Performing Gender and Violence in Contemporary Transnational Contexts

Edited by Maria Anita Stefanelli
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MAKING VISIBLE
Theatrical Form as Metaphor:
Marina Carr and Caryl Churchill

by Cathy Leeney

In this moment of feminism and post-feminism, one is conscious that women and men, globally, occupy vastly different realms of experience, different possibilities of becoming a person, and what that might mean. The contest for equal human rights for women and men is complicated in our contemporary moment by urgent issues of environment, economy and technology. As the planet toils under the weight of our demands as a species, inequalities between genders, classes and races occupy a shared context of profound changes in human expectations and behaviour caused by the impact of technology and the material prosperity of the favoured few. Gender and violence ground these situations of inequality while the relatively privileged struggle to understand and undo their entrapment in the power structures of globalization, information communication technology, and overweening materialism. Women and men are kept in place in a whirligig of consumption of both goods and information.

While playwrights Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr have written important work exploring women’s struggle, as Portia Coughlan puts it, ‘to enter the world and stay in it’ (255), and the price that is paid for such a chance, both women are also visionaries in our present time, creating theatre that captures a quality of experience that feels at once accurate, and yet surprising, sometimes shocking and destabilizing. This aspect of their work affirms them as key figures in contemporary theatre. Recent plays from both authors have certain elements that overlap, that draw their work into relation,
not as a question of likeness, but in their ability to expose the un-
examined assumptions that ground how we live, what hurts us, and
what we long for. Both have, more recently, created plays that are
coolly passionate, that are emotionally urgent and yet still a catalyst
for reflection and recognition: Caryl Churchill’s *Love and Information*

I will argue that a crucial aspect of the meanings of the plays
arises through their form, rather than through the more conventional
categories of character and thematic dialogue, although in both cases
character and narrative operate powerfully in support. In this sense
both plays experiment with dramaturgy in order to disrupt audience
expectations, to unpick easy judgements and strip away accretions of
cliché. These experiments in form lead, in Heidegger’s word, to
‘deconcealing’ (38); theatrical transformation occurs at the level of
the framework of the play, as opposed to at the level of an individual
character or group.

The philosopher of science Robert Crease has applied the
concept of ‘performance’ to what he calls the theatre of scientific
discovery. By doing so he connects science with theatre through the
notion of performance: scientific experiment is a kind of perfor-
mance. He defines scientific experiments as “unique events in the
world undertaken for the purpose of allowing something to be seen.
What comes to be seen is not something unique and peculiar to that
event, but something that can also be seen in similar performances in
other contexts…” (Crease 96). In relation to theatrical performance
then, Crease’s idea emphasizes how the play as a structure, as an
event viewed by the audience, uncovers something and allows it to be
examined. By drawing this parallel between the artist and the
scientist, Crease argues for a re-conception of what scientific enquiry
is, but if we reverse the relationship, and link the procedures of
experimentation in the sciences back into the arts through the idea of
performance as an experimental method, Crease also offers us a
refreshed aspect of theatrical performance. I would like to extend
this reversal of his idea so that the qualities he finds common to the
procedures of art and science are reflected back onto theatre art, to
see how the theatre of scientific experiment illuminates (again) the
play and its performance for audiences.

Crease defines performance as a presentation of an action, an
action related to a representation (using a semiotic system, text,
scenic space, scenography). It has the power “to coax into being
something which has not previously appeared [...] it is action at the limit of the already controlled and understood; it is risk”. The audience perhaps “recognises new phenomena in it” (100). Bert O. States observes that while scientists find experimental methods, artists find metaphors to test their ideas (23). Where the scientist employs laboratory equipment for experimentation, the maker of theatre uses the machinery of representation on stage and the metaphorical and metonymic relationships between representational elements to test and define. I am using States’s notion of metaphor in its broadest theatrical definition, to include metaphorical images in the language, as well as how actions and exchanges on stage may present a metaphorical image of social or emotional states of being.

Experiments and performances require observers and Crease comments on the role of the scientific audience: “properly preparing and viewing performances requires a detached attitude, one interested in seeing what is happening for its own sake rather than for some practical end”. Crease continues, saying that this detachment allows for “a deepened and enriched understanding of the world and our engagement with it” (96). So Crease suggests that, in the theatre, disengagement is valuable, creating perhaps a dynamic energy that counters empathy.

In Irish theatre tradition, W.B. Yeats was interested in how a theatre audience moves from emotional involvement, absorption, trance or empathy with the performance, to detachment, reflection, and meditation. Richard Kearney, following Ricoeur, talks about the same element, describing it as “aesthetic distance from which to view the events unfolding, thereby discerning ‘the hidden cause of things’”. Kearney notes how “this curious conflation of empathy and detachment produces in us [...] the double vision necessary for a journey beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being” (12-13). I am emphasizing this idea of detachment as a way of considering the cool quality of the plays I will briefly discuss. The dramaturgies in both Marble and Love and Information collapse ends into means, as the structures of the plays work to disturb and interrupt audience empathy.
Valentina Rapetti Interviews Marina Carr

MR Thinking about this interview and looking back at your career and achievements, I suddenly realized that you have been writing professionally for a quarter century now, which is impressive.

MC I am old!

VR I didn’t mean to be rude, but I had to say it, because twenty five years is a considerable amount of time.

MC I have never had a proper job in my life.

VR What is it that keeps you going? How challenging is it to keep on going on such a long creative journey, to explore new narratives, structures, characters; to approach time and space in different ways and to constantly renew one’s approach, one’s perspective on things?

MC Well, I suppose having, as you said, been writing for a quarter of a century, I spend a lot of time now just trying to live – and avoid writing until I just can’t put it off anymore. When you have written a lot, and there’s something about getting older, and the more you have lived. I think Wilde said – and I am paraphrasing now – that when he was younger he sat and he wrote and he understood nothing and now that he understood everything he couldn’t write. Now, I do not feel remotely like that, but I do think that the older you get the more you know, and it is almost as if it becomes shorthand. Things that you were passionate about when you were twenty-two, twenty-three you are not passionate about at thirty-two, thirty-three or forty-two, forty-three or forty-nine and a half. It is a completely different set of interests. Also, I think with time, there is a sense of accretion. You know, they say when you are putting on a
Interview with Marina Carr

play you should always follow the seasons. I think I follow the seasons, in a way; this is certainly my intention. I write about things that I find disturbing and that I need to figure out. There are points in one’s life, there are times of great confusion, when I think it is better not to write but just to try to figure out what it is. And read great books and drink great wine and try to be good with your children and your husband and all that sort of thing; and then I think there is a time to write. I don’t know if that answered your question.

VR

You started writing professionally in the late Eighties. Your first plays, *Ullaloo* and *Low in the Dark*, are usually referred to by critics as absurdist plays. Then came the so-called Midlands cycle which includes *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats*, *On Raftery’s Hill* and *Ariel*. All of these plays are set in rural Ireland and have resonances with classical tragedies and myths. They are written in Hiberno-English and explore issues of both national and gender identity, memory, violence, death, the supernatural and the afterlife. More recently you have written three chamber plays: *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006), *The Cordelia Dream* (2008), and *Marble* (2009). In 2011, *16 Possible Glimpses*, a play based on the life of Anton Chekhov, premiered at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin. Then you moved back to Greek myth with *Phaedra Backwards*. Is there a central thread in your writing? Can you trace different phases in your work as most critics seem to do?

MC

Well, the short answer is no. I leave that up to the critics, but I suppose there are themes that interest me. Not that I would ever think in terms of that, because I think when you are writing something, well, for me anyway, I have a very practical approach to writing. It is to get to the end of the page, to the end of the scene, it is trying to figure out. At its best, it’s chasing your characters by the tail, almost at its best, and it does not happen very often. At best, I think, you generally do not know what it is that you have written until it is written. And it’s almost as if someone else comes along and explains to you what you have written. I’m talking about a goal that happens maybe two, three times, maybe once in a decade. The rest of the time it is the job of writing, it is digging, it is excavation, it is rewriting. As for the themes thing, as you are aware, I am fascinated by the Greek stories. I am absolutely no expert, I am not a Greek scholar, I just love the stories: they are archetypal, huge, huge stories and I think
Valentina Rapetti

they are there. As Roberto Calasso says, at the beginning of The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony, quoting Sallust: “These things never happened, but are always”. And I think what a wonderful definition for myth and all of these stories. They are there for all of us, I think, to take from and to keep reinventing, to use, to understand what it is to be here, to try and make sense – and for me being very practical and a magpie. And it is the job of a playwright. These stories are there to be reworked and used.

VR  How long does it usually take you to write a play? Do you work at different things at the same time?

MC  Yes, I would have a couple of things going on at the same time. The writing takes a minimum two years. For example, the play on Chekhov, 16 Possible Glimpses, took about nine years, because I was just so dissatisfied with everything I wrote about him. I eventually figured out something, but that was unusually long. Generally about two years, four drafts. As a kind of rule of thumb, I would do four drafts, but I would finish a draft of one thing and then start another thing. In this kind of circular way.

VR  How much are you typically involved in the staging process of your plays? Do you like being involved during rehearsals or do you just let the play go once it is written? Does the staging process affect your writing in any way? I mean, has it ever occurred to you to change a line or the structure of a scene after a rehearsal session, a reading with the actors or a conversation with the director?

MC  Yes. If it is a new play I would be as involved as I am allowed. Sometimes it depends on your relationship with the director. If you can have a decent conversation, very often I have that privilege, but sometimes I have not got on so well with directors. Some directors, you know, they like their playwrights either dead or absent, so you know you are dealing with that, and then you have some directors who are open. I also believe there is a time when the writer has to withdraw from the rehearsal room. But I think particularly with the new work, because it is so untested and nobody really knows what it is about and what it means, I think that it is helpful if the writer is there some of the time, just for emphasis on certain things. And then I think once the play has had its first
VR  So, you don’t keep working on it? Once it is over, it is over.

MC  No, once it is done, it is done.

VR  We are here today to discuss the place of gender and violence in contemporary theatre by women playwrights writing from different cultural contexts and perspectives. Could you tell us what place, and how much space, these two issues occupy in your work? The emphasis on certain female characters in some of your plays, the focus on the theme of violence itself, are these things intentional, or did they just happen to you during the creative process? In other words, where do you start from when you begin writing a new play? Do you start from a character, a situation, an image, a plot, a particular theme you want to explore?

MC  Well, it is different every time. Seeing that this conference is on gender and violence I was looking at your questions over the last few days, and I was trying to think. I mean, in a sense this is a fantastic umbrella for a conference, because these issues are unavoidable. Gender is unavoidable and violence is unavoidable. So, you are covering all the bases, in a way. I do not intentionally set out to deal with gender or violence, but I think by their existence, by their definition, they just seem to be there. When I write absolutely normal scenes and then people come up afterwards and say, “That is really perverse” or “that is so far out there” I am always shocked and amazed at what they consider functionality or dysfunctionality, because I have to say I have yet to meet a functional person. I think we are all walking dysfunctional and desperately trying to disguise and appear, and put our best foot forward. Of the ninety-five million voices in here we generally express the one that is simplest, and that we think is going to be the most acceptable. And generally that voice is the voice that people will actually like you for; if you speak and behave in a certain way, then you will have approval and this is the way we are all brought up. The whole idea of violence is fascinating. Language is violence. Language coming out of women’s mouths has violence. That always fascinates me, because a woman saying something is threatening and this fear around the articulation of women I
think it’s the balls, it is our defence. Because physically we are never going to be top of the heap we happen to be in – we do not have that strength – I think. Nothing happens where the wheel turns, as Eliot says, but I think this last couple of millennia have not been great for old women, not since the Bronze Age, but maybe it will come back around. But until then I think our great defence is our capacity to articulate very finely all the emotions, and this is threatening for a lot of people, not just for men. I think it is threatening for other women, it is threatening to ourselves. I think women are constantly policing themselves around violence, around gender, around language and around this whole discourse. I think it is almost impossible to have an honest conversation around these subjects; that is what I feel. Whenever you open your mouth you are going to annoy everybody and life is too short to be annoying everybody. I am constantly saying I am going to shut up, which I am going to do now!

VR  Is reading an important part of your creative process? How much time do you devote to reading and how much time do you spend on writing in your daily routine?

MC  Well, the last couple of months not so much because I have been teaching to make some money. When I am working, three hours in the morning would be the maximum if it is a new thing. I feel tired after three hours – that is as much as I will do. Even if I had the whole day to myself I would not spend it writing. I would read all day and all night – I often read myself blind; poetry, Shakespeare, fiction. Music is another huge influence; painting is a huge thing. Basically filling up all the senses and then you see a lot comes out. Harold Bloom said that all art is just misinterpretation of the art that has come before you. You take something, you try and copy it and you get it desperately wrong and this is called whatever.

VR  What are, or have been, your recurrent sources of inspiration when it comes to books and authors? I dare say that Shakespeare and the Greeks have certainly been a constant point of reference in your work. Are there other writers you go back to with pleasure? And could you tell us something more about your fascination with Anton Chekhov, the man and the playwright, or the man first and then the playwright?
MC I was fascinated by him because, well, he was dead at forty-four, tuberculosis or consumption. Before penicillin that is what happened, everyone died – one of the good things about this century is that we have penicillin. What fascinated me about him was what he achieved in such a short time, but also the humanity of the man. I mean, writers are generally not people you would look up to for moral guidance, but I think he was an exception. I think he had a civic conscience, something that I certainly like. I think it is a civic responsibility, a civic conscience to actually have the capacity to think so largely outside one’s self and one’s own selfish concerns; I think he had that in spades. He built schools, hospitals, he was always saving people’s lives, he wrote four hundred stories and he wrote between fifteen and twenty plays (I cannot remember how many). He looked after his family, he had all these passionate love affairs, he married Olga Knipper, though it was not a love marriage. He lost the great love of his life, Lika Mizinova. Just a fascinating life and then to realize, because he was a doctor, he would be taken out at forty four. He knew all of this and then his absolute denial of it: I am not sick, I am not sick, I am perfectly healthy. And I think that is what allowed him to live for so long, but he actually denied it. He travelled across Siberia, basically 3,000 miles, 6,000 miles across Russia, crossed Lake Baikal to this penal colony, Sakhalin, and he did a survey on all the convicts there, their families, their children. He wrote a 1,000-page book on it. He was a passionate fisherman, he loved his vodka, his dogs. Just the energy, the sheer love of life, the sheer exuberance. And part of why I wanted to write about him was, I don’t know how Chekhov is presented over here, but at home he is portrayed like this fellow who is like a hundred and fifty five who never had an erotic thought in his life. And he kind of belongs to all these old men of letters in Ireland and England. When I wrote the play there were an awful lot of people who were really annoyed that I dared write about Chekhov. Who was I to even think about going near this icon who they turn into this whole fuddy-duddy, but I said no, actually he was not. Actually by the time the play finally got on, I was older than he was when he died. Think about the idea of dying that young and this whole thing, all of his life never wanting to be married and then finally he married a woman he did not love. Then this obsession towards the end of his life about having a child, when the great love of his life had a child with his best friend – and just did it to get back at him because he would not commit to her. You see all this kind of
Life and death, male and female, straight and gay, free and locked in, beautiful and plain, criminal and victim, strong and weak, real and fictional. These are only some of the virtually endless dualities dramatically presented by Raquel Almazan’s play La Paloma Prisoner, recipient of the 2015 Arthur J. Harris Memorial Prize. Indeed, what is most intriguing, is that the play also investigates what is between all these opposites, what lies on the border between self and other, what does not belong to either extreme but in some deep way entails both.

The figure of a serial-killer who in turn kills sex criminals immediately looms large in the play, in more ways than one. For those who know the American television series Dexter, this is familiar ground. Still, like the playwright herself said, the fact that we have a woman committing violence against the abusers is a revolutionary concept. It is not as simple as it sounds, and we are not only witnessing a tale of revenge. The whole play is suffused with a karmalike feeling of energies being redirected in the universe. The dead “talk back” to the living and things never seem to be settled once and for all: issues stay open, problems are not easily or simplistically solved. Quite the opposite, some events keep occurring time and time again, giving the play a mythic dimension, which is also present in other plays by Almazan (“Time is not measured in hours, we must behave with nature’s elements to tell us time. Each day has a spirit…” Café) ¹.

¹ For Café, see: <http://raquelalmazan.com/cafe/> Web December 2,
Interestingly enough, theatre seems to be the most effective genre for the denunciation of violence. Still today, so many centuries after the theories of catharsis were first applied to the violent emotions of performance by Aristotle, the stage turns into a microcosm of society and when the audience witnesses these acts they become aware of its presence in society at large. Furthermore, instead of freezing the denunciation into a single work of art, the mythic repetition reverberates it into a cosmic and timeless cycle, as well as into the here and now of our own experiences. This idea has a powerful dramatization when one of the convicts in *La Paloma* dies of childbirth and the other women give flowers to members of the audience, crashing the frontier between the act of denunciation and the world it speaks of. With this gesture one more boundary is trespassed and it is more revealing as it is a double “escape”: from the confinement of a jail – where the play takes place – and from the constrictions of a fictional work of art.

Life is therefore a matter of balancing between opposites, finding that delicate equilibrium that makes sense out of existence. Balancing and counterbalancing the evil is an open question around which the whole play revolves. La Paloma has superpowers, with which she kills men outside or even inside the jail – or so it seems. She’s in love with the youngest inmate, a girl aptly named Oro, personification of ancient princesses, embodiment of the City of Gold the *conquistadores* were looking for in the land of Colombia. Paloma is so strong that she can kill, but she also decides to love, and her love has the same strength, the same power, the same intensity that causes horrific deaths. It is just as strong and powerful. In the first scene she presents herself with the disturbing doubleness of love and death. “They call me Paloma because I’m gentle and I only want peace, flying to other dimensions”, she says. But she also warns: “I can destroy too”.

Destruction is also in the hands of Soliar, the FARC leader in love with her machine-gun, who dreams of her son and of a land free of the “Capitalist Gringo Control”. The political undercurrent of the

play flows freely and vehemently through the voices of most characters, but it is stronger and clearer in Soliar’s. She claims that she was honorable in her work, though she failed her task of killing the President of Colombia with a bomb. She applies what is one of the recurring approaches in the play, that of a double soul: compassion and cruelty, compassion towards the FARC captives, but, as Marilyn says, since she was one of them, “compassion of the devil kind!” Still, the almost naive ideal of political change is revealed by Soliar herself, who speaks of a dying hope, “the hope of ending five hundred years of brutal colonialism”.

The play is mesmerizingly made up of the past and present stories of all the convicts, what brought them there, their dreams, their desires, their innermost thoughts and feelings turned into pure theatre, through props, sound and space relations (and choreographies, as Almazan makes abundant use of dance in her plays and maintains that “we must question the very logic of movement itself in its current form”). The first story Paloma tells, that of playing with bread dough when she was little, making female figures out of the paste, has strong sexual and sensual overtones, as the softness of the dough and its sweet taste remind Paloma of a woman’s body and of her skin. Her relationship with Oro is marked by the sweetness of revelation for the younger woman, as the older one acquires protective and reassuring powers. These powers are not enough, though, to keep Oro alive. They only last for the fleeting time of the dramatized action, for tragedy strikes the inmates with the double death of mother and child.

Birth and death, as well as life and death are parallel features of the same life cycle and therefore are very strongly connected. After the death of Oro and of her baby, all the women together find new strength in a process of transition. “A continuation”, reads the stage direction in Scene 14: “Music changes to salsa. The passage from death to rebirth”. They respond to tragedy with the apparent superficiality of self-esteem provided by beauty. And with the mixture of holy and trash that is typical of some Latino cultures.

“AAAhh Colombia. You drag us down deeper. – And I put on a new dress”, say the women. “You tell me I’ve wronged, and I paint my toenails. Ay Colombia, You take my life and I make a new life. I can still smile and laugh from the gut. And cry the names of children yet to be born in you Colombia”.

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Joan of Arc is one of the most thoroughly documented and well-known figures of the fifteenth century: a national hero in France, she is typically portrayed as the divinely led peasant girl who donned men’s clothes, mounted a horse and guided an army. As historical records indicate, after bravely fighting for God, the French king Charles VII, and the military, Joan of Arc was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake by the English on May 30, 1431, when she was only nineteen. Following a long process of rehabilitation started in 1450, the Catholic Church finally canonized her as a saint in 1920.

Several playwrights have written about her (Bernard Shaw, Jean Anouihl, Charles Péguy, and Paul Claudel, among others), and, since the fifteenth century, Joan of Arc has inspired poets, prose writers, historians, composers, and, in more recent times, film directors. However, in most of these representations, her story ends at the stake. Carolyn Gage wanted to do something different. In her blog she writes: “In my play […] the stake is in the past. We are looking to the future” (Gage, “Saving Mr. Disney”). In her introduction to the play, she also states: “I wanted to create a character who could transform shame into pride, self-doubt into militant conviction, and self-hate into blazing anger at a system that is bent on turning women against ourselves and against each other” (Gage, Second Coming xiv). Thus, Gage’s Joan returns to share her story with contemporary women. She has become “an empassioned survivor” bent on recruiting her audience to the cause of women’s liberation and
redeeming their collective and historic pain (*Second Coming* 3). In this play, observing that for female characters marriage or death have been the options for too long, Joan self-reflexively raises the question of “*what is the happy ending for women? [...] Is there some happy ending for us that doesn’t call for our total spiritual annihilation?” (10-11). Rewriting Joan’s story, Gage asks us to read beyond the ending, following her in her ongoing search for new forms of representation 1.

*The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* was written in 1987, marking a turning point in Carolyn Gage’s personal and professional life. It was her “manifesto” as well as her “tribute to all the women […] she knew who had ever been raped” (xiii). The show was also “a recruitment speech”, conceived at a time in which Gage had begun to realize that her lifework lay in the field of women’s theatre, and that she “was going to need to organize [her] own theatre, train [her] own actors, attract and cultivate [her] own audiences, publish and produce [her] own work, […] and generate radically new archetypes and paradigms in [her] plays” (xiii) 2.

*The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* is a one-woman show in which Joan of Arc is portrayed as a teenage lesbian cross-dressing runaway who returns from the grave to voice a radical feminist critique of the betrayals she experienced with the highest levels of the church, state, and military. In dealing with a historical character that has reached mythic proportions, *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* foregrounds the necessity for women to probe the so-called facts of history. At the beginning of the play, the reliability of historical accounts is questioned by the protagonist, who disclaims the way she has been represented in the collective imagination. She is determined to redress the mistakes of history – all the things about her life that in five hundred years, as she says, “got lost in the translation” (7). She begins by stating that her name is not Joan but Jeanne.

1 As Janet Brown remarks, “[i]n feminist drama, this struggle to find new stories and new forms in which to tell these stories must necessarily be central” (163).

2 Linda Hart points out that theatre is a particularly effective (although risky) literary genre for bringing the silenced to speech: “As a form, the drama is more public and social than the other literary arts. […] The theatre is the sphere most removed from the confines of domesticity, thus the woman who ventures to be heard in this space takes a greater risk than the woman poet or novelist, but it may also offer her greater potential for effecting social change” (2).
TURNING MUTENESS INTO PERFORMANCE
IN ERIN SHIELDS’ IF WE WERE BIRDS

by Maria Anita Stefanelli

Now, these things never happened,
but are always
Sallust, Of Gods and of the World

I imagined women lying in their backs whilst being raped, looking up at the sky, longing to fly up with the birds. Then after the act, having been transformed by the trauma they had endured, actually flying above reality as birds above the earth. Trauma does transform. A part of the self will always fly above.

Erin Shields

Inspired by Book VI of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Erin Shields’ If We Were Birds focuses on a myth that the playwright takes as the source of war crimes currently perpetrated on women, children, and civilians 1. The re-writing of the violent Procne-Philomela-Tereus episode – often revisited by poets, novelists, and playwrights over the centuries – is interspersed with memories and comments by female characters representing “all those women who survived the unspeakable and still continue to fly” (IWWB 5). To “all those women” Shields dedicates her work.

1 Henceforth all references to Erin Shields’ If We Were Birds (first produced at the Tarragon Theatre, in association with Groundwater Productions, April 14-May 23, 2010) will be given in brackets with the abbreviation IWWB, followed by their position in the Kindle edition.
Turning Muteness into Performance in Erin Shields’ «If We Were Birds»

Turning Muteness into Performance in Erin Shields’ «If We Were Birds»

226). This means that the two women protagonists perform their gender through repeated acts in ways that enable transformation – and, eventually, a transformation does take place.

Shield’s play puts the spotlight on such theoretical issues as embodiment, empowerment, gender, and performativity, and proceeds to channel them into a blind alley, where divine escape is found in the characters’ metamorphosis, as happens in Ovid’s tale of multiple violence in Book VI. In If We Were Birds, however, there is a sequel to the myth, and Philomela and the slave women (also turned into birds) appear “in a purgatory of nature” (IWWB 49) to re-enact the terrible story. The idea of ‘purging’ and ‘cleansing’ is expressed in the environment in which both Philomela and the Chorus find themselves, as if the wrong that has been done might gradually be, if not erased, then at least purified. Acknowledging the injustice and urging atrocious vengeance, those haunted by their physical and psychological wounds repeatedly call on Philomela to “speak” (51, 58, 65, 69, and 74). Their voices are perceived by the audience as poetic lines delivered to restore order among humans, and to establish an organic process of cohabitation in this world, potentially “void of conceptions of force” (Shelley 23). A journey, as it were, towards reconciliation between humans and those who have become non-human – a transformation that not only involves species, but also gender.

The play opens with Philomela who has undergone her metamorphosis. She addresses the issue of the politics of speaking, encouraged by the members of the Chorus: “No more silence” (IWWB 62), but also: “Not much has changed now that I am a bird. / Especially the size of my fear/large enough to get caught in the throat but not enough to die” (66). The organ of sight, which is a “corporeal fact” of life (Sheets-Johnstone 1994b, 69) and is predominant in intercorporeal encounters, underpins Philomela’s recollection of her “ravaged tongue” (IWWB 1462), and the “blood” that her eyes “have watched stream from [her] body” (1468): images that become rooted in the woman’s subjectivity, that abide within her, and torment her.

Philomela recalls her childhood. As adolescents she and her sister were enveloped by a reassuring darkness (“We were not frightened by darkness then”, she says [88]), and by soothing feminine water (“Philomela is underwater in the bath tub, able to hold her breath for eighty-five seconds”, reads the stage direction [207]). According to the allegory of Plato’s cave – where the feminine figures
are “without voice, without presence […] frozen by the ‘like’, the ‘as if’ of that masculine representation dominated by truth, light, resemblance, identity” (Irigaray 1997, 83) – the space the girls inhabit within the royal palace is a metaphor of the inner space, the womb, or hystera, where they experience certain imaginary settings that they believe make up reality. Reality, however, is quite different, as they will learn in due course.

With the “Prologue” about to conclude, Procris enters recalling the joy of the sisters’ childhood when they experienced their bodies “in situation”; when they played “rough games”, just as boys are taught to play, and being ready, like them, to “undertake”, “invent”, and “dare” (de Beauvoir 306-07). Fear played no role in their lives at that age: that was before fear; it was before the threat of rape entered the innocent world the two princesses inhabited. It was even before the sisters discovered that a woman’s body can be raped. It was before they found out that sex is not only a somewhat mysterious thing to enjoy at some future time, but that it can also be used as a weapon to violate their body, and even destroy “(if only temporarily), the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood of a woman” (Cahill 13). It was before they realized that women are “pre-victims expecting to be victimized” (159). It was before they even imagined that creating a representation of themselves “to attract male desire” would make it necessary “to protect themselves from that desire” (160). And that inescapable contradiction leads to the realization that “[a]ttracting the male gaze is, in the context of patriarchal society, necessary to achieve social status and worth, yet that attraction is in itself a trenchant threat” (160). Nature’s gift of ‘seeing’ as a way of making contact with other animate beings, creating meaning through one’s flesh, and establishing a corporeal relationship with a social purpose, can easily turn into moral injury when the male gaze objectifies the woman, thereby causing humiliation, “degradation” (Kelland 180), and “subordination” (175). In that context rape is, indeed, “the ultimate expression of

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5 In later chapters of The Second Sex de Beauvoir provides a phenomenology of the body as lived through the different stages of a woman’s life, and explicitly offers her narrative as an account of lived experience. For a discussion of her acknowledgement of the body’s role in its transformations, and its responsiveness to cultural interpretations, see Bruce and Smits, Chapter 17.
patriarchal order, a crime that epitomizes women’s oppressed status by proclaiming, in the loudest possible voice, the most degrading truths about women that a hostile world has to offer” (Cahill 2).

The fifteen scenes that follow, from the girls’ “Bathtub Talk” to the final horrific “Supper”, lead the audience to discover that the girls’ gendered identity is dramatically constructed, deconstructed, and re-constructed through different bodily acts that, in their materiality, have meaning, and are realized through different modes of embodying 6. By putting her script “through cycles of writing, development and performance”, as she explained in an interview (Ue 98), Shields explores the stylization of bodily acts at a particular time and in a particular culture (Butler 1988: 520).

From their adolescence as tomboys, the two female protagonists are presented experiencing their sexuality with the younger of them fantasizing about disguising herself as a boy and then immediately changing into a mythical female marine divinity (a daughter of Triton) in order to follow her elder sister, once married, wherever she might be. In the following scene, the Chorus ironically makes the sisters “aware” of the “historical truth” of virginity as something to preserve for, and then be “ripped by”, a husband; “the first man to enter me fully” (IWWB 238). That the ode is spoken by the women of the Chorus, whose bodies – one will learn – have been ferociously violated during military conflicts, is bitterly ironic; it contrasts shockingly with the brutal actions performed on their own bodies, often in their husband’s or child’s presence, as the same women relate in a subsequent scene. Raised to consider their bodies as objects for another’s gaze (something which has its origin in “education and surroundings” [de Beauvoir 307]), and, when displayed, for a man’s use and control, the girls are convinced that once married, submission is due to the husband just as it was to their father when they were young. On the one hand, being exhibited expresses the women’s identities, but on the other, it reveals their vulnerability; their body, as well as their minds, becomes a site for the exercise of patriarchal power.

6 The process of embodiment takes place via the material “acting” of the body, a concept that Butler derives from the idea of the body as a repertoire of infinite possibilities that sets in motion “an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities” (Butler 1988, 521).
It is also up to the Chorus “to set the next scene then [step] into the shadows to watch” (IWWB 266) as the two kings, of Athens and of Thrace, discuss – in “A Celebrated Battle” (Scene 4) – the way in which the Theban rebels were vanquished, and to listen to Tereus’ summary of the action:

**Tereus:** I mobilized my men here, at the southern gates,  
Then with Ares pulsing through our blood  
We bashed ribs and skulls and hips and faces,  
Spraying the walls of Thebes with rebel innards.  
(IWWB 310-12)

After such a foretaste of Tereus’ savagery, and following the exchange of human creatures as “gifts”, which includes Pandion’s offer of Procne’s hand in return for the Thracian king’s help, the ritual of marriage is rehearsed in Scene 5, “Bind Us Together” (608). A performance within a performance, the ceremony has Philomela holding “a scroll with instructions” (609) to prepare her sister for this turning point in her life. They act out a “script” derived from the ancient rites of fertility, associated with the beginnings of theater as “action” and “doings”, which are actually, according to the tenets of “performance theory”, concrete ways of “moving/singing”; in short, “a movement in the lives of people” (Schechner 68-73). Though preoccupied and doubtful – now that the time is fast approaching – as to whether she should abide by the performance of the marriage ritual that she has been “practicing for years” (IWWB 626), Procne ends up accepting, of all the options available to her, to “embody” those “both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (Butler 1988: 521). Both girls, just like the actors on stage, enact the roles of bride and bridegroom. While the younger sister, however, simply mimics Tereus’ savagery, the wife-to-be describes how the body responds to the mind’s impulses:

**Procne:** My head is ready for it; right here floating above my body, reciting the ritual, the words, the actions like everything we have done before. But then down here. I even know what I’m supposed to feel, and how I’m meant to contain that feeling.

**Philomela:** Where?

**Procne:** There’s this churning, a wave of something I’ve never felt and it’s pushing into my mind, distracting me from
the words I'll say, the steps I'll take. It’s stronger than thought, Philomela. I’m scared. (IWWB 659-73)  

Procne’s gendered performance as a wife is, in this context, part of a ritual that has been repeated several times. The action, which is governed by “theatrical conventions”, brings about a “disquieting effect” (Butler 1988 527). Whatever pre-existing gender identity Procne may have embodied so far, its latest performance shows that it is “fluid”; a fluidity signaling a tendency for it to be “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (531).

Examined from Butler’s point of view of gender as “act” rather than “role”, Procne’s fear is more than justified, since she feels “down here” (inside her body!) a resistance to the embodiment and the enactment of a cultural convention (IWWB 671). Her maturity is leading her towards a breaking of gender boundaries that will be accomplished as a performative “act” at the moment she learns that her sister has been wickedly wronged by her husband, and that the truth has been maliciously hidden from her. Her sister’s innocence regarding her own performance of gender is, on the other hand, the reason why she falls into her brother-in-law’s trap. This experience will lead her, however, to overcome her jailor-persecutor by means of the traditional weapon of loom and thread, which, both in myth and in history, women have used to defend themselves, to speak of themselves in silence, and even gain a modicum of economic independence. Once again, then, the performative fluidity characterizing gender will produce awareness – regrettably with catastrophic consequences.

A joyful, playful, coquettish, reckless, and prudish Philomela, whose boastful modesty borders on foolishness, is the protagonist of the scene “The Journey”. It is here that all her emotions culminate in confusion when she is unexpectedly taken to a hunting cabin with “thick walls” and “a lock on the door” (1086) instead of a palace. The key mythic episode of her tongue being cut out is forewarned by hints and allusions, which gradually become open references to threatening intentions. Tereus is possessed by lust, feeling it “in [his] teeth” (1089-90), and, after aching, watering, throbbing, and clench-

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7 In a previous draft, “this sense of fear, of apprehension, or dread” follows.
SCENE 11 – TRAPPED

The chorus steps forward. As they speak, Tereus continues to rape Philomela.

PIOUS: At times like these when we are pounded into earth and muck and slime, we look up from where we lay and think:

DWINDLING: If we were birds we could fly up,

YOUNG: Away from this wrenching pain,

PREGNANT: Away from the shame and the blood and the terror,

YOUNG: Away from what will be left of ourselves when he’s done.

DWINDLING: If we were birds he would disappear below as the wind caught our wings like sails.

BLEEDING: Up up up we’d go, into clouds where our hearts could beat as loudly as they are.

PIOUS: If we were birds.

CHORUS: If we were birds.

Tereus exits.

YOUNG: They kept me tied to a stake in the ground, on a bed of leaves under plastic sheeting.

DWINDLING: Every night they pulled me from the cellar.

PREGNANT: Six of them on me, taking turns, in my own bed.

DWINDLING: Like a rat, they pulled me out.

BLEEDING: I was in the Safe Zone.

PREGNANT: They made my husband watch.

PIOUS: I was taken to an Internment Camp.

PREGNANT: He threw up, poor thing.

PIOUS: They kept us in empty rooms that used to be classrooms.

DWINDLING: Some hid in attics.

PIOUS: At night they would come with flashlights, shine them in our faces.
From «If We Were Birds» by Erin Shields

BLEEDING: Some in roofs of barns.

PIOUS: We tried not to be seen because we knew they would grab one or two girls who would never come back.

YOUNG: Some hid in holes in the Manioc fields.

BLEEDING: Some hid in piles of bodies.

PIOUS: The night they grabbed me, I was whispering prayers to the girls around me. Please god please god please god please.

They took me to a room where there were seven soldiers. They elbowed two young ones who had caps pulled over their faces. I knew those two. They had been my neighbours before the ethnic cleansing began.

CHORUS: Please god please god please god please.

PIOUS: They gave the boys drinks and told them to rape me, to enjoy it, to complete their initiation. The first boy grinned as though our eyes had never met. He tore the clothes from my body and raped me on a table while the older men cheered. When he was done, he spit in my face.

CHORUS: Please god please god.

PIOUS: The other boy squirmed. He made awkward jokes, he made excuses. A soldier hit him in the head, another fired a shot into the ceiling. They made me undress him, the boy who had been my neighbour. He was thin and trembling. Tears welled in his eyes. They made me touch him and pull him into me. They chanted, jeered, threatened if he didn’t ‘get it up’
they’d shoot him in the head.  
I whispered in his ear:  
“Good boy, you can do it, good boy, come on”.  
He couldn’t get it up but I pretended that he did.

PIOUS AND CHORUS: Good boy, you can do it, good boy, come on.  
PIOUS: They shot him while he wept  
and sent me back to the room.  
YOUNG: Oh, Philomela, banished to the room.  
PIOUS: The room of remembering the face of that boy.  
BLEEDING: The room of bleeding and wringing of hands,  
PIOUS: The room of praying for others like him.  
DWINDLING: The room of eternal captivity.  
PIOUS: The room in which despair can give way to hope,  
or maybe a chance at escape.  
PREGNANT: If there was something sharp,  
something heavy,  
something in the ceiling to hang yourself from, you would.  
DWINDLING: But there is nothing,  
in this room,  
there is nothing.  
PIOUS: But a loom.  
A Thracian loom with dirty thread lying in a tangled heap.

Philomela crawls towards the loom.

PIOUS: Philomela, you can crawl  
toward life outside this room.

Philomela weaves.
Afterword

**VOCAL AND VERBAL ASSERTIVENESS**

Remarks from a Champion of the Speaking Voice and the Spoken Word, and Practical Voice Exploration Techniques

by Kate Burke

In the early 1990s noted British theatre voice expert Patsy Rodenburg published two seminal texts: *The Right to Speak* and *The Need for Words*. Arcing far beyond a predictable menu of necessary voice and speech skills, these volumes sounded a clarion call for equal vocal rights. Every human being (read every woman) has a fundamental right to speak and a profound need for words. Yet for many women whose voices are dominated or obliterated by bullies, these fundamental rights are left un-honored, these needs unmet. The playwrights interviewed in this journal have given voice to women’s stories, on paper. It is every woman’s right and responsibility to cultivate an acoustical voice that expresses her complex inner life, in time and space.

Two contemporary manifestations of vocal deprivation and dysfunction include vocal fry and “uptalk”. The former has been in the news in recent years, notably when National Public Radio (in the U.S.) fired an announcer for her abrasive, frog-in-the-throat vocal delivery. Young women and, increasingly young men, run out of steam at the ends of phrases or thoughts, their voices subsiding in a crackly croak. It is nearly impossible to project a professional message to a large group in a large space with this choked off voice, and recent research has shown that young women with vocal fry do not secure high-level positions with top-flight companies. “Uptalk” is the tendency to end phrases and thoughts with a questioning, upward inflection, which makes the speaker sound tentative or apologetic.
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