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## **The inevitable need to speak in order to be:**

### **On the loss of voice in two plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker**

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[W]atch a child working out her first sentence [...] it is beyond the need to survive, you can survive with a few words and a lot of crying. It is a sentence, I believe, that is usually a descriptive sentence and inevitably communicated to someone. It is the beginning of dialogue. [...] The inevitable need to speak in order to be.

(Wertenbaker *Is Theatre Necessary?*)

If you silence a people, if a culture loses its language, it loses its tenderness. You lose your countryside, your parent, and because culture is essentially verbal, you lose your history. I have a fear of enforced silence. Silence leads to violence.

(Wertenbaker qtd. in Mackenzie)

The contemporary playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker has shown a long-standing engagement with the themes of language and identity formation. My opening quotations (taken from lecture notes and a newspaper article, respectively), begin to demonstrate the range of mediums through which she has explored these subjects and, as one would expect, such concerns have also made frequent appearances in her playwriting. This article will explore and compare two such plays: the unpublished *Case to Answer*, first produced by the Soho Poly in 1980, and the more widely known, *The Love of the Nightingale*, first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place, Stratford, in 1988.

*The Love of the Nightingale* takes as its starting point the myth of Philomela (Philomele in Wertenbaker's version) and Tereus, found in Book Six of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This story is set in motion when Philomele's sister Procne is given in marriage to Tereus, the king of Thrace, and, after travelling to his kingdom, feels isolated and lonely there. She sends Tereus back to Athens to fetch her sister to be her companion, but during the voyage, Tereus becomes infatuated with Philomele, rapes her, and cuts out her tongue to prevent her from disclosing his crime. Several years later Philomele devises a way

to reveal her abuse to her sister. In the Ovidian narrative this is done by weaving her story into a tapestry, but Wertebaker's play replaces the private art of weaving with the very public device of a puppet play-within-the-play. The two sisters then seek revenge on Tereus by killing his (and Procne's) son Itys. Tereus, in turn, attempts to kill the sisters, but they are spared this fate by the metamorphoses of the three central characters into birds.

At first glance, the conflict of the sexes can appear to dominate *The Love of the Nightingale* and, unsurprisingly, much of the academic analysis of this play has centred on feminist readings.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, journalistic criticism, both positive and negative, has tended to dwell on issues of gender. Some reviewers thought the ancient Greek story had been “used, brilliantly, as a template on which to mount a discussion on the roots of male violence and rape” (Arnott), others felt “that in using male characters schematically, [Wertebaker's] feminist bias [was] too nakedly revealed” (Marowitz). Regardless of whether it aroused their sympathy or their suspicion, nearly all these journalists took it as given that Wertebaker's focus was sexual politics. Wertebaker herself, however, has resisted such one-dimensional readings. Her introduction to this play in a collected edition of her work (*Plays One*) states, “Although it has been interpreted as being about men and women, I was actually thinking about the violence that erupts in societies when they have been silenced for too long” (viii). Pre-empting the public (mis)interpretation of this theme, the chorus of Wertebaker's play muse, “This one, you will say, watching Philomele, watching Tereus, watching Philomele, must be about men and women, yes, you think, a myth for our times, we understand./You will be beside the myth. If you think of anything, think of countries, silence, but we cannot rephrase it for you” (315).

The metaphor of an oppressed woman to imply an oppressed nation is expanded in a monologue given by Philomele's nurse Niobe, which includes the simile, “Countries are like women” (330). The speech occurs as the rape is happening off stage and is punctuated with Philomele's screams, juxtaposing the brutality of this with Niobe's account of her native island's failed attempt to withstand Athenian invasion. Niobe compares the futility of their resistance to that of Philomele against Tereus, “She should have consented. Easier that way. Now it will be all pain. Well I know. We thought Athens. Foolish of a small island but we were proud [...] Power is something you can't resist” (330). In paralleling Philomele's rape with the invasion of a country, and the power of a man over a woman, with that of a stronger nation over weaker one, Wertebaker's play offers the possibility of an alternative (or complimentary) reading to the more usual gender-focussed ones, through the frame of postcolonial theory.

From the very beginning, the importance of language to identity formation has been as crucial a concept to postcolonial thinking as it has to feminist theory. In his seminal 1952 work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon recognised that, beyond its communicative value, “to speak means [...] above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation” (17). Consequently the erosion of a people’s language is an erosion of their culture, which is, in turn, an erosion of their identity. This Fanon recognised as a key element in the process of colonisation: “Every colonised people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation” (18). This concept was equally central to the work of the later postcolonial theorist and writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Born in colonial Kenya, Thiong’o was educated firstly at English speaking Kenyan schools and later at Leeds University. His early works were written in English, but in 1986 he wrote *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* as a “farewell to English” (1126), outlining in it his reasons for returning to the native Kenyan languages of Gikuyu and Kiswahili. The book expands on Fanon’s ideas about the importance of language to identity. “The choice of language and the use to which language is put”, Thiong’o asserts, “is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and societal environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (1126). This comment is very closely echoed by Wertebaker’s view that “if a culture loses its language, it loses its tenderness. You lose your countryside, your parent, and because culture is essentially verbal, you lose your history” (qtd. in Mackenzie).

Both Wertebaker and Thiong’o also recognise that native language suppression is used as a weapon by colonising forces wishing to exercise control over a native people. Wertebaker was raised in Basque France where, even as a young child, she claims to have been aware of the systematic devaluation of the Basque language by the French authorities, and the negative affect this could have on the local population:

The threat of the loss of language is one of the greatest threats. I grew up in the Basque country of France where the language was systematically eroded and destroyed so I feel very strongly about language. The French government told parents that speaking Basque was backward and would hold children back in society, while learning French was better for children’s futures. As a result the Basque language practically does not exist any more although there are some attempts to revive its use. (qtd. in DiGaetani 268-9)

Wertenbaker's account, particularly its emphasis on the potential for such abuse to be delivered through an education system, resembles statements Thiong'o has made relating to his experience of colonial Kenya. As Thiong'o assesses, "The night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom" (1130) and "the domination of a people's language by the language of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (1135).

The suggestion that such linguistic or "psychological violence" can be more damaging to identity than physical violence is explored by Wertenbaker in *The Love of the Nightingale*. Immediately after the physical abuse of her rape we see Philomele rebuke Tereus with all her previous wit, articulacy and strength of character: "despite my fear, your violence, when I saw you in your nakedness I couldn't help laughing because you were so shrivelled, so ridiculous and it is not the way it is on the statues" (336). However, after her tongue is cut out (although this act carries as much physical violence as the rape, its symbolic value can be read as that of linguistic or psychological violence) much of Philomele's identity appears lost, at least through the eyes of other characters. When asked who she is, Niobe answers for her: "No one. No name. Nothing. A king's fancy. No more" (342), and even Procne questions her authenticity: "Why should I believe you? And perhaps you're not Philomele. A resemblance. A mockery in this drunken feast. How can I know?" (343).

Procne's initial rejection of Philomele seems motivated both by her voicelessness, and by what she has, nonetheless, been able to voice. That is, Procne is understandably horrified by Philomele's revelation of Tereus' crimes, and consequently angry with the bearer of this news. But in addition to this, she is furious with Philomele's inability to be the articulate sister she had previously valued so highly. Procne has always privileged verbal communication over other subtler forms of expression (see her treatment of the Thracian women, discussed below). In the height of her loneliness, she consoles herself with memories of her sister, most of which are connected to her articulacy: "How we talked. Our words played, caressed each other, our words were tossed lightly, a challenge to catch" (299). Even after she is led to believe Philomele is dead, Procne continues this practice: "She could speak with the philosophers. She was bold and quick" (339). Thus, when Procne is reunited with a very different sister to the one she has idolised, she would rather question the authenticity of this new, flesh and blood Philomele, than the one she has fixed in her memories.

In contrast, Niobe's denial of Philomele's identity is not born of anger at Philomele's new state, but from dismissal. To her, Philomele had been a 'mistress' whose wishes she was

dutybound to follow. Once silenced, as Niobe explains: “I don’t know what she wants. She can no longer command me. What good is a servant without orders?” (337) Because Niobe only ever saw her relationship with Philomele through these roles of servant and master/mistress, and lacks compassion for Philomele as a human being, she is unable to relate to a silent Philomele and consequently denies her altogether.

The practices of psychological or linguistic oppression and their links to colonisation are also explored in Wertebaker’s unpublished play *Case to Answer*. Written between 1977 and 1980, this script can be found in Wertebaker’s archive at the British Library. The play is a two-hander that focuses on the relationship of a young couple (Sylvia and Niko) and follows Sylvia’s increasingly desperate attempts to communicate with her husband. Sylvia’s efforts fail, largely due to Niko’s unwillingness to listen and, driven to desperation, she threatens to shoot him. In the resulting struggle it is, in fact, Sylvia who is wounded. At first glance, this might appear a very domestic scenario but, like Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* (which was also written between 1978 and 1979), Wertebaker’s piece establishes a series of connections between male colonialist attitudes to women and to other countries<sup>ii</sup>.

With a characterization that echoes the position of colonised peoples, Sylvia has lost confidence in her voice after years of her husband constantly devaluing her speech. “It was not overt”, she admits, “Just the occasional wince. And the force of your eloquence” (41). This process is demonstrated by Niko’s frequently dismissive lines, such as “Sylvia, what are you babbling about?” (40); and “What’s all this gibberish?” (3), which imply Sylvia’s speech is nothing more than unintelligible noise. Niko, Sylvia claims, has not only eroded the patterns of speech she did have, but gradually replaced them with his own: “Having frozen my language, you substituted yours, thereby transmitting your values, beliefs, convictions and thoughts. Since I had no means of questioning you, I had no way of resisting the power of your convictions” (48). Wertebaker ensures we do not fail to notice the postcolonial relevance of this loss of identity stemming from a lack, or substitution, of voice, by having Sylvia relate her own situation to that of an oppressed nation, using a number of specific references. Crucially, she questions Niko about the French and Spanish governments’ deliberate efforts to eradicate the Basque language:

Sylvia: What about language? Not allowing someone, a country, its own speech. Does that ever happen?

Niko: All the time. Franco did it with the Basques. The French are more subtle, they insinuate French is so superior a language only a savage wouldn’t want to speak it and they transmit their values that way.

Sylvia: What do you call that?

Niko: Oppression. Cultural imperialism is oppression. (42)

She then compares this practice to Niko's invalidation of her former way of speaking: "You've just said there's a worse kind of suffering. People who feel they're not worth listening to. People with no culture, no language, people who are always ignored. Can't you see I'm one of those?" (45)

Although Sylvia resents the way her authentic voice has been supplanted by Niko's stronger one, she also comes to the conclusion that she will not be able to get Niko to communicate with her in her 'own language', which he so disparages. She is therefore forced to consciously assume the political discourse in which she knows he is fluent, in order to make her complaints to him: "Count one, Statement of offence: theft of language. The particulars of the offence are that by continually ignoring my language, you made me feel it was inadequate. By making me doubt its value, you took it away from me. Count two. Masculine cultural imperialism" (48). Sylvia's practice echoes the way in which the independence movements of colonized countries were often forced to negotiate with their colonisers in the Europeans' languages. Sylvia then attempts to shoot Niko with his own gun, demonstrating the ability of the colonised to adopt, not only their colonisers' language, but also their means of violence and aggression.

In *The Love of the Nightingale*, Philomele does not primarily attempt to regain her lost voice through the adoption of the voice, or the violence, of her coloniser/oppressor, but rather through the highly original notion of re-enacting her story with puppet dolls. It is also worth noting that she does not attempt to communicate directly to her coloniser/oppressor in this way, but rather to her 'own people' (if we are to extend the woman/colonised nation metaphor, established earlier, then we can read other women as Philomele's compatriots) at the all-female Bacchic festivities. This course of action is successful in its aim of reuniting Philomele with her sister, and communicating to Procne the crimes of Tereus. However, once reunited with Procne, Philomele abandons the more creative and positive line of action represented by the puppet play and adopts instead the violence of infanticide. Just as Sylvia attempts her revenge with Niko's own gun, Philomele and Procne kill Itys with his own sword. Procne's influence can, perhaps, be seen as the corrupting force here. Wertebaker does not confine her examples of linguistic oppression within this play to one gender, and Procne is shown to access language, at least partially, by adopting some of the same methods of silencing as the play's male characters. She struggles to communicate with her Thracian women companions, whose rich metaphorical discourse is very different to her rational

Athenian one. Rather than attempt to understand their speech, she is dismissive of its value, telling her attendants to “Be silent” (318) and using devaluing phrases such as “What are you women muttering about this time?” (316), which echo the expressions Niko uses to denigrate Sylvia’s speech in *Case to Answer*.

The extreme actions of Sylvia, Philomele and Procne justify Wertebaker’s warning that “Silence leads to violence” (qtd. in Mackenzie). “Without language”, she maintains, “brutality will triumph” (*Plays One* viii-ix). She has linked these ideas both to her Basque experience and to “the violence in certain [other] countries where people are denied freedom of speech; it was when all the horrendous upheavals were taking place in South Africa” (qtd. in Clifford). However, Wertebaker does not fail to acknowledge the tragedy that it is often the suppressed and colonised peoples themselves who suffer all the more from the employment of violent methods of resistance. Although Joe Winston has argued that Philomele and Procne’s act is “a representation of bloody political rebellion [fitting Alison Hersh’s belief in] a model of female violence which is grounded in political resistance” (515), the endings of both this play and *Case to Answer* do not appear to endorse the adoption of such a violent course of action. Most tellingly, in both cases, the women’s revenge backfires dramatically. In *Case to Answer* the gun, originally aimed at Niko, in fact wounds Sylvia. In *The Love of the Nightingale*, the sisters’ act merely perpetuates a cycle of violence and revenge that would result in Tereus killing them both, if it were not for their transformation into birds. This metamorphosis is not presented as a thing of wonder, but of necessity. When Itys asks Philomele if she likes being a nightingale, her response is disillusioning: “not much, I never liked birds, but we were all so angry the bloodshed would have gone on for ever. So it was better to become a nightingale. You see the world differently” (353). The fantastical nature of Philomele’s mythical route out of cyclical violence makes the need for an alternative, accessible by contemporary victims of such brutality, all the more apparent. How are they to “see the world differently”, without the view of the nightingale?

Both the plays discussed in this article seem to advocate the need for their female subjects (and by the metaphorical associations that have been established, oppressed nations such as the Basque people) to find alternative routes out of oppression, that do not simply appropriate the same methods of violence that have been used against them. However, Wertebaker also concedes that this is far from easy. Sylvia’s last lines include the acknowledgement: “When that land comes into its own, battered and uncertain, it ceases to be a place of ease and sunshine. It may even cease to be desirable. (*Pause*) My act of courage was not aiming the gun and risking murder or suicide. (*Pause*) Admire me now” (56). The

final stage direction reads: “*She turns to Niko and looks at him, uncertain. He keeps his head down and doesn’t look at her*”. This ending gives us some hope in Sylvia’s new found voice, but also emphasises the ongoing communicative struggles the couple are likely to face, reflective of those faced by newly independent nations.

Similarly, in the final scene of *The Love of the Nightingale*, Philomele encourages Itys to ask her questions, but when he asks one she finds particularly difficult to answer she has to resort to song instead of speech. This last detail could, however, not be seen as a negative or easy way out of communication, but as yet another possibility for it. Song is, after all, as much a use of voice as speech is. It may perhaps, though not necessarily, lack some of the direct communicative aspects of speech, but it shares, and perhaps exceeds, all speech’s self-expressive qualities. Perhaps these qualities can also be related to the style of language the Thracian women employ. Jennifer A. Wagner has described theirs as an “idiomatic speech full of metaphor and images, often as compressed as poetry, that expresses the darker truths of intuition and emotion as precisely, if more obscurely than Procne’s language expresses reason and logic” (240). These attributes bear some resemblance to the idea of a distinctly feminine discourse, controversially outlined by feminists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and described by feminist theatre historian Sue Ellen Case as:

elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear and interrupted rather than complete. [...] Without closure, the sense of beginning, middle and end, or a central focus, it abandons the hierarchical organisation principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse. (*Feminism and Theatre* 129)

It is also possible to relate such a style of language to the accounts Thiong’o has given about his early experiences of speaking Gikuyu:

We [...] learnt to value words for their meanings and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musical arranged words. So we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. (*Decolonising the Mind* 1131)

The trouble with drawing such connections between women, previously colonised non-Western nations, and a language which privileges expression over logic, is that to do so

reinforces the binaries, of Male and Female, West and East, Logos and Mythos, that many feminist and postcolonial theorists find deeply unhelpful and restrictive. If Wertebaker is seeking to privilege such a 'language' (which others may argue, she is not), surely she would also need to show that it is accessible to all. And this is something I believe she does in other of her plays.

The imaginative use of voice, offering an indirect route towards communication, is something Wertebaker frequently presents as a source of hope and we see examples of the many different forms this can take repeated in several of her works. For example, the convicts in Wertebaker's best known play, *Our Country's Good* (1988),<sup>iii</sup> rediscover their own voices through borrowing those of the characters in their production of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*; and the asylum seekers in *Credible Witness* (2001)<sup>iv</sup> who, exiled from their native lands, share an uneasy relationship with language, but nevertheless find certain 'rituals', involving food and music, which remember and express their native identities. As I began this article by suggesting, Wertebaker may recognise that human beings share an "inevitable need to speak in order to be" (*Is Theatre Necessary?*), but she offers multiple sources of hope for those who have lost their voices, as long as they look to original and imaginative solutions and do not simply assume the tactics of those who silenced them.

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<sup>i</sup> See articles by Anne Varty, Joe Winston, Jennifer A. Wagner, Margarete Rubik, and Sheila Rabillard, fully referenced in Works Cited.

<sup>ii</sup> Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* addresses similar issues by juxtaposing a first act set in colonial Africa with a second set in 1970s Britain, and cross casting against race and gender to ridicule the judgements we make based on these categories.

<sup>iii</sup> Published in the collection *Plays One*.

<sup>iv</sup> Published in the collection *Plays Two*.