

THE LOVE OF THE NIGHTINGALE WITHIN AND BEYOND FEMINISM

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Studiul de față se axează pe universul tematic al piesei *The Love of the Nightingale* de Timberlake Wertenbaker, autoare a cărei operă este adesea vizată în lumina discursului feminist contemporan. Încercarea de față însă scoate în evidență o serie de alte aspecte ale piesei, cum ar fi conceptul violenței exprimat în cadrul receptării moderne a mitului antic, dar și o serie de probleme ce țin de limbă, comunicare, colonizare și rolul teatrului în societate.

Timberlake Wertenbaker is a contemporary playwright, American by birth, educated in France, at present lives in Britain and contributes to the development of British drama. Like many other women playwrights of the 1980s and 1990, she is often regarded as a feminist playwright by many reviewers but she personally considers feminism as humanism and especially as a challenge to authority. In particular, in her perhaps most famous play *The Love of the Nightingale*, “the conventional male/female dualism is there: men wage war, violence, lack conscience. Women love one another and feel desire for men, express themselves poetically, and yet are also politically passive, powerless. Within this dualism, the play gives greater theatrical power to the women. The plot follows their needs and desires. War is referred to, but we spend no time on the battlefield, we hear no discussion between the men about war” [5, p.218]. At the same time, the same critic believes, the play is also to be considered “a modern morality play, in which issues of gender join the issues of social and moral power that underlie the original Greek myth, but in which the fundamental political imperatives remain unquestioned” [5, p.219].

In her plays, Wertenbaker often relies on the effects and role of theatre in society. Following the Brechtianism of the period, Wertenbaker tries to avoid the empathy with characters in a way that will help the audience to see the play as a situation requiring objective analysis rather than emotional sympathy. Her plays are often inquisitory, formulating diverse questions to which the spectators should find solutions. According to Wertenbaker, a theatre should include ideas, thoughts, and discussions. She uses ‘play within play’ technique in order to force the audience to think, where, “by showing the actors on stage who are engaged in performing a play, the playwright involves the ‘outside’ spectator as a spectator of the inner play, thus reinforcing his actual situation as someone who is in a theatre watching a fiction. Through this double theatricality the external level acquires a heightened reality – the illusion of illusion becomes reality” [4, p.270]. Based on this definition, one can say that Wertenbaker relies on the capacity of a theatrical performance to reproduce itself spontaneously in fiction and in a reflection on that fiction.

Theatre is not an idle means of entertainment but an activity of reflection and play, mixing the words to be spoken and the play to be performed with the reflection on the act of saying. Contrary to the pessimistic attitude that theatre could scarcely change society, Wertenbaker insists on the potential for theatre to function as an agent of change. Timberlake Wertenbaker’s plays try to force people to question something, giving them powerful images that impress them and remain with them. At the same time, she tries to examine the extent to which theatre can be oriented toward action. In her productions, the audience is invited to question what it means to act, as well as what it means to embark on significant changes. Even when her plays are set in the past, they deal with contemporary social issues. The distance in space and time is essential to Wertenbaker since she counts on the detachment between audience and action, thus providing the necessary objectivity to the spectators.

The Love of the Nightingale is an example of a play set in ancient Greece. Wertenbaker takes the theme of the play from Greek mythology. Classical mythology has inspired numerous writers along the history of world literature. But during 1980s and 1990s the exploration of myths and archetypes becomes a priority especially for individual female performers and feminist theatre companies, to mention just the workshops and collaborations initiated by Magdalena Project *Nominatae Filiae* (1988) and some pieces performed at the Magdalena Festival of 1994 as some possible examples of creating characters inspired from female mythological figures.

At the same time, the exploration of archetypes has often developed along with the study of women's language in theatre. The focus on feminine archetypes and on 'women's theatre language' could be explained as a possible challenge to male authority of myths and as an opportunity for female mythological heroines to be re-presented anew. Unfortunately, such an approach is often regarded as an "essentialist view of gender, for it implies a belief in a universal common denominator, an essence of womanhood which would be true in all cultures and places" [2, p.12].

The aim of our study is to show that many female playwrights – who wrote and staged their plays during 1980s and 1990s and who explored female characters from Greek mythology – developed rather diverse and culturally specific themes and concerns. In this respect we would like to discuss Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, a play often interpreted in the light of feminist discourse, but which also "becomes a rationale within which to display certain ideas about the relationship between culture, morality, power and gender" [5, p.218]. In particular, we could add, the play embarks on discussing the issue of violence strengthened as an eternal human experience by the means of reviving and reshaping the classical myth, as well as the issues of language, communication and even colonization.

Timberlake Wertenbaker uses Ovid's version of the myth of Philomele although she deviates to a certain extent from its excessive violence. Wertenbaker's re-telling can be summarised as follows. The Athenian king Pandion gives his daughter Procne in marriage to Tereus, king of Thrace, as a reward for the latter's help to freed Athens. After five years of marriage Procne begs her husband to bring her sister Philomele to stay with her in Thrace. On their way home Tereus, overwhelmed by passion and desire rapes Philomele and when she threatens him to tell the world the truth he cuts her tongue and imprisons her. In her remote place Philomele makes some large dolls, representative of herself, her sister and her brother-in law and during the celebration of the Bacchic rites she finds an opportunity to re-enact the story of her double mutilation. Procne, who also watched the acting, blames her sister first, but when Philomele opens her mouth she realises the truth and wants to make justice. During the same Bacchic rites, when Itys, Procne and Tereus' son intrudes into the women's privacy he is killed by Philomele assisted by Procne. When Tereus wants to pursue the two sisters in order to avenge the death of his son all of them are transformed into birds: Philomele becomes a nightingale, Procne a swallow and Tereus a hoopoe.

The Love of the Nightingale was first performed on 28 October 1988 by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon. The play, composed of twenty-one short scenes, was played without an interval. Wertenbaker has added some characters that did not exist in Ovid's version. New characters include Male and Female Chorus, a Captain with whom Philomele flirts and falls in love on her way to Thrace and whom Tereus kills; Niobe, Philomele's servant who witnesses the rape but does not stop it; a group of actors who perform a Hippolitus play, a play-within-play during whose acting Tereus first realises how much he desires Philomele. To this we should add that instead of weaving her story on a cloth, Philomele acts it out by the help of the dolls that she has made; not Procne, but Philomele kills Itys, and there is no cooking and flesh eating. The play ends with Philomele teaching Itys to ask questions about the past events, about the present and to see all things anew.

Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* invites the audience to evaluate critically both the myth and the literary form which has perpetuated it. To start with the structure of the play, Wertenbaker ignores the traditional act division, the triangular, climatic play structure. Instead, the playwright creates twenty-one separate scenes, in each scene characters and setting change and at the end of every scene Wertenbaker creates suspense by cutting the scene abruptly, resembling so much Brecht's episodic play. Also, "there is an overall terseness in the style of the play, which evokes Brechtian echoes in the way characters step outside their immediate situations to question (...). The use of the chorus, too, while it has polemical and narrative purpose, also functions to 'tell' us when chunks of time pass, or when events happen off stage" [5, p.219].

This play has also a linear play structure, without rising action, climax and falling action; it is one continuous presentation of the issue, with no interval, no break. The playwright counts on the impact of this play without interruptions; act division could slow the pace of the play down and could less affect the spectators. The unities of time, place and action are abandoned completely. The catharsis, essential in the traditional theatre, is rejected completely since Wertenbaker wants to prevent the spectators from the possible identification with the victims of the play, as victimization is not accepted by the playwright.

With regards to the criticism of the theatrical form, Wertebaker uses a chorus that questions itself, comments on events, forcing the spectators to reflect upon what they see. They know what will happen beforehand. They also inform the audience about the off-stage action, so they have the function of explanation. There is one male and one female chorus. The Male Chorus is a group of speakers who do not have names; they see nothing and are “passive bystanders as the human agents proceed with the story” [5, p.218]. Their role is to narrate the plot accurately and raise questions. They never interfere in the course of events and they are never willing to change anything. When Philomele is raped they keep quiet and prefer to turn into a blind eye to Tereus’ act. Their only words are “We said nothing” [6, p.333].

In the Female Chorus there are identities, like Hero, Echo, June Iris, etc. They are Procne’s companions who foretell all the events, but they always speak mysteriously, so that Procne cannot understand them. The fact that in the Female Chorus there are individualities might be a criticism to the fact that women do not act together as men do. Male Chorus speaks and acts unanimously, that is why they are presented as a single, group character. There are different voices in the Female Chorus and no unification among them. For example, they try to warn Procne about the existent danger, try to advise her (and the spectators know that they refer to Philomele’s double mutilation), but Procne cannot understand them and thus she ignores everything. The lack of solidarity becomes obvious in their refusal to speak openly, clearly about the events. Although they are intuitive and reflect women psychology they do not seem willing to take the initiative in order to help Procne or Philomele. Even in the episode of Itys murder their participation is reduced to a simple position of eye-witnesses.

With regards to the criticism of myth, Wertebaker warns us that it should be approached with much prudence, for it has been used for centuries as a sacred story, a repository of truth, eternal and unchangeable. She might have felt the need, as some other female playwrights of the period, to reshape the myth, to retell it anew from a different point of view. In her play Wertebaker questions the myth: “What is a myth? The oblique image of an unwanted truth, reverberating through time” [6, p.315]. Instead of presenting myth as a sacred and true story the playwright tries to make the reader consider the original meaning of it, which is ‘word’ and therefore it is so ambiguous and open to different interpretations, such as that myth is ‘speech’, ‘matter’, ‘content of the speech’.

In order to reach a stronger effect, Wertebaker tries to deconstruct the myth as text and narrative: “We might ask, has the content become increasingly unacceptable and therefore the speech more indirect? How has the meaning of myth been transformed from public speech to an unlikely story? It also meant counsel, command. Now it is a remote tale” [6, p.315]. The playwright wants to emphasise the fact that mythology can be a form of ideology. By challenging mythology the playwright attempts to avoid the identification of her female protagonists with the female victims from the myth and at the same time to prevent the spectators from the same identification. In doing this Wertebaker sought to give interiority to her protagonists and to reflect the heroines’ mental landscape in a way that enabled the audience to share it.

Although both the myth and the play abound in violence – including in the last scenes, where, after women killed Itys, Procne states that everything is “as usual. Let the violence sweep around me” – the playwright is very careful while depicting every aggressive act. Philomele’s rape is not presented on the stage, but is narrated by Niobe, her servant. By doing this Wertebaker does not only respect the tradition of the ancient Greek theatre that never portrays any violent act on stage, but also prevents the “objectification of a female heroine as a rape victim” [2, p.19]. On the other hand, Philomele does not use words in her telling of the incident to her sister Procne; instead, she prefers to illustrate it by means of a puppet show. The fact that Philomele and Niobe manipulate the huge dolls in a “gross and comic” [6, p.342] manner shows the fact that Wertebaker mocks this violence.

Surprisingly, the act of cutting Philomele’s tongue by Tereus is presented onstage and not offstage, as the spectator would expect. However, we suppose that by illustrating the silencing of the oppressed people in such brutal way the playwright aims to shock the audience and to make them think of the necessity of a change.

The killing of Itys by Philomele is firstly introduced by the soldier who is horrified at what he sees. The chorus gathers around Philomele as she performs the murder in order to reveal her a bit later with bloodied hands and the dead Itys. In this respect, Rene Girard says that “the more a tragic conflict is prolonged, the more likely it is to culminate in a violent mimesis; the resemblance between the combatants grows ever stronger until each presents a mirror image of the other. There is a scientific corollary: modern research suggests that

individuals of quite different make-up and background respond to violence in essentially the same way” [3, p.47]. The fact that this incident takes place during Bacchic ritual might have also some other implications. According to the myth, the Bacchic ceremony requires a sacrifice. Euripidean version of the myth as revealed in *The Bacchae* emphasizes the same formula of Dionysus practice as presented by Wertebaker in her play, which is the dismemberment of a living victim by unarmed assailants. In none of the versions we deal with premeditated assassination but a rather spontaneous act of the crowd.

Still, if in Euripides version of the myth god Dionysus seems to be responsible of the murder – since he is the master of events and prepares all the details of a sacrifice – Wertebaker leads her reader toward the idea that no divinity should or could be blamed for the displayed violence. Any violent action and any bloodshed are in human hands; it is his/her responsibility and it depends only on the human being to display or prevent its occurrence. In the play Procne tells Tereus that the murder of Itys is a consequence of his own brutality: “You Tereus. You bloodied the future. For all of us. We don’t want it.” [6, p.351]

Wertebaker is very careful while presenting the victims or the aggressors of the play and we think that the morality of the playwright prevents the association of victims with female or male groups. In our opinion the issue goes far beyond gender distinction and Wertebaker wants to suggest that no matter the gender, when groups are subdued and denied a voice, the final result would be a collective display of violence. Wertebaker emphasises the fact that – although many critics saw the problems she depicts in *The Love of the Nightingale* as being concerned with female victimization – she was more influenced by some other manifestations of injustice: “Although it has been interpreted as being about women, I was actually thinking about the violence that erupts in societies when they have been silenced for too long. Without language, brutality will triumph. I grew up in the Basque country, where the language was systematically silenced, and it is something that always haunts me” [6, p.viii-ix].

As we can see the playwright is more concerned with political inequality and oppression of many silenced groups in general than any gender subjugation and her preoccupation about the violence in the world is so great that she finds an opportunity to skip from the mythological setting and to draw the readers’ attention to the truthfulness of the recorded history:

“June: Why do countries make war?

Helen: Why are races exterminated?

Hero: Why do white people cut off the words of blacks?

Iris: Why do people disappear? The ultimate silence.

Echo: Not even death recorded.” [6, p.349]

The abrupt shift from the mythological background to the real one has the intention to shock the readers/spectators and thus to show them that nothing has changed in this world: the cruelty existed from the beginning of this world and continues to exist till nowadays. The playwright is rather clear about the fact that it is not just about female oppression but the violence and abuse of power among humans in general. Wertebaker seems to suggest that if there is nothing to be done about the past and the present it might be in our hands to change the future and not to “bloody” it.

Central to Wertebaker’s *The Love of the Nightingale* are also the issues of language and silence. Although word and silence are two different concepts, Wertebaker tries to develop them together in her play. Procne is a character who, in spite of her enjoyment in playing with words is extremely submissive and she always obeys all the rules. She is a very good daughter, the embodiment of wisdom and common sense. After her marriage to Tereus her pleasure in words finishes since she is silenced twice. First, as a wife to Tereus, she must obey her husband and thus she understands her limited possibilities to express herself. The second, being taken away from her native country and her native language she is silenced in Thrace because she feels that here all the words have gone. Her native language that used to make meaning to everything has been changed in the country of her husband by a strange and incomprehensible language whose meaning she is not able to understand. Her position of an outsider in a different place, in a different culture contributes to her powerlessness with words.

The character that mostly finds delight in words is Philomele, the youngest daughter of King Pandion. She is extremely sensitive and more intellectual than other women of the play. She is a person that likes dreaming, making illusions and also she finds enjoyment in telling her sister about them. The freedom of Philomele’s tongue is not constrained by any conventions. She is extremely inquisitive and wants to know and learn as much as possible. Philomele was quite different from her sister Procne even when they were

children. This difference is never an obstacle for the two sisters to love each other; on the contrary, it increases their affection. Procne has an obedient nature; Philomele is inquisitive as to find out about the details of married life. She wants to know about the intimate relationship between husband and wife. She has a very curious mind and this curiosity of her is foregrounded in the play. It is this aspect of her personality that leads to her silencing by Tereus: "Timberlake Wertenbaker's retelling of the Philomela story, *The Love of the Nightingale*, both in its form and in its content, foregrounds spoken language, its evasion and also its confrontative power." [1, p.114]

Philomele's non-conformism goes so far that in her curiosity to find out more about men she wanted to flirt with Tereus. She really exceeds her boundaries but remains honest till the end and never thinks of betraying her sister. Being different from the others Philomele attracted Tereus' attention and when he suggests that his passion for her should be satisfied she insists that love making should be preceded by consent, but Tereus replies that "fear is consent" [6, p.329].

The young woman's rape by Tereus might be possibly understood as his desire to subdue Philomele's rebellious nature and her disobedience to his power and authority. However, Philomele mocks his so-called 'potency': "Did you tell her I pitied her for having in her bed a man who could screech such quick and ugly pleasure, a man of jelly beneath his hard skin" [6, p.336].

In spite of her pain and suffering, Philomele is not intimidated by her violator and threatens him that she will make publicly known that his potency is a lie: "There is nothing inside you. You're only full when you're filled with violence. And they obey you? Look up to you? Have the men and women of Trace seen you naked? Shall I tell them? Yes, I will talk." [6, p.336] Philomele's words become dangerous for Tereus because everyone could become aware of the fact that he is not a great and fearful king as everybody thought but simply "a pathetic being empty of everything but violence" [1, p.116]. Tereus, being pushed to the extreme, cuts her tongue, depriving Philomele of her words and thus of her power.

The way in which Philomele conveys her message to people differs from the original myth. In Ovid's version Philomele employs a traditional woman's ability, sewing, in order to tell everyone about what happened to her. In this play, in order to express the truth to Procne her talent becomes more communicative since she creates the dolls and enacts the act of her mutilation. Philomele expresses her violation through the means of theatre language, the means that goes beyond her body disfigurement: "Philomele communicates her story through a figure that is separate from her body and yet, at the same time, replicates it and, because of the doubleness of the Philomele doll and Philomele as manipulator, also reinforces it. In place of her dual silencing by Tereus, she substitutes a larger-than-life-doll-self, and a puppeteer-self that together vividly articulate Tereus guilt" [1, p.116-117].

Silence is a consequence of language. The communicative silence of Philomele's dumb performance provides a possibility for the two sisters, who once found so much delight in words, to communicate again. At first, Procne watches the show from outside and refuses to believe the message it tries to convey, but when she sees the mutilated mouth of her sister she accepts the truth: without any words, Philomele's silent scream expresses the dreadfulness of her abuse. Also, "the tongueless mouth, signifier of the loss even of a verbal language to express violation and erasure, is the central potent image in a play fundamentally concerned both with the meanings and function of words and with the power of theatre to depict and interrogate a particular set of violent events" [1, p.117].

Of course such outrageous situations in which women are deprived of language and cruelly abused by men might easily lead to the conclusion that women are generally oppressed by men, a conclusion supported by feminism, since men try to prove their manliness through violence, examples of which – raping and cutting the tongue – being given in Wertenbaker's play. Feminists might also insist on the idea that the only instance when men idealise women is when they are silent or dead. Hence, to bring women to their ideal state Tereus silences Procne, proclaims her dead, rapes Philomele and cuts her tongue.

Although we do not reject totally this possible interpretation, we also consider important to mention again that the problem the playwright tries to present is more complex than patriarchal oppression.

Apart from the above mentioned reinterpretation of the myth and in this respect the emphasis on violence, as well as the power of language and communication on the whole, one can also mention here the issue of colonization as another interpretative possibility. In order to support this idea we should refer to Tereus who at the beginning of the play helps Pandion, King of Athens, to win the war. To show his gratefulness to his

ally Pandion is extremely generous. Still, his hospitality can not last forever because Athens is a little place and it cannot have two kings and two armies at the same time:

“Tereus: (...) But I have come to love this country and its inhabitants.

Queen (to King Pandion) He wants to stay! I knew it!

Pause.

King Pandion: Of course if you wish to stay in Athens that is your right. We can only remind you this is a small city. But you must stay if you wish.” [6, p.296]

The King and Queen of Athens cannot keep away from the fear that Tereus might want to stay there forever. They begin to feel a threat that their kingdom might be colonized by their guest, since he is more powerful and his army is stronger and more numerous. Tereus jeopardises the tranquillity and the welfare of Athens, and therefore, Pandion, as a good king that should protect his country, gives him Procne in marriage and shuns the possible danger. Both Pandion and Procne can be considered as victims, subdued by authority and power.

A more vivid example that might support the idea of colonization can be revealed by Niobe, the servant, who compares the rape of Philomele to the rape of countries: “Countries are like women. It’s when they are fresh they are wanted” [6, p.330]. Niobe explains that her native country was a small island that the Athenians wanted to possess, although its only resources were some lemon trees. Niobe still bears in her mind the images of how the soldiers invaded the island, destroyed everything, raped women and left behind only a silent and barren land. “Why did the Athenians want our island? I don’t know. We only had a few lemon trees. Now the trees are withered. Nobody looks at them” [6, p.330]. Even though Niobe became subdued by the power and has neither will nor desire to resist it she is a victim of oppression, the victim of the brutality of colonization and the pain in her words is persistent.

To continue the idea that Wertebaker does not focus just on female oppression, we should mention that the act of aggression displayed by women of this play against men is also horrible. The spectator is astonished by violence demonstrated by Philomele, Procne and other women in the act of killing Itys. Moreover, the act of transformation of the three major characters into birds shows the fact that in their anger humans forget about what it means to be humane and their acts become wild and savage. Without this magic intervention of transformation the bloodshed among the people would have never ended.

Wertebaker, in *The Love of the Nightingale* as well as in her other works, draws the reader’s attention to the fact that without communication and without language humans cannot leave in peace and tranquility. Following the murder of Itys in the confrontation between Procne and Tereus, Tereus denies the possibility to explain coherently his violent actions. His aggressive actions were, as he declares, “beyond words” [6, p.350]. He claims that no-one had told him what love was, to which Procne states the key-words: “Did you ask?” [6, p.352].

It is not a simple coincidence that in the last scene of *The Love of the Nightingale*, Philomele, although transformed into a nightingale, regains her human voice, and thus, “the final ‘word’, as it were, is Philomele’s, to whom a voice has been restored” [5, p.219]. Itys, together with Tereus, are represented as “helpless, unaware of either moral or political ideas” [5, p.219] and this voice might have had the role to educate and guide Itys, whom one of the women of the Female Chorus refers to as “the future”. The future generations should not repeat the mistakes from the past but should better become interested in searching the truth about the crucial questions “What does wrong mean?” and “What is right?” [6, p.354].

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Prezentat la 10.10.2007