Timberlake Wertenbaker’s ‘Radical Feminist’
Reinterpretation of a Greek Myth:
*The Love of the Nightingale*

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Timberlake Wertenbaker, who is put next to Caryl Churchill in the literary canon, is one of the most important and prolific women dramatists in contemporary British theatre. Having managed to gain international recognition in mainstream theatres, Timberlake Wertenbaker has developed a theatre of her own, which discusses a variety of subjects but is also rich in feminist debate. Yet, surprisingly, Wertenbaker has neither accepted to be categorised as a feminist dramatist nor has she ever regarded any of her plays as feminist. This study will analyse Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), which deals with the silencing of women by patriarchal power and elevates the radical feminist idea of sisterhood. It will thus try to reveal the playwright’s (radical) feminist stance in her early career.

Timberlake Wertenbaker, whose dramatic career covers a period of more than twenty-five years, is one of the most significant women dramatists in today’s British theatrical scene. Having started her career by writing and producing plays for children in a small fringe company that she herself had established in Greece, Wertenbaker first encountered British audiences in her early career in several radical fringe theatres and other small theatre companies in London, such as the Shared Experience Company and the Women’s Theatre Group (cf. McDonough 1996: 406). During the season of 1984–1985, she began to work as a resident writer for the Royal Court Theatre, which has produced most of her notable plays (cf. Wilson 1993: 147; McDonough 1996: 406). Since then, Wertenbaker’s reputation as a dramatist has gradually increased and, as Susan Carlson observes, Timberlake Wertenbaker appeared as “one of several women playwrights, who, after beginning her work on the radical fringe, has found herself courted by more high-profile theatres” (1993: 268), including the Royal
Likewise, in another interview broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 5 July 2004, Wertenbaker avoids describing herself as a feminist playwright. When the presenter comments and asks Wertenbaker, “You are always interested in your plays in female characters being in the foreground of the play, certainly in most of the work, and you’ve been described as a feminist playwright. How would you describe yourself?”, Timberlake Wertenbaker replies as follows:

Well, I never describe myself, I just sit there and write and hope for the best. And I’m always a little bit surprised when somebody asks me that question. I have to be truthful, I have never found a way of answering it and I think that I’m a playwright. And obviously I’m attracted to women characters because I can sense their complexity and I often see slightly simplified women characters on the stage I think […] (http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/2004_27_mon_01.shtml, 30.07.04)².

Hence, Timberlake Wertenbaker has never been a self-proclaimed feminist playwright, and she has always refused to associate her work with feminism (cf. Carlson 1993: 278). However, a close reading of The Love of the Nightingale (1988) proves the opposite and explicitly reveals the playwright’s (radical) feminist stance in her early career.

The Love of the Nightingale (1988), which, according to Elaine Aston, is a “modern feminist re-inscription of Greek theatre” (1994: 18), is one of the most outstanding plays of Timberlake Wertenbaker. In this play, Wertenbaker looks at gender issues from a feminist perspective and criticises the values and moral order of patriarchy for its hypocrisy and double standards. The Love of the Nightingale takes its source from the Philomele myth, which tells about the enforced silencing of Philomele by Tereus, her brother-in-law, who rapes her and then cuts out her tongue in order to prevent her from publicising his guilt. However, as different from the myth, which ignores to reflect the female perspective, in this play Wertenbaker puts Philomele as an unconventional young woman into the centre of action and portrays her as a female figure who refuses to obey the values of patriarchy. So, as the critic Paul Taylor has observed, The Love of the Nightingale “offers both a moving dramatisation of the Philomele and Tereus myth and a knowing [that is, feminist] deconstruction of it” (qtd. in Carlson 1993: 270).

The Love of the Nightingale³, which is set in ancient Greece and which begins in medias res, opens with the fight of two soldiers, dramatising the war in Athens. As the two soldiers are fighting and cursing at each other, the Male Chorus interferes and informs the audience about the events taking

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² The transcription of the radio programme Women’s Hour, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 5 July 2004, is my own.
³ Hereafter referred to as LN with the appropriate scene and page numbers.
place at the king's palace: “Athens is at war, but in the palace of the Athenian king Pandion, two sisters discuss life’s charms and the attractions of men” (*LN*: Sc.1, 2). In the following scene, where the King’s two daughters are introduced, Procne and Philomele express their sadness about having to part from each other as Procne, the elder sister, is going to get married according her “parents’ will” (*LN*: Sc. 2, 4). Soon it is revealed that Procne’s enforced marriage is the outcome of an agreement between her father and Tereus, the king of Thrace. Since Athens has won the war with the help of Tereus, King Pandion decides to give him a reward to express his gratitude to the Thracian king and when Tereus indicates his intention that he wants to have one of his daughters, King Pandion agrees and gives Procne as a reward to the king of Thrace.

In her new land Thrace, Procne gives birth to Tereus’s son, Itys. However, nothing makes her happy as she misses her sister very much. In the end, when Procne can no longer suppress her longing for her sister after a separation for five years, Tereus sets off for Athens to bring Philomele to Thrace. After he arrives in Athens at the end of a long journey, he takes King Pandion’s consent and so they leave for Thrace in the company of Tereus’s soldiers and Niobe, an old woman who will take care of Philomele during her parents’ absence. However, while sailing, Tereus, who has already fallen in love with his sister-in-law, continuously delays their arrival in Thrace so that he can be closer to Philomele. Being determined to have Philomele, he makes amorous advances to her, yet Philomele, whose only wish is to embrace her sister as soon as possible, constantly refuses him saying that she loves him only as a brother. In the end, believing that Philomele’s love for her sister hinders her from seeing him as a lover, Tereus makes up a story and tells her that Procne has died when she suddenly fell down into the river while waiting for their arrival on top of a mountain and that her body could not be found. Upon hearing this, Philomele screams and begins to cry in the arms of Tereus. As time passes, Tereus feels more and more attracted to his sister-in-law yet, one day, when he suddenly sees Philomele flirting with the Captain, he does not tolerate this and, maddened by anger and jealousy, he kills the Captain. Thus, having also removed the second person who, he believed, put a barrier between himself and his beloved one, Tereus decides to declare his love to his sister-in-law. Yet when she still rejects him and reveals her fear of him, Tereus takes advantage of Philomele’s helpless state and rapes her.

In the palace, however, Procne, who has been waiting for their arrival for months, is deeply worried about Tereus and Philomele. She begs her ladies-in-waiting, who also act as the female chorus in the play, to tell her whatever they know about her sister and Tereus, but they do not disclose anything. Suddenly, Tereus enters with blood on his hands. In a state of shock, Procne asks him what has happened and once again Tereus tells a lie
explaining to her that he had to struggle with a “wild beast, or a god in disguise” (LN: Sc. 14, 32). As he expects, his silence about Philomele makes Procne think that Philomele has died and thus in grief she welcomes her husband.

In the next scene, Philomele, who wants to get rid of “the smell of violence” (LN: Sc.15, 33) and “the smell of fear” (LN: Sc.15, 33) on her body, “is being washed by Niobe, her legs spread around a basin. Her head is down” (LN: Sc.15, 33). Just as she quarrels with Niobe, who advises her not to make Tereus angry since “he might still be interested” (LN: Sc.15, 33), Tereus enters. Contrary to what he expects, Philomele becomes furious when seeing Tereus, and she both humiliates him by teasing his manhood and threatens that she will reveal the whole truth about him to the people of Thrace. Nevertheless, Philomele’s daring words and her rebellious attitude lead to her own tragic end: Tereus cuts out her tongue. When Niobe encounters Philomele bleeding to death, she pities her and comments on her tragic state: “The silence of the dead can turn into a wild chorus. But the one alive who cannot speak, that one has truly lost all power” (LN: Sc.16, 36).

However, Philomele’s clever act at the Bacchean feast attended only by women proves just the opposite. In the company of their servant, Niobe and Philomele join the feast carrying three huge dolls, which, as Niobe reports, were made by Philomele. As they are trying to move in the feast area, Niobe pushes Philomele into the crowd so that she can see the dancing acrobats. Philomele watches them until the acrobats finish their performance, but afterwards the space remains empty. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Philomele throws her dolls into the empty space encircled by the crowd. When seeing her, Niobe tries to take Philomele away from that place, but unknowingly Niobe herself becomes a part of Philomele’s dumb show. The scene is described in the stage directions as such: “Niobe grabs one of [the dolls] and tries to grab Philomele, but she is behind the second doll. Since the dolls are huge, the struggle seems to be between the two dolls. One is male, one is female, and the male one has a king’s crown” (LN: Sc.18, 40). While the crowd watching them “makes a wider circle and waits in silence” (LN: Sc.18, 40), Philomele continues to enact her rape and her further victimisation. As described in the stage directions, she “stages a very brutal illustration of the cutting of the female doll’s tongue. Blood cloth on the floor” (LN: Sc.18, 40). While she enacts the cutting of her tongue, the crowd continues to watch her very silently and Niobe stands still. “Then the servant comes inside the circle, holding a third doll, a queen” (LN: Sc.18, 40). It is at that very moment that Procne comes to the front of the circle formed by the crowd and watches the enactment of Philomele’s story. Meanwhile, “the Procne doll weeps” and “the two female dolls embrace” (LN: Sc.18, 40).

After Procne has learnt the whole truth about Tereus, the two sisters collaborate and decide to have their revenge on him. As the women con-
continue to entertain themselves dancing and drinking inside the palace, where the two sisters are also present, Itys, who has noticed his sword in Philomele's hand while secretly observing the Bacchean women through the window, rushes in to take back his weapon from Philomele. However, Philomele does not give it to him. While Procne holds Itys, Philomele “brings the sword down on his neck” (LN: Sc.20, 46) and the two sisters kill the child. At that very moment, thinking that the festivities have come to an end and ignorant about his son's slaughter, Tereus enters the palace. When he comes across Philomele with her blood-covered hands, he is shocked. In anxiety, he tries to explain to Procne why he has exploited Philomele, but he cannot suppress Procne's anger towards himself. Procne suddenly shows him the dead body of Itys covered in blood and speaks: “If you bend over the stream and search for your reflection Tereus, this is what it looks like” (LN: Sc.20, 47). Fearing the rage of the two sisters, with an instant decision, Tereus attempts to kill them both with Itys’ sword and he begins to run after them. However, he cannot catch them. As the myth goes, Philomele is metamorphosed into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow, and Tereus becomes a hoopoe.

In the final scene of the play, Itys appears together with the birds; yet, only Philomele, the nightingale, talks with him. She asks Itys if he understood why Tereus’s violent act of cutting out her tongue had been wrong, but he cannot give an answer and so the play ends:

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) (LN: Sc.21, 49).

As can be seen, in The Love of the Nightingale Timberlake Wertenbaker demonstrates the violation of women who refuse to yield to patriarchal authority and, around the central theme of the enforced silencing of women by men, she discusses such issues as rape and incest from a feminist perspective. Within the triangle of Procne, Tereus and Philomele, the playwright focuses on the tragedy of the two sisters and displays how they are victimised by patriarchal power. When Procne and Philomele are first introduced to the audience in Scene 2, it is clearly apparent that, contrary to Procne, Philomele does not conform to the traditional gender roles, that is, “the socially created expectations for masculine and feminine behaviour” (Lipman-Blumen 1984: 2) assigned by patriarchy. Procne’s first words, marking the beginning of the scene, disclose her sister’s unusual character:
“Don’t say that Philomele” (*LN*: Sc. 2, 2). As they continue to converse, it is revealed that Procne feels disturbed and warns her sister because, believing that her marriage will enable Procne to learn everything about sexuality, Philomele not only asks Procne questions about sexuality and intercourse but also freely expresses her own feelings of sexual desire: “I envy you, sister, you’ll know everything then. What are they like? Men?” (*LN*: Sc. 2, 2). Moreover, without any hesitation, she even speaks openly about her desire for love while watching *Hippolytos*, the play within the play dramatising Phaedra’s deep love towards her stepson Hippolytus, together with her parents and her brother-in-law. When the female chorus in *Hippolytos* states voicing Phaedra’s feelings: “[...] love, I beg you, pass me by” (*LN*: Sc. 5, 11), Philomele comments: “I would never say that, would you, brother Tereus? I want to feel everything there is to feel. Don’t you?” (*LN*: Sc. 5, 11). Hence, Philomele does not feel the need to restrict herself either in speech or in thought. She freely talks about topics which are regarded as inappropriate for a woman to talk about in public, and thus she publicises her thoughts and feelings, which are supposed to be kept in the private sphere in the view of patriarchy.

What characterizes Philomele as an unconventional woman is not only her outspoken nature in sexual matters, but also her inquisitive mind and disobedient character. Throughout their voyage to Thrace, she asks the Captain numerous questions about the lands she sees around and about women. Furthermore, she questions the Captain about goodness and truth, like a learned man passing on judgement on metaphysical issues denied to women, and she does this in a manly way, engaging in an “Athenian dialectic of logic, reminiscent of Plato’s dialogues” (*Case* 1991: 240):

> CAPTAIN. They [wild men in Mount Athos] worship male gods. They believe all harm in the world comes from women.
> PHILOMELE. Why do they believe that? (*Pause.*) You don’t agree with them, do you, Captain?
> CAPTAIN. I don’t know, miss.
> PHILOMELE. If you don’t disagree, you agree with them, Captain, that’s logic.
> CAPTAIN. Women are beautiful.
> PHILOMELE. But surely you believe that beauty is truth and goodness as well?
> CAPTAIN. That I don’t know. I would have to think about it.
> PHILOMELE. I’ll prove it to you now, I once heard a philosopher do it. I will begin by asking you a lot of questions. You answer yes or no. But you must pay attention. Are you ready? (*LN*: Sc.7, 15)

Having thus achieved to attract his attention, Philomele even makes advances to seduce the Captain putting his hand on her breast, which rein-
forces her role as the seductress: “You touched my hand on the ship once, by mistake, and once I fell against you, a wave, you blushed, I saw it, fear, desire, they’re the same, I’m not a child. Touch my hand again: prove you feel nothing” (LN: Sc.12, 27). Hence, as Sue-Ellen Case has put it, Philomele’s “unusually assertive nature, indicated by her ability to engage in philosophical discourse and her attempted seduction of the sea captain” (qtd. in McDonough 1996: 410) establish her as a considerably “distinctive” (qtd. in McDonough 1996: 410) female character who exceeds the boundaries of appropriate female behaviour in a patriarchal society.

However, despite her characteristic traits, which make her quite different from conventional women, Philomele meets the same fate as many ordinary women. Although she continuously rejects Tereus’s advances, she cannot escape his sexual attack and eventually is raped by him. With her rape, Philomele does not only experience sexual violation but also psychological violence; from the high status of a noble princess she is lowered to the position of a victim of rape.

Yet, Philomele still does not submit to Tereus after her rape, and instead of accepting her fate, as is traditionally expected of a woman, she begins to inquire into the reason behind his brutal act. Moreover, just as Tereus humiliated and degraded her by his brutal deed, so does she degrade him by her words, and she courageously threatens Tereus to reveal his crime “with suggestions of sexual fallibility” (http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol1no1/mcdonald.html, 22.03.08):

Did you tell [Procne] that 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? [...] 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, did you tell her that? [...] There’s 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 Thrace seen you naked? Shall I tell them? Yes, I will tell (LN: Sc.15, 359:

Hence, as Marianne McDonald has pointed out, in Philomele’s protests, “the sexual imagery crosses into the political” and once again “the private invades the public” (http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol1no1/mcdonald.html, 22.03.08). By asserting that she will reveal the whole truth about Tereus, Philomele intends not only to publicise but also to politicise the private. She knows that by humiliating Tereus sexually in front of the public, she will also be able to harm his imperial power and image, and thus reduce the king to nothing. She also makes a suggestion: “Wouldn’t you prefer someone with truth and goodness, self-control and reason? Let my sister rule in his place” (LN: Sc.15, 36). As can be inferred from her speech, Philomele does not only attribute positive qualities like reason, truth, goodness, and self-control
to a woman, but she also sees in her the capacity to rule a country. This can be interpreted as a revelation of Wertenbaker’s desire for a world ruled by women, which is a radical feminist attitude. Radical feminists strongly believe that patriarchy is at the root of all forms of oppression and so they demand the removal of all manmade structures (Case 1988: 63). Thus, radical feminists want to establish a structure that destroys patriarchal dominance, hence, defends mainly the primacy of the position of women (Aston 1994: 66). Consequently, it can be argued that through Philomele, Wertenbaker presents an optimistic view of women and takes a radical feminist approach in conveying the idea that if the world is ruled by women, it will be a better place to live in.

Philomele’s rebellious and disobedient attitude, however, results in her own destruction: her tongue, with which she has voiced truths, is mutilated by Tereus before she can announce her rape to the Thracian people. With this final act of violence, Philomele’s exploitation takes its most brutal form, and she permanently loses her ability to speak. As a result, she encounters not only sexual and psychological violence, but also physical violence.

In Scene 18, even though she has been deprived of her ability to speak, Philomele demonstrates how she achieves her goal of publicising Tereus’s guilt. Unlike Tereus, who resorted to violence and used his physical power either to inflict punishment on his victim or to satisfy his sexual desire, Philomele uses her intellectual power in realising her aim, and dramatising her rape and mutilation in a puppet play, she manages to expose Tereus’s brutality and hypocrisy to the women of Thrace. Thus, although she does not have a tongue to communicate her tragedy by words, Philomele can still express herself by the language of theatre. By this way, Wertenbaker displays not only the power of theatre as an efficient means of communicating ideas, but also the political aspect of performance. As Janet Brown writes in her article “Feminist Theory and Contemporary Drama”, in the feminist theatre of the late eighties and early nineties, a new understanding of the act of speech itself appeared. Accordingly, performance began to be “perceived as a political gesture, not merely a psychological or spiritual one” (Brown 1999: 157). Brown continues: “All performance arises from and expresses the community; it is public and therefore political in nature, impacting the larger society, and it operates in circular fashion, reaching backward in time to give speech to silenced forebears, and extending into the future, nurturing the next generation” (1999: 157). Thus, what Philomele does in her puppet play is in fact a political act which enables her not only to voice her own silencing and give voice to all silenced women through ages but also to warn the future generation of women about male hypocrisy and brutality. Taking advantage of the festival’s being a public spectacle, Philomele exposes Tereus’s ugliness to everyone attending the feast and so she both continues
her rebellion in her silence and takes away from Tereus's public image as the king.

Furthermore, it is significant that Philomele publicly reveals the whole truth about Tereus at the Bacchean feast. The Bacchean feasts, or the Bacchanalia, were special celebrations with “both open and secret phases” (Jameson 1993: 54) held in the honour of Bacchus (Dionysus), the god of fertility. These festivities were mainly held at night and were open to “wild parties […] in the course of which wine flowed, social barriers were breached, and sexual indulgence was at least thought to occur” (Jameson 1993: 60). Interestingly enough, during these festivities, women, or the so-called bacchantes, “had their own rites for the god in which men had limited roles or were excluded” (Jameson 1993: 60). Referring to Allison Hersch’s article on the excesses and transgressions of the Bacchic rites, “‘How Sweet the Kill’: Orgiastic Female Violence” (1992), Jennifer Wagner also explains that the Bacchanal feast was a specific occasion in which men were not allowed to take part (1995: 8). Moreover, as can be found in the Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature, it was even believed that during these festivities, which were closed to men, “Pentheus, the king of Thebes, was torn to pieces by the bacchantes when he attempted to spy on their activities” (“Bacchantes”). Thus, these festivities “were [held in] secret” (Jameson 1993: 61), and the god Bacchus was “seen as a liberating figure in whose worship women found a temporary escape from male domination” (Jameson 1993: 61). Consequently, during these celebrations, women were “freed of any restrictions on appearance and behaviour” (Wagner 1995: 8) and “gender norms [were] dispensed with, and female transgression authorised” (Wagner 1995: 8). Hence, elevating “the concept of the liberated women” (Jameson 1993: 62), the Bacchanalia were occasions that enabled women to release female energy, or what Emily Culpepper has named, the “gynergy” (qtd. in Daly 1978: 13), within themselves, when they appeared in their “most powerful” (Wagner 1995: 8) state. So, in the play, on this specific occasion, Philomele has all the necessary “circumstances” (Wagner 1995: 8) that allow her to communicate her sexual violation and mutilation. As a result, Philomele in her tongueless state can voice and communicate much more than Tereus. In this respect, Wertenbaker also questions “the meaning and function of words” (Cousin 1996: 117) and contrasts the “speaking silence of Philomele” (Cousin 1996: 117) with Tereus’s ‘silent’ speeches. In Scene 20, after Tereus’s guilt is revealed to the public at the Bacchean feast, Procline underlines this contrast:

TEREUS. I had wanted to say.
PROCNE. Say what, Tereus?
TEREUS. If I could explain.
PROCNE. You have a tongue (LN: Sc.20, 46).
At the end of the play, appropriate to her talkative nature, it is Philomele who is transformed into a nightingale. Thus, having defeated Tereus, who represents male power, with the support of her sister Procne, Philomele regains her voice and she continues to ‘speak’ as a nightingale in a different dimension. Moreover, just as she used to ask a lot of questions in her former life as a human being, thus exposing her inquisitive mind, now she wants Itys to ask her questions. Her words, “(The Nightingale). And now, ask me some more questions” (LN: Sc.21, 48), mark the beginning of the last scene of the play. In this scene, Itys does not answer Philomele’s questions, but at least he begins to think about concepts like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Here, it can be observed that some kind of communication between the male and the female has started with Philomele’s paving the way. As Christine Dymkowski asserts, “the asking and answering of questions demands genuine interaction and hopes for mutual understanding” (1997: 132). Hence, the last scene of the play, throughout which Philomele encourages Itys to ask her questions, both suggests hope for the future and implies that mutual understanding between the male and the female will transform “the unending cycle of violence and death into the possibility of life and hope” (Dymkowski 1997: 132).

In The Love of the Nightingale, Philomele’s sister Procne, who is another stereotypical character, appears as a figure that enables the playwright to make the idea of enforced marriage an issue. Criticising this patriarchal tradition in marriage in her work Psychoanalysis and Feminism, the feminist writer and critic Juliet Mitchell claims that patriarchal ideology identifies women as objects of exchange. Mitchell’s major argument is that “the unconscious […] [is] the domain of the reproduction of culture or ideology” (1974: 413) and so patriarchal ideology that devalues women is reproduced in every form of society by the agency of the unconscious. Hence, she argues, to change women’s identity as exchange objects there must be a “cultural revolution” (1974: 414) in the basic ideology of human society. In the play, this patriarchal ideology determining women’s marital life is explicit. Being given by her father as a reward to Tereus for his support of the Athenian soldiers at war, Procne “serve[s] as currency in a transaction between two men” (Wilson 1993: 157):

KING PANDION. She’s yours, Tereus. Procne –
PROCNE. But, Father –
KING PANDION. Your husband (LN: Sc.3, 5).

Thus, Procne is given to Tereus simply like a commodity with the authority of her father and so she is passed from her father’s domain into her husband’s domain. In other words, she becomes an element of exchange in a marriage that functions like an “institution of ownership” (Case 1988: 8) where the man is the owner and the woman is the property. Indeed, as is
also emphasised in the Greek word for marriage, ‘exdosis’, which means ‘loan’ (Case 1988: 8; “Loan”), Procne is given as a loan to her husband by her father with her marriage. She is still the property of patriarchy, but she is only transferred from one patriarchal authority to another. Consequently, not being given even the right to have a say in her marriage, Procne is totally under the control of patriarchal power.

In her new life in Thrace, Procne is still confined to the domestic sphere, yet the void left by her sister’s absence cannot be filled. While she complains to the women in her court, her longing for her sister is revealed: “How we talked. Our words played, caressed each other, our words were tossed lightly, a challenge to catch. Where is she now? Who shares those games with her? Or is she silent too?” (LN: Sc.4, 7). When Hero, one of her ladies-in-waiting, reminds Procne that she has a family, husband and a child, Procne explains the most important reason behind her longing for Philomela: “I cannot talk to my husband. I have nothing to say to my son” (LN: Sc.4, 7). Thus, being distanced from her only friend, and having no emotional and/or intellectual contact with either her husband or her son, Procne finds herself in a state of complete silence in the absence of her sister. So, Wertenbaker demonstrates how men, with their controlling power as husbands or fathers, dominate women and separate them from each other. In this respect, it can be stated that Wertenbaker also highlights two important issues of radical feminist philosophy. One of them is the emphasis on the idea of sisterhood, saying that all women are sisters and cherishing women’s mutual understanding and support (Banks 1981: 232), and the other is the emphasis on the oppressive nature of patriarchy (Case 1988: 63).

Although Procne has her female companions in her new life in Thrace, having neither an emotional nor a social or cultural bond to her women, she cannot be friends with them. Thus, she complains: “Where have the words gone? [...] There were so many. Everything that was had a word and every word was something. None of these meanings half in the shade, unclear” (LN: Sc.4, 7). When Iris tells her that “[they] speak the same language” (LN: Sc.4, 7), Procne draws her attention to the difference between the ways of communicating of the Athenians and the Thracians: “The words are the same, but point to different things. We aspire to clarity in sound, you like the silences in between” (LN: Sc.4, 7). Hence, coming from a cultural background that elevates the freedom of speech and thought into a land that favours the language of silence, as she claims, Procne cannot enjoy the pleasure and comfort of communicating her feelings and thoughts. Consequently, although Procne, unlike her sister, has the ability to speak she is condemned to lead a life of silence and solitude for survival and ‘happiness’ in her marital life in the land of her husband.

Furthermore, leading a life cut off from her roots in a remote land, Procne also experiences the oppressive state of being an outsider. As an Athenian
who is forced to continue her existence in a foreign land after her marriage, Procne cannot adapt to her new life in Thrace. Hence, even though she occupies the social status of a queen, in her new social and cultural environment, to which she has no ties except for her husband and son, Procne does not feel as part of the society she lives in. Her companions, the female chorus, express Procne’s boredom:

HERO. She sits alone, hour after hour, turns her head away and laments.
IRIS. We don’t know how to act, we don’t know what to say.
HERO. She turns from us in grief.
JUNE. Boredom.
ECHO. Homesick.
HERO. It is difficult to come to a strange land.
HELEN. You’ll always be a guest there, never call it your own, never rest in the kindness of history.
ECHO. Your story intermingled with events, no. You will be outside:
IRIS. And if it is the land of your husband can you even say you have chosen it? (LN: Sc.4, 6)

Thus, as Iris points out, although Procne lives in the land of her husband, she still feels as an outsider because she herself has not chosen her new land just as she did not choose her husband. Hence, a new life that is imposed upon her by patriarchal authority causes Procne to suffer from a life in isolation.

While Procne is portrayed as a passive female character who submits to the decisions of the male power for most part of the play, in the last three scenes, she changes into a rebelling character like Philomele. To find out whether Philomele was exploited by Tereus, she, in a misogynist attitude, first accuses her sister of having seduced her husband or his soldiers: “How do I know you didn’t take him to your bed? [...] I have never seen him violent. He would not do this. He had to keep you back from his soldiers. Desire always burnt in you. Did you play with his sailors? Did you shame us all?” (LN: Sc.18, 41). Hence, she not only attributes the role of the temptress to her sister but she also attaches “the stigma of shame” (Winston 1995: 514) to Philomele. Yet, after she decides that Philomele is innocent, she joins her sister in her desire for revenge. Thus, Procne, too, eventually rebels against the patriarchy represented by her husband and, like Medea in Euripides’ play, she slaughters her own son together with Philomele, which shows their way of establishing justice. In this scene, Wertenbaker explicitly emphasises the importance of female bonding, because it is through the collaboration of Philomele and Procne that an end is brought to male violence. According to radical feminist theory, breaking the tie between the father and the son and thus putting an end to male domination, which they see at the root of all forms of oppression, is a display of female supremacy (Banks 1981: 232;
Moreover, for radical feminists, the eradication of patriarchy is essential because according to their political theory the absence of men means to “heal their male-inflicted wounds, to strengthen their bond with other women, and to develop a distinctively female perspective on the world” (Jaggar 1983: 276). Consequently, in this scene, Wertenbaker “overturns the balance of power in favor of female supremacy” (Dolan 1991: 10) and, in a radical feminist approach, she demonstrates how women can subvert the male order if they collaborate with their ‘sisters’.

Furthermore, Procne’s involvement in her son’s death, which is a very radical form of rebellion, bears several meanings. In the first place, it suggests that Procne will no longer obey the rules of patriarchy. This is also revealed in her revolt against Tereus: “I obeyed all rules: the rule of parents, the rule of marriage, the rules of my loneliness, you” (LN: Sc.20, 47). Moreover, since a child represents the future, the slaughter of Itys can also be interpreted as the destruction of the future of patriarchy. Later, in this scene, Procne adds: “There are no more rules. There is nothing. The world is bleak. The past a mockery. The future dead” (LN: Sc.20, 47). Meanwhile, she suddenly shows the dead body of Itys to Tereus and in an ironical tone she says, “I did nothing. As usual” (LN: Sc.20, 47). When Tereus looks at Philomele thinking that she has killed his son, Procne tells him that he himself was responsible for his son’s slaughter and so she “forces [Tereus] to confront his own guilt” (Winston 1995: 515): “No. You, Tereus. You bloodied the future. For all of us. We don’t want it” (LN: Sc.20, 47). It can be said that at this point in the play, Wertenbaker gives a pessimistic view of the future with regard to gender relations, and in a wider perspective, to human relations. In an interview published in *Rage and Reason*, the interviewer reminds the playwright that in the play it is not Tereus but Itys who is killed by Procne and Philomele for their suffering, and asks: “Does the future promise nothing but violence if justice remains absent and all members of society are not given their voice?” (1997: 143). Wertenbaker answers:

> I did feel very strongly that if you can’t speak, if you don’t have the language, the only way you can express yourself is violently, and I think we have evidence of it all around. If you can speak, you can at least make your claims, hope to be listened to, make more claims, listen to the other side. Without that, yes. I think there will be nothing but violence. And the sections of society now, the people who have no voice, are violent, inevitably. If you refuse to listen to a section of society, you are silencing them (Stephenson and Langridge 1997: 143).

Thus, in this scene of the play, although Wertenbaker starts out with feminist intentions, on a larger scale she gives the message that if there are people who are silenced and if people do not try to understand each other and
communicate with each other, the cycle of violence and revenge will continue forever.

In the play, which develops around the theme of the silencing of women, Niobe is another stereotypical female character that represents a form of silence. Niobe stands for the women submissive to male authority, yet, contrary to Procne, who turns into a rebelling character towards the end of the play, Niobe yields to patriarchal power in all aspects. The reason behind her submission to male authority, however, is “self-preservation” (Wagner 1995: 8). Living in a patriarchal society, she is “well aware of power structures and the implications of yielding to it [sic]” (Wagner 1995: 8). Hence, in order to secure her survival in safety in a society that privileges the silent who submit to authority, she deliberately keeps silent. Thus, Niobe’s everlasting silence contrasts with Philomele’s silence of, who never submits to male power, and with that of Procne, who later in the play decides to raise her voice against patriarchy.

As illustrated above, Philomele is violently silenced by Tereus because she has not accepted the dominance of male power. She thus represents the silence which is imposed upon women by force or violence. Procne, on the other hand, chooses to break her silence contrary to Niobe, because of her changing stance against patriarchy. At the beginning, she allows herself to be manipulated by the male because, having listened to the advice of the Athenian philosophers, who reflected the male perspective, she believes that male domination over the female is “the measure” (LN: Sc.2, 4). Yet, when she becomes aware of the reality that men oppress and violate women if women rebel against their authority, Procne protests against men’s understanding of justice and puts an end to her silence. Niobe, however, neither falls into conflict with the social conventions of her society with regard to gender roles, like Philomele, nor does she, like Procne, eventually feel the need to react against the order of patriarchy. Since she is perfectly aware of the gender roles in a patriarchal society, which assign men to the position of the powerful while identifying women as the weaker sex, Niobe knows that her reaction against male power will cause her own destruction. Hence, believing that “silence is the only viable strategy for survival in the face of power” (Wilson 1993: 157), she willingly remains silent throughout the play.

Nevertheless, Niobe’s conscious silence indirectly contributes to the violation of her own sex. In spite of the fact that she is quite aware of the results of leaving “a young girl and a man alone” (LN: Sc.7, 16), she deliberately refrains from protecting Philomele from Tereus’s sexual attack. As the rape scene takes place off-stage, Niobe appears and, hearing Philomele’s screams in the background, she speaks: “So, it’s happened. I’ve seen it coming for weeks. I could have warned her but what’s the point? Nowhere to go [...] Power is something you can’t resist. [...] Well I know. She’ll accept
it in the end. Have to. We do” (LN: Sc.13, 30). Thus, by keeping silent, Niobe preserves her own survival but puts the existence of another person from her own sex in danger. However, it has to be emphasised that Niobe’s passivity towards Philomele’s rape does not result from a deliberate intention of oppressing Philomele, but from her fear of patriarchal power. Hence, Wertenbaker implies that women who remain silent in a male dominated society will be used as instruments for the destruction of their own sisters patriarchy.

As Joe Winston points out in her article “Re-Casting the Phaedra Syndrome”, “the social reality of rape in a patriarchal society is that the stigma of shame will be attached to the woman” (1995: 514). In this play, Niobe, “as the voice of conventional social attitudes” (Winston 1995: 514), makes this attitude apparent in her speech in Scene 13 after Tereus has satisfied his sexual desire: “There. It’s finished now. A cool cloth. On her cheeks first. That’s where it hurts most. The shame […] I know all about it” (LN: Sc.13, 31). Obviously, Niobe knows that if the truth is revealed to the public, in a social structure that favours the male, Tereus will not be questioned for his hypocritical and immoral deed, but Philomele will be stigmatised as a prostitute. Thus, not only will she have to feel the shame of rape but also to accept the guilt (Winston 1995: 514). Consequently, Niobe remains silent and displays her conventionality even after the rape: “In the meantime, get him to provide for you. They don’t like us so much afterwards, you know. Now he might still feel something. We must eat. Smile. Beg” (LN: Sc.15, 33). When Philomele reacts against Niobe’s hypocrisy saying “you’re worse than [Tereus]” (Sc.15, 33), Niobe makes her see the reality of patriarchy: “Don’t be so mighty, Philomele. You’re nothing now. Another victim. Grovel. Like the rest of us” (LN: Sc.15, 34). So she reminds Philomele that her status as the princess will no longer give her a privileged social status but as the victim of rape she will be seen as a fallen woman. Furthermore, before Philomele’s mutilation, she warns her: “Worse things can happen […] Hold back your tongue, Philomele” (LN: Sc.15, 34). Indeed, in the play, Philomele’s mutilation is presented as an experience “more shocking” (Winston 1995: 515) than her rape because after her mutilation Philomele appears “crouched in a pool of blood” (LN: Sc.16, 36) in front of the audience, which demonstrates the outcome of an extreme form of patriarchal violence. In this scene, what Niobe says echoes the voice of patriarchy again: “She has lost her words, all of them. Now she is silent. For good. Of course, he could have killed her, that is the usual way of keeping people silent. But that might have made others talk” (LN: Sc.16, 36). Thus, a traditional woman absorbed into patriarchal society, Niobe accepts the values of patriarchy as well as the “patriarchal moral order which uses shame as a means to oppress [women]” (Winston 1995: 514).
Patriarchy in *The Love of the Nightingale* is represented by Tereus, King Pandion, the Captain, and Itys, as well as the soldiers in the background. Among these characters, King Pandion, the Captain, and Itys have a less significant role than Tereus in displaying the destructive effect of patriarchal power. Yet, on the whole, all of these male characters depict the controlling and prejudiced attitude of patriarchy in their relationships with women.

Among these less significant male characters, Itys, representing the future of patriarchy, is an instrumental character that enables the playwright to display the influence of patriarchal mentality on the physical and mental development of children. As can be inferred from his dialogues with his parents, being the only boy of his family and the son of a king, he is brought up in a way to be equipped with manly qualities such as bravery and physical strength. Furthermore, his character being predominantly moulded by the male perspective, he has already formed an idea of gender categorisation even in his childhood. For example, as a ten-year-old child, he feels that bravery is a characteristic quality that belongs to the male and that fighting at war is the most evident display of possessing that quality. In order to prove that he will also be a brave man in the future, he demonstrates to his parents, “*turning round with his spear in hand*” (*LN*: Sc.14, 38), how he will fight when he grows up. So he begins to associate manliness with power, fighting and courage in his childhood. Moreover, Itys learns from his social environment that women are inferior to men and thus deserve to be devalued. When, for example, he reminds the two soldiers that they are not allowed to see the Bacchean women inside the palace, one of the soldiers, revealing his low opinion of women and in a manner aimed at influencing Itys, says: “It’s just women” (*LN*: Sc.19, 43). Thus, acquiring his gender identity through a male discourse that teaches him not only gender stereotyping but also gender polarisation, Itys, as a child, already believes that women are the weaker sex and so he has to keep away from women to develop manly feelings. Indeed, when his mother tells him about his aunt Philomele, Itys immediately reacts against her. The moment Procne states that “[he] would have liked [his aunt]” (*LN*: Sc.17, 37) if he had seen her, Itys makes his choice: “I have uncles. They’re strong” (*LN*: Sc.17, 37). Hence, before he even becomes an adult, he is conditioned by patriarchy to reject all things female in order to become a man and thus he begins to ‘other’ the female sex. Interpreted from a Freudian perspective, this separation of the boy from his mother, which is explained as the dissolution of the Oedipus complex in this theory, is essential to Itys’ achieving his self-identity and maleness (1977: 191). However, many feminist critics have argued that Freud’s theory of the boy’s turning away from his mother and all things female involves an inherent misogyny (Donovan 1985: 178). Moreover, they believe that this separation contributes to the establishment of patriarchal civilisation (Donovan 1985: 172). Thus, it may be argued that since
Wertenbaker depicts patriarchy as the primary source of violence and oppression in the play, her portrayal of Itys reveals her radical feminist criticism of male discourse. Via Itys, she displays how the misogynist attitude of patriarchy is empowered and passed through new generations.

With Tereus, however, Wertenbaker raises her most aggressive voice against patriarchy. Discussing primarily the issue of rape through Tereus, the playwright in fact subverts the phallocentric male discourse that dictates the superiority of male values and all things male. Hence, through the deeds of Tereus, Wertenbaker aims at exposing male hypocrisy in both the public and in the private spheres. To this end, the dramatist makes use of a metatheatrical device and so presents Euripides’ *Hippolytos* as a mini play within the play. Later, in the development of the play, with a reversal of gender roles she draws parallels between the characters of *Hippolytos* and the characters of her own play, *The Love of the Nightingale*. Accordingly, Tereus parallels Phaedra, who falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus, and Philomele parallels Hippolytus, the male victim of incestuous love. Moreover, just like Phaedra, who causes the death of Hippolytus when she lies to her husband Theseus that Hippolytus “dared to rape [her]” (*LN*: Sc.5, 12), Tereus causes the death of his own son Itys when his lies are revealed by the two sisters. As a result, while female desire, jealousy and hypocrisy are established as the causes of violence and disorder in the world of Euripides’ play, in Wertenbaker’s play, male desire and hypocrisy are presented as the causes of violence in the portrayal of Tereus (Winston 1995: 513). So, as Winston has observed, Wertenbaker’s play “identifies the destructive forces within society as emanating not from female sexuality but from acts of male violence” (1995: 513).

In the play, Tereus’s guilt is not restricted to one particular crime. He is guilty not only of adultery but also of incest and rape. Furthermore, having killed the Captain and cut out Philomele’s tongue, he commits the crimes of murder and mutilation. Consequently, Tereus can be seen as the embodiment of the vices of the male world. At the beginning, when Tereus first watches the play dramatising Phaedra’s incestuous love for her stepson, he constantly comments on the action and condemns Phaedra for her love and mendacity. “Phaedra has lied! That’s vile” (*LN*: Sc.5, 12), he says and states that “she could keep silent” (*LN*: Sc.5, 11) about her amorous feelings for her stepson. However, later, when he falls in love with his sister-in-law, he does not keep silent about it but tells Philomele that he loves her in the way Phaedra loved Hippolytus: “I am Phaedra. (Pause.) I love you. That way” (*LN*: Sc.13, 29). At the same time, before he admits his love for Philomele, he tells lies to her about Procne whereas he disapproved of Phaedra’s behaviour when she had told a lie to her husband. Thus, Tereus not only exposes his double standards with regard to morals, but also displays his
gendered perspective in his real life experience. While he finds it immoral for a married woman to reveal her desire for someone else, he finds no fault with revealing his own desire for his wife’s sister. Moreover, in spite of having formerly criticised the play about Phaedra and Hippolytus for its immorality, he later uses it as a “justification for his own emotions” (Wagner 1995: 8). Hence, Tereus turns out to be a “moral hypocrite” (Winston 1995: 514) and Wertenbaker exposes how men can destroy ethical values for their own purpose.

In the play, among the different types of crimes that Tereus commits, Wertenbaker focuses on rape. She demonstrates Tereus’s rape of Philomele not only as an act of violence but also as an exercise of power. When seeing that Philomele is afraid of him, Tereus immediately attacks her: “So, you are afraid. I know fear well. […] I will have you in your fear” (LN: Sc.13, 30), he says, and the rape occurs. Wertenbaker portrays this scene as an exposure of Philomele’s fear of male power and Tereus’s will, or desire, for the female body. Thus, in a radical feminist view, entering Philomele’s body by force, Tereus takes the place of the oppressor whereas Philomele becomes the oppressed. Among all feminist positions, rape is discussed as a major issue only in radical feminist theory because unlike socialist feminism, which analyses women’s economic exploitation, and liberal feminism, which discusses women’s social oppression, it is the radical feminist position that primarily focuses on women’s sexual oppression (Banks 1981: 232; Jaggar 1983: 261). Thus, the discussion of rape receives its most in-depth treatment in radical feminist theory. A radical feminist view of rape is evident in the position of Susan Brownmiller, who says that rape is a man’s “basic weapon of force against women, the principal agent of his will and her fear […] his forcible entry into her body […] the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength” (qtd. in Jaggar 1983: 90). Similarly, the American feminist writers Barbara Mehrhof and Pamela Kearon’s ideas on rape, published in their article “Rape: An Act of Terror”, can be given as an example of the radical feminist understanding of rape. Mehrhof and Kearon claim that rape is “an effective political device […] not an arbitrary act of violence by one individual on another; it is a political act of oppression […] exercised by members of a powerful class on members of the powerless class” (qtd. in Donovan 1985: 146). As can be seen, radical feminists do not accept rape as an individual act but regard it as a political act that involves the oppressed and the oppressor, and they believe that rape is a display of male domination over the female. Consequently, radical feminists conceive rape as a “social, patriarchal weapon” (Case 1988: 66) that is used as a means of threat and violence against the female by male.

Just as Tereus uses his sexual power in a destructive way, so does he use his physical power for destructive ends when Philomele “pledges to
publicly shame him” (Winston 1995: 514) by telling the truth to the Thracians. Having no tolerance for a woman who talks to him in a threatening way, which means to undermine his patriarchal authority, Tereus finds a practical way of silencing that woman and he cuts out her tongue. This third act of violence committed by Tereus is a deed performed with the intention of saving both his male authority and his imperial power, which he admits afterwards: “You should have kept quiet. (Pause.) I did what I had to. (Pause.) You threatened the order of my rule. (Pause.) How could I allow rebellion?” (LN: Sc.16, 36–37). As Joe Winston has explained, in her article “How Sweet the Kill: Orgiastic Female Violence”, Allison Hersch, with reference to René Girard’s views on violence, states that “violence, as conceived of by Girard, is characteristically initiated and controlled by men – it is gendered power, aligned with the male, which is typically used to reify the stability of patriarchal structures” (qtd. in Winston 1995: 513). Indeed, in The Love of the Nightingale violence appears as a force to be identified with male power, and the basic motive behind Tereus’s violent acts is the concern for the preservation of patriarchal power structures. However, as Winston points out, within the power system of patriarchy, “social order is not synonymous with moral order” (1995: 513). By committing the crimes of rape, incest, adultery, and mutilation, which Tereus performs with the support of the phallocratic authority that gives him the right to set his own rules, he violates the moral order of society. Yet when Procne later asks at the palace, being confronted by Tereus, who is ignorant of his son’s slaughter, “What kept you silent? Shame?” (Sc.20, 46), he simply answers, “No” (LN: Sc.20, 46). Thus once again Wertenbaker conveys the idea that in a patriarchal society men do not feel the sense of shame even if they may have destroyed the moral order because the moral order of patriarchy, in Tereus’s words, condones the vices of the male.

Tereus’s excuse for his brutality, however, makes it clear that he still judges his deed only from the male perspective: “[Philomele] could only mock, and soon rebel, she was dangerous” (LN: Sc.20, 47). Thus, totally ignoring Philomele’s feelings, he justifies himself referring to a patriarchal law which orders that women rebelling against patriarchal authority must be silenced. Tereus continues to act and think within the ideology of patriarchy even after he encounters the dead body of his own son. In astonishment, he reacts against Procne: “Your own child!” (LN: Sc.20, 47). Yet, in a simple response, Procne reminds Tereus that as the mother and the father of Itys, they both share the responsibility of the child: “Ours” (LN: Sc.20, 47), she replies. Here, apparently, Wertenbaker criticises patriarchal mentality. According to radical feminists, patriarchal ideology “defines women as beings whose special function is to gratify male sexual desire and to bear and raise children” (Jaggar 1983: 255). Thus, through Tereus, Wertenbaker reveals the gendered perspective of male society and criticises
the male practice of holding only the mother responsible for the raising of children.

As can be observed, in *The Love of the Nightingale* Wertenbaker does not only discuss gender issues and demonstrate the vices and hypocrisy of patriarchy but she also questions the moral values of the male world. As Winston points out, by depending on ancient Greek theatre, which “essentially had a moral purpose” (1995: 517), and “[i]n choosing Greek mythology as source material to treat the subjects of rape and silence imposed on the voices of its victims, Wertenbaker is overtly signalling that her drama, too, is a moral one” (1995: 517–18). Yet, what makes Wertenbaker’s handling of these two myths, that of Philomele and that of Phaedra, most remarkable is the fact that she rewrites and interprets them from a female perspective, as a result of which her play can be understood as an example of feminist myth criticism. Feminist myth criticism, discussed in Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), employs myths “as a means of redefining women’s culture and history” (Humm 1994: 54). By revising the myths reflecting the male perspective from the female viewpoint, feminist myth criticism aims to give a new cultural understanding of gender identity and to reveal the male bias against the female. By thus reinterpreting two ancient myths, traditionally narrated from the male perspective, Wertenbaker not only explores the female psyche present in these myths, but as a woman dramatist she also raises “the voices of women in giving dramatic expression to their moral interpretations of these myths” (Winston 1995: 518–19). This is a method mainly practised in radical feminist theatre (Case 1988: 69).

Moreover, as Winston highlights, “in an artistically innovative style” (1995: 519), the playwright presents the readers/audience a dialogical relationship between the two myths, “the one voiced from within a tradition of male discourse, the other chosen to interrogate that myth in the different voice of a woman” (1995: 518), and so she provides a feminist deconstruction of traditionally accepted male values. Furthermore, posing serious questions without giving answers to them, Wertenbaker’s critical re-visitation of the past leads the audience/readers to question the values of male discourse sanctioned by patriarchal authority. Hence, it may be argued that the playwright also establishes a dialogical relationship between her play and the audience/readers. This relationship is also achieved by the chorus, who addresses the audience at certain moments. In Scene 8, for instance, the male chorus says: “If you must think of anything, think of countries, silence, but we can’t rephrase it for you. If we could, why would we trouble to show you the myth?” (*LN*: Sc.8, 19), thus inviting the audience/readers to produce meaning.

Moreover, in *The Love of the Nightingale*, some of the most important questions are raised by the female chorus. For most part of the play, the
male and female choruses remain in the background and comment on the action and characters as in the Greek tradition. However, towards the end of the play, in Scene 20, the female chorus “drop their personae as the woman of the Thracian Court” (Wilson 1993: 158) and, addressing the audience, pose the questions central to Wertenbaker’s purpose:

IRIS. To some questions there are no answers. We might ask you now: why does the Vulture eat Prometheus’s liver? He brought men intelligence.

ECHO. Why did God want them stupid?
IRIS. We can ask: why did Medea kill her children?
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.
HELEN. Why are little girls raped and murdered in the car parks of dark cities?
IRIS. What makes the torturer smile?
HERO. We can ask. Words will grope and probably not find. But if you silence the question.
IRIS. Imprison the mind that asks.
ECHO. Cut out its tongue.
HERO. You will have this [the killing of Itys] (LN: Sc.20, 45).

Hence, by making the chorus address the audience and highlight some of the important social and political problems of both contemporary times and the past within the context of a play set in ancient times, Wertenbaker both creates an alienation effect on the audience and builds a bridge between the past and the present, thus inviting the audience to re-evaluate what they see and hear on stage in a critical approach.

As can be seen, in this open-ended play, which covers a period of more than ten years and is set in “three distinct places; in a civilised Athens with its theatre and philosophy, in the darker northern kingdom of Thrace, with its Dionysic rituals and secrecy, and on the sea voyage between the two” (Winston 1995: 512), Timberlake Wertenbaker primarily explores feminist issues such as the patriarchal silencing and oppression of women throughout ages, rape, incest, the brutality and phallocentricism of the male society, and the importance of female bonding, all themes peculiar to radical feminist drama (Aston 1999: 6; Case 1988: 66–74). However, the playwright also examines other themes, e.g. hypocrisy, adultery, the decay of moral values, the ill use of power, the desire for revenge and its destructive effects, alienation, and displacement. Moreover, the contrast of cultures also appears as a significant theme. While Athens is presented as the land of civilisation, philosophy, democracy, and freedom of speech, the Thracian culture is
identified as barbaric, uncivilised, and uncultivated. However, the one thing that brings these two contrasting cultures closer together, as conveyed by Wertenbaker, is the fact that women, either directly by force or indirectly, are silenced and oppressed in both cultures. On the whole, presenting its major themes “through a re-visitation and a revision of a [Greek] myth” (Case 1988: 69) and focusing on the relationship between ‘sisters’, The Love of the Nightingale appears as an illuminating example of radical feminist drama which underlines the importance of sisterhood, emphasises the commonality of women’s experiences, and depicts and protests rape as a political act that violates and oppresses women under male power. Consequently, highlighting the politics of radical feminist theory and dealing with the themes mainly peculiar to radical feminist drama, The Love of the Nightingale can be taken as irrefutable evidence for Timberlake Wertenbaker’s radical feminist stance in the early phase of her dramatic career.

References


