

Timberlake wertenbaker's the love of the nightingale essay sample

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When considering the challenges faced by feminist playwrights in their attempts to revive the forgotten voices in women's history, one play, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, stands out as an obvious choice for study. Given that the play deals literally with the subject of the female voice, the loss of this voice, and the challenge of regaining it, it is arguably the perfect starting point from which to examine the subject of the female voice in theatre.

The fact that the play also deals with an historical female voice makes it an even more appropriate piece to consider. Commissioned for the Royal Shakespeare Company and first published in 1989, the play is an adaptation of Sophocles' lost tragedy *Tereus*, in which Tereus, king of Thrace, rapes his sister-in-law Philomela, and then cuts out her tongue to prevent her from telling anyone. Philomela manages to tell her sister, and Tereus' wife, Procne what happened and they then take a gruesome revenge on him, and the play takes a feminist view of the tragedy.

However, to describe the play simply as feminist theatre would be slightly misleading, as throughout much of post war British theatre the boundaries between genres are blurry, if there at all in some cases. Feminist issues do feature heavily in the play, but there are also feminist elements present in other plays which would not typically be labelled 'feminist'. For example, Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* contains the feminist subject of the mother-daughter relationship, yet is perhaps best known as a social-realist piece.

The point is that 'feminist theatre' arguably does not exist as its own genre, so to label writers such as Wertenbaker and Caryl Churchill as simply

feminist may be wrong. Wertenbaker uses two ancient versions of the myth by Sophocles and Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*, to re-work the story of Tereus for the stage. She also includes her own additions to make the myth more contemporary and relevant. Indeed, Michelene Wandor describes the piece as a 'modern morality play', as issues of gender are joined with issues of social and moral power; man's power over women and society in general, and the power of women's speech.

The loss of the female voice is, however, the main theme of the play, and all other gender and social issues stem from this subject. It is not just the literal loss of Philomele's ability to speak in the play that is portraying the silencing of the female; the very nature of the play itself, that it is based on Greek theatre, evokes the idea of the suppression on the female. In classical theatre, the female was defined by her absence from the stage, in that all female characters were played by men, and Sue-Ellen Case writes that "Classical plays and theatrical conventions... can be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production" 1.

Wertenbaker's re-interpretation, where an actual woman is silenced on stage, is a nod to the original piece of Greek theatre, and Elaine Aston suggests that it is also a criticism of Greek theatre and society: "'The Love of the Nightingale' performs a feminist critique of the theatrical conventions and ideological concerns of Greek theatre, culture and society" 2. That the play is based on a myth also aids Wertenbaker's depiction of the silencing of the female.

Wertenbaker herself described the play as a critique of the nature of myth, and believed that as a literary form, myth 'wipes away the real and bodily in favour of a universal truth', yet we have always bought into myth for social and cultural guidance. This gives myth a paradoxical quality, in that whilst they are believed in, they are also sometimes dismissed as folklore, fairytales even. Like Greek theatre, myths also reflect the idea of the suppression of women; Western myths involve an investment into the idea of male action as opposed to female inaction, and in these myths transgressive women must be punished.

This idea is reflected in the play, as Philomele is punished for her transgressive desire to use public speech, which, being a patriarchal attribute, would make her equal to man. Myth also allows for transformation, though, and Wertenbaker uses this in the play; If Philomele must be silenced, then her voice must be reproduced alternatively. As she cannot tell Procne what happened through speech, she tells her story through dance, whereas in the original version of the tragedy she weaves the story into a robe.

Here Wertenbaker is deconstructing language as the main means of communication in drama, and is herself transgressing from one of the main conventions of drama, which are seen as patriarchal. This links to the idea of language as being unable to articulate meaning on its own, which is also present in the play; when Tereus and Philomele say 'I love you' to each other, they mean it in completely different ways. Whilst Philomele is talking about the expected familial love between a brother and sister-in-law, Tereus means it in a more lustful way.

Another way in which Wertenbaker critiques and examines typical dramatic styles and conventions in the play is through her use of the play within the play. To celebrate their victory in battle, Tereus and the Athenian King Pandion, Philomele's father, watch the play ' Medea'. They then discuss whether the passion of love is justification enough for immoral acts, premeditating the later events of the play. The predictive nature of the play within the play makes it both self reflexive and self referential.

Its is self reflexive in that it consciously acknowledges and critiques dramatic styles and conventions, and it is self referential due to the fact that it refers to the narrative of the play itself. One play deals with myth, the other is a myth, and their stories are closely linked. The play within also causes the audience, knowing what is to follow in the main play, to start to become more involved in the drama on stage; the ' forth wall' has been removed, and the audience are also watching an audience in the play.

The audience is of course unable to influence the course of the play, and this is replicated on the stage by the character of the Queen, Pandion's wife. The Queen is another female character who is without a voice-although not literally like her daughter-and also watches ' Medea'. Like the audience, she senses tragedy but cannot do anything about it; she is a spectator throughout the play, detached from reality. Unlike her daughter, the Queen does not have to be silenced, as she is unable to exert any sort of influence on the male characters.

As Marianne MacDonald writes, she has to 'cede to King Pandion on every issue... she is not even consulted about the plans made for Philomele... In Wertenbaker's text the king is named and the queen is unnamed. This was also typical of Athenian practice, in which a woman is not named in legal proceedings... she is identified by her relation to the immediate male who has power over her.

This play shows us the imperialism of the private (men over women) and the imperialism of the public (territories seized, slaves created).³ Perhaps the best example of the Queen's inability to alter the proceedings, and help her daughters, is her poignant response of 'What can I say?' to Procne's plea to not have to marry Tereus. She knows she has no voice, and even encourages Philomele not to use hers by saying 'Quiet child' when Philomele supports her sister's plea. To quote MacDonald again, 'This is a play about speech and silence, who speaks, for whom, and who is silenced'⁴, but this does not mean that it is just women who are silenced in the play.

MacDonald goes on to write that the play is also about imperialism and oppression, which affect both men and women; tyranny is not gender specific, and as Wandor puts it, 'The powerless, male or female, are helpless (the Captain killed by Tereus), the soldiers mere servants, the women slaves also helpless bystanders to brutality.' However, the main concern of the play is still the subject of the female voice, and Wertenbaker has used a classical myth to great effect in her attempts to overcome the dramatic difficulties which come with reclaiming historical female voices.

Another play which deals with reclaiming the female voice, although possibly not as literally as *The Love of the Nightingale*, is Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*.

Despite the blurred boundaries between theatrical genres, Churchill's play is a more overtly didactic feminist piece which deals with what it means to be a successful woman, and what a successful woman actually is. Like

Wertenbaker, in Act 1, Scene 1 of the play Churchill is dealing literally with the voices of historical women; Marlene, the protagonist, is having a dinner party where all the guests are influential and powerful women from history.

As Peacock writes, here Churchill 'theatrically manipulates history in an extremely novel way in order to examine and challenge the values represented by the successful contemporary Thatcherite career woman and to set those values against the reality of the lives of her ordinary and apparently less "successful" sisters" 5, and the interactions of the famous historical women, and later Marlene's with her own family, demonstrate how women's roles have developed over time, and what progress remains to be made.

This 'anti-realist' first act contrasts with the more contemporary second and third acts, and the play encourages us to examine the relationship between myth and reality. That there are elements of the successful historical women in the present in the play dissolves the binary of the real and the fictive.

However, although the play is about successful women- they are present in every section- the danger of using individuals to generalise female liberation and power is stressed throughout; for every successful career woman there are housewives.

So, like Wertebaker in her use of myth, Churchill has used female characters from history in order to meet the dramatic challenge of reclaiming the forgotten female voice. Not only do the historical characters in *Top Girls* help to revive the female voice, they also serve as guides as to what a successful woman is supposed to be and what she is not supposed to be.