

## Unspeakable Language of Revisionary Myth in *The Love of the Nightingale*

### Abstract

Timberlake Wertenbaker is one of the most important female playwrights in the contemporary British theatre. She has published twenty-three plays and she is very sensitive to language. She always focus on the relation between language and identity to care for the women who are silenced and forbidden to show their emotion and opinions. In addition, Wertenbaker often recreates the plays which are based on the history material, myth, and fairy tale in order to reconstruct the past, to criticize the present. During the revision, texts and characters can interact and generate the new issue in order to change the accepted sexual norms in the past. In this paper, I use *The Love of the Nightingale* to be an example to elaborate how Wertenbaker recreate the myth and female figures struggle against the male violence. Next, in this play, there are several unspeakable behavior between the characters which show the problem of women's suffering and the loss of language. However, through their suffering, Wertenbaker reshapes the stereotype images of silenced women to be the people who are aware of their language and emotion. In the conclusion, this revising myth for women give the oral history play a whole new illustration which stimulates readers to actively reconsider old myth. Wertenbaker intends to let the reader aware their importance as an audience who also joins the play and allow her myth to be told and revised continuously by the reader.

*The Love of the Nightingale*, this play is based on Sophocles' lost tragedy *Tereus* and also recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Wertebaker's version, this play is set in ancient Greece, and opens with the fight of two soldiers, dramatizing the war in Athens. When the soldiers are cursing each other, the male chorus informs about the war in Athens and the two daughters of Athenian king are discussing "life's charms and the attractions of men" (292). The two princes are very sad because the elder sister, Procne is going to get married with the king of Thrace, Tereus according her parents' will. Even though Procne gives births to son, Itys, she is not happy because she misses her sister very much. So, Tereus sets off for Athens to bring Philomele and her company, Niobe to Thrace. During the long journey, Tereus falls in love with her sister in law, and continuously delays their arrival time. Then, He is determined to declare his love to Philomele and rapes her after her rejection. When Philomele threatens to public his deed, Tereus cuts her tongue and keeps her secretly a prisoner. Later, she uses three huge dolls to enact her rape and cutting of her tongue in Bacchic festival. Procne recognizes her sister and they revenge by killing Itys. Later, Tereus attempts to kill them but he can not catch them. All of them are transformed in to birds, Procne into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow and Tereus becomes a hoopoe.

There are several unspeakable behavior in this play, which show the inability of language. First, the chorus is divided into two groups according to different gender. The male and female chorus "refuse to prevent that unspeakable behavior, and thus are complicitous

with events” (Wagner, 239). Furthermore, these two groups never speak to each other which can be considered that men and women has incomprehension mutually. It also seems that their actions are in accordance with their culture in order to follow the social rules. Through Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, Language is a system of signs and “ the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (854) which means the language is not inherent and its production produces simply a form, not a substance. Therefore, “Every means of expression used in society is based on collective behavior” (854) and the individual does not have power to change it. The language gives the order to people and also causes misunderstanding by different usages, like the incomprehensibility between male and female chorus.

Furthermore, in the play, the male chorus never involves in the action of the play but the female chorus are five characters who have names. These five female chorus, Hero, Iris, June, Echo, and Helen are submissive to male dominance in the mythology. They are “the other” who are passive to create their own identities and speechless for themselves. However, Wertebaker let these women eager to speak in the play, like June says, “All service is danger and all marriage too” (317). She is a wise predictors to warn Procne the coming danger. Therefore, the setting of the male and female chorus is different, the male is a group but the female are individuals who let people notice their existence to reconstruct their identities in the play.

Second, the incapable communication also happens in Procne and her girls.

PROCNE. Where have the words gone?

ECHO. Gone, Procne, the words.

PROCNE. There are so many. Everything that was had a word and  
every . . . None of these meaning half in the shade, unclear.

IRIS. We speak the same language, Procne.

PROCNE. The words are the same, but point to different things. We  
aspire to clarity in sound, you like the silences in between.

HERO. We offered to initiate you.

PROCNE. Barbarian practices. I am an Athenian: I know the truth is  
found by logic and happiness lies in the true.

HERO. Truth is full of darkness. (Scene 4, 298-99)

Here, Procne is even silenced metaphorically because of her strong sense of dislocation.

The usages of language are totally different so she can not communicate with people in the foreign country. The language that Procne has learned is the language of Athens, she has been taught by the philosophers so she insists on the clarity in using language that can express reason and logic. However, the language of Thracian women is indistinct and emotional, like the poetry which full of metaphor and images. “[T]heir models for comprehending for comprehending the nature of Truth and Beauty prove fatally inadequate either for understanding actual human behavior or for learning alternate ways of comprehending worlds” (Wagner, 240) That is to say, human being consider that language can shape the life and through the cognition of language, people can get the so-called truth. Ironically, even people use the same language, the concept of truth they get is totally different, like Procne's truth is

beautiful but Thracian women's truth is dark.

According to Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lies in A Normal Sense*, “They desire the pleasant, life-preserving consequence of truth; they are indifferent to pure knowledge if it has no consequences, but they are actually hostile towards truths which may be harmful and destructive” (766) The language is simply a tool to let human have a stable life because it built a social convention that let everyone to follow . “They are deeply immersed in illusions and dream-image; their eyes merely glide across the surface of things and see forms” (765). Human use language to create a fabricated world and the truth they believe are just illusions . “If truth alone had been decisive in the genesis of language, how could we possibly be permitted to say, ‘the stone is hard’ . . . We divide things up by gender, describing a tree as masculine and a plant as feminine – how arbitrary these translation are!” (766) So, the language is essentially metaphorical and can not capture the true nature of reality and it is essentially conventional, arbitrary and subjective.

Third, in this play, Philomele appears as a modern woman who is always sensitive to the language and has numerous questions. She is eager to articulate and present her identity. However, her questions challenge the patriarchal authority so her tongue is cut off. It seems that women is forced to be silenced again in the myth. But, in fact, silence become the most powerful language. Philomela spends a lot of time making three big dolls and in the feast of Bacchus, she re-enacts the rape scene. Through this silent performance, the

body language which is the original way that people use to express the idea might be more proper to approach the truth. Here, Wertebaker rearrange the silence to be the chance for women to cross the limitation of languages and empower themselves to create new identity.

And in the last scene, Procne and Philomele become the birds. They experience the metamorphosis which help them to escape from the violence of patriarchal dominance. Becoming animal leads them to cross the boundary of fixed social rules and understand how the social and language system are only constructed by human being. So, the metamorphosis let them abandon the authoritative human language which cause them silent before. They still can express the voice through rhythms and sounds and flee the patriarchal hierarchy to experience the new form of life.

PHILOMELE. Do you understand why it was wrong of Tereus to cut out  
my tongue?

ITYS. It hurt.

PHILOMELE. Yes, but why was it wrong?

ITYS.(Bored) I don't know. Why was it wrong?

PHILOMELE. It was wrong because-

ITYS. What does wrong mean?

PHILOMELE. it is what isn't right.

ITYS. What is right?

(The nightingale sings)

Didn't you want me to ask questions?

(Fade) (Scene 21, p353-54)

Through the last conversation between Itys and Philomele, reader can notice that Philomele has different subject position. She is not silent anymore. She can speak and has the right to answer question, instead of asking. Philomele attempts to use the Socratic dialogue, which means to use endless questions to clarify a question. She does not offer the rational and moral answer but just sings. In this play, using the serial question to gain the answer or the truth seems to be futile. “The arrogance inherent in cognition and feeling casts a blinding fog over the eyes and senses of human beings. . . it deceives them about the value of existence”(765) In this quotation, Nietzsche downgrades the significance of the intellect, rather than celebrating the intellect that is emphasized by Socrates. He questions the value of truth and asks “where on earth can the drive to truth possibly have come from?”(765). Language is not the tool for people to perceive the world and the disconnection between word and meaning from this play points out the language can be fabricated by external authority. Therefore, in this play, there is a limitation to express the meaning by using language so the question of Itys would not be given the definite answer which inspire the reader to search for more possibilities of truth for the fluidity of the myth.

Next, *The Love of the Nightingale* is a revisionary plays, a transcreation which review the myth with a strong intention to change it. In classical Greek, myth always has a dominant discourse that is “deeply grounded in patriarchal, misogynistic traditions”(Seamon, 276) But in this play, Philomele is good at asking questions to build her identity and Procne

has the psychological transformation that able to subvert the male authority. Moreover, the myth has “the form's coherence” (Wagner, 246) that supports the culture's ideological order. Christ Barker says myth is similar to ideology and it is something unchallengeable, natural and God-given (129).

However, in this play, Wertemaker’s revisionary myth is not only about the Philomele myth, but also is the question about what myth is.

MALE CHORUS. What is a myth? The oblique image of an unwanted truth, reverberating through time.

MALE CHORUS. And yet, the first, the Greek meaning of myth, is simply what is delivered by word of mouth, a myth is speech, public speech.

MALE CHORUS. And myth also means the matter itself, the content of speech. (Scene 8, p315)

The male chorus laments the myth loses the value that people just regard the myth as “the unlikely story” and “a remote tale” (315) which has the invisible wall in front of the reader and it becomes indirect to speak. They try to deconstruct the myth that give audience the right to interpret it because the myth can reverberates in each different generations to fulfill various purposes. *The Love of the Nightingale* is the revision that show the fluidity of the myth and achieve the old myth to be reborn.

In Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*, he claims that the work of translation is not the reproduction, not imitate the original, it can change the linguistic form of words.



“The obvious tendentiousness of a writer's literary style may in time wither away, only to give rise to immanent tendencies in the literary creation. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound archaic” (256). So Wertebaker translate the ancient myth which is totally different with the original. This play is composed of different materials which even translate the social, cultural and language system to be the new production. In addition, Benjamin says, “Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original — not so much from its life as from its afterlife” (254). To some degree, through transcreation, Wertebaker gives this oral Greek myth an afterlife that break away from the original and she recreates this play which can survive from the ancient myth and be retold in different intentions by contemporary readers. In the beginning of the play, the first epigraph, “ Listen. This is the noise of myth. It makes the same sound as shadow. Can you hear it? ” ( Eavan Boland, *The Journey*) This epigraph shows that the reader discuss the same myth, but their interpretation are different. The myth should not be dominated by a major voice and every revision is a rebirth.

Besides, Adrienne Rich says, “Re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction — is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”( 18). Rich states that reader have to know the past differently to convey wrong and sexist social norms to the next generation. In this play,

author deconstructs the stereotypical images of the gender relation and against the play from gender-oriented perspective. She not only consider the inferior status of women but also the restriction of men in the traditional sexual roles. Wertebaker uses the gender differences to discuss the issue of sex, guilt, shame and vengeance. This play raises many questions about moral and education function and through the multiple voices, the reader can gain the new moral understanding.

As mentioned above, this play does not offer reader directly what the myth is and through translation, the narratives and plots are transformed which cause the different issues. Reader will encounter the new context to reexamine what the history, society and language are from various perspectives. Therefore, in this play, the status of audience is very important because they have to join the play together to gain their own interpretation. Interestingly, there are two kinds of the audience, one is on-stage and the other is off-stage. Wertebaker arranges the theatrical device of a play-within -the -play in order to make a special mode of perception which create an aesthetic distance between the reader and the play. In the Scene five, in Athens, there is a fragments of *Euripide's Hippolytos* as a play with in a play, watched by the king's court with Tereus as a guest. This scene is expressed by different audience responses that divide into four contrasting responses of the Queen, the King, Philomele and Tereus(Winston, 516). The Queen regards the play as the soap opera that only focus on the plot. The king uses the sophisticated view to interpret the play which is like a substitute

religion that can foreshadow people's fate. Tereus detests the play, especially on moral ground that he mentions, "These plays condone vice"( 303) and considers Phaedra's action is wrong and vile. Ironically, when he is attracted by Philomele, he claims that he is Phaedra. He takes the play to be his excuse in order to avoid the responsibility of his action. Philomele thinks that the play can embody her romantic view and indulge her emotions. However, Philomele " fails to see how it is influencing her own life" (Winston, 517) and Tereus absorbs the play as the value to guide his action and excuse his hypocrisy. Through the different perspectives of the audience, there are different interpretations to illustrate the meaning of play.

So, as the off-stage audience, Wertebaker's revision open to the collective enunciation and new community, rather than expressing authoritative statement. There is no definitive voice which can dominate the development of the play so characters from different historical background can have the conversation with each other. Wertebaker stimulates readers to enter the play in order to reconsider the task of it, rather than accept it passively. But how to enter the play? Therefore, when the audience watch the play or read it, they feel that it is "beautiful and moving but distant and unreal" (Winston, 517). The plat-within-the-play is a theatrical mode of perception which aims at creating an alienation effect to force the audience or reader to think actively.

In conclusion, in the scene twenty-one, Echo is the last character who speaks, "[T]his play has been designed as an echo" (Wagner, 249). It means that there is no ending of

the myth or history because the story might be the parody of our life, which can happen repetitively. Wertenbaker makes the boundary of historical and social conventions deconstructed in her revision. The female escape from textual closure and speak out to explore their autonomy and identities. However, Wertenbaker does not try to offer the solution to resolve the problems of women's suffering. Therefore, the last scene is open-ended and impossible to gain the absolute answer. She make her play to let reader perceive different enunciation from different societies and cultures at the same time. In addition, the system of language is ruptured by author's arrangement so the various voice cause the differences. As a result, when language is used, every word will become an image which can re interpreted again and again. So, audience can not indulge into the illusion of truth that is constructed by social language system. The expression of language sometimes simply represents the collective behavior of human which is a form without substance. Therefore, the audience always have the right to question and reinterpret the meaning of the myth. Wertenbaker uses this play to express there is no standard answer to elaborate any literature and audience's every illustration can be seen as the rebirth which give the afterlife of the work.

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