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**REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING IN  
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS**

by

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A dissertation submitted in part requirement for the  
MPhil Theatre by Research

University of Glasgow  
Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies  
September 2005

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## ABSTRACT

The following dissertation studies the way in which Timberlake Wertenbaker, Sarah Kane and Liz Lochhead revise classical myth in the plays *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), *Phaedra's Love* (1994) and *Medea* (2001). Starting from an idea of revision as a 'fresh perspective' on the past legacy, the thesis exploits textual and performance analysis to point out the three playwrights' main intents and results. Especially focusing on the gender and spatial dynamics working in the plays, the study highlights the figures of Philomele, Phaedra and Medea and, where possible, their 'new' and unprecedented characterization. Great importance is also given to the language and to the metatheatricality of the works, since both play a very important part in the three revisions. Language is usually a tool to provide the heroines with 'a dissident idiom' and to establish a stronger link with the present. Metatheatricality, on the contrary, seems to entrap the female characters into the myth and prevents them from fully breaking the hold of the past on them. Reflecting on the dynamics of audience reception, the dissertation also underlines the relevance of classical myth to our times as well as its still problematic nature.

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'Listen. This is the noise of myth. It makes the  
same sound as shadow. Can you hear it?'  
(Eavan Boland, *The Journey*)

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it-----  
A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot  
A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.  
Peel off the napkin  
O my enemy.  
Do I terrify?-----  
Yes, yes Herr Professor  
It is I.  
[...]  
Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.  
I guess you could say I've a call.  
It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.  
It's the theatrical  
Comeback in broad day  
To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
Amused shout:  
'A miracle!'  
[...]  
Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.  
Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

(Sylvia Plath, *Lady Lazarus*)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the result of a year of postgraduate study in the TFTS Department of Glasgow University. It follows a fruitful period of cultural and personal improvement and hopes to lay the foundation for successful future studies.

I would like to thank Dr. P.A. Skantze, who supervised my work with great patience, enthusiasm and precious advice throughout the year. Prof. Margaret Rose and Prof. Anna Anzi of Milan University deserve my heartfelt thank, since without their help and encouragement this adventure would have never been possible. My gratitude goes also to Prof. Jan MacDonald and Dr. Matthew Cohen, who generously guided my first steps in the department.

Once again, this work is dedicated to Cornelio, Nadia, Giuseppe and Micol, my beloved and much missed family. Your practical and emotional support has always helped me and 'restored' my self-confidence in moments of bad mood and disappointment. I hope the dissertation will somehow recompense you for my being far from home for so long and I know I will never thank you enough for the opportunity you gave me.

Friends in Italy deserve my gratitude too, for having accepted and encouraged my choice. I want to thank Lorenza for being so close to me since the first day of our Liceo, reminding her that physical distance cannot weaken the strength and value of our friendship. Thanks to Eleonora, Valeria and Lele for their enthusiasm about my studies and overall support. I am grateful to Emanuele for his help throughout last year and wish him all the happiness he deserves. Thanks to the friends in Glasgow too, wonderful 'machines' (!) with whom it is a pleasure to share cheerful moments. And finally, I am thankful to Mark for having read and corrected (almost all!) the following pages.



## INTRODUCTION

The need for revision and rewriting of masterpieces of the past has always been strong among writers of every age. This sort of 'necrophilia' has been justified in various ways: for instance, it can be a means to take a rest from one's personal artistic demons and to compete with the classics. It can be a tool to verify whether the voices of the past are still able to speak to a contemporary audience. It can also prove to be a successful 'commercial' strategy, since relying on a famous work or on popular characters can undoubtedly attract the interest of both readers and spectators. Modern and especially post-modern artists make use of the revisionist practice with a high degree of self-consciousness. They perceive a clear division with a past reputed as 'different' from their own reality, while at the same time deeply engaging with it. Tampering with linguistic, rhetoric and thematic elements used by previous writers, authors usually revise with the aim of questioning the traditional epistemological relationship between subject and reality.<sup>1</sup> In dispute with a totalising vision of the world, these artists avail themselves of devices such as pastiche and crossover to express their own heterogeneous idea of the world.<sup>2</sup> Free from any restrictions, post-modern aesthetics welcomes various sources of inspiration and mixes together apparently irreconcilable issues, to make discontinuity and juxtaposition its emblem. It uses myth to give its work a sort of external and artificial unity, though aware of facing a fragmentary and confusing reality. Post-modernism recycles the past and puts it through irony and parody, providing previous codes and conventions with new interpretations. Linda Hutcheon summarizes this 'schizophrenic' impulse:

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<sup>1</sup> Examples in this sense can be Angela Carter's short stories, as for instance *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), or Umberto Eco's novels, works that 'update' and 'subvert' traditional literary and historical materials. Many are also the revisions of Greek drama or of Shakespeare, as for instance in Stoppard's or in Barker's work.

<sup>2</sup> Pavis uses the terms 'pastiche' and 'crossover' to indicate post-modern theatre's favourite practices. See Patrice Pavis. *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. Transl. by L. Kruger. London: Routledge, 1992.

... postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges ...<sup>3</sup>

Revisionism works much in the same way as the restoration of figurative works does. Both obey the communicative needs of the artist or of the restorer, depending on purposes that may vary every time. Both start from an accurate knowledge of the past and bring it under a new light. Yet, while restoration usually respects the history of the work and its original features, rewriting often turns them upside down and obliges them to speak a new language.

Since everything possible has already been created, the view might be that self-indulgence, auto-reflexivity and quotation have become the kingdom of contemporary art. Harold Bloom repudiates the kinship of the contemporary artist with the past as fundamental: on the one side, the link with the tradition helps revisionism to gain authority and esteem, while on the other rewriting inevitably aspires to be independent and therefore underlines its own dissident potential.<sup>4</sup> The 'kinship degree' between the original work and the revised one varies according to the latter's will of emancipation. However, Genette labels any relationship between the 'ancestor' and the 'descendant' texts as 'transtextuality', thus indicating any contact point, whether explicit or not, between the two.<sup>5</sup> As for the revisionist practice, the most important link is the one Genette calls 'hypertextuality' between the 'hypotext' and the 'hypertext'. Clear and recognizable parallelisms connect the two, for instance the title, the name of the characters or the main events of the plot. Though hypertextuality is open to multiple results, as for instance the parody of the hypotext, its most evident feature seems the author's will to declare his or her membership of an ancient and vast cultural tradition. Revisionist works go back to the sources of this tradition and feed themselves with its heritage. At the same time, they often dare to overturn the legacy of the past, instilling in it the seed of their different sensitivity and creativity.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> See Gérard Genette. *Palimpsestes*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982.

Feminism starts with the notion of 'an absolute beginning', an unheard-of novelty that did not exist in the past. It feels the need to create a women's cultural tradition able to shape and to firmly establish a new 'female' identity. Therefore, many women artists give birth to a corpus of works as noble and dignified as those that constitute the male one. At the same time, they normally tend to express a viewpoint different from the prevailing one: this happens *hence* and *because of* the fact that they are women, not *despite* it.<sup>6</sup> While 'male' art often depicts woman as a present, lost or utopian object, women artists want to build a symbolic system alternative to the one in force. 'Woman' begins to mean the possibility and the necessity of a dissident semantics that moulds the classic burden of images and attributes linked to womanhood throughout the ages.

As Sandra Gilbert points out, the so-called 'revisionist imperative' is probably the most distinctive feature of contemporary 'female' and 'feminist' literature. Its usual aim is to turn the heroines of myth, religion or history from 'objects' of a male gaze into 'subjects' of the narration. The past is therefore 'translated' and 'converted' so that it can address the reader and the spectator in an unprecedented way.<sup>7</sup> Ascertaining women's cultural alienation, Gilbert exhorts them to revise critically their past:

When I say we must redo our history, therefore, I mean we must review, reimagine, rethink, rewrite, revise, and reinterpret the events and documents that constitute it.<sup>8</sup>

Gilbert gives many examples that testify to the women artists' engagement with the reformulation and reinterpretation of the canon of Western culture. Indeed, Virginia Woolf speaks of "rewriting history" and Adrienne Rich hopes that 'female' literature begins with a "re-vision" of the past. Carolyn Heilbrun observes that women need to "reinvent" the whole of humanity and Joan Kelly states that they have to 'restore women to history and... restore

<sup>6</sup> See Luisa Muraro. *L'amore come pratica politica*. In Paola Bono, ed. *Questioni di teoria femminista*. Milano: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1993, p. 192.

<sup>7</sup> See Sandra M. Gilbert. *What Do Feminist Critics Want?*. In Elaine Showalter, ed. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. London: Virago, 1989, pp. 29-45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

our history to women.”<sup>9</sup> These artists mean to discover an unexplored ‘motherland’ and to gain a heritage that the mothers generally could not transmit because of unfavourable socio-cultural contingencies. For the first time, they make those female voices from the past audible, placing them into an echoing ‘room of *their own*’.

The American poetess Adrienne Rich gives a vital contribution to the discussion about revision. In some of her essays, Rich explores women’s history, arguing that their experience has always been closeted in the ‘footnote text’. In particular, Rich faces the problem of language, fundamental to the feminist debate. Language, whether literary or not, is a prevailingly ‘male’ creation; it conveys ideas and feelings worked out by the men who, through the centuries, held political and cultural power. Therefore, this ‘male’ idiom denies full and appropriate possibility of expression to the meanings women gave and give birth to. Rich labels the predominant idiom as the ‘oppressor’s language’ and equates it to a stock that damages all the marginal social groups, not only women. Although the ‘male’ language produces meanings that are subjective, partial and historically influenced, they are reputed as objective and ‘universally’ valid *a priori*. Such critical awareness leads Rich to consider revision as the cardinal point of her idea of literature:

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. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive of self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.<sup>10</sup>

Rich compares women to sleepwalkers who suddenly come to or to the dead who awaken and go back to life. She encourages women to study the past and its art, approaching it from an unprecedented viewpoint. However, Rich invites us neither to ignore nor to underestimate the value of the patriarchal

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*. In Barbara Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, eds. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*. New York: Norton & Company, 1975, p. 90.

tradition. Instead, she prompts women to break the hold of that tradition on themselves, serenely assessing its assumptions. The poetess describes her own painful artistic path in which she found it difficult to find masters and styles that fit the idea she had of herself. From her long cogitation comes a new notion of 'writing':

You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Rich sees literature as an act of 'rewriting', one that creates a fresh semantic system strong enough to undermine the authority of the past. Rich clarifies the meaning of the term 'patriarchy', considered as any social organization in which males hold power and decide what 'role' females should or should not play. She argues that in a patriarchal society people gain authority according to their status (for instance, 'father') and not thanks to their qualities. In it, women usually occupy the mystical and aesthetic sphere, whereas men deal with the practical and the political. Following this reasoning, Rich provides women artists with a definition of 'feminism' and prompts them to fully understand the inadequacy of 'male created ideologies':

Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to our fathers and recognize that the world they have described is not the whole world.<sup>12</sup>

If revision is therefore a necessary 'act of survival', classical myth becomes a powerful source of inspiration as well as a mined battlefield for contemporary female artists. As Alicia Ostriker points out, myth seems hostile to a woman, since it supports an idea of 'femininity' as either 'angelic' or 'demonic'. Yet, women have also always shown a deep 'need for myth' in their works. Such apparent contradiction unfolds itself in the assessment of myth's powerful dual nature:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> A. Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose: 1966-78*. London: Virago, 1980, p. 207.

It exists or appear to exist objectively, in the public sphere, and consequently confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes 'merely' of the private self. ... At the same time, myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation ...<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, the prestige of myth allows women artists to make themselves audible to an often biased society. On the other, it allows them to tackle issues that have always constituted the essence of the human condition itself. Both the wide-ranging influence of myth and its poetical pregnancy can actually broaden women artists' purposes and strengthen the value of their works. Ostriker depicts women writers as the 'thieves of language' and ascertains that they have mostly profaned the sanctuaries of tradition, rather than insisting on the creation of an 'exclusive *langage des femmes*.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, an artistic choice based on 'essentialist concerns' would do nothing but reinforce gender divisions and discriminations, since it would locate the debate inside a context of 'biological differences' that cannot undergo alteration. Furthermore, a strictly 'female' idiom would not be understandable to people who do not know its 'rules' and 'principles' and would therefore fail to effectively spread its own new message. On the contrary, a theft of the common language and a consequent inner redefinition of its most rooted meanings can actually make 'cultural change possible'.<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes has clearly explained the dangerous potential that lies inside myth: myth is a socio-political construct disguised as natural truth. Myth strengthens and validates the predominant ideology of a community, presenting such ideology as natural and inevitable. Barthes suggests that myth's despotism can only be fought 'from the inside', building a second-degree myth upon an existing one. Creating a 'parody' of myth, revisionist mythmaking repeats the old pattern with a fundamental difference.<sup>16</sup> Although it assaults myth and language on the same level of meaning by apparently worshipping their everlasting authority, an effective rewriting

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<sup>13</sup> Alicia Ostriker. *The Thieves of Language – Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*. In Elaine Showalter, ed. *The New Feminist Criticism*. Op.cit., p. 317.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Transl. by A. Lavers. London: Cape, 1972. The Greek word 'parody' literally means 'a parallel song', a song that stays 'beside' the original one.

aims at exploiting elements not yet 'tamed' by either myth or language and offers to its users 'a potent strategy for dissidence'.<sup>17</sup> Entering the shrines of myth, women artists can seize its contents, bend them and force them to say 'what *women* mean'.<sup>18</sup>

The present study analyses the reworking of myth by three contemporary women dramatists, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Sarah Kane and Liz Lochhead. Exploring the similar or opposing strategies employed by the dramatists, it aims to provide significant and perhaps successful examples of contemporary revisionist mythmaking. The order of the chapters follows the chronological staging of the three plays, while the inner structure is mostly divided into a section on the singular myth and its 'history'; one on the main heroine and her characterization and one on the metatheatrical devices that abound in the three works. The analysis of Wertenbaker's and Kane's play is carried out through a script-based approach, while that of Lochhead's *Medea* is based on the study of a particular staging. Since it was not possible to get a recording of a staging of *The Love of the Nightingale* and of *Phaedra's Love*, this choice is fundamentally pragmatic. Yet, it also recognizes the close link between Lochhead's work and Theatre Babel's production, as the author was explicitly asked to write the play for this company. The centre of the dissertation is, where possible, the 'new' depiction of Philomele, Phaedra and Medea and the role that gender dynamics and historical-cultural factors play in their stories. Whereas the dissertation ideally began bearing in mind Rich's idea of 'revision' and hoped to clearly track a fresh perspective on mythical heroines, its result is variegated and at times controversial. The relevance of the issues myth deals with and its charm stay unrelieved, yet its assumptions regarding 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not always automatically questioned and rejected. While most contemporary revisionist mythmaking succeeds in filling 'the old vessel with new wine', as Ostriker puts it, this study will show that in some cases the new grape harvest has not begun yet.

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Sellers. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 26. Sellers refers to Julia Kristeva's theories about language and its potential for contravention. Kristeva suggests that 'unanticipated meanings' and 'intertextuality' can effectively operate cultural disruption.

<sup>18</sup> A. Ostriker. *Op. Cit.*

## CHAPTER 1:

### ***The Love of the Nightingale* by Timberlake Wertenbaker**

#### **I: The story of the myth.**

The play *The Love of the Nightingale*, staged for the first time by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1988, is a rewriting of the mythical story of the two Athenian sisters, Procne and Philomele, and of the Thracian King Tereus, who marries Procne. The first complete formulation of the play was probably in Sophocles' *Tereus*, a tragedy of which only a few fragments remain. The best known version of the myth is narrated by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, where the Roman poet provides the aetiology of the birth of three birds: Philomele, whose name in Greek literally means 'sweet song', is transformed into the nightingale that constantly laments its past sorrows. Procne is the swallow, able to articulate only cacophonous sounds, while Tereus takes the shape of the hoopoe, whose crest resembles the King's helmet.<sup>19</sup> Ovid believes that countries such as Tereus' Thrace are 'prone to lechery' and strongly condemns the King's 'fleshy lust'. In particular, he underlines the fact that Tereus' misdeed 'hast confounded all', as Procne and Philomela are both wives to him; the first is made a 'cuckquean', the second 'a foe'.<sup>20</sup> The myth has always fascinated a variety of artists, who quote it in their works. For instance, Dante refers to it in *Purgatorio IX* and *XVII*; he considers Procne a 'distorted mother', as she does not have any pity on her son Itys. Chaucer, in the seventh story of his *Legend of Good Women*, portrays Tereus as a predatory wolf and Philomela as a passive lamb; in particular, he depicts rape as the 'dede of men' that contravenes the chivalric code of behaviour. Shakespeare is inspired by this story for his *Titus Andronicus*, where not only Titus' revenge, but also Demetrius' and Chiron's brutal behaviour towards Lavinia remind us of Philomele's myth. In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot

<sup>19</sup> Wertenbaker follows Ovid's version. Yet, also other authors relate that Procne became the nightingale that cries her son's death and Philomele the swallow.

<sup>20</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. by Arthur Golding. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, pp. 191 and 194.



describes Philomele's song as ' "Jug Jug" to dirty ears', pointing out both 'the pure notation of birdsong' and 'the prurient notation of sexual slang'.<sup>21</sup> In *A Game of Chess* Philomele's story exemplifies the sterility of human relationships and the development of a debased eroticism; in *The Fire Sermon* Philomele pronounces the name *Tereu* after having been raped, linking this to the theme of the absence of purification. Finally, in *What the Thunder Said*, Eliot refers to the swallow Procne and to its song; he expresses his desire for a regeneration brought by an 'April no more cruel'. Furthermore, David Lynch and Angelo Badalamenti composed the song *The Nightingale* and used it as the tune for his serial *Twin Peaks*. Once again, the melodious and sad bird is linked to a plot of baffling violence. All these quotations point out the inhuman cruelty of this story, certainly one of the bloodiest episodes in Greek myth, together with the story concerning the brothers Atreus and Thyestes, which features a similar plot. The three women playwrights I chose to analyse deal with myths which are extremely violent and whose content has become 'increasingly unacceptable', as the Chorus says in Wertenbaker's play.<sup>22</sup> Medea, Phaedra, Philomele and Procne are deeply wronged by men and resolve to take their revenge on them; their children become instruments of revenge, as their death deprives their fathers of any possible future.

I will analyse *The Love of the Nightingale* according to three important components that constitute it: the gender dynamics that concern the main characters; the potential for dissidence linked to space and language; the reference to other myths and the metatheatrical devices that broaden the story's paradigmatic value. Wertenbaker explains that the choice to base her play on the Greek myth of Philomele 'answered another passion of mine, that for the Greeks'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, she is a polyglot writer who has translated plays from different languages, including Sophocles' *The Theban Plays* and Euripides' *Hecuba*. This talent allows her to deal with ancient myth more directly, probably without the impersonal mediation of a translator.

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Reeves, *T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> See p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Plays I*. Introduction. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. VIII. All the quotations are taken from this edition, whose page I indicate in brackets.

Furthermore, her interest in language and its significance runs throughout her work and is usually tightly connected to the characters' search for identity and for their place in an ever-changing world. In addition, she was born in the United States, but grew up in the Basque country, where issues concerning language, its validity and authority have always played a central and often tragic part.

The dramatic time of Sophocles' *Tereus* is probably four or five years after the marriage between Tereus and Procne, while the dramatic place is supposedly Tereus' palace in Thrace. Though Sophocles is not renowned for his depiction of 'barbarians', a theme Euripides explored much more, in this tragedy 'he introduced the opposing themes of a civilized Athens and a barbarian Thrace'.<sup>24</sup> Critics notice that the marriage tie between two countries suggests friendship and peacefulness, but Tereus' brutal behaviour also causes feelings of hate and contempt. However, Sophocles probably means to expose Philomela' and Procne's misdeed too and he avoids presenting their revenge as either just or inevitable. Tereus and the two sisters are alike evil and 'convicted of a lack of reason'; the theme of bestiality in human nature is portrayed as 'regardless of nationality'.<sup>25</sup> Wertenbaker puts two fragments of Sophocles' *Tereus* in the preface to her play, underlining the link she establishes with the Greek author. Although we can only make suppositions about the lost play, it is reasonable to attribute the following words to Procne:

Now, by myself, I am nothing; ...  
We are nothing; who in our fathers' house  
live, I suppose, the happiest, while young,  
of all mankind; ... Then, ...  
we are thrust out and marketed abroad,  
some to strange husbands, some to barbarous, ...<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, one of the central issues in Sophocles' lost play concerns women's condition. The Greek dramatist contrasts a youth happily spent as girls with their families and a married life in 'a strange land', far from their 'parents

<sup>24</sup> Akiko Kiso, *The Lost Sophocles*. New York: Vantage Press, 1984, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76 and 77.

<sup>26</sup> T. Wertenbaker. *Op. Cit.*, p. 285. The translation of *Tereus* is by Sir George Young.

and ancestral gods'. Women are compared to marketable goods, sold by their fathers to the best bidder. The sexual experience with a strange man, referred to as 'the yoking of a night', highlights women's sufferance, while the recurrence of passive verbs underlines the impossibility for women to overturn their fate. Furthermore, Sophocles' Procne cohabits with a Chorus probably composed by Thracian men, 'male retainers of her husband'.<sup>27</sup> She cannot voice her feelings to this Chorus, presumably hostile to her both as a 'woman' and as a 'foreigner'. The theme of isolation in the clash between two cultures, crucial in Sophocles, will turn into the blackout of language in *The Love of the Nightingale*. Wertenbaker's Procne, though surrounded by women, will experience the same loneliness and inability to communicate.

### **1.1: A cultural and linguistic clash.**

The opening scene of *The Love of the Nightingale* strengthens the juxtaposition between men' and women's situation, as well as the conflict between two different cultures. It heightens binary opposition by contrasting an 'open' and a 'closed' space where activities differently 'gendered' occur. Indeed, the author juxtaposes the 'active' role of 'fighting', played by men, with the more 'passive' one of 'watching' and 'speaking', played by women.

The play opens with two Soldiers who fight each other in an open and public space, while the Male Chorus illustrates their actions through the words 'war' and 'death'. Functioning as a narrator, it explains that 'war' and 'ruins in the distance' establish the 'place and perspective' of the action; it implies that the consequences of war fall on the weakest members of society, women in particular. Indeed, the next scene is set in a private and domestic space, where two young sisters discuss 'life's charms and the attractions of men'. Though still inexperienced, they do not fear to express their desires and feelings towards men:

PROCNE: Don't say that, Philomele.

PHILOMELE: It's the truth: he's so handsome I want to wrap my legs around him. ...

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<sup>27</sup> W. M. Calder III. *Sophocles, Tereus: A Thracian Tragedy*. *Thracia* 2. 1974. In A. Kiso. Op. Cit., p. 61.

PHILOMELE: Oh, yes, I feel such things, Procne, such things. Tigers,  
 rivers, serpents, here, in my stomach, a little below. ...  
 What are they like? Men?  
 PROCNE: Look: they fight.  
 PHILOMELE: What are they like: naked?  
 PROCNE: Spongy. ...  
 PHILOMELE: Life is sweet, my sister, and I love everything in it.  
 (292- 294)

Presumably, the two sisters are secretly observing some warriors from their rooms. Whereas Procne notices that men 'fight', connecting them once again to the idea of 'violence', the act of watching awakens in Philomele a desire to know those sweating bodies. Procne, older and getting ready to marry, represents a cultured Athenian woman who recommends 'measure in all things'. On the contrary, Philomele appears more candid, passionate and eager to enjoy life in all its aspects. Realising that a 'brave young warrior fighting to protect us' gets killed, Philomele manifests her fear of leaving 'this room' and its safety. Procne, aware of the fact that her parents will soon choose a husband for her, wishes she did not have to leave as well. However, she will accept her father's will, obedient to the patriarchal custom.

The contrast between two different cultures is embodied by Tereus and the Female Chorus on the one hand, and by Procne and Philomele on the other. The Thracian king, 'an ally from the north', helps Pandion, king of Athens, to win the war. In exchange for the service given, Tereus explains to Pandion that he wants 'to bring some of your country to mine, its manners, its ease, its civilized discourse'. In addition, Tereus believes that Athenian women 'have a reputation for wisdom' and are the caretakers of culture. What Pandion fears comes inevitably true: Tereus wants to marry Procne and he cannot refuse to give his approval, since a denial would be unfair. The Male Chorus reveals the relief in Athens after Tereus' departure, as his army had become a burden to the city. The result of the 'male' war appears to be an ill-fated marriage between two people who do not know each other and do not share anything. Political agreements determine Procne's future and force her, as the Male Chorus will say later, to be 'the cause perhaps, in any case the motor of a myth that leaves her mostly absent'. The Queen plays a similar 'silent' role in the circumstance, as her only words, 'What can I say?', testify to the

impossibility of assuming a more active role in the circumstance. Therefore, Procne's hope to find in her an ally against the marriage is bitterly disappointed.

However, the most striking cultural contrast is that between Procne and her companions, who compose the Female Chorus. Wertenbaker bases this opposition on the use of different languages and, more importantly, shows that women too can abuse power. Although she has spent five years in Thrace and given birth to her child Itys, Procne has not yet adapted to the foreign country and feels lonely. In particular, her melancholy takes the shape of a 'lack of words', as she herself points out:

PROCNE: Where have all the words gone?

HERO: She sits alone, hour after hour, turns her head away and laments. ...

HERO: It is difficult to come to a strange land. ...

IRIS: And if it is the land of your husband can you even say you have chosen it?

JUNE: She is not one of us. ...

PROCNE: 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.

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 truth.

HERO: Truth is full of darkness.

PROCNE: No, truth is good and beautiful. See... (Pause) I must have someone to talk to. (297 – 299)

The distance established by the reiterated pronouns 'we' and 'she' strengthens Procne's isolation: she will always be 'a guest' in Thrace, since the way she communicates does not intermingle with her companions' one. Moreover, Procne imperiously considers the Thracian women 'barbarian', literally 'stuttering', as they do not speak the Athenian prevailing idiom. Her naïve belief in logic equates truth to happiness, while the Chorus' women do not rely upon such a strong faith. Procne's fascination with language and its sound results in her desire to have Philomele beside her again. The Queen

conveys her mood especially through long sentences, offering a 'verbal' picture of her youth spent with her sister in Athens. Her words in this scene, indulging in a sort of self-indulgent circle, mention past words that played and caressed each other. Despite Philomele's absence, Procne's statements 'palpably' create a deep connection with her younger sister. Furthermore, pointing out the lack of communication among herself, Tereus and their son Itys, Procne increasingly emphasises the importance of her 'verbal' relationship with Philomele. On the contrary, the Female Chorus' women express themselves by means of short clauses that are more denotative than descriptive. Theirs is a telepathic and allusive language, which fleetingly hints at its objects rather than accurately depicting it. A subtle weave of echoes and cross-references permeates the whole play, suggesting that meanings do not lie only in logically built sentences. The play shows that people 'are only brushed by possibilities' and these possibilities can be determinant as well as unpredictable. The Chorus' women often convey meaning through a metonymic technique, quoting names or repeating sounds that voice their concern with Procne's behaviour. For instance, Echo pronounces the name 'Tereus' twice, as if to underline the danger that lies inside it.<sup>28</sup> Helen linguistically fails to articulate her anxiety, as 'there are no words for forebodings'. The expression 'a beating of wings' is repeated twice in the play, by Hero and Echo the first time, and by Philomele the second one. This way, Wertenbaker establishes a link between the Female Chorus and the play's heroine, since both Procne's companions and Philomele manage to use a language alternative to the predominant one. While Procne urgently needs and asks for 'verbal clarity', the Female Chorus answers with a poetical and metaphorical idiom. Therefore, she invites them to go to the 'rituals' still unknown to her, and ends the scene repeating the words 'this silence' twice. A silence haunting the play thus far will soon turn to a tragic reality.

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<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the name 'Tereus' comes from the verb 'τερεω' that means 'to observe, to spy'. Tereus is 'he who spies' on Philomele and, seeing her beauty, begins to crave for her.

## **II: The figure of Philomele.**

Wertenbaker makes of Philomele the play's main character, the one who actively appears in most of the scenes and who pronounces many crucial speeches. Furthermore, even when Philomele is reduced to silence and is apparently harmless, Wertenbaker provides her with a mighty voice and allows Philomele to successfully expose her plight. The construction of the space, of the actions that happen in it and of a 'dissident' language constitute the main weapons Wertenbaker uses to profitably shape her heroine and to challenge stereotyped gender dynamics.

In the whole play, closed spaces usually welcome the presence of women, who can act and speak in them freely, as the two sisters do in Athens. However, closed spaces seem to be only a limited concession men give women, since women's independence inside them ends as soon as men enter, as Tereus' return to the Royal Palace, controlled by Procne during his absence, will show. Closed spaces are a golden cage on which men nonetheless exercise their power, though silently and from the outside, as in the case of the hut where Tereus secludes Philomele. As far as space dynamics are concerned, Philomele and Niobe are the only women of the play who speak and act in open spaces, though in two very different ways.

A significant change takes place from the sixth scene on, as Philomele leaves the safety of a 'closed space', her paternal house, and ventures on an 'open space' in which men only have so far been seen. The small ship that brings her to Thrace is a typical 'male location', for sailing has always been an activity traditionally reputed as 'male'. With the only exception of her nurse Niobe, men surround Philomele on the ship, Tereus, the Captain and the Male Chorus' members. The princess begins to threaten the 'masculinity' of open spaces during the sea journey, turning herself from passive spectator of these 'male' areas into an active and daring presence inside them. On the ship, the audience recognizes in Philomele a new maturity, since she does not behave as the ingenuous girl of the second scene anymore. In particular, Philomele displays a vast freedom of choice as for her words and her actions, 'physically' and 'linguistically' behaving in two opposite ways towards the two most important men on the ship.

Philomele enjoys speaking with the Captain, who seems to be embarrassed by her loquacity. During their first dialogue on the ship, she shows her confidence in dealing with philosophy, and with the Socratic maieutics in particular. When they pass Mount Athos, the Captain explains to her that 'wild men' live there, men who kill all female beings believing that 'all harm in the world comes from women'. As Procne does, Philomele relies on the solidity of logic; she counteracts to the Captain's doubt about the 'female nature' following a dialogical method. As soon as the Captain states that 'women are beautiful', Philomele equates 'beauty' to 'truth' and 'goodness', according to the ancient principle of καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός. Furthermore, she begins asking him questions, in order to 'give birth to the truth', as Socrates taught his disciples to do.

Having home-sailed for a while, Tereus orders his men to camp on 'a desolate beach', where they spend more than one month. The beach is the second open space in which the audience sees Philomele speaking and moving. Interestingly, on the beach Philomele behaves both in a 'masculine' and in a 'feminine' way, changing the connotation of the space thanks to her presence. At first, Philomele collects flowers on the beach, flowers that she would like to bring to her sister. This gesture, borrowed from Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, represents not only a 'typically female' activity, but can also be a symbol of her blossoming sexuality.<sup>29</sup> Tereus approaches Philomele's beauty in its moment of uttermost splendour, to give her the false news of Procne's death. He tells her how Procne died falling down from a cliff into a river, another allusion to Ophelia's death. Receiving the news, Philomele reacts 'femininely', screaming her sister's name and crying bitterly. She does not reject Tereus' hug, still trusting him and considering him 'her brother'. The beach, a 'place forsaken by the gods', and the gloomy Mount Athos, with its scary 'hooded men', keep providing the setting in which Philomele approaches men 'concretely'. Yet, in the second scene she performs on the beach, Philomele behaves in a more 'masculine' way. On the

<sup>29</sup> See Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings*. London: Routledge, 1999. Berry interprets the flowers Ophelia gives to Laertes as symbols of her sexuality and as evidence of the loss of virginity. 'Death by water' links Ophelia to a fertile space, the river but also the female womb.



beach Philomele has her second dialogue with the Captain and tries to find out the reason behind Tereus' decision to stop the journey, but the Captain replies saying that she asks 'too many questions'. Not intimidated by his words, the girl speaks out her love for him and provides evidence of his interest in her. Dangerously though, she still reputes 'desire' a god, conforming to the writ of classical mythology:

PHILOMELE: I used to watch you at night, ... You seemed a king of elements, ordering the wind.

CAPTAIN: ... The winds have names, they're godlike, man obeys.

PHILOMELE: I never understood obedience, Captain philosophical.

CAPTAIN: You're a woman.

PHILOMELE: Does that make me lawless? ...

PHILOMELE: Take me with you.

CAPTAIN: You shouldn't speak like that. Not to me. My job is to obey him.

PHILOMELE: Again! What about your obedience to the elements?  
And desire, isn't that a god too?

CAPTAIN: Philomele...

PHILOMELE: ... 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.

(She holds out her hand. The Captain hesitates and touches it.)

So – I was right. Take me with you. (324 – 325)

Furthermore, as the Captain suggests that they should ask Tereus' approval, Philomele takes his hand and puts it on her breast. Consequently, the Princess rearranges the dynamics of a supposedly 'male' space by means of her words and gestures. Not only is Philomele able to confute logically a man's opinion, she also reverses the 'rules' of wooing. Indeed, the audience sees a woman who directs a man's acts, overcoming his 'female' coyness and freely offering her body to his touch. The way Philomele and the Captain move results unusual too, since she displays a 'male' dynamism and he a 'female' stillness. As Sue-Ellen Case points out,

Wertenbaker constructs a seduction scene led by the woman. ...

Wertenbaker has drawn a character who has access to her knowledge and desire, as well as the ability to express them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *The Power of Sex: English Plays by Women, 1958-1988*. *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. VII, no. 27, August 1991, p. 240.

As in the second scene, watching makes Philomele desire the Captain, a desire she then manifests through a daring language, considered 'unsuitable for women', and through physical actions that provoke the Captain to reveal his feelings for her. Philomele's attachment to the official Athenian culture is still very strong 'mentally', as the dialectic strategy she enacts shows, but not 'physically', since she moves in a nonconforming way. Yet, she will soon tragically realise that the culture she belongs to is going to provide Tereus with an alibi to rape her.

## II.1: The rape and the silencing.

MARY: What will he do to her?  
 MRS. TEMPTWELL: Rape her. ...  
 MARY: Rape? What the Greek gods did? Will he turn himself  
 into a swan, a bull, a shower of golden rain? Is he a god?  
 MRS. TEMPTWELL: He'll feel like one.  
 MARY: ... It's not like the books.  
 (T. Wertebaker, *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, Act 1, Sc. 3)

Tereus brutally interrupts both the dialogues between Philomele and the Captain, suddenly entering the stage in the first case and killing the Captain in the second. The double, brutal silencing of Philomele's manifestation of feelings is but the sinister anticipation of her soon-to-come actual mutilation. Philomele's different attitude towards the two men unfolds itself again through words and actions. Actually, while Philomele talks 'easily' to the Captain, she neither speaks spontaneously to Tereus nor entertains 'his lordship' with a harmless conversation, as Niobe expects her to do. Contradictorily, the King repeatedly asks Philomele to talk to him, fascinated by the promise of a 'sweet song' that lies in her name; yet, he is soon bothered by her manner of questioning that, as he says, 'grills' him.

After the Captain's death at Tereus' hands, Philomele appears on the beach for the third time, facing a moment of extreme loneliness and despair singing a sort of ritual song to the moon:

PHILOMELE: Catch the moonlight with your hands. Tread the moonlight with your toes, phosphorescence, phosphorescence, come to me, come to me, tell me the secrets of the wine-dark sea. (Pause) I'm so lonely. (Pause) Procne, come to me. (Pause. She waits) Procne, Procne, sister. Help me. Catch the lather of the moonlight. Spirits, talk to me. Oh, you gods, help me. (Tereus enters. Philomele senses this. Softly) Phosphorescence, phosphorescence, tell me the secrets of the wine-dark sea... (326 – 327)

Philomele resorts to an 'alternative language' as soon as she perceives that the danger, embodied by Tereus, is inexorably approaching. Far from the logical, crystalline idiom she used before, her song resembles the symbolic and pre-logic language spoken by the Female Chorus. The reiteration of words such as 'phosphorescence' and 'evanescence', with their fricative sounds, fits the set made of a beach, of foamy waves shattering against the rocks and of moonbeams that light the sand and the sea. The Homeric-like epithet 'wine-dark', together with the accurate placement of pauses and silences, creates a poetical language whose meaning Tereus cannot understand. The reference to the moonlight, delicately in tune with Philomele's transparent skin, matches the classical and manifold image of the moon: as symbol of the goddess Artemis, the moon represents chastity and virginity. As Selene, the moon has a fertilizing effect on both men and land. Finally, as Hecates or Persephones, the moon is seen as revengeful and presides over necromancy. Since the rape happens offstage, the moon will be the only 'spectator' of the brutal act. Therefore, Philomele asks the pulsar, or Artemis, for protection, or at least for sympathy. As Shakespeare's Titania would say, the moon 'weeps every little flower, lamenting some enforced chastity'<sup>31</sup>. In this case, it can only cry passively in front of the violence.

Philomele's 'dissident idiom' and her invocation to the moon work therefore as a sort of armour against Tereus' entrance and his interruption of the ritual. Once again, Philomele tries to get some answers from the King, only to go back to her song when she realises that he will not provide any explanation for his behaviour. Finally, Tereus explains to her why they are

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<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Act III, sc. I, 187 – 189.

still there, on the beach:

TEREUS: Philomele, I am telling you. (Pause) I love you.

PHILOMELE: I love you too, brother Tereus, you are my sister's husband.

TEREUS: No, no. The play. I am Phaedra. (Pause). I love you. That way. (Silence)

PHILOMELE: It is against the law. ...

TEREUS: The power of the god is above the law. It began then, in the theatre, the chorus told me. I saw the god and I loved you.

PHILOMELE: Tereus. (Pause) I do not love you. I do not want you. ...

TEREUS: Love me.

PHILOMELE: No.

TEREUS: Then my love will be for both. ...

PHILOMELE: I have to consent.

TEREUS: It would be better, but no, you do not have to. Does the god ask permission? ... So you are afraid. I know fear well. Fear is consent. You see the god and you accept. (328 – 329)

Unfortunately, Philomele stops using the 'alternative language' of the ritual and goes back to the predominant one. Thus, whereas Tereus could not interrupt her words before, he is now very able to use a 'male' and hegemonic idiom. As Esslin explains,

The loser in a contest about words loses his claim to live. Power, the power over life or death, derives from the ability to make one's opponent accept the meaning of words chosen by the dominant partner.<sup>32</sup>

On this occasion Tereus arranges the beach as a 'male' space, both because he is physically stronger than Philomele and because he appears linguistically more powerful. While Philomele screams and tries to get some help from Niobe, Tereus grabs her and leads her offstage, where the rape takes place.

As Joe Winston writes, Wertenbaker relocates the moral issues represented by the Phaedra myth 'from within the frame of female experience', interlinking it to a myth less known, that of Philomele.<sup>33</sup> To justify his behaviour, Tereus refers to the play *Hippolytos*, seen by him and Philomele before leaving Athens. While he did not hesitate to condemn Phaedra's

<sup>32</sup> Martin Esslin. *Pinter the Playwright*. London: Methuen, 1984, p. 251. In particular, Esslin refers to Pinter's *The Caretaker* and to the way the characters in it use the language.

<sup>33</sup> Joe Winston. *Re-Casting the Phaedra Syndrome: Myth and Morality in Timberlake Wertenbaker's The Love of the Nightingale*. *Modern Drama*. Vol. XXXVIII, 1995, p. 512.

behaviour and her illicit passion, Tereus now presents his desire as being 'divine' and, therefore, above the law. He likens himself, and his sexual organ in particular, to a god whose power is irresistible. As Philomele did speaking with the Captain, Tereus equates 'fear' to 'consent', expressing a belief very common in the patriarchal society. Euripides' Phaedra is tortured by shame and commits suicide, although she has not 'actually' abused Hippolytus. On the contrary, Tereus' act shows that violence, usually motivated by sexual pleasure, and incest have often been perpetrated by men against women and, furthermore, they have been justified using several examples belonging to the heritage of classical mythology. Philomele starts realising now that the culture she belongs too is not only simply 'logical' and 'right', but can also be discriminating and unjust. The logic of her reasoning and the appeal to the law are useless. Her 'darkness' and her 'sadness', as Tereus states, make her even more attractive to him. Not only does he not need her consent, her opposition increases the pleasure of his conquest. She names Tereus' desire as 'frivolous' and considers it a 'treachery', but her words are not strong enough to stop him. Furthermore, the stigma of the rape will be attached to her forever, causing the loss of the 'respectable' state of virginity.

Wertebaker depicts the victim of violence with few but significant gestures and words. After the rape, Niobe washes Philomele, who has 'her legs spread out around a basin' and holds her head down. Though her posture suggests resignation, embarrassment and shame, we soon realise that Philomele is not going to accept the violence submissively. Indeed, the confrontation with Niobe, an old and experienced woman who has learnt not to question the power, strengthens Philomele's desire to expose Tereus' misdeed. The girl asks the Nurse to be washed many times, to remove 'the smell of violence', which Niobe yet calls 'the smell of fear'. Philomele says she wants to die and, in a way, her washing can also be seen as an attempt to 'cancel' or 'hide' the profaned body, a body that she may not perceive as 'hers' anymore. Cynically though, Niobe advises Philomele to keep a low profile and to get Tereus to provide maintenance for her, as he 'might still feel something'. Voicing the most basic of common sense, Niobe knows that the two of them, being unmarried women, have to survive exploiting the

attractions of their sex. Philomele's rage, lit by the nurse's words, addresses both the old woman and Tereus:

PHILOMELE: You. You are worse than him. (She pours the dirty water over Niobe) Filth. Here. Drink his excretions.

NIOBE: Don't be so mighty, Philomele. You're nothing now. Another victim. Grovel. Like the rest of us. ... Keep silent.

PHILOMELE: Never. ... (Tereus enters)

TEREUS: Now I wish you didn't exist. ...

PHILOMELE: Me ... (Pause) I was the cause, wasn't I? Was I? ... something in my walk? ... It was the beach. I ought not to have been there. I ought not to have been ... at all ... then there would be no cause. ... My body bleeding, my spirit ripped open, and I am the cause? No, this cannot be right, why would I cause my own pain ... That isn't reasonable. ... It was your act. It was you. I caused nothing. (334 – 335)

Although the stage directions do not specify it, we may assume that Philomele's washing happens in the hut where Tereus imprisons her. The hut is the second closed space Philomele acts in, the setting where her maturation will range from 'female' rebellion to socio-political protest. Philomele's words and gestures, apparently weakened by the rape, return to be 'masculinely' mighty. She is 'violent' against Niobe, using the water that washed her body, dirty with Tereus' excretions, to associate the Nurse with the King. This act underlines the role of the Nurse as the spokesperson of the values embodied by Tereus, although she herself has previously been a victim of them. Wertenbaker seems to imply that the patriarchal society forces its own victims to voice its ideology, as Niobe does in obedience to the *status quo* and for the love of a quiet life. Moreover, Philomele's threatening questions and logical answers prove that she cannot be the cause of the rape. She places the responsibility with Tereus, as the reiteration of the pronoun 'you' and of the possessive 'your', juxtaposed to 'I' and 'my', stresses. She locates the cause of Tereus' behaviour inside his code of 'values' that contemplates violence as the means to erase any threat. Unable to attack Tereus 'physically', Philomele assails him 'verbally', blaming and ridiculing his masculinity. Her linguistic aggressiveness is the counterweight to Tereus' physical brutality:

PHILOMELE: What did you tell your wife, my sister ... Did you tell her what a coward you are and that you could not, cannot bear to look at me? ... Did you tell her you cut me because you yourself had no strength? ... Take the sword out of your hand, you fold into a cloth. ... There's nothing inside you. You're only full when you're filled with violence. ... Shall I tell them? Yes, I will talk.

TEREUS: Quiet, woman. (335 – 336)

The various terms Philomele uses to address Tereus reveal to the audience important details about the rape. They perform a significant turnover of meaning, as the King's acts are renamed according to a new, and negative, semantic scale. Maybe pointing the finger at his body, the actress playing Philomele invites the spectators to revise their 'physical perception' of him. Indeed, Tereus' nakedness is described as 'shrivelled' and 'ridiculous', far from resembling the male beauty 'on the statues'. His pleasure is depicted as 'quick' and 'ugly', while the expressions 'man of jelly' and 'scarecrow' annihilate his previous role as 'the northern hero' and 'the leader of men'. The violence that fills Tereus takes the shape of an imperialistic thirst after power, exercised both against women and foreign lands. Philomele's commitment to truth gains the strength of a threat that avenges women's long silence. Her speech, built as a juridical tirade, addresses the women of Thrace first, then the soldiers and men of Thrace. The former may have been forced by Tereus exactly as Philomele was; she encourages them not to confound Tereus' 'puny manhood' with 'high spirits'. The latter are invited to deem Tereus' misdeeds as 'tiny spirit and shrivelled courage' rather than as 'bravery'. She also prompts them to let Procne rule in his place, as her sister has the virtues of 'truth and goodness, self-control and reason' that make a good sovereign. Philomele's speech is crucial because it sees a woman providing a dreadful and unrestricted depiction of a powerful man. It also establishes a very important difference between Ovid's Philomele and Wertenbaker's:

Philomela is the marriageable female Tereus seizes to challenge the primacy of Pandion and the power of Athens. ... the political anxieties that fuel the myth are transformed into erotic conflicts; then the

responsibilities for Tereus' lust is displaced onto Philomela herself: as Ovid has it, the chaste woman's body is fatally seductive.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of focusing on the conflict between Tereus and Pandion, between the 'civilised' Athens and the 'barbaric' Thrace, Wertenbaker locates the play's tension inside the gender dynamics. Whereas Ovid's Philomela is seductive thanks to her passivity and her unwitting beauty, Wertenbaker's Philomele attracts Tereus also through her 'careless tongue' and her disdain of social rules. Ineffectively using the epithet 'woman' to silence Philomele, Tereus then resolves to cut out her tongue, condemning her to what seems to be a perpetual condition of submission. The hut is now Tereus' kingdom, a claustrophobic space where Philomele lies crouched in a pool of blood, trying to express something in vain. Since Tereus cannot 'allow rebellion', her mutilation appears inevitable; moreover, Philomele's taming changes the perspective from which the King looks at her:

TEREUS: You are more beautiful now in your silence. I could love you.  
... You should have kept quiet. I was the stronger. And my  
desire. ... Let me kiss those bruised lips. You are mine.  
My sweet, my songless, my caged bird. (He kisses her. She is  
still) (338)

Her being silent and still makes space for the paradoxical arising of a feeling of love in Tereus. Whereas previously he saw her as a rebel who needed to be conquered, now she has acquired some features and virtues particularly appreciated by the society he represents. Not only has Philomele lost her voice, she is also reduced to an object that belongs to Tereus, a silent animal he provides for, as the money he gives Niobe shows. The reclusion of Philomele in the hut, a private space reduced to a 'male' realm by Tereus' violence, emphasizes her momentary loss of movement and expression in the King's community. As Niobe will explain five years later, when she and Philomele leave the hut for the first time, Philomele is gradually becoming 'No one. No name. Nothing. A king's fancy. No more'. Indeed, her taming,

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<sup>34</sup> Patricia Klindienst. *The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours*. *The Stanford Literature Review*, No. 1, 1984. My quotation is taken from <http://vos.ucsb.edu/>, p. 4.



though initially attractive, will contribute to the progressive reduction of Tereus' lust for her.

## II.2: The role of the mature woman.

Both Procne and Niobe perform the part of the mature woman who conforms to the *status quo* and who does not dare to question an unjust power. These women behave despotically, showing a lack of sympathy for other women and an inability to support them. Furthermore, they share a common destiny, lamenting aging and the diminishment of their sexual attraction.

In the ninth scene, the Female Chorus warns Procne for the second time, trying to make her foresee the danger of letting Tereus alone with Philomele on a long journey. The Queen mocks the women's 'gloomy muttering' and is totally unable to catch the meaning of their images. To be understood, these images 'require sympathy' and 'another way of listening', as Hero and Echo say. The collapse of communication among them induces Procne to behave as her husband, for she silences the Female Chorus with a strong attitude:

PROCNE: Enough of your nonsense. Be silent. (318)

Wertenbaker depicts Procne as a wielder of despotism, brutality and verbal violence, notions not linked to the characters' gender, but rather to the way they speak and behave. In the first part of the play, Procne acts mostly as a 'male', because she makes use of an aggressive language that succeeds in silencing and submitting people who hold a social position less powerful than hers. As the author herself points out,

Power is power. ... the whole thing that you either give power to the people, or power to women, or to minorities and then it's all right. It's not that simple. ... That's something that feminists have to take on board, that women are not necessarily better by nature.<sup>35</sup>

Procne's exploitation of the predominant idiom proves this clearly. The Queen reduces her companions to a silence which, as Adrienne Rich puts it,

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<sup>35</sup> T. Wertenbaker. In Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge. *Rage and Reason*. London: Methuen, 1997, pp. 140–141.

means 'oppression and violence'.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the Queen is docile and obedient to Tereus' will. Prompted by Procne's insistence, the Female Chorus finally reveals that Tereus is not dead. Procne is eager to ask other questions and criticise the women's silence:

PROCNE: ... Don't you ask yourselves questions? ... Weeks, weeks and no one speaks to me. (Pause) ... Where are your men? Where is mine? Where is Tereus? (Tereus and the Male Chorus enter)

TEREUS: Here. (Pause) A delay.

PROCNE: (very still) A delay. (332)

Procne's immobility and the reiteration of 'Tereus' words highlight the implausibility of his explanation. Though Procne notices some blood on her husband's hands, she does not dare to ask him the reason for it. In addition, Tereus does not even mention Philomele's absence, and Procne accepts this fact without any complaint. She opens her arms and welcomes her husband, unable to question his power and authority.

Five years later, Procne is ready to take part in the feast of Bacchus for the first time, and links this choice to her having become 'Thracian' gradually. Speaking to Tereus, she remembers how she used to be afraid of him when she was younger:

PROCNE: You're going? Of course, you must. ... We do not have many evenings together. I was frightened of your evenings when we were first married. ... I am a woman now. I can take pleasure in my husband. (She approaches Tereus, but he puts her away from him and leaves. When he is gone, she holds the bottom of her stomach) Desire. Now. So late. Oh, you gods, you are cruel. Or, perhaps, only drunk. (340 – 341)

Procne's invocation of the gods suggests again her dependence upon the system of values she inherited in Athens. Rather than placing the source of her sexual desire inside herself, she seems to trace it in the gods' will. However, the change she has undergone through the years is evident, as her words and actions underline. As Philomele did with the Captain, Procne

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<sup>36</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose: 1966 – 78*. Op. Cit., p. 204.

actively leads an attempt to seduce her husband. She moves towards him and offers him her body, ready to enjoy Tereus' virility. Yet, he clearly rejects her, not finding her attractive anymore.

The Thracian Queen shares with Niobe a common destiny, that of the mature woman unattractive to men:

NIOBE: ... I will go and talk to the sailors. Although what they will say to an old woman... no one wants to talk to an old woman. ... They say I would be beautiful if I were young and if I were beautiful then I would be young. ... (312 – 314)

Wertebaker entrusts Niobe with the audience's 'entertainment', while the rape happens offstage. Niobe tells her story and the story of her island, similar to those of many other countries and women too:

NIOBE: So it's happened. ... She should have consented. Easier that way. Now it will be all pain. Well I know. We fought Athens. ... The men – dead. ... And us. Well – we wished ourselves dead then, but now I know it's better to live. ... You bend your head. ... power is something you can't resist. ... Oh dear, oh dear, she shouldn't scream like that. ... She'll accept it in the end. Have to. We do. And then. When she's like me she'll wish it could happen again. I wouldn't mind a soldier. ... Nobody goes to my island anymore. It's dead too. Countries are like women. It's when they're fresh they're wanted. ... It's finished now. A cool cloth. On her cheeks first. That's where it hurts most. The shame. (330)

Not only Niobe has been violated as well as Philomele, she also has learnt to view rape as inevitable, being the act of an unquestionable power. The comparison between women and countries connects both sexual violence and imperialism to the pleasure of conquer out of conquer. Indeed, Niobe's island was as 'proud' as Philomele is, since it dared to fight Athens. At the same time, Athens had no real 'need' to conquer an island whose only richness were 'a few lemon trees'. Violence towards minorities, women and the poor in weak countries seems therefore the means through which despotic societies give vent to their aggressiveness. In addition, as soon as the subjugation has been successfully carried out, imperialistic societies seem to lose interest in their victims: Tereus gradually diminishes his visits to Philomele as well as the Athenians left Niobe's island immediately after the

conquer. Furthermore, in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production (1988) a black actress played Niobe, widening the socio-political range of Wertebaker's play. Thus, the Nurse's plight triplicates its weight, as her inferiority unfolds itself in her gender, in her race and in her social position. Indeed, *The Love of the Nightingale*, far from exposing 'only' violence against women, succeeds in denouncing racism and imperialism too. Like Procne, old Niobe does not have the chance to enjoy sexual pleasure. Her reference to a possible affair with a soldier, a symbol of war and virility, remarks her acceptance of a society dominated by the logic of violence and cruelty. In addition, it might confirm the idea of sex as inevitably crude and harsh, and to reinforce Tereus' equation of 'fear' to 'consent'. Despite Tereus' fault, the stigma of rape will be attached to Philomele: the victim has to endure not only the pain of violation, but also society reproach.

### III: The active part of theatre and myth.

*The Love of the Nightingale* is linked to Euripides' *Hippolytos* through a relationship of *intertextualité*, as it contains some lines of the Greek tragedy inside its fifth scene. On the contrary, a relationship of *ipertextualité* ties Wertebaker's play to Euripides' *The Bacchae*, as her work has clear contact points and parallelisms with the Greek one.<sup>37</sup> The myth concerning the arrival of Dionysus in Thebes is particularly in need of revision from a contemporary point of view, as it includes the seeds of rebellion, the subversion of traditional values and the breaking of social structures aimed at by much revisionist myth-making. From a female perspective, the *Bacchae*'s myth speaks of ecstatic and violent rites made by women who only occasionally had the opportunity to express their repressed feelings and to worship a god as puzzling as Dionysus. Jan Kott underlines the importance this ritual plays for the women who compose the Chorus of the tragedy and for Agave, their leader and mother of the King Pentheus:

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<sup>37</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Op. Cit.* The 'starting text', *The Bacchae* in our case, is the hypotext, while the 'arrival text', *The Love of the Nightingale*, is the hypertext.

The Chorus in *The Bacchae*, as in an initiation rite, discovers the *tremendum* – the ‘almost simultaneous revelation of the sacred, of death and of sexuality’<sup>38</sup>

Dionysus has supreme familiarity with women; he loosens any inhibition, undoing women’s inner tensions and prompting them to free their more secret pulsations.<sup>39</sup> Actually, the *Bacchae*’s rite is usually interpreted as a sort of collective hysteria. Through it, marginal members of a society, people excluded from power, express their protest against society. Two other women playwrights have exploited this myth and its potential: Maureen Duffy with *Rites* in 1969 and Caryl Churchill’s *A Mouthful of Birds* in 1986. The former, set in a ladies’ public lavatory, show a group of women who, growing increasingly aggressive, kill a woman dressed as a man, considering ‘him’ an enemy. In the latter, different people’s lives are invaded by either an internal or external force and experience an ‘undefended day’; at the end some women kill a character dressed as Pentheus, exactly as in Euripides’ tragedy. Therefore, both plays deal with the theme of violence and of women being violent in particular. As Kott puts it,

Dionysus promises liberation from alienation and freedom from all ties, but he grants only one ultimate freedom: the freedom to kill.<sup>40</sup>

Wertenbaker modifies the plot of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and uses Euripides’ tragedy as a suggestive backdrop to the two sisters’ revenge on Tereus. Procne dresses as a *Bacchae* for the first time and joins the other women of Thrace. The stage, or better a public and usually ‘male’ square, fills with *Bacchae* and music starts playing. Niobe, Philomele and a Servant enter too, carrying a ‘male’ doll with a crown and two other ‘female’ dolls. The Nurse explains that Philomele has spent her years of confinement sewing the dolls and painting their faces. While people gather on the square, Philomele throws two of her dolls into a circle and begins moving them,

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<sup>38</sup> Jan Kott. *The Eating of the Gods – An Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1974, p. 203. The text in inverted commas is a quotation from Mircea Eliade. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*.

<sup>39</sup> See Roberto Calasso. *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*. Milano: Adelphi, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> J. Kott. Op. Cit., p. 228.

despite Niobe's obstruction. As the stage directions explain, 'the rape scene is re-enacted in a gross and comic way, partly because of Niobe's resistance'. Philomele then shows 'a very brutal illustration of the cutting of the female doll's tongue' (342). The crowd of Maenads laughs during the rape scene, while deep silence and stillness dominate the stage after the mutilation one. The Servant brings the third female doll, a queen, into the circle; this doll weeps and then embraces the other female doll. Procne, who has been watching the performance with the crowd, approaches Philomele and takes her away. The crowd picks up the dolls and move off, leaving the stage bare. After a while, the two sisters reappear, surrounded by 'a long silence'. At first, Procne doubts the truth of the show, accusing Philomele of having always been 'wild'. Then she asks Philomele to open her mouth and, looking at the dreadful mutilation, she suddenly realises that her sister has not been lying:

PROCNE: To do this. He would do this. (Pause) Justice. Philomele, the justice we learned as children, do you remember? (343)

Drinking some wine, the two sisters dance off, ready 'to revel' with the help of the 'drunken god'. In Ovid's plot, Philomela tells Procne the truth sewing her story on a tapestry. Analysing it, Klindienst traces in the princess the archetype of the woman who becomes an artist by weaving:

For Philomela to refuse her status as mute victim she must seize authority. When Philomela transforms her suffering, captivity and silence into the occasion for art, the text she weaves is overburdened with a desire to tell.<sup>41</sup>

Wertebaker makes an artist of her Philomele too, choosing to broaden the theatrical pregnancy of her play. Philomele's show, the second play-within-the-play after the performance of Euripides' *Hippolytos*, uses movement and music to create a theatre that is physical, rather than verbal.<sup>42</sup> Inside the theatrical frame provided by *The Bacchae*, and with Procne's masking to

<sup>41</sup> P. Klindienst. Op. Cit., p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> As Joe Winston notices, the 'grotesque manipulation of life-sized puppets' reminds us of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The dolls re-enact dark and macabre events that reveal an upsetting truth and disturb the audience. See J. Winston. Op. Cit., p. 516.

reinforce the 'theatrical atmosphere', Philomele performs a typical 'male' role, becoming the director of a play that concerns her own life. Philomele's idea of theatre itself is now deeply different from the one she had in Athens. During *Hippolytos*' performance, her father Pandion says that the play can help them come to a decision about whether sending Philomele to Thrace or not. Captured by the plot, Philomele pities Phaedra and cries seeing Hippolytus' tragic death 'out of his father's lands', as the Chorus says. Hearing that phrase, Pandion is alarmed:

PANDION: That's the phrase. Philomele, you must not leave your  
father's lands. You'll stay here.

PHILOMELE: But, Father, I'm not Hippolytus. You haven't cursed me.  
And Tereus isn't Phaedra, look. (306)

Philomele does not realise that she is allowing theatre to influence her life in a decisive way. Indulging in the emotions the play arises, and then being 'purified' by them, she fails to see how dangerous the journey to Thrace is. Her father, or rather the culture he represents, has actually cursed Philomele, transmitting to her a fatalistic view of life that ignores the importance of individual choice and action. Indeed, Euripides' depiction of Phaedra's love as exclusively dependant on Aphrodite's will strengthens the idea of life as a stage on which personal responsibility plays no part.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, when she has no longer a voice to express herself, theatre becomes the only instrument Philomele can use to denounce Tereus' outrage. A public arena, theatre gathers people together to discuss crucial issues, as Wertenbaker advocates:

I think art is redemptive and the theatre is particularly important because it's a public space. That's the crucial element. ... Theatre should not be used to flatter, but to reveal, which is to disturb.<sup>44</sup>

Making theatre for Philomele is a necessary act of political rebellion. After years of seclusion, she re-enters a public and 'male' space and uses theatre to

<sup>43</sup> As we will see analysing Kane's play, Seneca gives a different connotation to Phaedra's feelings.

<sup>44</sup> T. Wertenbaker. In Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, eds. *Rage and Reason*. London: Methuen Drama, 1997, pp. 141 – 142.

expose the abuse inflicted by the powerful on the weakest members of the society, in this case women. Furthermore, the play reflects upon the audience's role, multiplying its presence and mirroring its behaviour through the two Choruses, through *Hippolytos*' 'internal' audience and through the crowd's presence at Philomele's show. The spectators of *Hippolytos*, like Pandion and Philomele, make the mistake of taking theatre too seriously, leaving to it crucial decisions about their life. Oppositely, the audience of Philomele's show reacts twice in a 'wrong' way, laughing at the rape scene and remaining passively silent after the mutilation one. As Jennifer Wagner points out,

The audience's lesson ... is that danger can come from both overidentifying with a performance, and from refusing to see the applicability of a performance.<sup>45</sup>

While the Bacchae revel inside the royal palace, two soldiers are on guard outside it. They wonder about this 'woman's mystery' and wish they knew what was happening. The young Itys, Procne' and Tereus' son, approaches them and gets curious about the rite himself. He climbs on the shoulders of one of the soldiers and looks inside the palace from the window:

ITYS: There's one I've never seen before. She looks like a slave. That's my sword. That slave girl. A slave, a girl slave holding my sword.  
(347)

Itys will be killed by Philomele and Procne inside the palace, as the Second Soldier witnesses spying from the window. Significantly, the two sisters appropriate the royal palace, a private space that symbolizes Tereus' power and the end of it, since his son dies inside it. Furthermore, Philomele kills Itys using his own sword, a symbol of the 'male' familiarity with violence. The spying Soldier, shocked by the event, behaves again as a 'timorous' audience, not revealing what is happening and remaining silent in front of the

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<sup>45</sup> Jennifer A. Wagner, Formal parody and the metamorphosis of the audience in Timberlake Wertenbaker's 'The Love of the Nightingale', *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 31, Issue 3, Summer 95, p. 231.



bloody revenge.<sup>46</sup> As Agave kills her son Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, so the two sisters murder the young Itys, who has dared to spy and to interrupt the secret ritual:

Pentheus is made the scapegoat. The scapegoat is a surrogate who must be made to resemble the One whom he has replaced.<sup>47</sup>

While in *The Bacchae* Pentheus is 'a surrogate' of Dionysus himself, here Itys replaces his father Tereus. As in *Medea*, the killing of the son is the worst possible revenge, since it deprives Tereus of any future succession. Furthermore, Wertenbaker clearly sees the violence as the inevitable result of the brutal silencing:

Although it has been interpreted as being about women, I was actually thinking of the violence that erupts in societies when they have been silenced for too long. Without language, brutality will triumph.<sup>48</sup>

#### **IV: The two Choruses.**

Wertenbaker splits the Chorus into a male and a female, performing two different roles and using two different languages. Through non-illusory devices, the Male Chorus informs the audience of the play's shifts in time and space. The official voice of the play's society, it narrates the main events in a detached way:

MALE CHORUS: In the cold dawns, Tereus burns.

MALE CHORUS: Does Philomele know? Ought we to tell her? We are only here to observe, journalists of an antique world, putting horror into words, unable to stop the events we will soon record. (308)

Every time Tereus commits a misdeed, the Male Chorus, another 'duplicate' of the real audience, pretends not to see anything, nor does it dare to question

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<sup>46</sup> As we will see in the last paragraph of the chapter, the Female Chorus will 'show' the audience what happened inside the royal palace.

<sup>47</sup> J. Kott. *Op. Cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>48</sup> T. Wertenbaker. *Op. Cit.*, *Introduction*, pp. VIII – IX. She also refers to her childhood in the Basque country, 'where the language was systematically silenced'.

the King's authority and his senseless decisions. It also reflects on myth, providing many definitions of it: myth is 'the oblique image of an unwanted truth, reverberating through time'; myth is a 'public speech' and 'the content of that speech'. Myth is a 'counsel, command' and 'now it is a remote tale' (315). The Male Chorus highlights myth's elusive nature:

MALE CHORUS: We might ask, has the content become increasingly unacceptable and therefore the speech more indirect? How has the meaning of myth been transformed from public speech to an unlikely story? ...

MALE CHORUS: ... but we cannot rephrase it for you. If we could, why would we trouble to show you the myth? (315)

Though perceived nowadays as an imaginary story, myth's often troublesome content still works as an archetypal backdrop to people's lives. The Male Chorus implies that myth's fleeting images need to be shown repeatedly, and *The Love of the Nightingale* does it from an unusual and challenging perspective.

Unable to speak the prevailing idiom, the Female Chorus seems to lack authority and credibility for most of the play. The ninth scene voices this problem:

HERO: Sometimes I feel I know things but I cannot prove that I know them or that what 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. (316)

Hero's difficulty in speaking is underlined by the absence of punctuation, that makes a confused heap of sentences and repetitions of her speech. On the contrary, Helen's enunciation is clearer; it expresses well the gap between the 'female' perception of the world, and the 'male' words she and her companions can use to depict that reality. The Female Chorus' inability to effectively communicate remarks its social inferiority for most of the play. However, this does not mean that the play's linguistic dichotomy is based upon the biological difference. This is evident in the Female Chorus'

relationship with Procne, a woman who knows how to speak 'correctly' and manages therefore to silence them. Rather than using a language that 'physically' matches their diversity, the Chorus' women trace the anomaly inside the dominant idiom. As we have seen, Philomele does the same in her song to the moon. For instance, while Procne assigns to words only a literal and connotative meaning, the Female Chorus speaks through denotative images whose meaning is often ambiguous and multiple. The 'jumble of possibilities' typical of their language offers a 'potent strategy for dissidence' too, as it tries to convey a truth which is different from the official one.<sup>49</sup> Though achieving opposite results, the idioms of both Choruses are far from 'spontaneous' and appear extremely self-conscious. Mirroring the real audience's possible passivity, the two Choruses display a good understanding of the ongoing tragic events, but fail either in actively opposing them or in successfully exposing them.

It is at the end of the play that Wertenbaker entrusts the Female Chorus with a song that reveals the play's deepest concern. Suddenly endowed with a clear and powerful voice, the women of Thrace address the audience resolutely:

HERO: Without the words to demand.

ECHO: Or ask. Plead. Beg for. ...

IRIS: There are some questions that have no answers. We might ask you now: why does the Vulture eat Prometheus' liver? He brought men intelligence. ...

IRIS: We can ask: why did Medea kill her children? ...

HELEN: Why are little girls raped and murdered in the car parks of dark cities? ...

HERO: We can ask. Words will grope and probably not find. But if you silence the question. ...

HERO: You will have this. (348 – 349)

The series of questions, ranging from classical myth to contemporary problems, invites the audience to keep interrogating itself about crucial issues. It broadens the play's socio-political scope, exposing the silence and violence suffered by all marginal groups, not only women. The Female Chorus admits that Philomele could have even forgiven Tereus, but implies

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<sup>49</sup> See Susan Sellers. *Op. Cit.*, p. 26. Sellers refers to Julia Kristeva's theories about language.

that, without 'the words that help to forget', her bloody revenge was inevitable.

At the end of its long song, the Thracian women show the audience what the soldiers pretended not to see, the murder of Itys and the revelation of it to Tereus. Being active for the first time, the Female Chorus breaches the royal palace's private space, allowing the audience to witness a brutal act of personal and political rebellion. Procne places Tereus in front of his responsibility:

PROCNE: No. You, Tereus. You bloodied the future. For all of us. ...  
TEREUS: Your own child!  
PROCNE: Ours. There are no more rules. There is nothing. The world  
is bleak. The past a mockery, the future dead. (351)

Tereus still tries to clear himself, saying that he silenced Philomele 'for love', but Procne repudiates his idea of love. She too advocates a redefinition of his current moral values. As Kott explains, the murder of the son by the mother represents 'the negation of time' and the turning of cosmos into chaos.<sup>50</sup> While Tereus is ready to kill the two sisters, the Female Chorus tells the audience about the myth's 'strange end'. The three main characters become birds and come on the stage. As Philomele, or better the Nightingale explains, the metamorphosis was good because 'we were all so angry the bloodshed would have gone on forever' (353). Their story begins again and the birds' singing will tell it to future generations. Indeed, the last scene sees a tender dialogue between Philomele and Itys:

ITYS: You want me to ask questions.  
PHILOMELE: Yes. ...  
PHILOMELE: Do you understand why it was wrong of Tereus  
to cut out my tongue? ...  
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) (354)

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<sup>50</sup> To be precise, Kott discusses 'the eating of a son by the mother'. In Ovid, Tereus eats Itys' body, served by Procne. Wertenbaker omits this element, maybe to relieve the already too bloody plot of the story. See J. Kott. *Op. Cit.*, p. 200.

Being now a nightingale, Philomele has somehow recovered a voice, the alternative way of expression looked for throughout the play. As the Female Chorus suggests, Philomele prompts the nephew to investigate the causes and consequences of the events. Previously, Philomele had tried to give birth to the truth using the method of the Socratic maieutics. Therefore, Wertenbaker traces the possibility to fight oppression 'from the inside', as Barthes invites to do. Though the Greek society is expression of a prevalently 'male' culture, its best legacies can become instruments of political resistance, as the use of theatre and philosophy in the play shows. The incessant questioning of what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' becomes an imperative not only for the young Itys, but also for the theatre itself and for its audiences in particular. They all are encouraged not to accept passively the univocal meanings and values inherited from the past. Through an ending that raises questions more than it gives answers, Wertenbaker suggests that the theatre should continue the debate about the irrational and tragic nature of society.

## CHAPTER 2:

### *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane.

Then there'll be nothing  
anger thinks forbidden, ...  
A wife destroys her husband, ...  
the earth is watered with  
blood and great leaders  
are defeated by lust.  
Rape's a joke and love and  
laws both fade away.  
(Caryl Churchill, *Thyestes*)

#### **I: Masculinity centre stage.**

Sarah Kane was asked to rewrite a classical play in 1996, when London's Gate Theatre ventured into the adaptation of a masterpiece of the past for its season called *New Plays, Ancient Sources*. At first, Kane did not like the idea, since she considers ancient drama to be centuries away from her conception of theatre:

It was the Gate which suggested something Greek or Roman, and I thought, 'Oh, I've always hated those plays. Everything happens off-stage, and what's the point?' But I decided to read one of them and see what I'd get. I chose Seneca because Caryl Churchill had done a version of one of his plays [*Thyestes*] which I had liked very much. I read *Phaedra* and surprisingly enough it interested me.<sup>51</sup>

Kane's 'off-stage' is highly significant in this case, because in her first play, *Blasted*, staged at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in 1995, everything literally happens 'on-stage': rape, fellatio, masturbation, defecation, blinding, the eating of a baby. Her will to show anything, her concern with themes such as hate, revenge and violence remind one not only of Senecan tragedies, but also of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Like *Phaedra's Love*, these plays depict violence and the extremes of life. Indeed, Mark Ravenhill calls her 'a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility'.<sup>52</sup> Her interest in

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Kane, interview with Nils Tabert. In Graham Saunders. *'Love me or kill me' – Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Ravenhill. *Obituary*. *The Independent*, 23 February 1999.

Seneca, and in the figure of Phaedra in particular, should therefore not sound surprising. The transition from Euripides to Seneca sees a significant change in the title of the tragedy, as the attention moves from Hippolytus to Phaedra. Although both Seneca's tragedy and Kane's title refer to the figure of Phaedra as the play's main character, Kane's revision has its own centre occupied by the Prince Hippolytus. Actually, before starting *Phaedra's Love*, Kane was working on her version of Brecht's first play, *Baal*. When the Gate Theatre told her that they could not stage a rewriting of Brecht and commissioned a reworking of a classical play instead, Kane saw Baal and Seneca's Hippolytus as very similar, and put some scenes of her *Baal* in the new play. The German play presents women simply as one of the pleasures Baal enjoys in his search for self-realization. Brecht's anti-hero is the prophet of a '*carpe diem* philosophy', which especially takes shape in an unscrupulous sexual freedom. As the *Hymn of Baal the Great* says, Baal receives 'a sweet ecstatic feeling' from the women he has sex with.<sup>53</sup> Kane's Hippolytus uses sex as his main diversion too, but, contrary to what Baal does, he explicitly states that he neither gets pleasure from it nor from any other thing.

Rather than choosing to adapt a classical play in order to dramatize women's stories from a new perspective, as many women playwrights do, Kane here portrays a disgusting and nihilistic masculinity. Yet, she rejects any simplistic dichotomy between men and women, explaining that she only writes 'about human beings' and does not see the world 'divided up into men and women, victims and perpetrators.'<sup>54</sup> Nor does she write about 'sexual politics', for she believes that 'class, race and gender divisions are symptomatic of societies based on violence or the threat of violence, not the cause.'<sup>55</sup> Seneca's Hippolytus is a misogynist, devoted to Diana's cult and to the practice of hunting. Hippolytus is, as most of Senecan characters, 'excessive in the extreme' and seems to 'range in some precise order of evil.'<sup>56</sup> Kane catches this unlimited purity, an anomaly in itself, and turns it

<sup>53</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Baal*. In *Plays 1*. Transl. by Peter Tegel. London: Methuen, 1987, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Kane. In H. Stephenson and N. Langridge. *Op. Cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark. *Senecan Tragedy*. Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1988, p. 80.

upside down. Indeed, her Hippolytus is a contemporary Western young man, lazy, fat and listless. He spends his days watching TV, eating hamburgers and crisp packets and having sex with anybody, whether male or female. Like a rock star or a celebrity, he is very popular among the young because of his decadent beauty, his dissolute life and his unrestrained will of transgression. As in other plays by Kane, the disgust that Hippolytus provokes in other characters and in the audience is also the source of his charm. Through him, Kane intends to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of modern society and of its apparatuses. Kane's Hippolytus is pure and upright in his uncompromising sincerity and harshness. His life and death are both utterly intransigent and he experiences them without any fear, in a constantly disappointed attempt 'to feel something'. As Grace says in Kane's *Cleansed*, 'And when I don't feel it, it's pointless.'

Kane herself directed the first staging of *Phaedra's Love* for the Gate. In it, Seneca's Nurse is replaced by the figure of Strophe, a daughter Phaedra had from a previous marriage; the 'institutional characters' of Theseus, the Doctor and the Priest are significantly played by the same male actor; the set is simply hinted at as 'a royal palace', but the plot and the events make it clear that Kane has Buckingham Palace in mind. The play's eight short scenes all hinge on Hippolytus' figure, as, even when he is not onstage, the other characters speak of him and worry about his situation. The longest scenes are consecutive and see the young Prince talking to his stepmother, to his stepsister Strophe and to the Priest who tries to make him repent. The only scene in which he is neither present nor talked about is the seventh, when Phaedra's body lies on a pyre and incinerates. Her death is the turning point of the play, the moment in which the course of events changes irremediably. Phaedra seems to acquire depth and value only *post mortem*, and her weight in the plot becomes much heavier only after we do not see her anymore.

The play begins with Hippolytus sitting in a darkened room and watching TV, a Hollywood film to be precise. Since he does not say a word, his first impact on the audience is purely visual and auditory. The items scattered around him, for instance used socks and electronic toys, testify to his laziness and carelessness; he does not refrain from sniffing his dirty underwear or



from blowing his nose on it. As soon as the film becomes more violent, Hippolytus masturbates into a sock, without showing 'a flicker of pleasure'; he eats many hamburgers greedily. Therefore, Hippolytus embodies the sum of the traditional capital sins and symbolizes a contemporary youth characterized by apathy and emotional sickness. At the same time, his body is the visual metaphor of the State's decline. The young Prince, who should represent the future of his Country, embodies on the contrary its decadence and corruption. In the second and in the third scene, other characters obsessively speak of Hippolytus and he occupies the play's centre despite, or, perhaps even more emphatically, through his palpable absence. Phaedra consults the Doctor about Hippolytus' alleged sickness, also called 'depression'. While Phaedra is seriously worried about her stepson's situation, the Doctor cannot help giving very banal advice, suggesting that Hippolytus should tidy his room and lose some weight. His final diagnosis is lapidary and definitive: 'He's just very unpleasant. And therefore incurable. I'm sorry.'<sup>57</sup>

## II: The choice of Seneca and the Phaedra myth.

We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves  
That, ruined, yields no echo. ... Oh this gloomy world,  
in what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness  
doth, womanish, and fearful, mankind live?  
(John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Act V, Sc. V)

Albert Gérard clearly explains the peculiarity of the myth concerning Phaedra and her family:

Such a situation compounds adultery with incest. It brings into play the fundamental psychological motivations of love and honour, sex and vengeance. It exemplifies the utter disruption of natural order and moral hierarchies. It almost inevitably compels author and reader alike to pass moral judgement and to take sides in the context between natural impulses and ethical precepts ...<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Sarah Kane. *Blasted and Phaedra's Love*. London: Methuen Drama, 1996, p. 64. All the quotations are taken from this edition, whose page I indicate in brackets.

<sup>58</sup> Albert S. Gérard. *The Phaedra Syndrome – Of Shame and Guilt in Drama*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993, p. 2.

Ken Urban writes that Kane's plays engage in a 'complex negotiation of ethics'. Urban argues that Kane, an admirer of Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' and of Howard Barker's 'Theatre of Catastrophe', approaches Gilles Deleuze's philosophical thought.<sup>59</sup> Kane does not build her plays according to moralistic principles, stating what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. Nor does she depict a 'cynical amorality', although many reviewers often accused her of being a 'new brutalist' and called her work a 'disgusting feast of filth'. On the contrary, Kane shows an ethics not based on the transcendent values of 'good' or 'evil', but rather on criteria which vary according to the context or to the individual's specific experience. Curley explains that Seneca's plays 'portray a world in which evil flourishes more naturally than good and in which the culminating crime is accomplished by means of dramatic representation'.<sup>60</sup> With their stress on life's more sinister, dreadful and gloomy sides and with their exploration of the *furor*'s outburst, these plays fascinated Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights as well as Kane. In particular, Kane stages the scene of Hippolytus' death, undoubtedly the 'culminating crime' of Kane's play, using the most dramatic techniques in the play. When faced with the question: 'How much despair can you convey and how much horror can you show before an audience is overdosed?',<sup>61</sup> she is positive that:

... There's only the same danger of overdose in the theatre as there is in life. The choice is either to represent it, or not to represent it. I've chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively, in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future ...<sup>62</sup>

As Gérard underlines, the Phaedra myth dwells on a typically comic triangle, composed by a wife, her husband and his attractive young son. In it, 'the 'natural' phallocratic authority of the *pater familias*' is threatened and the wife's 'enslavement to sexual urges' violates the sacred institution of

<sup>59</sup> See Ken Urban. *An Ethics of Catastrophe. The Theatre of Sarah Kane*. *PAJ*. No. 69, Vol. XXIII, no. 3, September 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas F. Curley. *The Nature of Senecan Drama*. Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1986, p. 199. In particular, Curley refers to *Medea* and *Thyestes*.

<sup>61</sup> See John Peter. *Alive when kicking*. *Sunday Times*. 29 January 1995.

<sup>62</sup> S. Kane. In H. Stephenson and N. Langridge. *Op. Cit.*, p. 132–133.

marriage and the taboo of incest.<sup>63</sup> Kane is well aware that Phaedra's story offers her an unrivalled example of 'disruption of natural order and moral hierarchies', a debased landscape where baroque excesses predominate and make 'the descent into hell' concretely possible. It gives her the opportunity to tackle themes as the abyss of love, incest, rape, murder, suicide and violence that run throughout her work. Furthermore, it allows her to depict the corruption and impoverishment of people's feelings, without taking sides with a character or another. Indeed, she does not provide the audience with a clear viewpoint, but rather forces it 'to craft their own response'.<sup>64</sup>

In particular, two elements of Phaedra's story struck Kane: firstly, the fact that the play is about a 'sexually corrupt Royal Family', and secondly that Hippolytus is 'deeply unattractive'. This perception testifies to Kane's ability to remove these elements from the original play and to build around them a new play, which addresses the contemporary audience in a highly disturbing way. As Sierz notices, Kane transforms the Phaedra myth in a sort of modern soap opera, where the 'normal' family intercourse is subverted to such an extent that it acquires an almost grotesque and depraved quality.<sup>65</sup> In addition, some moments of the play really 'sound' like a contemporary scandal concerning very important people: for instance, the exchange between Phaedra and her daughter, with its morbid account of the Queen's passion, resembles the 'Camillagate' tapes. The dialogue between Strophe and the Prince, with its reference to a possible sexual relationship between he and Phaedra, reminds of Bill Clinton's affair with Ms. Lewinsky.<sup>66</sup> It is not surprising that Kane liked Churchill's version of *Thyestes*, since that play too engages with a 'waste land' of similar proportion, as Atreus explains when planning his revenge: 'No part of the family is free from traps. My wife is corrupted. The deal we made to share the kingdom's smashed. House sick. Children's blood in doubt. Nothing certain but brother enemy.'<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> A. Gérard, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>65</sup> See Aleks Sierz, *'In-Yer-Face Theatre' – British Drama Today*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>67</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Thyestes*. London: Nick Hern Books Limited, 1995, p. 9.

Kane decided to direct *Phaedra's Love* herself, to avoid not 'seeing exactly the images I'd written.'<sup>68</sup> Indeed, disappointed by some productions of her first play, *Blasted*, she thought that some directors had completely misunderstood its spirit. Alexs Sierz provides a very detailed and useful account of her staging:

*Phaedra's Love* ... lasted seventy minutes without a break. The set ... occupied the whole of this tiny theatre, leaving the audience perched on benches in the middle and on the edges of the room. The atmosphere was hot, claustrophobic. With the action happening all around, the feeling was one of eavesdropping on a problem family. ... Phaedra brushed past audience members as she approached him [*Hippolytus*]. ... Being in the middle of the action made you feel complicit in the horror ...<sup>69</sup>

As Kane says, the continuous shift from closeness to the actors to distance from them makes the play 'at one moment intimate and personal, at the next epic and public.'<sup>70</sup> In Barker's words, these seventy minutes of uninterrupted horror 'stimulate a restlessness which is not ... discharged, but carried away by the individuals of the audience'. Furthermore, as happens throughout Kane's work, the play's 'unapologetic intimacy with the forbidden ... evacuates the territory of values.'<sup>71</sup> As Barker advocates, *Phaedra's Love*, whose actors 'touch' the spectators both literally and metaphorically, lends its audience pain and never flatters it with hope.

### III: The figure of Phaedra.

Critics agree that, contrary to the usual trend of most of his tragedies, with Phaedra Seneca creates a passionate and daring heroine who is very far from being a pale copy of the Euripidean model. Important are the differences in the two plots: in Euripides' play the goddess Aphrodite is responsible for Phaedra's feelings towards Hippolytus, while in Seneca's the stepmother, prompted by the Nurse, admits that the gods play no part in her passion for

<sup>68</sup> S. Kane. In G. Saunders. Op. Cit., p. 71. Kane explains that she was disappointed by some productions of her previous play, *Blasted*.

<sup>69</sup> A. Sierz. Op. Cit., p. 108.

<sup>70</sup> S. Kane. In H. Stephenson and N. Langridge. Op. Cit., p. 134.

<sup>71</sup> Howard Barker. *Arguments for a Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997 (third edition), p. 123.

the youth. The Nurse states that lust is the cause of her insane love, and Seneca's Phaedra, though deeply tormented by this truth, finally agrees with her companion's opinion. In the Greek tragedy, Phaedra never meets Hippolytus; when the Nurse reveals to the young warrior that his stepmother loves him, Phaedra hears Hippolytus' indignant reaction from inside the palace. Desperate and worried about her honour, she kills herself and leaves a note for her husband Theseus, accusing her stepson of having raped her. In the Senecan play, Phaedra is much more active: she herself approaches Hippolytus in an open and 'male' space, probably a wood or a meadow where he goes hunting. Rejecting the epithet of 'mother', Phaedra offers to be his slave, according to the literary theme known as *servitium amoris*. Then Phaedra declares her love for him and places her feeling inside a sort of 'family curse': indeed, as her sister Ariadne fell in love with the father, Theseus, and was left by him, Phaedra loves the son and is doomed to suffer from this situation. When Hippolytus, disgusted by her words, runs away from Phaedra and the Nurse, he forgets to take his sword with him. Seeing it, the Nurse decides to use the weapon as evidence of the fact that Hippolytus raped Phaedra. Furthermore, the stepmother commits suicide only after the Messenger's account of Hippolytus' tragic death. Whereas in Euripides' play the goddess Artemis reveals Phaedra's fault to Theseus, in Seneca's Phaedra herself speaks to her husband and admits her guilt. This device again underlines the boldness of the Senecan heroine, who appears in most of the play's scenes and is onstage until the end.

Kane constructs her play and Phaedra's figure in a way that strikingly differs from Seneca's. Indeed, not only does Hippolytus become the protagonist, but also Phaedra's range of action and decisiveness loses its importance. In Kane's play Phaedra appears only in three of the eight scenes. In the second scene she asks the Doctor advice regarding Hippolytus' alleged illness; in the third one she reveals to Strophe that she is madly in love with her stepson; and, finally, in the fourth scene she speaks to Hippolytus about her unbounded passion. The dialogue between the Queen and the Doctor is but a verbal repetition of Hippolytus' daily routine as shown in the first scene:

DOCTOR: He's depressed.  
 PHAEDRA: I know. ...  
 DOCTOR: What does he do all day? ...  
 PHAEDRA: Watch films. And have sex. ...  
 DOCTOR: Does he have sex with you?  
 PHAEDRA: I'm sorry?  
 DOCTOR: Does he have sex with you?  
 PHAEDRA: I'm his stepmother. We are royal. ...  
 DOCTOR: Are you in love with him?  
 PHAEDRA: I'm married to his father. ...  
 DOCTOR: Are you still in love with him? [Theseus]  
 PHAEDRA: Of course. I haven't seen him since we married.  
 DOCTOR: You must be very lonely. ...  
 DOCTOR: Perhaps he's missing his real mother.  
 PHAEDRA (looks at him)  
 DOCTOR: That's not a reflection on your abilities as a substitute,  
                   but there is after all, no blood between you. I'm merely  
                   speculating. (61 – 64)

During the entire second scene, Hippolytus is repeatedly referred to, through the reiteration of the pronouns 'he' and 'him', of the possessive 'his' or the noun 'son'. The accumulation of grammatical elements hinting at him works as 'the sonorous configuration' of Phaedra's obsession with him. The Doctor's insinuation about the Queen's feelings for Hippolytus and her evasive answers immediately highlight one of the main problems of the play, incest. Phaedra, instead of replying clearly with a 'yes' or a 'no', implies that her parental and social position 'naturally' prevents her from loving Hippolytus. At the same time, Phaedra does not conceal her intimacy with her stepson and admits that they are friends. She betrays her liking for Hippolytus, describing him as 'funny' and showing her tender affection. The reference to Theseus reminds the spectators of another central issue, adultery. Seneca's Phaedra clearly states that Theseus is an enemy to her, an unfaithful husband who, very often away from home, does not disdain adultery or rape. On the contrary, Kane's Phaedra says she loves her husband, if only because they have not seen each other very often after getting married. In doing so, she places herself in the large family of wives neglected by their husbands, as Penelope or Dianeira. At the same time, she seems to be a frail and lonely woman who needs to love and to be loved to give her a sense of life: with her husband absent, Phaedra is attracted by the only other man in the palace, Hippolytus. Stating that there is no blood between Phaedra and the Prince,

the Doctor complicates the question of 'natural impulses' and 'ethical precepts': indeed, why should Phaedra respect the laws of nature, when she has no natural bond with Hyppolytus? Or why should she be faithful to a husband she neither knows very well nor shares nothing with? If it is true that the Doctor refers to 'the natural bond' as far as the question of 'motherhood' is concerned, it is also undeniable that he, sensing the catastrophe to come, slyly seems to justify the incest as, after all, not forbidden by the blood tie. It is likely that the scene with the Doctor takes place inside the royal palace, exactly as this third scene and all the others, with the only exception of the sixth and of the eighth.<sup>72</sup> Such a claustrophobic setting strongly contrasts with that of Seneca. In the Latin play both the Nurse and Phaedra dare to venture out into an open and dangerous space, the wood where Hippolytus spends most of his time. In Kane, the royal palace is decidedly a 'male' space where a 'male' power reigns: the political succession will pass from a father to a son and the two women who live in it do not even have a blood tie with the two men. In particular, Hippolytus' room will be the set wherein the most important actions and dialogues take place.

In the third scene an intense dialogue occurs between Phaedra and Strophe, the daughter she had from a previous marriage. Their relationship is apparently very close, though the audience soon realises that Strophe is very different from her mother. Kane's choice of Strophe's name is worthy of attention, since it is a reference to a 'poetical quality' which is, ironically, an ability to tell an unpleasant truth or, as Barker puts it, to 'deliver the wound'. From this moment on, Kane's intent to use a language that is 'a completely contemporary urban poetry' becomes evident.<sup>73</sup> Everyday idiom mingles with a rhythmic and structural accuracy that resembles a poetic diction. As the scene opens, Phaedra immediately reveals her unease and anxiety, while Strophe proves cold and rational:

PHAEDRA: Have you ever thought, thought your heart would break?

STROPHE: No.

<sup>72</sup> The stage directions do not exactly say where the second scene happens, but we may suppose that 'the royal doctor', as Phaedra calls him, personally visits the palace.

<sup>73</sup> S. Kane. In A. Sierz. *Op. Cit.*, p. 109.

PHAEDRA: Wished you could cut open your chest tear it out to stop the pain?

STROPHE: That would kill you.

PHAEDRA: This is killing me. ...

STROPHE: Hippolytus.

PHAEDRA (screams)

STROPHE: You're in love with him.

PHAEDRA: (laughs hysterically) What are you talking about? ...

STROPHE (looks at her)

PHAEDRA: Is it that obvious?

STROPHE: I'm your daughter. ...

PHAEDRA: There's a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be. ...

STROPHE: Mother. If someone were to find out. ...

STROPHE: You can have any man you want.

PHAEDRA: Any man I want except the man I want. ... (64 – 69)

As her name suggests, the figure of Strophe replaces both the Nurse present in Euripides' and Seneca's tragedies and the Chorus.<sup>74</sup> Kane stresses above all the fact that Phaedra is a 'mother', a biological mother to Strophe and by law a stepmother to Hippolytus. Although Kane's Phaedra tells Strophe that Hippolytus is not her son, she does not reject her role of 'mother' as firmly as Seneca's Phaedra does. Her unconditional love for the young Prince, though certainly linked to sexual attraction, can also resemble that of a mother for her son. Indeed, Phaedra does not seem aware of Hippolytus' ugliness; she is always ready to forgive his disgusting behaviour and to justify him for his depravation. Furthermore, in Seneca both the servants and the Chorus show a deep respect for the Queen, stressing her divine origin and the important position she holds in the palace, with the King being absent.<sup>75</sup> While the Nurse is subordinate to Seneca's Phaedra, here the relationship between mother and daughter results inevitably on equal terms. Moreover, the fact that in Kane's work nobody addresses Phaedra with the epithet 'Queen' drastically diminishes her political power and her authority. The erasure of Phaedra's divine and royal attributes increases the domesticity of the play and its 'soap opera' quality.

Strophe speaks briefly and directly. She does not hesitate to tell her mother

<sup>74</sup> Indeed, 'strophe' indicates one of the parts that constitute the Greek Chorus' song. In this sense, Kane's Strophe can also voice the common people's opinion about the events.

<sup>75</sup> Phaedra and her sister Ariadne are the daughters of Europe and the god Minos; therefore, in Seneca's play they are called 'Zeus' descendants'.



the truth and seems to pronounce the name 'Hippolytus' as if it were a curse, the person whom everybody alludes to without daring to name him. She immediately foresees the tragic consequences that incest will bring on: it would become 'the excuse' (68) people are waiting for, in order to 'tear apart' the Royal Family. Questions of 'blood' and 'ethics' play again an important role, as Strophe appeals more than once to the 'natural duties' her mother owes her. Strophe appears to be jealous of her stepbrother and of the undeniable favour he finds in Phaedra's eyes. Since she is her daughter, Strophe claims she can read Phaedra's thoughts and asks her to forget Hippolytus 'for my sake' (67). Moreover, Strophe suggests that her mother, if she cannot think of Theseus, should at least respect her previous husband, Strophe's father. Strophe's behaviour contrasts with that of the Nurse in Seneca. Actually, Seneca's Nurse blames Phaedra for her 'illicit passion' and tries to persuade her to forget Hippolytus. Yet, as soon as Phaedra says that death is for her the only way to stop loving him, the Nurse, pitying her lady, decides to go and speak to Hippolytus. Therefore, whereas in Seneca the Nurse shows a deep understanding of Phaedra's turmoil, Strophe is more worried about the family's reputation. In addition, Strophe does not play an active part, as she limits herself to talk to her mother, without doing anything concrete to help her.

At first, Phaedra seems to give in to her natural instincts, without considering the laws of morality and social decorum. Kane depicts her overwhelming passion for Hippolytus in terms that resemble those used by Seneca: 'Can feel him through the walls. Sense him. Feel his heartbeat from a mile.' (66) Her love for Hippolytus exhibit a sort of supernatural quality, that allows her to overcome physical boundaries. Kane explains that her idea of love resembles the unrestrained feeling described by Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. This passion is equivalent to the tragic experience of deportation to a Nazi concentration camp and to its physical and mental alienation: the body loses its weight and consistency; the mind is gradually bereaved of its ability to reason and to keep in touch with the reality; space is perceived as a hateful prison and time becomes an obsessive repetition of thoughts that focus on the yearned moment of liberation. Seneca's Phaedra declares that 'she does not want what she wants', admitting

to have lost control over her actions. Likewise, Kane's Phaedra believes she can do nothing but love Hippolytus. However, unlike Seneca's Phaedra, Kane's lives in a world where volition does not exist and where a Greek-like fatalism governs human feelings. Actually, Phaedra is positive that she and Hippolytus were 'meant to be', something that can be equated to Aphrodite's role in the Euripidean play. The violence contained in the verbs and in the imagery she uses ('to cut', 'to tear it out', 'to crack open', 'a spear in my side') again links Kane's theatre with Seneca and with Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. In addition to the cliché of a fated love, Strophe provides another possible explanation for her mother's hysteria, inviting her not to think she can cure Hippolytus. As Phaedra will explain later, her stepson's depression and disgusting behaviour are the reason for her untameable passion. If at the end of the scene ethical precepts seem to have got hold of Phaedra, since she says she wants to 'get over him', her confused and fragmentary answers make it evident that she will not be able to do it.

### **III. 1: The amorous catastrophe.**

'I don't find my plays depressing or lacking in hope. ... To create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair, is for me the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do.'<sup>76</sup>

Scene Four, the longest of the play, sees the only dialogue between Hippolytus and his stepmother; their meeting is fundamental both to the play's development and to its stylistic quality. Furthermore, as it happens in Seneca's tragedy, their exchange seems 'to underscore and to enhance this web of inversion and inhumanity'.<sup>77</sup> Kane's Phaedra, as her Latin precursor does, approaches Hippolytus to reveal her feelings. However, she does not enter a space as open and 'uncivilised' as a wood, but a closed room dominated by a male presence. Inside this space, Hippolytus establishes the behavioural rules, whereas Phaedra's range of action is very limited. Watching television and playing with a remote control car, without getting

<sup>76</sup> S. Kane, In A. Sierz. Op. Cit., p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> A. L. Motto and J. R. Clark. Op. Cit., p. 87.

any pleasure from these activities, Hippolytus does not even notice that Phaedra enters his room with some presents for his birthday. In a motherly attitude, Phaedra begins to tidy the room, piling the dirty socks and throwing away the rubbish. Her servile gestures do not fit her royalty and remark her social inferiority towards Hippolytus. The young Prince is the visible symbol of the boredom and emptiness of modern life; his life is a never-ending repetition of dull actions that annihilate the meaning and value of time. While Phaedra is sick because of her unlimited love, Hippolytus suffers from the most modern of the diseases, depression. Kane herself states that the play concerns 'two extremes', and links her characters' personality to her personal experience: '[The play] ... was also about that split in my own personality ... the act of writing the play was to try and connect two extremes in my own head.'<sup>78</sup> Kane says that she is Hippolytus and Phaedra at the same time, 'both lethally cynical and obsessively in love with someone who's completely unlovable.'<sup>79</sup> Various moments of this scene provide the audience with a possible explanation behind Hippolytus' and Phaedra's behaviour. Such psychological insight into the mind of both characters differentiates Kane's play from Euripides' version of the myth, where Aphrodite's will causes Phaedra's love while Hippolytus' chastity and misogyny come from his devoutness to Diana. The Queen's love springs out of the Prince's tedium and of her masochistic desire to relieve his sufferance:

PHAEDRA: You're difficult. Moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt. You stay in bed all day then watch TV all night, you crash around this house with sleep in your eyes and not a thought for anyone. You're in pain. I adore you. (74)

As Strophe previously did, Hippolytus too remarks the fact that Phaedra could have any man she wants, remarking her beauty and sex appeal. Hippolytus wonders why Phaedra chose to marry Theseus, a man he considers 'a wanker' (73). Therefore, both Strophe and Hippolytus suggest that her mother is inevitably attracted by power, even when power is embodied by men who, like the King and the Prince, lack any quality.

<sup>78</sup> S. Kane, interview with Nils Tabert. In G. Saunders. *Op. Cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>79</sup> S. Kane. In A. Sierz. *Op. Cit.*, p. 110.

Politically powerful men can provide Phaedra with an important social position, which, unlike Seneca's Phaedra, is something she does not have by birthright. At the end of the scene, Hippolytus also states that another possible reason for her passion is her lack of self-esteem. In Seneca's play, Phaedra kneels down in front of Hippolytus and offers to be his slave. Yet, she reminds him that she belongs to a 'royal stock' and implies that Hippolytus should feel honoured by her love. Oppositely, Kane's Phaedra does not care for her dignity and pride. Her love resembles a disease that only Hippolytus can treat. Phaedra's passion is a feeling unrelated to the object of its veneration, as it is neither discouraged nor weakened by Hippolytus' baseness. Indeed, had Phaedra had respect for herself, she would have never exposed herself to Hippolytus' gratuitous sadism. On the other hand, the Prince himself portrays his way of life honestly. In particular, he stresses his hate of people, his use of sex as a means to spend time and his disgust for the hypocrisy and the fanaticism that surround the Royal Family:

HIPPOLYTUS: Everyone wants a royal cock, I should know. ...

PHAEDRA: You only ever talk to me about sex.

HIPPOLYTUS: It's my main interest.

PHAEDRA: I thought you hated it.

HIPPOLYTUS: I hate people. ...

PHAEDRA: Have you ever thought about having sex with me?

HIPPOLYTUS: I think about having sex with everyone. ...

PHAEDRA: Would you enjoy it?

HIPPOLYTUS: No. I never do. ...

HIPPOLYTUS: Some people do, I suppose. Enjoy that stuff. Have a life.

PHAEDRA: You've got a life.

HIPPOLYTUS: No. Filling up time. Waiting.

PHAEDRA: For what?

HIPPOLYTUS: Don't know. Something to happen. (70 -75)

According to Kane, Seneca's Hippolytus is 'deeply unattractive' because, although 'he is physically beautiful, he's chaste, a puritan, a hater of mankind'.<sup>80</sup> She repurposes Puritanism not as a lifestyle, but as an attitude people have. In this sense, whereas Seneca's Hippolytus found his manicheist vision of life on the principle of purity, her Hippolytus is as much an extremist in his pursuit of honesty at any cost and in his radical cynicism.

<sup>80</sup> S. Kane. In H. Stephenson and N. Langridge. Op. Cit., p. 132.

The only moment in which Kane's antihero seems to be vulnerable, notwithstanding his strong rejection of any emotion, is when Phaedra mentions his ex-girlfriend. The end of his affair with this woman represents another likely cause of Hippolytus' self-hatred, disguised as indifference. In addition, he cruelly tortures her by means of words and gestures that deprive her feelings of any value:

HIPPOLYTUS: ... If we fuck we'll never talk again.

PHAEDRA: I'm not like that.

HIPPOLYTUS: I am. ...

PHAEDRA: Would you like your present now?

HIPPOLYTUS (looks at her. Then turns back to the TV. Silence)  
(75 – 76)

Phaedra gives Hippolytus a present in the form of a fellatio that she performs on him, while he goes on watching TV and eating sweets with the utmost indifference. When she begins to move her head away, he holds it down and ejaculates in her mouth. Eventually, he releases her head; at first Phaedra looks at the screen, then, after a long silence, she starts crying. The sex scene, probably the play's bleakest moment, emphasizes Hippolytus' role as the executioner and Phaedra's one as the victim. Although Phaedra voluntarily begins the 'seduction scene', as Wertenbaker's *Philomele* does, her actions depict an idea of love as sacrifice, total devotion to a person who does not reciprocate that devoutness in any way. Indeed, Hippolytus annihilates her shy activism through both psychological subjugation and physical supremacy. Hippolytus' coercive gesture resembles an attempt to suffocate Phaedra and suggests he holds the reins of her life. Furthermore, while Seneca's Phaedra reacts immediately to Hippolytus' rejection and, with the Nurse's help, engineers her revenge plan, Kane's Phaedra's only response is a bitter cry. Her frailty and helplessness portray a 'femininity' paradoxically dependent on a cynical and indifferent 'masculinity'. When this 'masculinity' shows itself in all its deterioration, Phaedra's 'femininity' does nothing but appearing even weaker and more paralysed.

The tense exchange between the two contributes to a better delineation of their personality. Hippolytus' permanent sense of humour induces Kane to describe her play as 'my comedy'. She finds the Prince disgusting, but she

also thinks that he has a kind of bleak irony which is 'life-saving'. She appreciates his straightforwardness, for 'he's not pretending to be something that he's not. He's completely open about the fact that he's sexually corrupt.'<sup>81</sup> Though deeply rough, Hippolytus might appear more sympathetic and reliable than Phaedra. While Phaedra insists on the presumed romanticism of her love and is often ridiculous with her childish naivety, Hippolytus does not indulge in any deception. In particular, when he states that Phaedra's infatuation 'is not about him' nor 'ever was', Hippolytus exposes the degeneration of a society where people idolize celebrities and are willing to do anything to make their acquaintance. Indeed, Phaedra herself loves an idealized image of Hippolytus that does not match what she sees and perceives. The 'amorous catastrophe' she lives is, in Barthes' terms, a 'panic situation' without remainder or return.<sup>82</sup> Borrowing Kane's words concerning her play *Cleansed*, such experience is 'a loss of self. ... it's actually a kind of madness.'<sup>83</sup> Despite Phaedra's tears, Hippolytus does not avoid inflicting further humiliation:

HIPPOLYTUS: There. Mystery over. (Silence) ...  
 PHAEDRA: I've never been unfaithful before.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: That much was obvious. ...  
 PHAEDRA: I want this to happen again.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: No you don't. ...  
 PHAEDRA: You're just like your father.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: That's what your daughter said.  
 (A beat, then Phaedra slaps him around the face as hard as she can)  
 HIPPOLYTUS: She's less passionate but more practiced. I go for  
 technique every time. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: It's dead now. Face it. Can't happen again. ...  
 PHAEDRA: You can't stop me loving you.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: Can. ... (Silence) Do I get my present now?  
 PHAEDRA: (opens her mouth but is momentarily lost for words. Then)  
 You're a heartless bastard.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: Exactly. (76 – 79)

<sup>81</sup> S. Kane, interview with N. Talbert. In G. Saunders. Op. Cit., pp. 78 – 79.

<sup>82</sup> See Roland Barthes. *A Lover's Discourse – Fragments*. Transl. by Richard Howard. London : Penguin Group, 1990, pp. 48 – 49.

<sup>83</sup> S. Kane. In Ken Urban. Op. Cit., pp. 42 – 43.

By slapping Hippolytus, Phaedra unsuccessfully tries to oppose his physical and psychological despotism. Yet, the strength of her sudden, violent reaction is increasingly reduced by her subsequent speechlessness and hesitation, as the stage directions remark. Phaedra's difficulty in articulating a strong answer testifies to her submission to Hippolytus on a physical and verbal level. Yet, this might also be a stylistic choice employed by Kane on purpose: privileging short and sharp cues, Kane highlights the bleakness of the situation. At the same time, the play's precise economy, in which the weight of the words is carefully balanced by their absence, might resemble Beckett's love for silence.<sup>84</sup> The pauses that intersect the dialogue enclose the play in a significant poetic 'wrapper' and, as David Tushingham writes, create 'silences to remember'.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, Phaedra's silence expresses what seems to be too dreadful or painful to be formulated: for instance, the dreariness of sex or the agony in which human relationships lie. Admitting that he had sex with Strophe and revealing that Theseus committed incest too, Hippolytus enhances the debasement of the situation. Furthermore, he finally reveals he has got gonorrhoea and 'kindly' suggests that Phaedra should see a doctor. This disquieting image of spiritual and physical corruption closes the scene and threatens to get spread widely and quickly.

### III.2: The 'psychological rape'.

The fifth and the sixth scenes set the stage for two of the play's central issues, those related to rape and to religion. Strophe enters the Prince's room and advises him to hide, as the mob outside is ready to lynch him. She explains that Phaedra is accusing him of rape, but at first does not reveal that her mother has already committed suicide. This expedient allows the tension to increase, as the audience itself is not sure whether Phaedra is still alive or not. It also makes a great difference to Hippolytus's reaction, for, if he is not much bothered by the accusation of rape, he will be deeply touched by the

<sup>84</sup> Samuel Beckett, *German Letter to Axel Kaun*. In C. Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993, p. 57: 'Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, ... torn by enormous pauses, ... so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?'

<sup>85</sup> David Tushingham, Review for *Time Out*, 22 May 1996. *Theatre Record*. Vol. 16, no. 1, Is. 11.

news of her death. Strophe cannot believe Hippolytus to be a rapist and wants to know whether he raped her mother or not:

STROPHE: My mother's accusing you of rape.  
HIPPOLYTUS: She is? How exciting. ...  
STROPHE: Did you rape her?  
HIPPOLYTUS: I don't know. What does that mean?  
STROPHE: Did you have sex with her?  
HIPPOLYTUS: Ah. Got you. Does it matter? ...  
STROPHE: Yes.  
HIPPOLYTUS: Why?  
STROPHE: *Why?* ...  
STROPHE: She's my mother. ...  
HIPPOLYTUS: Because she's your mother or because of what people  
will say?  
STROPHE: Because she's my mother. (81 – 82)

The reiteration of the same words creates a sort of confusion around the meaning of the term 'rape' and remarks the importance of the term 'mother' to Strophe, who will repeat it six times. Kane explains that in her play there is also 'something about the inadequacy of language to express emotion that interested me. ... what Hippolytus does to Phaedra is not rape – but the English language doesn't contain the words to describe the emotional decimation he inflicts. 'Rape' is the best word Phaedra can find for it, the most violent and potent, so that's the word she uses.'<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, as Dale Spender points out, 'rape' is a word that names both the female and the male experience of an event, without considering the huge discrepancy between being a rapist or a victim of rape. She asserts:

What is needed is a name that is not neutral, that does not rationalize the ugly facts. What is required is a name which symbolizes the horror and awfulness of rape and which directs the negative meanings to males. ... Women need a word which renames male violence and misogyny and which asserts their blameless nature, a word which places the responsibility for rape where it belongs ...<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> S. Kane. In Stephenson and Langridge. *Op. Cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>87</sup> Dale Spender. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1980 (second edition, 1981), p. 180.



A similar need to invent a new word, a word able to describe the emotional violence endured by Phaedra, is felt by Kane while working on her play. Indeed, while in Euripides and in Seneca Hippolytus' 'fault' is to reject Phaedra's love, in Kane's play he actually commits a 'crime', although it is not easy to label it. It is certainly true that Phaedra is willing to have 'sexual contact' with him, as Strophe tries to verify. Yet, it is also undeniable that Hippolytus' behaviour inflicts an irreparable wound on her psychological integrity, made worse by the discovery of Strophe's and Theseus' incest. The key difference from the classical versions of the play lies in the motivation that leads Kane's Phaedra to suicide: in the 'shame culture' depicted by Euripides, she wants to protect her honour at any cost. In Seneca, Phaedra kills herself only after knowing of Hippolytus' tragic death, feeling pain and remorse for having slandered him. Here, she chooses to die both because Hippolytus does not reciprocate her love and because she cannot face the unmatched baseness that undoes her whole family. Seneca's Phaedra is the heroine who shows both more bravery and affection for Hippolytus. On the one hand, she herself speaks to Theseus and slanders Hippolytus, without the mediation of the gods. On the other, in despair for Hippolytus' tragic death, Phaedra does not hesitate to reveal her deceit and to kill herself in front of Theseus. Kane's Phaedra is therefore more similar to Euripides' heroine, since 'shame' plays an important part in her decision to commit suicide. However, Phaedra neither slanders Hippolytus nor revenges herself on him; rather, her death seems another awful, masochistic way to punish herself and to run away from her incestuous family. Furthermore, while in the Latin play Phaedra commits suicide on the stage, in *Phaedra's Love* the audience does not see her extreme gesture. Strangely for a playwright who usually dares to put everything centre stage, Kane decides to conceal Phaedra's intimate moment of utmost violence to herself. As in Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* and in Lochhead's *Medea*, the more crucial and bloody moments are narrated but not shown to the audience. A 'visual reserve' still surrounds issues as rape, murder or suicide, issues that, however, gain a strong haunting quality by being concealed from the spectators. The hidden scene of the Queen's death works as the 'visual' equivalent of the use of a 'pregnant

silence': by stripping off the redundant and the unspeakable, Kane amplifies and strengthens the potential of both words and images.

The dialogue makes it clear that Strophe also has suffered from Hippolytus' behaviour and underlines once again Strophe's almost morbid attachment to the family's reputation. The tension between the two is released as soon as Strophe reveals that Phaedra is dead; actually, Hippolytus' attitude becomes conciliatory for the first time:

STROPHE: If you did it I'll help them.  
HIPPOLYTUS: Of course. Not my sister after all. One of my victims.  
STROPHE: If you didn't I'll stand by you. ...  
HIPPOLYTUS: Why?  
STROPHE: Sake of the family. ...  
STROPHE: She's dead you fucking bastard.  
HIPPOLYTUS: Don't be stupid.  
STROPHE: Yes. What did you do to her, what did you fucking do?  
(82 – 84)

The value of the blood bond and the issue regarding a 'natural' behaviour or the loyalty 'due' to one's relatives again play a central part. Hippolytus equates Strophe's loyalty to the press' or the mob's hysteria about the Royal Family, while Strophe is uncertain whether to take sides with him or with the crowd. As soon as Strophe starts beating him, the Prince holds her arms; when she then begins crying and wailing 'uncontrollably', his hold turns into an embrace. This is probably the most endearing moment of the play, as Strophe and Hippolytus behave as 'brother' and 'sister' for the first time, tenderly comforting and supporting each other. Paradoxically, Phaedra's death infuses new life into Strophe and Hippolytus; they become closer over Phaedra's body, emphasizing again her role of loving mother. Strophe, who in the third scene appeared as cynical and cold as Hippolytus, turns 'female' here and cries as her mother did. Likewise, Hippolytus loses some of his 'masculinity' and, though physically stronger than Strophe, behaves in a more 'female' way in this occasion. Furthermore, Hippolytus is ready to take upon himself the responsibility for what happened, as the insistence on the verb 'to blame' highlights:

STROPHE: Never even told her I loved her.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: She knew. ...  
 STROPHE: You told her about us.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: Then blame me. ...  
 STROPHE: You –  
 HIPPOLYTUS: Me. Blame me. (A long silence. They hold each other)  
 STROPHE: She loved you.  
 HIPPOLYTUS: (looks at her) Did she?  
 STROPHE: Tell me you didn't rape her. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: She says I did and she's dead. Believe her. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: This is her present to me. ...  
 STROPHE: Deny it. There's a riot. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: Are you insane? She died doing this for me. I'm doomed.  
 (84 – 85)

At first, Hippolytus seems incredulous about Phaedra's feelings and asks Strophe for confirmation. He did not expect Phaedra's suicide, since he reputed her love simply as a superficial attraction towards his regality. Then he welcomes her legacy to him, although this unique 'present' is definitely going to deprive him of his power. He considers himself privileged, because the inanity on which his existence is founded has now turned into a chance to live. The label 'theatre of extremes' can be applied to Hippolytus' reaction as well, since he reputes a blessing of what other people would probably see as an infamous slander. In his extreme search for 'something to happen', the Prince reverses the usual meaning of words and gestures and is deeply thankful to his stepmother for this opportunity. In Euripides' and Seneca's plays Phaedra is the only character who proclaims herself 'doomed', since she faces the same unhappy destiny that her mother Pasifae and her sister Ariadne suffered. Here both Phaedra and Hippolytus are positive to face an inexorable fate and do not try to modify the course of the events. Obeying the dictates of his 'extreme purity', Hippolytus tells Strophe that he did not rape Phaedra, but he is nonetheless determined to give himself in charge to the police.

In a way, Phaedra's suicide redeems that part of her personality that has previously been perceived as frivolity. Her will towards self-destruction draws her closer to Hippolytus, as she herself proves to be ready to die for an absolute. In Phaedra's case, this absolute is an ideal of 'love' that, unable to move its object, Hippolytus, in life, paradoxically affects it in death.

Certainly Hippolytus' harshness annihilates Phaedra's frail personality to such an extent that she kills herself. However, her suicide can also be seen as her only assertion of resoluteness: Phaedra can neither accept Hippolytus' brutality nor tolerate that he sees her feeling as pointless and trifling. Therefore, she willingly becomes a 'martyr' in the oldest sense of the term, choosing to die in order to remain faithful to the love she feels. As in Euripides' play, suicide is the only possible way to preserve what is dearest to Phaedra: 'honour' in the Greek tragedy, 'love' in Kane's work. One of the last lines she pronounces before leaving Hippolytus reads as 'You can't stop me loving you' (79). Though tyrannical in her relationship with her, Hippolytus' power is finite. Disquietingly, Phaedra's usually very limited range of action mostly exercises itself in death. Had she decided to live, her miserable situation and Hippolytus' harshness would have soon killed her feeling. Her sacrifice infuses life into Hippolytus too, for it awakens in him a desire to feel something, though such desire takes shape only in death. It has been argued that in *Phaedra's Love* the female characters 'are the most underdeveloped and receive the least emphasis', but Kane has always disputed this assertion.<sup>88</sup> She says that 'Phaedra is the first person to become active in the play', since her death delivers Hippolytus from his apathy and also causes the collapse of the monarchy.<sup>89</sup> However, the comparison between the ancient and the modern play proves that Seneca's Phaedra is much more active and daring than Kane's heroine. Ironically, Kane's anachronistic portrait of a passive and sacrificial woman is set in the contemporary world and shows analogies with real people. Her depiction of Hippolytus and Phaedra comes from the persuasion that our society is exclusively based on violence. This dichotomised society sees the clash between 'male gendered' people, who are aggressive and politically powerful, and 'female gendered' people who are usually psychologically weak and self-injurer. Therefore, rather than a new, independent character who redeems the image of Phaedra inherited from the past, Kane's Phaedra is the symbol of a 'female', ill feeling that, inserted in an unfavourable habitat,

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<sup>88</sup> See H. Stephenson and N. Langridge. *Op. Cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

runs toward self-destruction. Rather than a revisionist play, *Phaedra's Love* bitterly verifies that the past's *status quo* has not changed for the better. On the contrary, gender relationships seem to be even worse than in Seneca's time: Kane's Phaedra, illogically attracted by a diseased masculinity, shows nothing better than a feeble and subdued 'femininity'.

#### IV: The question of 'faith'.

Although the sixth scene is explicitly set in a prison cell, such a location does not differ much from that of the other scenes. In her account of Infernal Bridegroom Productions' staging of *Phaedra's Love*, Elizabeth Klett describes the set as divided into four rooms, all grey and so small that there was almost no space for movement in them.<sup>90</sup> The claustrophobic rooms of the Royal Palace, and Hippolytus' in particular, enhance the sense of either intimacy or entrapment that the audience too shares. Indeed, it is possible to state that all the rooms seen so far are similar to a prison cell, since the people who live in them experience an utter feeling of oppression, boredom and loss. The Priest visits Hippolytus in his cell and, after the Doctor, he is the second 'representative' of the society living outside the Royal Palace. Through the Priest's figure, the playwright widens her criticism of a society that considers a question as personal and crucial as religion on a level with a practical commodity. Though imprisoned and bound to die, Hippolytus proves to have lost neither his irony nor his straightforwardness. After revealing he had always suspected that 'the world didn't smell of fresh paint and flowers', he rejects the Priest's offer of help and refuses to 'confess' anything. While the Priest insists on Hippolytus' social responsibility, the Prince expresses his opinion about religion:

PRIEST: Royalty is chosen. Because you are more privileged than most  
you are also more culpable. God –

HIPPOLYTUS: There is no God. There is. No God.

PRIEST: Perhaps you'll find there is. And what will you do then? ...

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<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Klett, *Phaedra's Love*, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, May 2003, p. 337. Klett refers to the performance given at The Axiom Theatre, Houston, on 11 October 2002.

HIPPOLYTUS: What do you suggest, a last-minute conversion just in case?  
 ... If there is a God, I'd like to look him in the face knowing  
 I'd die as I'd lived. In conscious sin. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: I know what I am. And always will be. But you. You sin  
 knowing you'll confess. Then you're forgiven. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: ... I killed a woman and I will be punished for it by  
 hypocrites who I shall take down with me. ...  
 PRIEST: There is a kind of purity in you. ...  
 HIPPOLYTUS: ... Free will is what distinguishes us from the animals. (He  
 undoes his trousers. ) And I have no intention of behaving  
 like a fucking animal.  
 PRIEST (performs oral sex on Hippolytus)  
 HIPPOLYTUS: Leave that to you. (86 -- 91)

The logic of Hippolytus's reasoning is smooth. He points at the fundamental difference between 'to confess' and 'to admit': the former refers to the religious sacrament and involves men's repentance, whereas the latter does not imply any contrition or remorse. The joy he feels has nothing to do with Phaedra's death, as he makes clear stating that his stepmother was 'human', that is fragile and vulnerable. His joy comes rather from 'within', from the perception that he has now the chance to live and die for an absolute, 'truth' in his case. His coherent philosophy leads him to deny God's existence and consequently to state that he cannot sin against a God he does not believe in. Furthermore, he emphasizes the Priest's hypocrisy by showing the absurdity of a 'last-minute conversion' and the paradox of being 'honest men, honestly sinning' (91). While the Prince admits that he has already committed the worst sin of all, that of 'intellectual pride', he also warns the Priest not to mock God himself, who, being omniscient, would certainly detect an unfelt repentance. By equating royalty to a sort of divine condition on earth, the Priest underlines Hippolytus' social function as a 'moral model' that should preserve the country's stability and respectability. In addition to the fact that such a role is obviously at odds with the Prince's behaviour, Hippolytus suspects that the Priest worries more about the end of the Royal Family than about Hippolytus' damnation. Actually, the downfall of a Prince, worshipped as 'God on earth' (91), and of his corrupted and debased relatives, can weaken the power of another traditionally untouchable institution as the Christian Church. The point Hippolytus makes about the question of faith is

one that Kane agrees with: 'If you're not sure God exists you can cover your arse, living your life carefully just in case ... or you can live your life as you want to live it. If there is a God who can't accept the honesty of that, then tough.'<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, she explains in an interview that once a friend told her: 'You've got your values wrong. You take honesty as an absolute. And it isn't. Life is an absolute. And within that you accept that there is dishonesty.'<sup>92</sup> Actually, Hippolytus does not consider life as an absolute and is therefore ready to resign it, in order not to betray his real absolute, truth. As in his exchange with Phaedra, Hippolytus' uncompromising honesty might result more acceptable and coherent than the other characters' pale conformism, and his uncommon 'purity' seduces the Priest as it did with his stepmother. Hippolytus' power of attraction affects all the characters of the play, whether 'male' or 'female'. Strangely, the more Hippolytus humiliates them, the more they prostrate themselves, in a constantly unsuccessful attempt to please him. While in the fourth scene Phaedra undoes Hippolytus' trousers, here the Prince himself does it. He leads the second 'seduction scene' of the play, positive that even in this case his 'partner' will not object to offer him a sexual performance. The Priest then performs oral sex spontaneously, subjugated by Hippolytus' perverse charm both physically and psychologically, exactly as Phaedra was. The second fellatio of the play, maybe even bleaker than the first the audience saw, resoundingly closes the scene with the stark juxtaposition between 'free will' and 'bestiality'.

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<sup>91</sup> S. Kane. In Aleks Sierz. *Op. Cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

## V: The outburst of the plague.

If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation, urging forward the exteriorisation of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or a nation, becomes localised.  
(Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and the Plague*)<sup>93</sup>

The last two scenes of *Phaedra's Love* see a shift in Kane's stylistic choice. While previously a minimal and very accurate language conveys the play's gloominess, from now on this is transmitted and even amplified through the use of powerful, visual images. Such a device brings the play nearer to others Kane wrote, such as *Blasted* or *Cleansed*, where the iconic component is stronger and more effective than the verbal one. It also raises problems concerning the practical realization of Kane's theatre, as very often it is literally impossible to carry out her stage directions, with the result that at times the plays lose their credibility and efficacy.<sup>94</sup> As she did in *Blasted*, at this point Kane literally 'plants a bomb' and blows the whole plot up; she compares this technique to 'what happens in war -- suddenly, violently, without any warning, people's lives are completely ripped to pieces.'<sup>95</sup> Though in *Blasted* the outburst of war is not just metaphorical, also Phaedra's death can be seen as the play's catastrophe, in the deepest sense of a 'total reversal' of the events. Furthermore, Phaedra and Hippolytus might be reputed as 'cruel' according to Artaud's definition of 'cruelty' as 'strictness, diligence, unrelenting decisiveness, irreversible and absolute determination.'<sup>96</sup> As Kane says, they pursue their absolute honestly, to the point that they are ready to die for it. In particular, Hippolytus is what Artaud calls 'the executioner-tormentor', someone who practises cruelty and is at the same time resolved to endure it when the time comes.<sup>97</sup>

The only words pronounced in the seventh scene are Theseus' ones: 'I will

<sup>93</sup> Antonin Artaud. *The Theatre and its Double*. Transl. by V. Corti. London: John Calder, 1970 (1977), p. 21.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, James Macdonald, who directed *Blasted* in 1995, asserted the impossibility to stage some parts of the play.

<sup>95</sup> S. Kane. In A. Sierz. *Op. Cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>96</sup> A. Artaud. *Letters of Cruelty*. In A. Artaud. *Op. Cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.



kill him', obviously addressed to his son Hippolytus. In the classical versions of the play, the King had been far from home for a long time, abducting Proserpine from Hades. His return from the 'real' hell is followed, both in Seneca and in Kane, by the entry into another infernal place, a domestic hell that, though metaphorical, is certainly not better than the previous one. Theseus approaches the funeral pyre on which Phaedra's corpse lies, he lifts the cover and looks at her face. Then he kneels by her body, frantically tearing at his clothes, his skin, his hair, until he is exhausted. However, unlike what the female characters did, Theseus does not shed a single tear, accordingly to his role of a strongly 'male' king and warrior. His speechless but raging reaction may result unexpected, since he has always been a careless and unfaithful husband. Like Strophe and Hippolytus, Theseus realises Phaedra's importance only after her death. Yet, his fury may also be the consequence of his 'male' antagonism towards Hippolytus, who illegally abused his wife. Phaedra's body, still and defenceless, is therefore the battlefield on which father and son fight to confirm their sexual superiority. Finally, Theseus lights the pyre and 'Phaedra goes up in flames', another symbolic evidence of his power over her. Elizabeth Klett notes that Phaedra's pyre is 'spectacularly burned' centre stage, and that the final confrontation among the Royal Family's members and the mob takes place in front of her tomb.<sup>98</sup> Such a device stresses the importance of Phaedra's decision, since her pyre becomes a sort of sacrificial altar at whose foot her relatives meet death and redeem the shallowness of their lives.

In the final scene many people stand outside the Royal Palace, around a fire; among them there are Theseus and Strophe, disguised in order not to be recognised. The comments the mob makes emphasize the inanity that surrounds this gathering, but above all the crowd's thirst for blood and violence:

THESEUS: Come far?  
MAN 1: Newcastle.

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<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Klett, *Op. Cit.* Klett explains that the walls of the Palace are turned around and create a wall that stands on both sides of Phaedra's tomb.

WOMAN 1: Brought the kids.  
 CHILD: And a picnic.  
 MAN 1: String him up, they should.  
 WOMAN 2: The bastard. ...  
 WOMAN 1: Parasites.  
 MAN 2: We pay the raping bastard. ...  
 THESEUS: Say they've rid themselves of the corrupting element. But  
                     the monarchy remains intact. ...  
 WOMAN 1: He must die. ...  
 MAN 1: For our sake.  
 MAN 2: And hers. (92 – 94)

Furthermore, Man 2 says that Phaedra 'was the only one had anything going for her'. His words highlight the similarity between the Queen's death and Princess Diana's one. Kane herself said, in an interview six months after Diana's car accident, that 'it would be a really good time for a production [*Phaedra's Love*] in Britain.'<sup>99</sup> Indeed, just as many people thought that Diana was the best member of the Royal Family and raised her to the status of a contemporary icon, so the play's mob begins to idolize Phaedra's presumed purity and to abuse the other Royalists. The common element is the never-ending, sclerotic search for heroes and enemies upon which common people lighten their own frustration and strain. The sadistic mob, ready to enjoy the cruel show of Hippolytus' death, is but a reproduction of the 'real' audience in the theatre. The double frame engineered by Kane prompts the spectators to critically think about their own need of a violent ritual, a necessity that is not only voyeuristic. Having given birth to theatre itself in the past, this ritual loosens the audience's darkest fears and pulsations through the killing of a scapegoat, as the Bacchae do in Wertenbaker's play. The kinship between the 'fictional' and the 'real' audience is also confirmed by what Spencer notes: 'People we have previously taken to be members of the audience transform themselves into a vindictive mob, howling for vengeance.'<sup>100</sup>

As the Doctor and the Priest did previously, Theseus sides with the monarchy and considers it as an untouchable institution. He advocates its purification from 'the corrupting element' that jeopardizes its future and does

<sup>99</sup> G. Saunders. Op. Cit., p.75.

<sup>100</sup> Charles Spencer. Review for *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 May 1996. *Theatre Record*. Vol. 16, no. 1, Issue 11, p. 652–53.

not seem to be bothered by his own 'corrupted' behaviour. As Hippolytus is taken past, his martyrdom begins: indeed, the mob starts screaming insults towards him and hurling rocks. Yet, the young Prince does not accept a passive role in the dramatic ceremony that stages his death: after a while, he breaks free from the Policemen who hold him and hurls himself into the crowd; by chance, he falls into Theseus' arms and immediately recognizes him. The King kisses his son after some hesitation, then pushes him into the mob. It is at this point that 'the visual horror' usually prevailing in Kane's theatre reaches its full potential: Man 1 strangles Hippolytus with a tie, while some Women kick him relentlessly. Touched by the scene, Strophe shouts at them not to kill him and is immediately blamed by Theseus for 'defending a rapist'. She 'deserves' her own punishment too, therefore the King rapes her to the crowd's great delight and cuts her throat.<sup>101</sup> Man 1 pulls down Hippolytus' trousers and Woman 2 cuts off his genitals. At first, they are thrown onto the fire, while some children both cheer and escape disgusted, then to a dog that eats them. Theseus proceeds with the macabre ritual, as to cleanse the whole of his son's filth: he cuts Hippolytus from groin to chest, tears out his bowels and throws them onto the fire. The people go on kicking the Prince, stoning him and spitting on him; the Policemen themselves decide to leave his body on the street, so that it can rot quickly. 'With horror', Theseus recognizes his stepdaughter only when Hippolytus pronounces her name. The King seats himself beside Strophe's body and mourns over the bloody events:

THESEUS: Hippolytus.

Son.

I never liked you. (To Strophe)

I'm sorry.

Didn't know it was you.

God forgive me I didn't know.

If I'd known it was you I'd never have – (To Hippolytus)

You hear me, I didn't know. (96)

<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, also the crowd of Bacchae in *The Love of the Nightingale* laughs during the rape scene performed in Philomele's show. Therefore, both Kane and Wertebaker highlight the audience's inadequate reaction to the issue of sexual violence.

Whereas Hippolytus' behaviour towards Phaedra can be considered a 'psychological violation', Theseus' violence towards Strophe is dreadfully physical. As in other plays by Kane, deranged relationships between men and women give life to a conception of sex as a torture instrument; the violence that permeates people's lives on both a personal and a political level traumatically affects love and sexuality too. As he did burning Phaedra's corpse, Theseus disposes of another female body as he likes. He does not hesitate to exercise brutal violence against Strophe and to kill her as soon as the 'conquest' of her body has taken place. Not only does this episode show the King's hypocrisy, since he behaves exactly as Hippolytus, much despised, did. Also, the scene shows onstage what was 'only' a slander in both Euripides' and Seneca's play: the rape of a woman. While in Greek mythology the horror of women's violation is usually 'softened' by the god's metamorphosis into an animal or a natural element, here it is dreadfully embodied in Theseus' punishment of Strophe.<sup>102</sup> The untenable justification Theseus provides does not give him enough strength to outlive his children; he cuts his own throat too and bleeds to death. The three, racked bodies lie completely still, looking dead already. Yet Hippolytus opens his eyes eventually and, looking at the sky, pronounces the play's last words:

HIPPOLYTUS: Vultures. (He manages a smile)  
 If there could have been more moments like this.  
 (He dies.) (A vulture descends and begins to eat his body.) (97)

The last scene is certainly the one in which Kane's attempt to eliminate any distance between the audience and the play's characters reaches its top. Sarah Hemming insists on the ending's brutality, writing that '... her visceral drama ends in a bloodbath involving rape and castration, with bleeding body parts being chucked over the audience's heads'<sup>103</sup> While in Seneca Hippolytus' death is narrated in details by the Messenger, Kane chooses to show it fully and aims 'to do the violence as realistically as possible.'<sup>104</sup> She recounts that

<sup>102</sup> For instance, Zeus raped Leda, Helen's mother, assuming the shape of a swan.

<sup>103</sup> Sarah Hemming. Review for *The Financial Times*, 23 May 1996. *Theatre Record*. Vol. 16, no. 1, Issue 11, p. 653.

<sup>104</sup> S. Kane. In G. Saunders. Op. Cit., p. 80.

the first rehearsal of the final scene was 'a trauma' for her and the actors, one of whom decided to leave the theatre. Yet she is positive that none of them felt the violence unjustified, but 'only' 'completely unpleasant'. Kane believes that, despite the extreme difficulty of staging the scene, spectators are 'willing to believe something is happening if you give them the slightest suggestion that it is.'<sup>105</sup> Such opinion could be easily questioned though, since many reviewers report that the castration scene, for instance, provoked laughter in many people. The risk is to cause an audience's response opposite to the one aimed at by the playwright and the director. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the expedient of having some actors seated among the audience enhances the sense of complicity in the catastrophe and of a shared responsibility for the terrible ending. In addition, Kane's final touch adds a possible psychological explanation to Hippolytus' self-hatred, for it becomes clear that he is the neglected son of a man who has no scruples and is even ruder than he. Such battered relationship provides the ideal backdrop to the never-ending rivalry between the two men, who both use women as tools to prove their sexual power and to assert their unconcern with any moral law.

As Howard Barker advocates, Kane's ending overwhelms 'the barriers of tolerance' and shows the spectators an unrivalled escalation of brutality. Yet, she firmly points out that her plays are not 'a stage version of Tarantino' and that she has no intention of glamorizing violence, as others do.<sup>106</sup> Welcoming Barker's ideas about theatre, Kane seems to require her audience both a 'suspension of disbelief' and 'a suspension of morality'.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, she places her characters inside a landscape of terror that, though usual in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, may result absolutely indigestible to a contemporary audience. Hippolytus' martyrdom is rooted in the most ancient conception of theatre, as it gains the value of a collective ritual of huge purport. Tracing back to the original meaning of the word 'tragedy', literally 'the song of the he-goat', the Prince turns into the scapegoat upon which the mob relieves

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> See A. Sierz. *Op. Cit.*, p. 105. Kane says that her plays are about 'hope and love' and that they do not cynically flirt with violence.

<sup>107</sup> H. Barker. *Op. Cit.*, p. 90.

primordial and repressed pulsations. At first, the events regarding Phaedra and her stepson seem exclusively private, as they involve the most intimate sphere of the feelings between two people. Then, despite the Chorus' absence, the play turns public and relates both the story of a dysfunctional family and of a community nourished by violence. Could the procession of Hippolytus' passion be staged outside the theatre, for instance on a street crowded with people, we would watch a sacred performance reminiscent of Middle Ages' time, a bloody ceremony that is 'dramatic' in the deepest sense, as its power relies upon action and motion rather than upon verbal tools.

The most vivid element of the last scene concerns Hippolytus' personal choice though, since his martyrdom underlines his 'intellectual integrity' once again. As the character of Ian in *Blasted*, Hippolytus has a sort of Christ-like quality that reaches its full potential at the end. Had he denied the rape, as the Priest advised him to do, Hippolytus could have saved himself and kept his political power and social privileges. Rather than something he suffers from, the mob's lynching is a death that 'he freely accepts', tracing in it the possibility of an ultimate physical and spiritual redemption. In a way, the Prince has been a 'preacher' for the whole length of the play and is now ready to die for his ideal. The last scene puts him through an experience not far from the Christian ethics, for it is made of love, that of Phaedra for him, and of sacrifice. Paradoxically, 'a moment like this' is uplifting and gives Hippolytus a fully tragic quality, since he undergoes a 'bloody catharsis' that frees him from a life that was merely 'filling up time'. As in Brecht's *Baal*, the striking image of the vultures that eat Hippolytus' body closes the play:

Baal watches the vultures in the star-shot sky  
 Hovering patiently to see when Baal will die.  
 Sometimes Baal shams dead. The vultures swoop.  
 Baal, without a word, will dine on vulture soup.<sup>108</sup>

The rapacious birds remind the audience that man is nothing but a body bound to rot, a perishable corpse that lies in a dreadful 'pit of darkness'.

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<sup>108</sup> B. Brecht. Op. Cit., p. 3.

## CHAPTER 3:

### *Medea* by Liz Lochhead.

#### I: The reasons for a revision.

As we said previously, Adrienne Rich describes the female writers who revise myth as “the dead” who awaken. Sleepwalkers who suddenly come to, these writers regain consciousness of the ideological assumptions in which they are imprisoned in order to free themselves from them.<sup>109</sup> Yet this sort of revisionism does not apply to Euripides’ *Medea*, as Liz Lochhead herself explains in her foreword: ‘I read too some of what was written about Euripides. How could that feminist critic find him misogynist? Had she been reading the same play?’<sup>110</sup> As these words and the title itself suggest, Lochhead’s play *Medea – After Euripides* is an adaptation rather than a revision of Euripides’ tragedy. Since Lochhead was asked to write it by Graham McLaren, the artistic director of Theatre Babel, an analysis of both her text and of the company’s staging is vital to a true understanding of the motivation behind this production.<sup>111</sup> When McLaren first approached her with the *Grecians 2000* project, Lochhead had just finished writing her comedy *Perfect Days* and was reluctant to shift from a lightweight and very modern topic to ancient tragedy’s solemnity. She did not know ancient Greek and therefore had to read many translations of the play, to engage with a language that ‘holds loads of things’ and to adapt rather than translate it, highlighting the elements that most mattered to her.<sup>112</sup> Although both McLaren and Lochhead, who afterwards realized a second project based upon Greek tragedy, agree that their taste for classical drama is the result of artistic motivation, they appreciate the fact that these ‘big plays’ work and

<sup>109</sup> See A. Rich. *When We Dead Awaken*. Op. Cit.

<sup>110</sup> Liz Lochhead. *Medea – After Euripides*. London: Nick Hern Books (limited), 2000, Foreword. All the quotations come from this edition, whose page I indicate in brackets. Lochhead probably refers to Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz’s *Anxiety Veiled – Euripides and the Traffic in Women*, but she does not specify the name of ‘that feminist critic’.

<sup>111</sup> The performance I analyse in this essay is the one given at The Old Fruitmarket in Glasgow, on 17 March 2000.

<sup>112</sup> See Lesley McDowell. *Liz Lochhead: Hooked on Classics*. *The Independent*, 5 July 2003.

grip people even now.<sup>113</sup> They believe that the brevity and universality of these works can appeal to a contemporary audience and are aware of the commercial potentiality of an 'updated' Greek theatre. McLaren explains that he was searching for a version of the play 'not latinate nor academic' and was confident that Lochhead could create something 'sexy'.<sup>114</sup> He implicitly admits that his main aim was not only 'to reinvestigate the classic theatre for a Scottish audience', but also to please this audience with a highly enjoyable play.<sup>115</sup> The choice of the cast was very important too, since the director wanted to give actors as famous as Maureen Beattie, 'a legend', the opportunity to perform a role as grandiose as that of Medea. Furthermore, Lochhead writes the play for Beattie and dedicates it to her, believing that Beattie is possibly the only actress who can take on herself Medea's part. Both the text and the staging aim at bringing out Beattie's histrionic skills and mature charm, qualities which undoubtedly contributed to the production's great success and attracted audiences by promising an outstanding performance.

Lochhead's poetic and dramatic production has often engaged with the so-called 'revisionary imperative'.<sup>116</sup> She has re-read literary figures such as Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Stoker's *Dracula* in her plays *Blood and Ice* and *Dracula*; fairy tales' characters in her collection of poems *The Grimm Sisters*; protagonists of both myth, as Medea, and history, as in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. As Sara Soncini points out, with *The Grimm Sisters* Lochhead 'began to feel the urge ... to 'retell familiar stories from another angle', turning the women from the objects into the subjects of the narrative'.<sup>117</sup> In some interviews about her trilogy *The Thebans*, Lochhead speaks of her passion for myth and Greek drama:

<sup>113</sup> The trilogy *The Thebans*, performed at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2003, comprises the story of Oedipus and Antigone, adapted from Sophocles, and a short version of the story of Jocasta, mostly taken from Euripides.

<sup>114</sup> McLaren's words are taken from the introduction to a video recording of *Medea* at the Old Fruitmarket in Glasgow.

<sup>115</sup> Words taken from a video recording about *Artery: Grecians 2000*, the name of McLaren's project concerning Greek theatre.

<sup>116</sup> See S. M. Gilbert. Op. Cit., p. 29.

<sup>117</sup> Sara Soncini. *Liz Lochhead's Revisionist Mythmaking*. In Valentina Poggi and Margaret Rose, eds. *A Theatre That Matters: Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama and Theatre*. Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 2000, p. 58.



The stories, the odysseys are part of your very fabric as a human being, part of your imaginative and linguistic structure ... They are incredible stories. There's no subtext, they are subtext. People speak out their internal dilemmas, and that's incredibly powerful. As a dramatist it gives you a sense of how bloodless plays are now, and how we should really get things big, and write about things that matter.<sup>118</sup>

And again, she insists on classical theatre's topicality:

I didn't have to make relevant. There is no time in history when they didn't seem both prescient and contemporary. Recently especially, it has been a Greek time – a time of revenge at an almost primitive level. ... it's incredibly exciting to work where the stakes are so enormous, where the play is about how you live and how you die.<sup>119</sup>

As Alicia Ostriker explains, myth belongs to 'high' culture, it appears to exist objectively and confers authority on the writer who, as Lochhead herself, exploits its potential. At the same time, myth speaks of intimate material and raises fundamental questions about men and their behaviour.<sup>120</sup> Lochhead shares Ostriker's opinion about myth and the multiple versions of myth depicted by Greek drama. Indeed, myth offers her 'incredible stories', great characters debating about subconscious tensions and 'dilemmas' that are at the same time 'prescient and contemporary'. However, Lochhead seems to ignore the value of myth as a 'public speech' and to underestimate its ability to give a woman writer literary prestige and authoritativeness, a concern that affects many women artists who approach and revise myth. When Lochhead says that 'Greek drama reminds you that we're just the same as we've always been', she underlines the fact that myth is neither unrealistic nor extreme, since it still happens often that men and women kill their children, especially amidst a conjugal crisis.<sup>121</sup> In her foreword, she states that she used Euripides' *Medea* 'as a complete structural template' and insists that 'Euripides did all the work', thus diminishing her contribution to the

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<sup>118</sup> Mark Brown, *From ancient Greece to modern day Iraq: Liz Lochhead embarks on her own odyssey*, *Scotland on Sunday*, 3 August 2003.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Dawson Scott, *Liz Lochhead's darkest hour*, *The Times*, 4 August 2003.

<sup>120</sup> See Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>121</sup> Mark Brown, *As their acclaimed production of Medea returns to Edinburgh, Lochhead and McLaren are planning a new Greek epic*, *Scotland on Sunday*, 29 July 2001.

play's success.<sup>122</sup> Actually, the only alteration she makes to Euripides' plot is the substitution of Medea's dialogue with Glauke for her meeting with Aigeus and the erasure of the *deus ex machina* ending, while she maintains the order and the content of all the other scenes.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, Lochhead does not really retell Medea's story 'from another angle', since she does not repute Euripides' version as misogynist or unfair to Medea's plight. I would argue that to a certain extent she approaches the old text from a new perspective, since the overall tone of her play is comical and sardonic rather than tragic and solemn, particularly the figures of Medea and Jason. Finally, her revision includes a new construction of the Chorus and very interesting metatheatrical and alienating devices.

As for the protagonist Medea, Lochhead finds the classical heroine 'larger than life' and 'terrifying'.<sup>124</sup> Yet, she specifies that her Medea is 'not supernatural, not an immortal, but is all too human'.<sup>125</sup> Most of the critics have argued that Euripides' Medea is hardly comparable to other classical heroines. Like many of them, she is ambitious and very proud of her royal background and therefore cannot stand to be laughed at or to be humiliated. However, unlike many tragic heroines she does not commit suicide after taking her revenge on Jason, as Phaedra or Dianeira do, and experiences her final apotheosis on the Sun's chariot. In a way, she obeys a 'male code of honour' that makes her almost unique among other female heroines. Jason's new marriage constitutes a violation of the sacred wedding bond, an *αδίκημα* that must be revenged. Euripides emphasizes the image of Medea's deserted bed, where the term *λέχος* has strong erotic connotations. Indeed, the sexual act was considered vital to women's physical and mental health in ancient Greek society, and this belief is another possible explanation for Medea's furious anger.<sup>126</sup> When Lochhead refers to her Medea as neither 'supernatural' nor 'immortal', she seems to distance her interpretation of Medea from Euripides' one. However Euripides, usually defined

<sup>122</sup> L. Lochhead, *Medea*, Foreword.

<sup>123</sup> Another alteration to the old text is the fact that in Lochhead's play Medea has three children instead of two, and one of them is a daughter, to whom Medea seems particularly attached.

<sup>124</sup> Words taken from the video recording *Artery: Grecians 2000*.

<sup>125</sup> L. Lochhead, *Medea*, Foreword.

<sup>126</sup> See Bruno Gentili, *La "Medea" di Euripide*. In B. Gentili and Franca Perusino, eds. *Medea nella letteratura e nell'arte*. Venezia: Marsilio, 2000, pp. 29 – 41.

'anthropometric' by the critics, often underlines men's free choice and omits the gods' role in human life.<sup>127</sup> In Medea's case, she murders both her enemies and her children not in order to obey the gods' will, as one could expect. Hers is rather a controversial but firm decision made by a woman who, though aware of her monstrous crimes, is led by her implacable θυμός, a word that means 'passion' or, better, 'fury'.<sup>128</sup> At least as far as Medea is concerned, Lochhead does not intend to enter the old myth from a feminist point of view, since she believes that Euripides' ideas were themselves 'feminist' in a sense. Although she aims to create a Medea 'all too human' and 'understandable', I would observe that her Medea's main quality is an irreconcilable duplicity. On the one hand she is a tragic heroine, an outsider, a foreigner, a woman who cannot rein herself in love or in anger:

can I convince myself to  
play the part of one of you    until I learn it?  
can I get philosophy? ...  
can I wear the mask of moderation? (23)

On the other hand, she is the protagonist of 'a domestic commonplace' (35), a wife dumped by her husband for a younger woman:

I was never a woman at all until I met my man! ...  
then it's when we fall in love that genders us  
Jason        I am a woman now!  
              right out of the blue  
              humiliation! ... (9 - 10)

And later on, speaking to Jason, she adds:

I gave you progeny  
I'd have seen the force of a fresh liaison  
were I barren but I bore you sons (18)

<sup>127</sup> See Guido Paduano, *Il nostro Euripide, l'umano*. Firenze: Sansoni, 1986.

<sup>128</sup> In this sense, Euripides's Medea differs from Seneca's one. In the Latin play Medea is persecuted by the Furies and by the ghost of her brother Apsyrtus, who prompt her to kill her children to placate and to compensate the previous murder. Therefore, Seneca's Medea seems to be less independent and free to make a decision about her behaviour.

The first lines state the importance that the encounter with Jason had for Medea. Saying that love is the decisive element that assigns a gender to people, she declares to be 'gendered' female because of the humiliation and the sorrow she is experiencing. On the contrary, Jason is undoubtedly 'gendered' male, as he exploits his charm to get what he needs from his lovers, leaving them as soon as they are no more useful. Medea seems also to think that a woman needs a man to fulfil herself and that one of the 'duties' of a wife is to give her husband a progeny; Jason had therefore no reason to leave her, the mother of his three children. The most relevant feature of Lochhead's play is yet its ability to speak to a contemporary audience, especially to a Scottish one. Actually, the play tackles issues of intolerance and racism towards a person, Medea, who is 'different' because she is a foreigner and an outstanding woman. While in Euripides Medea kills her children to deprive Jason of his dearest belongings, in Lochhead's version Medea chooses to murder them in order to save them from a terrible future:

this bitter place  
where I must kill to prove my love (43)

Her paradoxical sentence hints that Scotland is the 'bitter place' where the children of a foreign mother cannot be accepted. Furthermore, the empirical connotation of the verb 'to prove' suggests that Lochhead's revision is going to demonstrate how Medea's infanticide is inevitable, thus remarking her being trapped in a 'role' predetermined by the patriarchal society.

## **II: The 'subversive' use of Scots.**

In an article about his version of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, the playwright Bill Dunlop writes:

Any translation or adaptation into Scots is, perforce, a political act which asserts the validity of a language that may be described as the late Isaac Bashevis Singer described the Yiddish in which he wrote:

'I would not say that Yiddish is dead. Neither would I say that it is alive',<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Bill Dunlop, *Klytemnestra's Bairns: Adapting Aeschylus into Scots*, *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, Vol. 1, no. 1, June 2000.

Ian Brown notices that the nature of 'rule' and 'order' has been frequently explored by contemporary Scottish playwrights. Such nature is inevitably linked to the notion of 'hierarchy' in a society that tributes particular importance to debate and egalitarianism. Brown states that the role of language has been often investigated both 'as expression of order and as potential for disorder' and that an author's choice of language and register 'implies cultural and political choices'.<sup>130</sup> As Lenz writes,

The decision to write a play in Scots is still a political step. With some authors, the choice of Scots is clearly a statement of national and cultural politics. In less radical cases, Scots serves to transmit a feeling of specifically Scottish identity.<sup>131</sup>

Lochhead's concern with language, with its power and its socio-political implications runs throughout her poetical and dramatic production, and *Medea* is no exception.<sup>132</sup> In her foreword, she explains that the conventional way of doing *Medea* in Scotland would have been with Medea speaking Scots and the other 'civilised' characters speaking English. Therefore, her 'unconventional' decision to have the Corinthians speaking Scots testifies to 'a genuine in-the-bone increased cultural confidence'.<sup>133</sup> However, this choice also raises questions about 1) the validity of Scottish language in a translation, 2) an adaptation of a canonical text and 3) the audience's reception of it. As Lochhead states in the first stage direction, the characters of her play all have a Scots accent, which varies from Scots to Scots-English according to a particular emotional state. The Scots used by the play's common people or by King Kreon is a lively, poignant idiom which highlights the emotional peak of the action and conveys the idea of a close-knit society that reacts to a dangerous foreigner.

In McLaren's staging, King Kreon wears a long, black coat and has a mustache that probably means to remind the audience of Hitler and of any dictatorial leadership. Kreon's tone is authoritative and his accent is strongly

<sup>130</sup> Ian Brown, John Ramage and Ceri Sherlock. *Scots and Welsh: Theatrical Translations and Theatrical Languages*. *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, Vol. 1, no. 2, December 2000.

<sup>131</sup> Katja Lenz. *Die schottische Sprache in modernen Drama*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1999. In I. Brown, J. Ramage and C. Sherlock. Op. Cit., p. 1.

<sup>132</sup> See Robert Crawford and Anne Varry, eds. *Liz Lochhead's Voices*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993.

Scots, in particular when his anger with Medea is more evident and when he aims to scare and menace her violently:

you    glowering hate face ...  
husband dumped you    has he?  
so you hate him    the world's no wide enough  
to haud you baith? ... (11)

The Chorus presents Kreon as 'a man with his own agenda' (11), thus stressing the relevance he accords to political matters. Kreon is depicted as a man of power devoid of any pity, a man who makes the laws and executes them without considering the needs of other people. After entering the stage with his retinue, he sits on a chair and listens to Medea's calm requests. What had appeared to be his previous solemn authoritativeness weakens when he first replies to Medea: 'Frankly I'm feart of you'. Indeed, the audience laughs at this answer, reputing his reason as neither logical nor sound. Seeing that her first words do not succeed in softening his resolution, Medea kneels down in front of him and keeps this position till the end of their dialogue. This characterization implies that Kreon rules with an authoritarian and intolerant power, like that Lochhead detects in the Scottish reaction to the Clause 28.<sup>134</sup> She draws a disturbing comparison between Euripides' patriarchal and hegemonic society and her own Scottish society: both overtly show a scorn not only for women, but also for 'outsiders' as gay people, foreigners, 'wild barbarians' unable to speak a 'patrician' Greek or a proper Scots. It is certainly true, as Lenz points out, that Lochhead's choice of Scots as the dominant idiom of the play endows her work with 'a feeling of specifically Scottish identity'. Nonetheless, Lochhead exposes the fact that this same society is no more interested in 'egalitarianism' or in a 'constant questioning of authority', but seems to have assumed the attitude of a hegemonic and intolerant country, resembling the much despised England. Both the Nurse and the Manservant, the play's 'ordinary people', speak with a Scottish accent. Neither has a first name and both seem therefore to be 'anonymous', an impression borne out also by their grey and black clothes

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<sup>133</sup> L. Lochhead, Foreword to *Medea*.

<sup>134</sup> Clause 28 is a decree that bans teachers from promoting 'the teaching ... of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. *The Scotsman*, 19 January 2001.

that disappear into the staging. They appeal to a common sense with which the audience is likely to agree. The Nurse indulges in the emotional aspect of the story, underlining her pity for Medea and for the three guiltless children who are unjustly banished. The Manservant seems to be more 'realistic' and colder, stating that Jason does not care anymore for his previous family, but also implying Jason is right to do so, because he is a man and, moreover, a royal and powerful man. The Manservant also advises the Nurse not to get involved in her mistress's problems. The Nurse makes her first speech seated on a chair in the middle of the stage; her head bent down in token of resignation and sadness, and her voice hoarse, deep and evocative of the dangers Medea faced in following Jason:

... why was it ever oared? ...  
 my lady Medea would never then have sailed wi Jason  
                                   daft for him   doted! ...  
       nae wonder Medea winna be comforted   shivers  
                                   stinks of fear   canna eat  
 canna sleep   greet till she can greet nae mair (3 – 4)

Not only is the Nurse the character who introduces the action and its protagonists to the audience; her strong Scottish accent, the lively rhythm and the accurate pauses of her narration also underline the emotional value of words such as 'daft' or 'doted'. They lead the audience to place the action in a contemporary context and to think of its implications for their own society. After her first speech, she spends most of the remaining time seated on a chair in a corner of the stage, becoming a marginal spectator unable to affect the events. The Manservant, a young and uncouth man, uses often bawdy words that work as comic relief, as when he is sensitive to Medea's sex appeal or when he speaks of Jason without euphemisms:

this new Jason   the day  
 does not give a tuppenny fuck for anybody in this hoose (5)

Spontaneity and rudeness vie with the strong emotions the Manservant's Scots conveys, since he describes one of the darkest moments of the play:

Glauke's and Kreon's terrible death. As in the Nurse's case, the Scottish class accent expresses an emotional state and gloomy sensations:

then – something hellish – before our eyes  
her face cheynged colour ...  
stuck there as we were like stookies  
wi the horror of it ...  
and there they lie  
father on top of daughter corpse on corpse  
in a horrid parody of an unnatural embrace (40 – 42)

The Manservant appears devastated by what he saw, but does not spare the audience any 'delightful detail', as Medea puts it, while lying down on-stage, fully satisfied by the death of her enemies. He first begins a mechanical and plain listing of what happened, then puts a hand on his head as if to amplify his incredulity, then again hugs himself pronouncing the word 'horror', a kind of new Kurtz trying to comfort himself. Once again the use of Scots encourages the audience to feel deeply involved in the play's bloody events. Since Medea and Jason are not native of Corinth, they do not speak with a Scottish accent, and this fact renders them 'strangers' to a Scottish audience. Jason 'is a Greek too – but not from this place' (16), while Medea is a foreigner who speaks a good English, a refugee or an incomer whose diversity is immediately perceivable.

In Euripides' play the Chorus of Corinthian women shows a deep understanding of Medea's pain and often underlines Jason's impious betrayal of the sacred wedding bond. Of course Lochhead's Chorus is sympathetic to Medea's feelings and very critical of Jason's behaviour, but at the same time it colludes in reinforcing the image of Medea as a foreigner who does not behave as they would:

is that how they cry in Kolchis Medea? (7)

Characterized by its universality and archetypal quality, the Chorus contains not just 'Scottish' women different from the foreigner Medea, but 'women of all times, all ages, classes and professions' (7). They are 'ladies of all time / ladies of this place / and others' (9), as Medea says when she first turns to them, addressing openly, through the deictic 'this' and the pronoun 'others',



the women of 'the here and now audience' and of every other possible audience. In McLaren's production, the Chorus consists of seven members, four women and three men dressed all with a long, black frock. They have white powder on their faces, maybe a symbol of the supposed impartiality of their judgement, and their hair is plaited in locks that resemble Medusa's coiffure. The three men of the Chorus might represent either transvestite or homosexual people; their presence suits the contemporary context of the play, in which there are no traditional, rigid gender divisions. The make up and the long frocks do not make these three actors easily recognizable as men; their presence among women and the fact that they will describe themselves as 'survivors of the sex war' strengthen the idea of gender as not biological, but rather cultural. Indeed, these men are gendered 'female' because they have deeply suffered for love and therefore represent the weaker member of a couple. The Chorus, tackling the play's crucial problems of adultery and infanticide, significantly speaks with a strong Scottish accent, sometimes in unison, sometimes not, and its movements, varying from forming a line to forming a circle around Medea, are accurately choreographed. Only Medea notices and interacts with the Chorus, who she asks to keep her plans secret. Crucially, the Chorus' women recognise Medea's primal cry as the cry of all women of all times and share her desperation because something similar has happened to them too:

so your man fucks another? fuck him ...  
   you'll grow out of that  
   we were not born yesterday  
   we are all survivors of the sex war  
   married women    widows    divorced  
   mistresses    wives    no virgins here (7)

And later on, when the Chorus refers to Medea's primal cry:

  that cry!  
   it was a cry we've heard  
   from the woman  
 opening the door to the telegraph boy in wartime ...  
   the cry from    the woman  
   whose lover's eyes have not quite lied  
   when she asked him

"tell me is there someone else?" (8 - 9)

Through the Chorus, Lochhead highlights the crucial relevance of Medea's myth to a contemporary audience: Medea's story is 'the same old story' of the relationship between a man and a woman. It exemplifies how men, having used women to have children and ensure themselves descendants, can discard them whenever they want to. Most of the words used by the Chorus or by Medea during their dialogues convey the idea of sisterhood, of an alliance formed among women:

we are sorry for your sorrow sister ...  
we promise you we are women Medea  
we know men we know who's in the right  
punish him for us Medea (9 - 10)

Medea too addresses the Chorus twice with the epithet 'friends' (39 - 43) and she appears as a general who recruits her troops and encourages them to join forces against a common enemy:

we women are too weak they say for war  
wrong us in bed though oh men  
we'll have your guts for garters (10)

Lochhead places Medea's story in the context of a never-ending sex war and implies that women should support each other in hard times, thus advocating a sort of socialist solidarity and loyalty. The opposition between the pronouns 'we', 'us' and the noun 'women' on the one side and 'they' and 'men' on the other highlights the contrast between men and women in the play and in the audience too, while the subtle use of words as 'bed' and 'garters' suggests that the battlefield is now, as it always was, linked to the sexual relationships. In McLaren's staging Medea follows the word 'garters' with a wave of her right hand, mimicking the pulling and squeezing of an object full of liquids. This vulgar gesture refers certainly to the 'guts' of men, but also to their testicles, suitable in a sex war context. However, the hope for a female alliance lasts as long as Medea's vengeful plan concerns only Jason, but it is immediately undone as soon as Medea hints at the murder of her children. Lillian Corti explains that child-murder has always been a problem for which

society rejects any responsibility. Whether considered as a method to regulate population or as a way to both affirm and deny 'the powers of generativity', infanticide has often assumed to be the province of unmarried women or witches, scapegoats of a society that wants to protect itself from 'unpleasant matters'.<sup>135</sup> The Chorus increasingly distances itself from Medea's behaviour, unable to understand her reasons and to consider her as 'one of them':

you are not our kind    but  
every animal would die for its young (29)

In particular, the Chorus insists on the fact that child-murder is unnatural and that there is no reparation for it:

Mother Earth open up and swallow her now  
before she forever defiles you  
with the spilt blood of her own children ...  
sex makes birth    makes death  
but here is a broken circle  
here is nothing natural (43 – 44)

In Theatre Babel's performance, the Chorus speaks against infanticide while encircling Medea, who sits on a chair and seems to be untouched by its words. The careful orchestration of the voices, created from a dynamic rhythm and effective juxtaposition, makes the Chorus seem a 'common Scottish conscience' dealing with a burning question. At the same time, the menacing and hectic tone, together with their Medusa-like hair, render them 'anti-Furies' who harass Medea in order for her *not* to commit a terrible murder. The Chorus gives her decision no justification, nor it is ready to admit the least responsibility from a society that sees Medea only as a dangerous foreigner and considers the children as mere instruments to ensure itself a future. While it was ready to side with Medea against an unfaithful husband, the Chorus repudates now the society's prosperity, embodied by Jason's sons, as more important than a wronged woman's revenge.

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<sup>135</sup> Lillian Corti. *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998, pp. 15 - 18.

### III: The figure of Medea.

As in Euripides' play, the Nurse's prologue points to her lady's previous unreasonable passion for Jason and uses an imagery connected to food and animal behaviour, which recurs frequently in the text:

now it all sours on her ...  
and Medea left to rot ...  
an old coat that nae langer fits him ...  
try soothing her she's a stone ...  
claws at herself keening  
she's capable of onything (3 – 4)

The verbs 'to sour', 'to rot' and 'to claw', the metaphors that associate Medea with 'an old coat' and 'a stone', all contribute to the heroine's dehumanization and objectification; later on the Nurse describes Medea again:

like a lioness suckling her last living cub  
claws at me bull glares  
would gore me gash me (8)

Kreon compares Medea to a 'tigress' (11) and to 'vermin' that infest his 'nest' (13). After the murder of her children the Chorus refers to Medea as 'a stone' and as 'iron' and says that her heart is 'nothing human' (44), while Jason cannot pronounce her name anymore and equates her with a disgusting 'monster' (44). Medea herself does not hesitate to use the verbs 'to crawl' and 'to fawn' (15) to depict her 'animal' behaviour towards Kreon. She names her children 'cursed litter' (6), thus relating them both to the idea of rotten food and of inhuman conduct. Whereas in Euripides' play the nouns 'tigress' and 'lioness' occur no more than three times and the play emphasizes Medea's pride and sense of royal superiority, Lochhead places Medea in the sphere of the primordial, as her 'primal cry' (6) at the beginning of the play suggests.<sup>136</sup> Like a hurt animal that instinctively reacts to her enemies' attacks, Medea becomes 'primeval' as the prototype of the

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<sup>136</sup> For the analysis of Euripides' *Medea*, see Gianni Guastella, *L'ira e l'onore*, Palermo: Palumbo, 2001.

'dangerous' woman despised and rejected by the patriarchal society. Moreover, she sums up the archetypal image of women fostered by a male – dominated society. Reduced to pure nature, to everything that is not part of the dominant culture and has to be 'civilised', Medea is compared to an untamed animal that menaces the *status quo* and must therefore be annihilated. Yet, she also represents an object gone out of use, a commodity that Jason does not need anymore. As in Euripides' play, Lochhead's Medea is first presented as 'a voice' that cries out offstage, a voice that furiously curses Jason and the children, not directly named but pointed at by the repetition of the deictic 'you' and by the expression 'hated father'. Her first, tense words denote her again as a wounded animal unable to control its instincts and to be reasonable, while still able to foresee the tragedy about to take place:

Why don't you bloody die you  
 cursed litter of a cursed mother?  
 I hate my life and all I've done in it  
 I wish I'd never made you with your hated father  
 let it all crash around us in the ruins it's in (6)

McLaren's production at The Old Fruitmarket used an expansive and bare stage whose main tonality varied from grey to black; behind it a large screen, the lighting predominantly white, grey or black, worked as a suggestive backdrop with a doorway through which the characters enter and leave the stage, a dividing element that prevented the audience's eyes from seeing the play's violence. Medea is a mature woman dressed with a long, warm red frock, distinct from all the other characters who wear black or grey clothes. She is a tall, impressive and seductive woman and her dress becomes the visible symbol of her diversity, of her passionate nature and of the blood she will shed. Moreover, the frock becomes Medea's 'red badge of courage', the emblem of her boldness in a highly conformist society. After her cry, the women of the Chorus ask the Nurse to bring Medea out, confident that they could help her to overcome the pain. Before entering the house, the Nurse tells the audience of Medea's outstanding skills, 'her cunning', 'her spells', 'her power' (8), then a 'silence from within' increases the suspense that

surrounds Medea's figure and the audience's fearful expectation of her, while the Chorus, 'tense', waits for her entrance. As Barlow notes, the expectations of Euripides' spectators at this point of the play are subverted. Medea's first words convey neither agitation nor wrath:

This is to be a Medea with a mind ... This wild creature  
is capable of reason and considered thought ... <sup>137</sup>

Also in Lochhead's play Medea's first appearance onstage contrasts strikingly with her previous, aural furor and suggests her ability to 'play' different parts, to modulate her behaviour and her hypnotic voice according to the context she is in. The stage directions describe her as 'not a girl – but dignified, beautiful, calm and utterly reasonable. Somehow exotic.' (9) What Lochhead implies is that Medea, far from being just a furious 'lioness' ruled by strong feelings of love or hate, is a solemn and charming woman too, now cold and detached from her inner turmoil. The following *captatio benevolentiae* deconstructs the image the citizens of Corinth, and of Scotland, have of Medea, and by extension of every foreigner:

... I'm here now  
I know you've thought me strange 'standoffish' 'a snob'  
you've said of me not understanding my shyness  
my coolness merely masked my terror of being snubbed  
no one loves a foreigner  
everyone despises anyone the least bit different ...  
'why can't she be a bit more like us?'  
say you Greeks who bitch about other Greeks  
for not being Greeks from Corinth! (9)

The accurate use of deictics is here particularly effective to set the play's action, but also the performance's general context. The deictics bring out the dialectical relationship first between Medea and the Chorus and then between Medea, the epitome of 'strangeness' and 'outlandishness', and the audience. Actually, 'here' and 'now' establish the place and the time of the action in Corinth and in the theatre too. The iteration of the personal pronouns 'you'

<sup>137</sup> Shirley A. Barlow. *Euripides' Medea: a Subversive Play?*. In A. Griffith, ed. *Stage Directions*. BICS Supplement 66. London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1995, pp. 36 – 45.

and of the possessive adjective 'my' underlines the gap not only between Medea and the Chorus' women, but also between she and the audience's members. Her 'standoffishness' and 'snobbishness' turn out to be merely 'shyness' and the 'terror' of being ignored. The pronouns 'no one' and 'everyone' address every member of the Chorus and of the audience, depicting a general standard of behaviour towards the foreigners that subtly contradicts the 'myth' of Scottish people as friendly and warm. The 'Greeks' Medea refers to are equated to the Scottish in the theatre: they do not consider Jason as a 'stranger', although he is not from Corinth and speaks with a different accent; they do consider Medea as a 'stranger' because she is not from Corinth and speaks with a foreign accent. Furthermore, this speech could hint at the irony of overvaluing a high-quality 'British English accent', something Scottish people do not usually have. In a way, Medea's image and the Scottish idiom share the same attributes: Medea's fury and thirst for revenge are as 'animal' and 'primordial' as the Scots' ferocity towards the strangers. Medea follows this condemnation of the hostile society with a description of the humiliation she felt after Jason's betrayal and denounces women's social mistreatment, in a famous *rhexis* that has often been seen as a 'protofeminist' speech. She faces Kreon, who grants her another day in Corinth, Jason and Glauke instead of Aigeus. She kills the king and his daughter giving them poisoned presents and decides to murder his children too, to spare them the Corinthians' certain revenge.

### **III.1: The comic device.**

While the order of the events and the contents in Lochhead's text follow precisely Euripides' own, the general tone of her play, especially in the central part, reminds the audience of a comedy more than of a tragedy. When Medea enters the stage, she bows to the Chorus, opens her arms and speaks of her situation in a brilliant way. Well knowing how to entertain the audience, she is aware of the value of her gestures and of the poignancy of her voice, through which she underlines the most important words of her *rhexis*. Despite his power, Kreon openly reveals his fear of Medea and

depicts the patriarchal society's worry about women who do not conform to the rules established for them:

frankly I'm feart of you why no? ...  
you're a clever quine and cunning  
malice is your middle name  
and your man threw you oot who'd blame him? ...  
so it's in self defence  
nothing personal (11)

In Kreon's speech, the word 'malice' becomes synonymous with the name 'Medea' itself, placing her once again in the sphere of evil and cruelty 'naturally' inborn in women and linking her to Medusa, Phaedra, Eve and the Step Mother in fairy tales, all symbols of the demonic woman so popular in Western culture.<sup>138</sup> Kreon's words contrast with the Chorus' opinion though, since the women and men in it repute Medea's infanticide as 'unnatural'. This disagreement seems therefore to make the sex war context even worse; indeed, it implies that only people who are gendered 'female' as Medea could perhaps understand the reasons behind her decision and sympathize with her. As Medea herself points out, a clever woman is a menace to patriarchal society, 'an abomination' that flies 'in the face of nature' (12). The term 'nature' exposes the ideology behind the common image of women: although the depiction of women as either 'angels' or 'demons' has historical, social and cultural bases, it has become a 'myth' perceived as 'naturally true' and unquestionable. As Althusser would argue, ideology is deeply rooted in the society and reclaims people for itself in such a persistent way, that often the same individuals who are oppressed by ideology conform to and support it. This is not Medea's case though.<sup>139</sup> She replies to the king with great irony and the audience at the Old Fruitmarket is visibly amused by her sarcasm:

I've heard this before  
I'm oppressed by my reputation  
the evil one the witch the clever woman ...  
I can't be very clever can I

<sup>138</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*. Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1949. See also Alicia Suskin Ostriker. Op. Cit.

<sup>139</sup> See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. Transl. by B. Brewster. London: NLB, 1971.



or I'd not be in this pretty situation? (12)

Towards the end of this first dialogue, she kneels down in front of Kreon and, while she promises to behave as an 'abject slave', she gently caresses his legs. She swears to do anything for him to show her gratitude, clearly relying on her sex appeal. Her 'so sexy skills' (19), as Jason puts it, are what McLaren asked Lochhead to highlight; they stand out also at the end of the play, when Medea asks the Manservant to take part in the wedding and to tell her all the details. She moves very close to him and, being taller, dominates him. While she promises to be forever 'grateful' again (37), he looks into her exposed bosom, a ridiculous slave to her charm. Undoubtedly this characterization of Medea exploits the story's commercial potential, since it manages to attract and easily please a wider audience. However, it deprives Medea of her full tragic quality, depicting her as a woman who uses her beauty to get what she wants, a very common situation nowadays. After Kreon's exit, Medea entertains the audience again with her subtle humour and with her histrionic skills, both solemn and ironic:

that man  
I sucked up begged touched him ...  
I gagged but swallowed it  
the fool he's a dead man could have thwarted me  
but granted me my glory day  
to make three cold corpses  
of him the king of the bride and of the man I hate  
my darlings my familiars  
so many ways of killing and which shall I choose? ...  
the female way is the best way  
poison  
the murderess' way and am not I the queen of it? ...  
Hecate black goddess of midnight  
help me now ...  
women useless are we?  
good for nothing?  
good for evil  
and evil all the good I ever want to be good for again! (15 - 16)

Beattie's Medea refers to her murderous plan with great pleasure, as if it were a tasty dish to serve the audience. While pronouncing the verbs 'to gag' and 'to swallow', she mimics a gesture of vomit at which the spectators laugh,

sharing her disgust for Kreon's arrogance. In addition, Lochhead's Medea is not bothered by the Chorus' presence. She enjoys her intimacy with it and with the audience and tries to make it evident why she has the right to take her revenge on her enemies.<sup>140</sup> Her list of the various ways to kill her 'darlings' and her 'familiar' strengthens not only the humorous tone of the scene, but also the imagery linked to food and to the animal world, for she could 'roast' them 'like herrings' or 'spike' their 'guts' on the 'bridal bed' (15). The way she chooses to murder best suits the sense of female solidarity expressed so far in the play and gives voice to a female literary and cultural tradition. At the same time, the text raises a juxtaposition between the term 'sorceress', linked to the Greek tradition, and the term 'witch', associated to the Nordic one. The Greek sorceress is a powerful and venerable woman whose magic skills often result decisive in helping the hero to overcome misfortune. Indeed, Jason wins the Golden Fleece only thanks to Medea's help and is fascinated by her supernatural powers. On the contrary, the Anglo-Saxon witch is usually an old and ugly woman connected to evil and horrible forces. Thanks to her necromantic knowledge, the witch is endowed with prophetic wisdom, as the 'weird sisters' in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Lochhead's play insists more on Medea's image as witch and demonic woman, more suitable for the Scottish context. Medea invokes Hecate, 'the mistress of the night road, of fate, and of the world of the dead'.<sup>141</sup> Her prayer is not solemn though, since she whispers Hecate's name softly, as if doubting whether the goddess can help her. Ironically, Medea wants to meet the expectations bound to her myth and decides therefore to be the 'queen' of murder and to show that women, if they are useless in other contexts, are but 'good for evil'. The name Hecate itself, the iteration of the adjective 'black' and the term 'midnight' contribute to the creation of a gloomy and almost gothic atmosphere, suiting the murders she is about to commit. In the

<sup>140</sup> The production with Fiona Shaw directed by Deborah Warner offers a very different interpretation of the Chorus. Medea and Jason are two very famous people the Chorus is curious about. Actually, the Chorus visits their home and 'gawk at them', as if incredulous in front of two celebrities. See Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner, *A Symposium on Medea*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 42, Summer 2003. Their production of *Medea* was at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 2000. The translation was by Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael.

<sup>141</sup> Erich Neumann. *The Great Mother*. Transl. by R. Manheim. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995 (second ed. 1963), p. 170.

speech's final climax, the terms 'good' and 'evil' are strongly juxtaposed and placed in an oxymoric relationship, thus reinforcing the idea of women as 'naturally wicked'. The evil she committed before, a means to help Jason to reach his ends, endowed her with a bad reputation and is the cause of her exile. She will therefore commit evil once again, to punish her husband's ingratitude and vileness.

During her first dialogue with Jason Medea's irony becomes clearer. She first listens to his words irritated and incredulous and then makes a scene typical of a quarrel between wife and husband, with verbal jokes about sex and its importance:

JASON: It is not what you think ...  
I could have crept back to you in secret would have  
but you can't keep it zipped ...  
MEDEA: I can't keep it zipped!  
who what could be worse than you? ...  
I made you Jason! ...  
so Jason you love me and wish me well? Pray tell  
friend sweet husband where am I to go? ...  
to Pelias' daughters? They'd welcome me with open arms  
that glad we did the old man in! ... (17 – 18)

Jason's reference to Medea who 'can't keep it zipped' adds to her image an interesting 'male' dimension. Through both words and gestures, Lochhead's Medea plays also the part of 'the ravenous man' who knows how to best enjoy and exploit his sex appeal. The implication is that a woman can behave as 'miserably' as a man, but the male world does not seem ready to accept this widened notion of gender. Saying the word 'zipped', Medea's forefinger points at Jason, showing the audience his shamelessness and waiting for their burst of laughter. The complicity between she and the spectators increases and contrasts with the isolation she experiences inside the play's world.. Even when Medea speaks of her plight, she does not commiserate herself and aims rather at getting a comical effect through the breathless accumulation and exaggeration of her words:

you're safe I'm exiled abandoned and alone (21)

This happens also when she explains her 'hellish plan' to the Chorus' women, as they gather around her and listen carefully. Medea, proud of her power, shows an almost infantile happiness, amplified by a gesture of triumph at the end of her explanation:

here's my hellish plan I'm proud of it  
listen ladies it is lovely! ...  
we'll do her in! ...  
oh yes (27 – 28)

With effective movements of her hands, Medea makes the spectators 'see' what is going to happen to her enemies. In a way, she resembles a conjurer who skilfully entertains the audience and almost hypnotizes it through her magic.

### **III.2: Medea as 'mother' and 'rival in love'.**

If the irony and the colloquialisms of Lochhead's play contribute to the diminishment of the original tragedy's solemnity, it is certainly true, as Elizabeth Roy notes, that

Scotland sees Medea as a role model, a character who has had considerable impact on the national psyche – an inspirational figure of a woman who refuses to be confined to the role assigned by husband or patriarchy, a woman who feels intensely the pain and rage of betrayal.<sup>142</sup>

Roy suggests an analogy with Mary Stuart, a character well-loved by Lochhead. Thus the figure of Medea becomes immediately familiar to a Scottish audience. Furthermore, according to Roy Lochhead's play portrays 'a very identifiable situation'.<sup>143</sup> It satisfies McLaren's desire to have a translation that speaks 'of universal modern experience', including the topic of Medea's motherhood and of her relation with 'the other woman' Glauke.<sup>144</sup> Contrary to Euripides' story, Lochhead's Medea has three children, two boys and one girl, who are all dressed in grey and never speak.

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<sup>142</sup> Elizabeth Roy. *Medea ... a fresh perspective*. *The Hindu*, 22 February 2002.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> McLaren's words are taken from the *Introduction to Medea*.

After the first dialogue with Jason, Medea sits on a chair surrounded by the Chorus and her tone suddenly changes as soon as she speaks of the children:

... I feel  
emptied  
Jason is right my children would be better off  
if I leave them here with their father  
who loves them he loves them  
loves them and can offer them  
everything  
so much so much  
I love my children  
can I leave them? (22 – 23)

Her voice is now low and deep, able to express her desperation and great love of the children, who symbolize both her previous passion for Jason and the 'instrument' to destroy his future. Importantly, Medea does not question her husband's love of the children, but decides to kill them because she knows what awaits them:

as if I could ever leave them  
here ringed around by my enemies  
and taught to hate me! Never! ...  
I'll kill the children must  
to save them  
shall I let my sweet boys become cruel men like their father?  
shall I let my daughter grow up to womanhood  
and this world's mercy? Never!  
I'll kill you first my darlings  
then when I've done for Jason utterly I'll die happy (27 -- 28)

The children's murder is therefore an imperative to Lochhead's Medea; no other solution is left. While in Euripides' play Medea meets Aigeus in order to ensure herself a place to stay, here she states she wants to die after the murders. She implies that both Jason's future and her own are dead forever; life is no more worth living, after the loss of what is dearest to her. The children's silent presence enhances the 'domestic commonplace' also because it reminds the audience of the very contemporary problem of

divorce.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, it is unquestionable that the children come second to the love affair between Jason and Medea, no matter how much affection the parents show for them:

MEDEA: children! Don't shrink from us  
we both love you  
come kiss your daddy see like I do ...  
JASON: ... no hopes are too high  
nothing's too good for Jason's children ...  
fear nothing your daddy and the Gods will  
always be there for you to protect you (31 –32)

The fact that Lochhead's Medea has a daughter is very significant too. Whereas the two boys have always been considered as a small representation of Jason, the incarnation of what Medea hates most, in her daughter Lochhead gives Medea a small version of herself. Furthermore, Medea seems to be more attached to her than to the boys: during her last speech to the children, sitting on a chair, she keeps the little girl on her knees and hugs her, while the boys are up around her. Medea's words create one of the play's more emotional scenes, devoid of the previous irony:

... I thought my heart was dead but I still love you  
goodbye before I see you grown ...  
I chose this way but by the Gods it's sore ...  
I can't do it ...  
it's not right ...  
come on woman do it dare  
are you so weak that motherlove can turn you? (37 – 38)

The term 'woman' echoes here as an insult and Medea, paradoxically, encourages herself 'not to be a woman', not to be weak nor loving. She has already said she cannot bear to let her daughter 'grow up to womanhood' (28), thus reiterating women's social and cultural plight, something she does not want to be confined to. When she enters the house to commit the infanticide, the Chorus runs behind her as to stop her, but pointlessly. A bell

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<sup>145</sup> For instance, Fiona Shaw sees Medea's children as the victims of 'narcissistic parents', parents who permanently quarrel and always are the centre of attention. Yet, considering that in olden times parents usually left child raising to servants, Shaw's interpretation might be too 'modernized'. See Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner. *Op. Cit.*

tolls three times, suggesting to the audience that the three children are already dead. While the screen turns from black to red, alluding to the shed blood and to Medea's raging passion prevailing now over the performance's grey tone. Although Medea's love of her children is deep and her sorrow genuine, she resolves 'to kill Jason while he is still alive' by murdering the children. While she could argue that the children's future is settled anyway, Medea insists on revenging herself on Jason rather than saving the children, since she wants 'to turn out Jason's heart and to devour it' (45).

To the Chorus' great surprise, Glauke enters the stage after Jason's exit. 'A very pretty, very young girl' (23), she wears a long, black dress like the Chorus. Medea, sitting on a chair, sees her and makes a sort of roar with her mouth, ready to tear the 'girlie' rival to pieces. Glauke's character has been reassessed in many contemporary revisions of this tragedy. Generally, Glauke is seen as a vulnerable woman and a victim to life's events, since her father decides which 'part' she has to play in life.<sup>146</sup> In Lochhead's play, however, Glauke is very confident and even arrogant at the end of her meeting with Medea. Rather than prompting Medea to bury the hatchet, her smug attitude works as a tool to persuade the audience to side with Medea. This episode reinforces the 'domestic commonplace' tone of the play, since Glauke is 'the other woman': the third party in a love triangle, an inexperienced but quite confident girl who tries to reach an agreement with the ex-wife. Medea displays again her bitter irony and, relying on her brilliant dialectic, ridicules Glauke's almost pastoral speech. At first, Glauke seems to respect Medea and appeals to Medea's reasonableness and dignity:

GLAUKE: Medea my lady  
                   I think it's daft we should fight like this  
                   over a man I am Glauke -  
 MEDEA: I've heard of you well my girlie Glauke  
                   what should we fight about instead?  
 GLAUKE: they say you are a witch but I don't believe it  
 MEDEA: believe it you bit of thistle-down ...

<sup>146</sup> In Alvaro, Glauke falls off a tower when she sees an enraged crowd going towards Medea's house; she is totally passive and refuses to live. In Pasolini, Glauke is neurotic and defenceless in the presence of life's tragedy; she is not able to face her faults and her duties. In Christa Wolf, Glauke suffers from epilepsy and does not want to recover; she cannot be a 'heroine' and throws herself into a well.

GLAUKE: ... he loves me I did not plan it  
 I never wanted my happiness should hurt another woman ...  
 But if a man no longer loved me ...  
 I'd be too proud to try and keep him  
 I don't hate you  
 MEDEA: do you expect me to say the same? (23 – 24)

Medea's rhetorical questions underline the inadequacy of Glauke's words. The wish for a lasting sisterhood among women, a wish expressed by Medea to the Chorus, disappears in the dialogue between the two rivalling women. Medea's sarcasm escalates when Glauke refers to the subject of sex and passion in human relationships:

GLAUKE: ... these things are not easy  
 even though for you and Jason  
 everything has long been over  
 in the man and wife sense of things ...  
 MEDEA: thank you for these homilies ...  
 GLAUKE: I think you mock me  
 MEDEA: you mock me  
 you may not be as clever as I  
 but I no longer have my husband ...  
 GLAUKE: the past the past ...  
 You live in the past ...  
 MEDEA: I made that man  
 and now a fool of a slip of a girl  
 is to feast on what is left of him?  
 so 'everything has long been over  
 for Jason and I  
 in the man and wife sense of things'? ...  
 the oldest lie in the book  
 we fuck all the time (24 – 26)

At first Glauke sits on a chair too, as to place herself on Medea's same level, while Medea keeps her legs open and her hands on the knees. This position enhances her exasperation at hearing her enemies 'putting everything into perspective' (25), suggesting the right way to judge the events. Medea's gestures, classifiable as 'male', contribute to the play's overlapping of the traditional notion of gender. Later, when they both walk the stage as if it were a ring, Medea's intellectual superiority is conveyed not only through the subtlety of her answers, but also through her being tall and imposing. The scene reminds the audience of a very common challenge between a young,



and supposedly more desirable, woman and a mature and less attractive one. Her pride is wounded when her sex appeal is questioned and Medea reacts with decisiveness, stating that what Glauke and people in general think is false, as the episodes of 'seduction' of Kreon and the Manservant confirm. The scene becomes even more contemporary as Glauke reassures Medea that she cares for the children and 'will be good to them', asking the rival to send the two boys and the girl to the wedding. The competition between the two women concerns not only the 'possession' of a man, but also winning over the children, as it often happens nowadays in divorced families. The Chorus, shocked by Glauke's boldness, tries to justify her behaviour saying she is 'in love and happy' (26) and too young to understand Medea's point of view. Towards the end of their dialogue, Glauke's tone becomes more aggressive, she looks Medea straight in the eye and seems ready to battle without any fear. Already pregnant with Jason's child, Glauke describes Medea's womb as

... a dried up pod  
rattling with shrivelled old seeds  
you cannot give him any more babies (26)

Her words strengthen the image of women as sex objects and mere instruments of procreation. The audience gains therefore the impression that in a patriarchal society women's fighting over men will never be over, as marriage is for them the only way to get a respectable social status.

#### IV: The 'villain' Jason.

According to Lillian Corti, Medea encloses in herself three archetypal images:

For Medea, the 'barbaric sorceress' ... is a witch; Medea, ... , the wanderer, the exile, ... resembles the figure of the Jew, and Medea, the woman who has been exploited and betrayed, is equivalent to the unmarried mother.<sup>147</sup>

These three figures, Corti says, have traditionally been charged with infanticide and Medea is 'the queen of it' (15). Whereas in the dialogues with the Chorus, with Glauke or the Manservant the 'sexy and ironic' Medea prevails, in those with Jason Medea's otherness, both as a woman and as a foreigner, stands out. Roy writes that in McLaren's staging Medea's English has an Ashkenazi Jewish accent, the accent of 'the eternal foreigner' devoid of a fatherland.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, Hardwick notes that at the time of the 2001 Fringe performance the murder of a Kurdish asylum seeker took place in Sighthill, an area of Glasgow, and the audience was therefore well aware of the somehow desperate situation of refugees.<sup>149</sup>

The stage direction depicts Jason as 'a Greek too – but not from this place'. Although he is certainly 'less outsider' than Medea, Jason too is a foreigner inside the play's dominant society. Yet, he becomes an important member of that society thanks to his marriage with the King's daughter. In Euripides Jason claims that his new marriage has political reasons and brings benefits both to Medea and his children. In Seneca the Chorus stresses the fact that his marriage with Medea is 'not legal' and not accepted by the society, rendering the new bond with Glauke as his first and sacred marriage. Many contemporary rewriters of the Euripidean tragedy, for instance Pasolini and Alvaro, make a disillusioned, bourgeois man of Jason, depicting him as a failed hero who agrees to a 'marriage of convenience' in order to improve his social status. Jason is the symbol of a political and rational world where magic and passion are no longer valued. Pavese writes that in Corinth Jason

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<sup>147</sup> Lillian Corti. Op. cit, p. 7.

<sup>148</sup> See Elizabeth Roy. Op. Cit.

<sup>149</sup> See Lorna Hardwick. *The Reception of the Texts and Images of Ancient Greece in Late Twentieth - Century Drama and Poetry in English*. *NOW Magazine*. Vol. 21, no. 32.

learns how 'not to be a hero' and sees in him the incarnation of the transition from the dreams of youth to the disenchantment of adulthood. Many critics notice that in Euripides Jason reduces Medea's tragedy to the desperation of a woman deprived of her bed, giving less importance to the broken bond and to her loneliness. In Lochhead too Jason rationalizes his behaviour for political reasons, paradoxically saying that his decision will bring benefits to Medea and the children. In addition, Lochhead's Jason acquires the quality of the typical 'villain', an egotist who aims at consolidating his own position, a scoundrel who cheats on his partner without scruple. Certainly his dialogue with Medea suits the sex war context mentioned by the Chorus before; the two characters use often obscene and vulgar words that fit the play's 'soap opera' quality and again underline the importance of sex in Lochhead's play:

JASON: ... call me every vile thing that creeps I don't care ...  
I feel bad about it  
although you've brought it on yourself Medea ...  
I'll still care for you ...

MEDEA: ... amazing shamelessness never fails to amaze ...  
... how dare you  
shit on those you say you love and then come visiting?  
first things first I saved your life  
and everybody knows it ...  
I made you Jason! ...  
and here's his wedding present to himself  
rootless penury for his discarded beggar wife and brats ...

JASON: ... excuse me I'd say you got more than gave quite frankly  
dragged from the backwoods to civilisation ...  
to this place where Gods help them they've made  
much of you ...  
my marriage with the princess it's not what you think  
politics not passion what I feel for her is nothing  
to the sweet hot love that once I felt for you!  
calm down it's a good thing potentially listen ...  
what's eating you's the sex thing it's not  
that I've gone off you and fancy fresh young flesh to fuck  
that's crude I'd not have thought you'd have gone  
for such mean and clichéd thoughts Medea ...  
and I don't want more kids ...  
I'll not be nothing nor will our boys be beggars ...

MEDEA: what it is is this a senior statesman  
with a foreign wife a savage I'm an embarrassment  
to you ...

JASON: ... you're a madwoman it'll be the worse for you

MEDEA: go on you're hot for her go mount the cow ... (16–22)

The characterization of Jason as a 'villain' is evident in the 'animal' imagery that describes him, as he is compared to a 'worm' that creeps and Medea equates him to a bull ready to 'mount' Glauke. In McLaren's staging, Beattie mimics the gesture of mounting an animal, thus underlining Jason's vulgarity. Yet, her mimicry and her language also strengthen her own masculine dimension, whose bawdiness is not inferior to Jason's one. In a way, Medea is a villain too, especially as far as her sexual behaviour, that appears to be quite unprejudiced, is concerned. Words as 'sweet hot love', 'young flesh to fuck' and 'mount' convey the idea of a Jason 'seducer': he enjoys sex and would not object to resuming his relationship with Medea. His cynicism weakens therefore his explanation of politics as the only reason for his betrayal. When he says 'sweet hot love', Medea flares up and tries to beat him; he blocks her hands behind her back and keeps her still for a while. His physical domination over her does not hide the impudence of his words, rather it encourages the audience to side with Medea. Although he states that his feelings for Glauke are nothing compared to what he felt for Medea, Lochhead implies that he does not dislike having sex with 'young flesh', as many contemporary men who dump their wives for a younger girl. The first sentence pronounced by Jason, 'it is not what you think', resembles the typical 'modern' answer in films where a husband has to justify his betrayal. In Theatre Babel's production, Jason is a mature man with a beard and a black suit. In fact the three men of the play, Jason, Kreon and the Manservant, all dress in a similar way and are moustached, a choice that does not allow to distinguish clearly among them. Their resemblance may suggest that they share the same attitude towards life: these men, or better men in general, are 'all the same', that is very sensitive to women's sex appeal. The distinction Jason makes between Medea and Glauke follows the split whore / angel so common in the representations of women over the centuries: the 'barbarian' Medea is the woman you can have 'hot sex' with, a woman linked to a wild and irrational world unlike a 'proper' and respectable wife. Glauke, the chaste woman to marry and to have children with, can give him political power.

Not only here but also later on with Glauke, Medea repeats the sentence 'I made you Jason / I made that man' (18 – 25), where the verb 'to make'

alludes to her magic skills and to her ability to literally give birth to people or to make them die. Once again, this sentence presents a 'male gendered' Medea, a woman who expresses herself in a typically 'masculine' idiom. Indeed, she resembles a powerful politician speaking of a pupil who, successful in his career, shows only ungratefulness. She is like a commandant who blames his second-in-command for having deserted him. As in Euripides' play, she lists the dangers they faced and admits that 'passion' and not 'sense' drove her actions then. Above all she underlines, in a very serious and grave tone which contrasts with the one she usually has, her being a poor 'outsider' in a foreign society, a condition her children share with her. While she is 'discarded' and similar to a 'beggar', Jason is a 'statesman' who cannot stand to have a 'savage' and 'foreign' wife; the striking contrast between him, who is 'safe' and happy, and her, who is, as the huge climax points out, 'exiled abandoned and alone', refers again to her situation of refugee. Jason's vulgarity stands out also when he speaks of his children: he explains that he wants to give them 'bossclass brothers' who can best protect them; he implies he can solve Medea's plight by means of cash or letters. Therefore, Lochhead creates a Jason who, far from being a resolute hero or even a bourgeois, common man, is a 'politically incorrect' villain. Caring a lot for his fame, Jason is aware of being popular with women and uses people to reach his aims. He refers to himself as 'captain Jason', pointing out his arrogance, his superiority towards a 'barbarian', his machismo. Since he believes immediately to Medea's 'conversion', when she pretends to accept his decision and gives the children the poisoned presents, Jason is depicted as ingenuous too. Indeed, he makes the audience laugh with his words' ridicule: he says it is natural for 'a passionate woman to get a bit upset' (31), underestimating his ex-wife's pride and otherness. After Glauke's and Kreon's death, Jason runs to Medea's house, in the hope of saving his children from the Corinthians' revenge. As soon as he realises that they are already dead, his tone becomes grave and despairing for the first time during the performance. He expresses his pain and deep disgust of Medea, but cannot avoid referring to sex once again, despite the moment's solemnity:

I wish I had never held you  
a beautiful monster in my arms  
I wish I had never turned to you in the night  
never felt my seed spurt to your foul womb  
never let you give birth  
to this (46)

These last words prevent him from reaching a fully tragic dimension, as they pitylessly highlight Jason's rudeness. They confirm that Jason's patriarchal society considers women as 'beautiful monsters' and inevitably associates their sexuality with something 'foul'.

### **V: The metatheatre as a 'trap'.**

Certainly the ending is the point where the story's tragic aspect is at its height. Yet, its comic quality pervades the play until it has more in common with a 'domestic drama' than with a classical tragedy. Throughout the text, Lochhead inserts many metatheatrical devices; her aim is not only to reveal the fictional aspect of every piece of theatre, but also to play with Medea's myth and the way this myth has always been perceived. Above all the metatheatrical devices contribute to the diminishment of the tragedy: they trap the characters in a role 'already determined', obliging them to fulfil the 'requirements' linked to their names. As I argued previously, Lochhead endows her Medea with a subtle irony, an ability to speak of herself 'in the third person', from a detached point of view. This allows the actress playing Medea's part to draw the audience's attention to the archetypal image of Medea:

clever men are envied ...  
but a clever woman  
fie it is to fly in the face of nature  
an abomination (12)

The name 'Medea' has always meant a wicked and licentious woman, the epitome of the evil 'naturally' connected to women. Jason himself enhances not only Medea's 'bad reputation', insisting on her dangerous cleverness and sensuality, but also every woman's 'bad reputation'. Moreover, he refers to himself and to Medea as 'actors' playing a predetermined part:

first let's not exaggerate your role in my story  
 what you did for me Medea you did it  
 in the first flush of lust for me let's face it ...  
 [you are] a cunning woman passion's puppet ...  
 your cunning your so sexy skills  
 if you were stuck in the sticks would they be sung about?  
 fame matters oh it does to you and me Medea  
 embrace it  
 it's our fate to be sung about not sing! ... (19 / 20)

Whereas cunning has always been a traditional attribute of Medea, her 'so sexy skills' have been underlined mostly by McLaren's staging. The risk of such a choice is to enhance the idea of female sexuality as something 'corrupt' and to show Medea as a 'manipulator' who exploits her sensuality. Despite being just a mediocre man, Jason's concern for 'fame' implies that he still wants to be thought of as a great hero and wants to be 'sung about'. Later on, speaking with Glauke, Medea's words provide the most evident of these metatheatrical devices:

it is always useful  
 to view one's situation from the outside  
 see it from the point of view of the  
 other players in the drama (24)

By means of this speech, Medea strengthens her complicity with the audience, who actually laugh when they hear her words. She implies that Glauke's 'point of view' is untenable and persuades the spectators to side with her. And again, after having decided to kill her children, she does not listen to the Chorus' appeal against infanticide, but prefers to speed up the action:

let's get a move on ladies  
 less talk more action  
 nurse! (28)

These quotations testify to Medea's and Jason's awareness of their 'parts' both in ancient and in contemporary mythology. Their anti-naturalistic attitude stresses the ideological processes through which their representation was built in the past and gave them 'eternal fame'. In particular, Medea's

words state the audience's privileged perspective and openly encourage the spectators to view the dramatic situation 'from the outside'. She advises them to take the different characters' points of view into consideration with a critical and disenchanted eye, without being content with the traditional interpretation given to 'the same old story'. In addition, Medea assumes the role of the play's director, thus taking again a typical male position. She opts for 'less talk' and 'more action' in order to please the contemporary audience and she clearly takes responsibility for what is going to happen. At the end of the play Lochhead's Medea summarizes the multiple identities she, as the model of the 'demonic' woman, was given by the patriarchal society:

tigress? fury? harpy? witch? she wolf?  
    monster?    yes I am!  
 for I have torn out your heart and devoured it. (45)

She fits all these archetypal images of women, since she has bitterly met the expectations linked to her part and to her fame. In McLaren's staging, Jason laments his children's death kneeling on the stage, while the Chorus' women are scattered all around with their heads down, mourning for the three innocent. Medea, haggard and with her hair undone, does not seem majestic anymore, but her figure still occupies the centre stage, amplified by the red screen behind her. While Euripides' play ends with Medea's apotheosis on the Sun's chariot and with Jason's desperation, in Lochhead's play the mutual responsibility of both the father and the mother is underlined:

JASON: children the mother you had  
 MEDEA: children the father you had  
    end of the story  
 JASON: it's over it's all over  
 MEDEA: it will never be over end of the story (46)

It is important to notice that, while in the original tragedy Jason states that a Greek woman would have never done what Medea does, thus emphasizing again Medea's barbarism, Lochhead's Jason does not say anything similar. The play's end stresses the fault of two egocentric parents who accuse each other of negligence towards the children. The problem of Medea's



'otherness' and its link to the Scottish context seems to lose importance. Actually, she is an 'all too human' mother and wife who, as it often happens nowadays, punishes her husband 'by means of' the children, apart from the fact of her foreignness. McLaren's Medea shouts 'It will never be over' at the top of her voice and her cry resembles an echo which resounds over the centuries and which resolutely asserts that the war between men and women, in every time and place, is doomed to last forever. Indeed, Jason and the Chorus repeat their last speeches twice, while the Nurse starts retelling her prologue, as if 'the same old story' were to begin anew. This reiteration is a very clear denial of any catharsis, since the characters of the play, far from being 'purified' by emotions and contrasts, look ready to experience them again. In contrast to the emphasis put on Medea's conscious decision to kill her children, the Chorus's last line asserts a fatalistic view of human life:

what we wish for   work for   plan for   hope for  
                                  think is bound to happen   won't  
                                  what is fated   will  
                                  end of story. (47)

This ending leaves the play open to debate, as it raises questions about man's capability to 'play the game', as Jason expected his children to do (32). The ineluctability of the events, underlined by the metatheatrical devices, questions and even denies Medea's and Jason's capability to determine their parts on life's stage.

## CONCLUSION

As the analysis of both text and performance shows, the three plays share important features but also significantly differ in their main concern. While the dissertation ideally set out with an idea of revision as 'seeing afresh', the detailed study of the three works testifies to a somehow surprising gap between the playwrights' intents and artistic choices. The analysis of *Medea* concerns the artistic choices made by a particular director and his theatre company, while that of *The Love of the Nightingale* and *Phaedra's Love* consist of my own interpretation of the two scripts and are therefore more literary than dramaturgical. Although *The Love of the Nightingale* and *Medea* have been examined by means of different approaches, the former through a close textual reading, the latter through a performance-based one, the comparison between Wertenbaker and Lochhead leads to the discovery of some significant common points. On the contrary, the textual interpretation of *Phaedra's Love* brings forth more problematic conclusions. Indeed, *The Love of the Nightingale* and *Medea* focus on the heroine's experience, the former recovering a supposedly 'female' voice that disappeared with the loss of Sophocles' *Tereus*, the latter welcoming Euripides' legacy and amplifying its 'feminist' potential. Kane's play, however, decreases the resoluteness and boldness with which Seneca endowed his Phaedra, opting for the much more detailed depiction of a male character. Thanks to the absence of a full-form theatrical precursor, Wertenbaker freely disposes of her imagination and successfully 'manipulates' the old myth for her own communicative purposes. Apart from the introduction of Glauke in the plot, Lochhead decides to keep faithful to Euripides' structure, following the Greek layout for the events and the speeches. On the contrary, Kane rearranges the spatial dynamics of the Senecan drama, diminishing Phaedra's range of movement, while returning the heroine's responses to Euripides' shame culture. Effectively giving them the opportunity to 'awaken from death', Wertenbaker allows Philomele, Procne, Niobe and the Female Chorus' women to play on the stage for the first time and to expose their social and linguistic plight. Phaedra and Medea, two figures often 'revised' by various artists throughout

the ages, cannot properly be considered 'sleepwalkers'. Actually, the popularity of their stories is likely to influence the audience's reception of Kane's and Lochhead's rewriting: since the spectators might compare the new versions with others previously seen, they also might be biased in their response to them.

In consideration of the gender dynamics that affect the plays, a remarkable distance separates Philomele and Medea from Phaedra, while the male characters overall share similar features. Lochhead's heroine is a seductive middle-aged woman who subdues the other characters thanks to her physical and linguistic predominance. She and Jason behave in a similar way, often using the same bawdy language and gross gestures. The view might be that Medea is gendered 'female' because of her emotional suffering inside a sex war context, as well as 'male' through her at times obscene words and actions. Philomele and Procne have 'masculine' features too, since they challenge the 'male' connotation of different spaces and activities by means of their 'dissident' presence. Indeed, the two cultured sisters profitably use traditionally 'male' tools, such as the dialectics or theatre, for their own ends. At the same time, Philomele and the Female Chorus oppose the patriarchal system with an 'alternative' language, though their attempt is not always successful. Whereas Medea is onstage almost from the beginning till the end of the performance, concretely becoming the centre of the play, the greater number of 'important' characters in *The Love of the Nightingale* contributes to an interesting polyphony of voices and to a much more varied setting. The sex scenes in the three plays work firmly to enlarge the gap between Medea and Philomele on the one side and Phaedra on the other. Kane's heroine never questions the predominantly 'male' configuration of the play's space, whose centre is mostly occupied by Hippolytus. Phaedra coyly begins the seduction of the Prince, but she is immediately subjugated by the pushiness of his movements and words, that will lead her to commit suicide. Both Hippolytus and Theseus resemble executioners who cruelly torture their 'female' victims. They abuse Phaedra and Strophe psychologically and physically, handling a despotic socio-political power symbolised by the predominance of the royal palace as the almost sole setting. On the contrary, Philomele and Procne lead one seduction scene each, resolutely approaching

the object of their desire and overtly revealing their feelings. Tereus hinders the two sisters' movements, killing the Captain in the first case and rejecting Procne in the second, but the boldness of their actions remain. Similarly, Lochhead's Medea seduces the three men of the play and relies on her sex appeal to get what she needs from them. Yet, her gestures occur in a public rather than a personal level, since Medea is mainly a foreigner in danger of political exile. The male characters in *Phaedra's Love* and *The Love of the Nightingale* feature the same brutality, while Jason is depicted more as a rascal who searches for political benefits. Significantly, the heroines avenge themselves on the male characters by concretely killing their sons or implicitly causing their death, as in Phaedra's case. They all set their personal revenge above the presumed 'natural' love a mother owes to her children, questioning a 'male' and unjust power by depriving it of its political succession.

Dealing with classical myth, the three playwrights have the opportunity to tackle issues whose importance lies in both a private and a public sphere. In Wertenbaker the transition from the personal, represented by Philomele's rape and silencing, to the political, symbolised by the use she makes of theatre, is clearly visible. Lochhead blends the two realms together for most of her play, since Medea's personal story epitomises women's as well as the exiles' or the Jews' plight. In *Phaedra's Love* Kane combines the two aspects by emphasizing the royalty of the main characters, whose 'public' function culminates in Hippolytus' final lynching. However, the three works differ as to their 'cultural' and 'linguistic' approach to myth. In both Lochhead and Kane a comic and domestic tune plays a very important part. *Medea* and *Phaedra's Love* tame the haughtiness and historical distance of myth by relocating it in a recognizable 'modern' context, whereas Wertenbaker's more solemn idiom and the enhancement of 'ancient' dramaturgic elements work to preserve the authority of myth. At the same time, the Choruses' reflection upon the nature and value of myth and language prompts the audience itself to interrogate the meaning of the past socio-cultural legacy. Wertenbaker feels neither the need to dampen myth's echo nor to lower its disturbing content, reputing the 'unwanted truth' of myth as fundamental to our times as it once was. Certainly Lochhead and Kane agree with

Wertenbaker about the prescient and universal value of myth, nonetheless they seem to make the fabric of myth more 'familiar' to the spectators, by 'updating' its language and historical context. Furthermore, this device unmistakably points out their political target, as it profitably exposes some weighty shortcomings of modern society. Lochhead's linguistic choice clearly tests the 'credibility' of Scottish as a tyrannical idiom and questions the openness and tolerance of her own supposedly 'friendly' society. Lochhead's Scottishness and Wertenbaker's Basque background influence both writers to explore the tragic outcome of 'violence against language'. Actually, the silencing of Scots under English rule might have brought about an intolerant Scottish society that, at least in Lochhead's *Medea*, is unable to welcome foreigners and to sympathise with their plight. Likewise, violence brutally erupts because of the silencing of language both in the Basque country and in *The Love of the Nightingale*. Kane too draws a disquieting comparison between the ancient Royal Family and the English one, highlighting some common points between Phaedra's and Princess Diana's death and using a language that at times reminds us of recent 'sexual' scandals. Kane strongly criticises the hysteria that surrounds the Royals, exposing both the press' and the people's morbidity towards them. However, the way Kane portrays a noble but dysfunctional family increasingly reduces the prestige and aloofness of myth. In particular, rather than being a Queen proud of her mythical extraction, Phaedra is a caring mother and a frail woman enslaved to her stepson's personality. On the contrary, the presence of the Nurse and of female companions testifies to Procne's and Philomele's royalty, a position also shown by their 'uncommon' culture. Similarly, the Nurse and the Manservant in *Medea* suggest the royal lineage of the heroine, whose outstanding personality is also conveyed through her histrionic charm and overshadowing physique. Lochhead too relieves her play of the gravity of myth, resorting to comic language and gestures that partially lighten the traditional solemnity of characters such as Medea and Jason. Lochhead's and Kane's similar approach underlines the topicality of myth on the one side and its problematic character on the other. Actually, the comic and the domesticity of *Medea* and *Phaedra's Love* may imply that contemporary

audiences are no longer used to facing issues as disturbing as those myth deals with without the mediation of the playwright's relief.

The 'visual tackling' of rape and murder significantly differs in the three works. Following the custom of Greek theatre, Lochhead decides not to show violence at all, leaving the account of Kreon's and Glauke's death to the Manservant and referring to Medea's infanticide exclusively through the red of the stage and the repeated toll of a bell. *Medea's* relationship with the audience takes two different shapes, carried on by Medea on the one side and by the Chorus and the Nurse on the other. Though she does not directly speak to them, in McLaren's staging Medea often seeks the spectators' plaudit and easily rouses their amused response to Jason's implausibility. At the same time, the presence of the Nurse and of the cross-gendered Chorus again multiplies the audience's point of view. Actually, the Nurse silently watches most of the play sitting on a chair, while the Chorus actively interacts with Medea, unable, however, to persuade her not to kill her children. Significantly, Lochhead renders the Chorus increasingly silent as the tragic end approaches, thus prodding and testing the real audience's attitude towards the events. Wertenbaker subtly deals with violence and its eruption, at first hiding and then doubling the numerous episodes of brutality.<sup>150</sup> Rape and mutilation happen offstage the first time, but are theatrically re-enacted by Philomele's life-size dolls. Likewise, Itys' murder 'concretely' takes place inside the royal palace, hidden from the spectators' gaze. It is then re-performed by the characters when the Female Chorus lifts up the curtains and shows the audience the consequences of silencing. Therefore, *The Love of the Nightingale* does not refrain from displaying violence, yet chooses to frame it with alienating devices. Consciously juxtaposing the 'real' action and its theatrical duplicate, Wertenbaker places violence at a certain distance from the audience. Delaying the moments of 'visible' brutality on the stage, the play partially 'protects' the spectators from violence as well as questions their reaction to it. Mirrored by the two Choruses, by the audience during

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<sup>150</sup> However, the Captain's death at Tereus' hand is fully shown onstage. While a 'visual discretion' surrounds violence against a female body (Philomele's) and against the young body of a boy (Itys'), brutality versus an adult male body seems to be less 'disturbing' and more 'acceptable'.

*Hippolytos*' performance and by the crowd that watches Philomele's dolls' show, the real audience sees its own 'role' variously performed. Thus having the opportunity to meditate on their behaviour in the theatre, the spectators can choose whether to engage with what they experience or to remain silent and untouched as the many fictitious audiences do. Removing the Chorus from her revision, Kane deprives it of a 'collective' presence with which the audience may or may not identify itself. Enclosed in a small and oppressive space, Kane's play seems at first still endowed with a 'fourth wall' that discourages the spectators' involvement. Yet, some of the actors move directly from the stalls onto the stage and in the final scene some spectators take part in *Hippolytus*' stoning. Whereas the first part mostly shows psychological violence and hides Phaedra's suicide from the 'public' gaze, the last scene blasts the spectators with a disconcerting physical brutality that comprises rape against a woman, dismemberment of a male body (*Hippolytus*') and also, in Theseus' case, self-mutilation. Therefore, not only does Kane multiply the vicious elements of the original myth, she also overtly underlines the audience's voyeuristic as well as 'concrete' complicity with violence. Interestingly, the audience's reaction to rape is similar in *The Love of the Nightingale* and in *Phaedra's Love*, as the stage directions remark. Indeed, the Bacchae and the crowd laugh when the puppets perform Philomele's rape, exactly as the mob does when Theseus abuses Strophe. Both plays criticise therefore the audience's inadequate response to rape; through the multiplication of the audiences, they point out the spectators' complicity with violence and their silent and passive reaction to it. Lochhead does the same with the increasingly speechless Chorus and with the immobile Nurse. Yet, the different way in which Kane and Wertenbaker show violence against women also plays a determining role. While Phaedra's suicide happens offstage, the violence which *Hippolytus* and Theseus perform against Phaedra's and Strophe's bodies is dreadfully visible. Objectifying the female body in front of the audience, Kane depicts gender dynamics in a traditional way, showing men who fully and despotically dispose of it. On the contrary, Wertenbaker avoids victimizing the female body and represents it with the mediation of puppets that arrange a more balanced and unbiased space for the audience's judgement of the events.

The metatheatrical devices play a very important part in the three works. Perhaps because classical myth probably found its best expression in Greek theatre, the use of theatre and its possibilities accumulates also in the revisions. This occurs especially towards the end of the performance, when the plays draw a 'conclusion' about their main issues. Medea becomes the director of her story and Jason displays a very self-conscious attitude about their being 'famous characters'. Wertenbaker constantly multiplies the stages upon which central and marginal characters act, playing with a variety of perspectives and juxtaposing the notions of 'real' and 'fake' events. Kane's work turns more theatrical in the last scene, operating a sort of sacred ceremony on the stage and actively involving actors and spectators in it. The plays have a very self-conscious dimension, since they constantly overlap 'reality' and 'fiction' and increasingly stimulate the audience's reflection upon its own role inside the theatre. At the same time, the theatricality increasingly reduces the characters' range of action, stressing the 'mechanical' and 'automatic' peculiarity of their behaviour. Indeed, apart from a few changes in the plot, the plays follow the ancient pattern of the myths and re-enact their brutal ending. Although the reasons behind violence may differ from those working in the classical model, murder and suicide still play a central part in the new versions. Philomele and Procne, Medea and Phaedra are located inside a world which contemplates very little volition and does not reject violence. The theatricality underlines therefore the inevitability of the bloody endings and foresees the reiteration of future violence. While the final metamorphosis partially 'purifies' the brutality of the events in *The Love of the Nightingale*, Kane's last scene emphasises the disquieting presence of violence in modern society, rather than suggesting a way to uproot it. Furthermore, Lochhead's play denies any final catharsis, stating that the story narrated by its myth 'will never be over'. Therefore, the revisionist mythmaking carried out by Wertenbaker, Kane and Lochhead testifies to the still crucial relevance of myth, while at the same time suggesting its resistance to change. Regardless of the degree of 'irreverence' shown by the three plays, the persistent authority of myth seems to discourage a too dissident approach and to hinder a radical overturning of its contents.



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