first part's alternating style almost seems to be intent on reproducing the succession of manic and depressive phases of Katerina's bipolar disorder. The writing here is colloquial and excited, rich with explicit high-brow and pop culture references, followed by long lists of

<sup>13</sup> The label Μυθιστόρημα (Novel) does appear on the Greek book cover, alongside with the reprint number. However, it is common practice in the Greek publishing industry in general and it is the standard custom of the Pataki publishing house in particular to specify the literary genre on the cover of the book; therefore, I believe this wording should be attributed to the publisher and not to the author.

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names and titles which occur several times in the narrative. The peaks of humour in Katerina's voice are characterised by, as Dimitris Papanikolaou states, «pop building up, systematic self-sarcasm, sacrilegious undermining (of anything [...]), anarchic mixing of references, a certain indifference towards the grand scheme and the national narrative».<sup>14</sup> This is a form of «irony and humour that we could call camp».<sup>15</sup> An example can be seen in Katerina's description of her mother:

My mother: a woman who has suffered adversity and humiliation, who has lived and grown old without knowing the pleasure of romantic love, and strives, like the heroine of a cheap sentimental novel, to fill her inner void with a load of the overpriced crap that the antique dealers and decorators of Thessaloniki keep plying her with. She takes frequent trips on her own and longs to move to Athens where she believes she'll be able to rub elbows with the heirs of old-monied, respectable aristocracy [...].<sup>16</sup> (Corteau, *The book of Katerina* 17)

The passage brings together some of the rhetorical strategies that Keith Harvey (240-260) identified as representative of camp language: the parody of aristocratic mannerism, which in other places of the novel is obtained through the use of Katharevousa and French, whereas here is reached through the criticism of the mother's wealth ambitions; the paradox through incongruities of register («a load of the overpriced crap that the antique dealers and decorators of Thessaloniki keep plying her with»; «heirs of old-monied, respectable aristocracy»). Elsewhere, we can find other techniques which can be linked to camp language, such as grotesque by heightened language awareness through motivated naming practices (as in the nicknames given to the characters, in particular to Katerina's sister Kliò and her son Petros); inversion of gendered proper nouns and grammatical gender markers (especially in the case of *H Baygélw η Φανατικά*, the female nickname given to the womanising uncle, translated as *Vangelis the Arse-Snatcher*); several instances of word play and double entendres referring to sexual acts («whenever Mum was visited by the Spirit of Urgent Redecoration, we were sent off packing to Platamon along with Dad and Zoë, so she could go nuts with the furniture people and the various decorators», Corteau, *The book of Katerina* 21)<sup>17</sup> and a myriad references and quotations from music, cinema, Greek and European literature, and politics.

Through campness, the novel creates a theatricality which differs from what we have seen in Taktsis in more than one way: on a stylistic level; on the dramatic and performative levels which the discourse necessarily inhabits, reinforced by the author's choice to wear a female

<sup>14</sup> «Ποπ καθίζηση, μόνιμος αυτοσαρκασμός, ιερόσυλη υπονόμευση (των πάντων [...]) αναρχική ανάμειξη παραπομπών, σχετική αδιαφορία για τη μεγάλη εικόνα και την εθνική αφήγηση». (Papanikolaou, *Kάπι τρέχει με την οικογένεια* 207)

<sup>15</sup> «Ειδωνεία και χιούμορ που θα μπορούσαμε να ονομάσουμε καμπ». (Papanikolaou, *Kάπι τρέχει με την οικογένεια* 208)

<sup>16</sup> «Η μάνα μου: μια γυναίκα που έχει περάσει κακουγίες και ταπεινώσεις, που έχει ζήσει και γεράσει χωρίς να γνωρίσει τη χαρά του έρωτα, που πασχίζει, σαν ηρωίδα κακού μυθιστορήματος για γυναίκες, να γεμίσει το μέσα της κενό μ' ένα σωρό υπερτιμημένες μαλακίες που της μοσχοπούλανε οι αντικέρ διακοσμητές της Σαλονίκης. Απ' τα ταξίδια που κάνει συχνά μοναχή της, έχει πόθο διακαή την μετακόμιση στην Αθήνα, όπου φαντάζεται πως θα μπορεί να συναναστρέψεται γύρους παλαιών τζακιών και φουφούδων». (Corteau, *To βιβλίο της Κατερίνας* 33)

<sup>17</sup> My emphasis. «όποτε η μάνα μου πάθαινε οίστρο και ήθελε ν' αλλάξει διακύμηση, μας έστελνε πακέτο στον Πλαταμώνα, μαζί με τον μπαμπά και τη Ζωή, κι εκείνη οργιάζε με τους ταπετσέρηδες» (Corteau, *To βιβλίο της Κατερίνας* 38). The English translation is very effective; however, the original Greek wording also conceals a sexual innuendo, channelled by expressions such as «πάθαινε οίστρο» (literally *to be in estrus* with the double meaning of the divinely inspired poetic enthusiasm and the heat of animals during mating season) and «οργιάζε» (used in a metaphorical sense to indicate abundance or exaggeration, its literal meaning being *participated in orgies*).

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mask; and finally, in the reference to being-as-performing-a-role and life-as-theatre, both identified by Susan Sontag in the first attempt to describe campness. (Sontag 515-530; Cleto, *Per una definizione del camp*, *passim*) Camp and its theatricality, which have always been more or less directly identified as an aesthetic form related to gay subjectivity, are a subversive and deconstructive element of gender categories.<sup>18</sup> Its parodying of femininity, indeed, features an exaggeration and an exuberance which communicate an artificial convention of the female sexual role, questioning the natural state of any gender systems as a result. By casting irony upon womanhood and 'imitating' it, camp denaturalises gender categories and brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the original it imitates. In this sense, then, camp promotes a feminist perspective and forms the premise for the application of a constructivist approach to gay subjectivities, placing itself as a militant rhetorical tool which brings into the literary sphere the political framework that Corteau presents in interviews, public appearances and more in general with his support of movements acting against gender- and sexuality-based discrimination.

This engagement can also be found in several other aspects of the text, such as the story of the Jewish ancestor Sara, forced to convert to Christianity and take on a new name, Katina, which is telling in many ways. If, on the one hand, the name is but a diminutive of Katerina, on the other it designates a woman of low social extraction, often vulgar and prone to gossip: (Triantafyllides) the transformation of Sara in Katina through christening is not only a religious conversion but also a social one, from woman from a distant land and heir of a different lineage, keeper of an exoticism which is potentially fearsome because unknown, to a 'tamed' specimen of the known woman. This is what seems to be alluded to in the sentence «A married woman now, with a roof over her head, Sarah soon turns into Katina at heart and churns out Dimitrós's brood». (Corteau, *The Book of Katerina* 3) The name *Katina*, however, contains a further semantic layer, as its essentially misogynistic nature was reclaimed and resignified by the feminist periodical magazine *Katina*, in circulation between 1985 and 1995 in Thessaloniki.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Militant Camp and Political Engagement

The use of a camp style in the first part of the novel, therefore, channels a conversation relating to gender as a social construct, more or less openly feminist and critical of specific representations of femininity. In the second part of the novel, where the alternating styles reach some form of balance and uniformity, another element is introduced which can be linked back to a political stance: the duality of the narrative voice. Starting from the moment when Petros is born, Katerina's monologue slowly opens itself to cracks through which Petros' own voice can be heard. His voice can be identified in the more or less brief parenthetical asides – from in-line comments to full paragraphs – that start accompanying Katerina's tale, progressively becoming more frequent. These are flashforwards that foresee the consequences of the main character's behaviour, intentional or not, on her son's life: at these moments in the text, the tone is closer to that of an *a posteriori* filial recrimination. As an example, what follows is the passage in which Katerina accuses herself of having forced her son into obesity:

<sup>18</sup> Initially, camp discourse has been interpreted by critics as a reactionary manner of closeted individuals, connected to the art of passing as a tool of expression at once revealing and defensive for those who have internalised the social stigma of homosexuality. I refer here summarily to the seminal work by S. Sontag, J. Babuscio e M. Booth, found in Cleto, *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*.

<sup>19</sup> When I asked A. Corteau in private correspondence whether the name Katina were a direct reference to the feminist movements in his hometown, he replied that it was merely a happy coincidence, due to the homonymy with another of his grandmothers.

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But the gravest crime, which I'll live to regret, is on his fifth birthday, when estimating that the only things he's eaten all day are a couple of Mars bars and a cup of orange juice, I go to the nearest pharmacy and get a bottle of appetite stimulant called Mosegor, and start giving him a spoonful each day along with royal jelly, until my Petros balloons to double his weight within a matter of months. He'll be chubby for the remainder of his childhood; it will take him more than fifteen years to shed this weight I put on him like a curse. (Corteau, *The Book of Katerina* 98)

These 'previews' revealing to the reader the impact of Katerina's behaviour on Petros' life even beyond the timeframe of the story often contain echoes of biographical details of author Auguste Corteau's life, which also emerge from other works and interviews. The reader, therefore, is insistently forced to consider the presence of a second voice in the novel, which seems to coincide with that of real life Corteau; as the story develops, accompanying Petros into his adult life, it also refers more and more explicitly to his homosexuality, and the ways in which Katerina reacted to it and processed the news.

The somewhat indirect interventions from Petros then, occurring between the lines of Katerina's monologue, give voice to a gay individual, a militant individual, allowing him to present his point of view on the topics of homosexuality and family reactions to it, becoming an expression of a political conversation which reflects upon homophobia and its consequences for the development of the person subjected to it.

Starting with the confession of Petros' very first crushes, regarding one of his classmates, Katerina's son's orientation becomes more and more explicit, tangible, making its way through the ordinary development of a young man: school friendships, discovery of sexuality, first love. Katerina's reaction to these moments is that of a mother who, despite her education and beliefs – including a vast knowledge of psychology and pedagogy – finds herself afraid of her son's sexuality and therefore unable to welcome it unconditionally; she believes his orientation will lead him to inevitable unhappiness, but also that it is the result of her failure in raising her child. The belief that being attracted to and loving men will lead Petros to be alone in his life will never really leave Katerina's mind, though after some time, her acceptance will derive for the most part from the realisation that his homosexuality will not prevent her from ensuring his dependence on her:

Look at Tassos's brother: he's been living for twenty years with his adorable, kind-hearted Moroccan partner, but he still takes his laundry to his mum and every Sunday he and the boyfriend have dinner at his parents'. Would I prefer it if some cheap hussy seduced my Petros and caused him to tank his exams? Not in a million years – he's better off being gay, never mind the fact that everyone knows gay men are smarter and more gifted and have tons of girlfriends, more than any macho man. And even if he does end up all alone, he'll always have me. This is an egotistical, petty thought and I often add it to the sins for which I ask forgiveness in my nightly prayers, but on the other hand it seems reasonable that Petros won't be able to find himself a man. And not because he's a bit roly-poly; he simply doesn't know how to love a man. He doesn't even know how to love his own father: the two of them have been getting on each other's nerves since Petros was a little boy, or else are too indifferent towards one another to bother finding ways to bond. But even if he never finds a man who'll love him – and what do men know about love, anyway? All they ever think about is what goes on below the waist – I'll always be here, a rock, my heart forever whispering Petros, Petros, Petros. (Corteau, *The Book of Katerina* 140)

What emerges from this narration is the portrait of a mother so focused on her son that she becomes destructive towards him, to the point of wishing him no romantic ties in the future so that he may never leave her; ready to drown her son in her own attachment to the point of becoming symbiotic and him becoming her spouse; jealous, now more now less, of any potential female attachment which may even just suggest an emancipatory process that would lead him away from her; prone to an increase of her own self-destructive behaviour any

time reality reminds her of her responsibilities. This is a character incredibly reminiscent of Ekavi in *The Third Wedding Wreath*. However, compared to Ekavi's paroxysmal reiteration – as she continues to behave towards her son Dimitris in the same manner, leading to his divorce and eventually his death – Katerina reveals instead a certain degree of self-awareness, or at least awareness of the psychological dynamics that guide her behaviour. In *The Third Wedding Wreath*, Nina's mediation reveals the symbolic violence<sup>20</sup> enacted by Ekavi towards her offspring; at the same time, she also unravels the similarities between Ekavi's and her own parenting styles and ends up highlighting the nature of gender roles and family dynamics, but not their psychological causes; in *The Book of Katerina*, on the other hand, similar dynamics which rule over the main character's married life and her relationship with her son are explicitly linked to her mental condition, and specifically to her bipolar disorder, which becomes the crucial interpretative key to the entire novel; her ancestors' history in the first part of the novel becomes, then, a description of the family's psychological baggage and inheritance, i.e. the history of intergenerational psychological transmission of suffering and trauma through time, all the way to Katerina; the presence of the second, implicit, narrative voice in the second half of the novel encourages the reader to realise the psychological and physical consequences that Katerina's behaviour and her unmedicated condition brought upon herself and her loved ones.

This psychological reading of personal and familial dynamics, which frequently appears in Corteau's production, reflects his political stance on giving visibility to mental illness to liberate it from the stigma still present in public discourse. He explicitly stated as much during an interview:

It is important to speak at all times about mental illness, until the stigma that still accompanies them is completely erased, until any conversation about depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia can be carried out with the same ease, the same release as a conversation about diabetes type B or arteriosclerosis. [It is important] that we treat them as conditions, as illnesses that afflict people, and not as if the sufferers themselves were responsible for them, because this is the problem. This shame [...] we must cast it out from all public discourse about the disease, this is why it is so important that we speak.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

*The Book of Katerina* then seems to fully realise Corteau's political agenda, and reveals itself as a militant, engaged work under a number of aspects: it demands to confer visibility to mental health issues and develops a literary discourse around family and the role that the mother plays in it, bringing to the surface a number of further aspects related to the psychology of interpersonal dynamics; by doing so, it portrays an inter-relational image of mental health, problematising the literary trope of the mother, conferring it depth and history capable of distancing it from the Medea stereotype, humanising it in the process. At the same time, however, the novel carries out a conversation about gender as a social construct which, under many aspects, forms a new development in Taktsis' stance on the matter, destabilising the reader's expectations

<sup>20</sup> In Pierre Bourdieu's meaning of the term ("Sur le pouvoir symbolique").

<sup>21</sup> «Είναι σημαντικό με κάθε αριθμό να μιλάμε για τα ψυχικά νοσήματα μέχρι να εξαλειφθεί τελείως το στίγμα που ακόμα τα συνοδεύει, μέχρι να μπορεί η κουβέντα γύρω από την κατάθλιψη, τη διπολική διαταραχή, τη σχιζοφρένια να γίνεται με την ίδια χαλαρότητα, την ίδια αποφύγιση όπως μια κουβέντα για τον διαβήτη τύπου B' ή για την αρτηριοσκλήρωση, να τις αντιμετωπίζουμε ως καταστάσεις, ως νόσους οι οποίες πλήττουν τους ανθρώπους, και όχι σαν να είναι οι ίδιοι οι πάσχοντες υπαίτιοι, γιατί αυτό είναι το πρόβλημα. Αυτή η ντροπή [...] πρέπει να την εξοβελίσουμε από τον δημόσιο λόγο γύρω από την αρρώστια, γι' αυτό είναι τόσο σημαντικό να μιλάμε» (Papapriles Panatsas and Nakes, *Διγαμμα. Συνέντευξη Αύγουστος Κορτά, 20'40"* et seq.)

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through the use of a female mask and of camp humour, in order to deconstruct the normative idea of womanhood; finally, in a series of references to the author's own biography, it explicitly states those elements of gay and activist subjectivity which D. Papanikolau defined as «the contradictory experience of growing up, acquiring an identity, living and writing as gay in a contemporary petit bourgeois Greece at the end of the 20th Century».<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> «η αντιφατική εμπειρία του να μεγαλώνεις, να αποκτάς ταυτότητα, να ζεις και να γράφεις ως γκέι σε μια σύγχρονη μικροαστική Ελλάδα του τέλους του 20ού αιώνα». (Papanikolaou, *Kάτι τρέχει με την οικογένεια* 207)

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