RE-TELLING EXILE: REINTERPRETATIONS OF ANCIENT MYTHS IN TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER'S *THE LOVE OF THE NIGHTINGALE* AND CHRISTA WOLF'S *MEDEA.VOICES*

Corina Lungu
Ovidius University, Constanța

Literary representations of exile have been associated, to a certain degree, with the issue of Otherness. Geographic displacement is bound to produce frustration for the one who finds the place, the culture and the language spoken in the new territory they inhabit unfamiliar. The exile, i.e. the displaced person, may in turn be perceived as an element of disruption, bringing new cultural aspects into the setting. The thus resulting alienation is exacerbated by the refusal or inability of the "foreigner" to follow the norms established by their new community. This paper will focus on the representation of exile in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* and Christa Wolf's *Medea. Voices*, more specifically on the connection between geographic displacement and discourse. The first aspect taken into consideration will be the silencing of the exile and their inability to comprehend or be comprehended as they are set into a new environment. The second aspect is related to discourse as discussed by Foucault, i.e. history written by those to whom the power belongs, and taken for granted as the Truth.

Although they come from a different background, both Wertenbaker and Wolf had a similar approach in their reinterpretation of Greek mythical figures. The former introduces the audience to Procne and Philomele, two educated Athenian sisters who enjoy listening to philosophers and carrying conversations. Their evolution throughout the play, however, is anticipated by the fragments quoted from Sophocles' lost play, *Tereus*:

> Now, by myself, I am nothing; yea, full oft/ I have regarded woman's fortunes thus;/ That we are nothing, who in our fathers' house/ Live, I suppose, the happiest, while young,/ Of all mankind; for ever pleasantly/ Does Folly nurture all. Then, when we come/ To full discretion and maturity, we are thrust out and marketed abroad. (Wertenbaker 285)

The eldest sister, Procne, will be offered by her father as a trophy-wife to the king who helped Athens during the war, Tereus. She is envied by her younger sister, Philomele, who wishes love, but is most of all curious about

the aspects of marriage and sexual relations. Thus, their first conversation is centered on the naked male body, making the reader think of a reversal of the *speculum*, which is defined by Luce Irigaray as an intrusive male instrument used for analyzing the inside of the female body, more specifically her genitalia (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 144-145): "Philomele: I envy you, sister, you'll know everything then" (Wertenbaker 293).

Once married, Procne has to face exile to a foreign country, unable to communicate with the women around her or with her husband. Therefore, she experiences solitude as a form of silencing: "Where have all the words gone? (…) I cannot talk to my husband, I have nothing to say to my son" (298-299). Her female companions, also unable to make themselves understood by a foreigner, seem to value silence and ambiguity, and their warnings remain unheard: "Helen: I am worried. It is not something I can say. There are no words for forebodings. (…) June: Best to say nothing" (300). Nevertheless, Procne gradually assumes her role as a wife, not questioning her husband, as well as the dominant masculine discourse in relation to her female companions. Thus, rather than complain about the silence, she eventually demands it: "Enough of your nonsense. Be silent" (318).

Philomele's violent silencing by Tereus is anticipated during Scene 5, when they become part of the audience of the metaplay *Hyppolitus*. Philomele insists on leaving for Thrace, to visit her sister, despite her parents' reticence. Her argument, "I have to keep my word" (304), can be understood as determination to obey by her promise, but also as the refusal of silence. In contrast, Tereus condones silence, despite rejecting lying due to its immorality. According to him, not revealing the truth is acceptable, because it makes it non-existent. Thus, Tereus acknowledges the power of words in the making of reality. Moreover, while at sea, Philomele uses questions as a maieutic method of persuasion, thus emulating the Athenian philosophers employing the Socratic means of education. Tereus, on the other hand, is bothered by her questions and wishes her talk to be "entertaining." He also admits that he does not know anything about his wife, nor is he familiar with the conversations she carries with her female companions. Furthermore, when Philomele threatens to talk about her rape, he cuts her tongue, thus replicating the previous violation. In order to live in exile, in Thrace, the woman had to be muted, because, as the servant Niobe admits, "The one alive who cannot speak, that one has truly lost all power" (337).

Medea, in Wolf's *Medea. Voices*, also suffers from being silenced. Her assertiveness, her claim to be at least equal to the men around her, turns her into an enemy in the eyes of many Corinthians, including females who have accepted their submission. An exile, running away from her father's

tyrannical regime and marrying a stranger, Medea finds herself unable to communicate with her husband Jason. Her quest for truth seems hopeless, since the revealing of a secret Corinth was built upon would bring her death. She can only confide in a few faithful Colchidians who have joined her and who are also rejected for being "savages" by the "civilized" Corinthians. Following their displacement from a country ruled by a patriarch who would not provide freedom to his subjects, the exiles realize that the new territory they inhabit cannot become a homeland. Even those Colchians who adopt the Corinthian lifestyle and try to integrate within King Creon's court are seen as "others", being used for the services they offer, yet unable to fit into any social group.

The silencing of women becomes possible both in *Medea. Voices* and in *The Love of the Nightingale* due to the female characters who passively accept their inferior roles and try to promote a custodial culture. Queen Merope in the former and, more visibly, the servant Niobe in the latter, are aware of the situation in which the other characters find themselves. However, in their attempt to preserve their lives and safety, they keep silent about the secrets they have witnessed, thus turning into accomplices of the male oppressors. Queen Merope does not reveal the fact that her eldest daughter was killed by her own father in order for him to secure his throne. Symbolically, the queen develops a double existence – an official one, as the wife of King Creon, and a (quite literally) underground one, as a mother mourning her murdered child. In *The Love of the Nightingale,* Niobe, Philomele's servant, witnesses the rape taking place off-stage, but reports it only to the audience by means of a soliloquy. Moreover, she tries to pressure Philomele into accepting a form of prostitution, telling her to ask for money in return for sexual favors for the king. Niobe repeatedly warns her mistress to be quiet about everything and even accept the rape as a natural aspect of life, similar to the conquering of countries by violent armies.

Nevertheless, even when they seem unable to articulate their thoughts or their unconscious, some of the women try to make themselves heard by means of what Irigaray would call *parler femme*, i.e. "speaking (as) woman" (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 135). Procne's companions, who in fact represent a multiplicity of the same female self, experience this paradoxical situation whenever they attempt to communicate with their mistress:

> Hero: Sometimes I feel I know things but I cannot prove that I know them or that I know is true and when I doubt my knowledge it disintegrates into a senseless jumble of possibilities, a puzzle that will not be reassembled, the spider web in which I lie, immobile, and truth paralysed.

> Helen: Let me put it another way. I have trouble expressing myself. The world I see and the words I have do not match. (Wertenbaker 316)

Similarly, in *Medea. Voices*, Galuke, King Creon's daughter, suffers from epilepsy and cannot function in any social situation until Medea manages to reach to her unconscious, in a form of psychoanalysis avant-la-lettre. Only when she articulates the secret her father had wanted buried can Glauke lead a normal life, having been healed.

Philomele alse manages to find a form of expressing herself and revealing the truth about her rape. However, if traditionally she uses weaving to tell her story, in *The Love of the Nightingale* she uses dolls in a form of dramatic performance related to the spoken word rather than to writing:

> The language in which Philomele eventually gives form to her rage and agony is a physical theatre language. Like Ovid's Philomela, she employs a traditional woman's skill, sewing, but she uses it in order to create for herself an alter ego, a huge doll puppet through which she can enter and control the public space of performance. (…) 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. (Cousin 116-117)

Moreover, after her metamorphosis in a nightingale, Philomele recovers her words, her language is human-like, allowing her to redeem Itys. By means of a series of interrogations, he finally understands the importance of language and of questioning not only actions, but also abstract concepts promoted as values, such as "right."

However, it is important to notice that both Philomele and Medea's recovering of their voices is achieved, essentially, by having them become the subjects rather than the objects of their own "stories." By employing the dramatic mode, in Wertenbaker's case, or the monologue, in Wolf's novel, the authors allow their characters to construct their own realities, thus offering the audience/reader an alternative to the histories fabricated by male tradition. Therefore, the female protagonists appear as scapegoats demonized by the persecuting collective unconscious (Girard 116), whose system of representation has been continuously replicated by the Western literary canon.

According to Terry Eagleton, in *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic*, the tradition of the scapegoat can be traced back to ancient Greece, where during the annual rite of Thargelia, the pollution accumulated by the city throughout the previous year was expelled by selecting for purification

two *pharmakoi*, chosen from the most destitute and deformed of the city. Initially, these *pharmakoi* were killed, but the murder gradually became symbolic, turning into a parade followed by the thrusting out of town of the "guilty" ones (274-279). René Girard claims that the *pharmakos*, with its paradoxical quality ("the guilty innocent"), lies at the foundation of many religious creeds, since it is a figure symbolically loaded with the guilt of the community, which it thus represents, but at the same time invested with the power to deliver this community. The pretext for destroying or exiling a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, is always a fundamental crime, seemingly threatening the cultural, social or moral foundations of the society it inhabits. The transgression compromises the order, which is ultimately restored by means of the scapegoat's sacrifice (75-79).

Both Medea and Philomele appear, in *Medea. Voices* and *The Love of the Nightingale*, respectively, as *pharmakoi*, whose only escape from exile is, ironically, another form of exile. They are both foreigners inhabiting new territories and unable to fit there, marked by difference in attitude or physical mutilation. They are housed and maintained by the king, but not accepted inside the palace. Medea is suspected of having murdered her brother, Absyrtos, though there is no evidence supporting the accusation. The doubt raised by her throwing the brother's remains into the sea is exploited by the king's advisers, who fabricate a type of discourse meant to turn Medea into a scapegoat and thus prevent her from making public information that was intended to remain secret. The outbreak of the plague adds a new element to the witch hunt started in Corinth, and Medea is accused of having caused the sickness of those she is healing. Even after she is evicted and her sons are stoned to death by a mob, the Corinthian authorities create a new discourse, accusing her of filicide and Glauke's murder. Only her new form of exile, among the other rejected women of Colchidie, gives her the freedom to express her thoughts and cast curses on her persecutors.

In *The Love of the Nightingale*, Philomele also appears as a *pharmakos*, the agent of social redemption and the source of catharsis for her audience, both within and without the play. The murder of Itys is not performed by his own mother as a simple act of vengeance, nor is it followed by its consumption. Philomele harms him in order to redeem him and the community, thus stopping the violence. The cathartic function of her murder is also suggested by the fact that this represents the only act of violence shown to the audience, as opposed to the previous ones which had occurred off-stage, being narrated by the male choir or by Niobe. Philomele's new exile consists of a form of corporeal displacement, as she, her sister and Tereus are metamorphosed into birds. However, only Philomele and Itys are capable of communicating, thus transcending their previous forms of existence.

Although they offer different perspectives on traditional myths, neither *The Love of the Nightingale*, nor *Medea. Voices* claim to present the Truth, they are not supposed to be taken for granted. On the contrary, they compel the reader and/ or the audience to question the so-called "grand narratives" presented previously especially by male authors, as well as the meanings of these myths when read in contemporary contexts. Therefore, both works end with a series of interrogations to which no clear answer is provided, having their audiences actively involved in interpreting the text or performance in front of them.

WORKS CITED

Cousin, Geraldine. "Re-Tellings." *Women in Dramatic Place and Time: Contemporary Female Characters on Stage*. London: Routledge, 1996. 98-138.

Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence. The Idea of the Tragic*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 274-298.

Girard, René. *Ţapul Ispăşitor*. Trans. Theodor Rogin. Bucureşti: Nemira, 2000.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Irigaray, Luce. "This Sex Which Is Not One." *Writing on the Body*: *Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Eds. Katie Conboy et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 248-256.

Wertenbaker, Timberlake. "The Love of the Nightingale." *Plays One*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Wolf, Christa. *Medea. Voices*. Trans. John Cullen. London: Virago Press, 1999.