

In Search of a Voice of Her Own: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*

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Abstract

*Timberlake Wertenbaker, one of the most outstanding of contemporary British woman dramatists, wrote **The Grace of Mary Traverse** (1985) while she was Resident Writer at the Royal Court Theatre, an institution well-known for its long-standing support of hopeful young dramatists. Like most of Wertenbaker's other plays, **The Grace of Mary Traverse**, is set in the past, in this case the late eighteenth-century; however the past is only used as a critical tool to comment on the present. **The Grace of Mary Traverse** illustrates the venturesome quest of its daring heroine, Mary, for knowledge and experience, hence a voice of her own, and an identity. Mary's quest takes her from the protected yet suppressive domestic sphere of her father's house, to the public domain, that is the streets of London, where women are often subjected to patriarchal oppression. There, she encounters all kinds of decay, eventually partaking in the corruption herself. In this paper it will be discussed, with reference to feminist theory, to what extent Mary has been successful in acquiring a voice of her own.*

Key Words: Timberlake Wertenbaker, **The Grace of Mary Traverse**, identity, feminism

1. Introduction

It is claimed that **The Grace of Mary Traverse** (1985) is one of the two plays, the other being **Our Country's Good**, that "put [Wertenbaker] at the forefront of the generation then emerging from the Royal Court" (O'Mahony, 2004). In this play Timberlake Wertenbaker (1944 -) may seem to unveil, at times a socialist and at times a radical, feminist perspective. However, she is reluctant to be categorised as a feminist writer. Upon being asked in a BBC Radio 4 interview on 20 June 1991 "whether she accepted the radical feminist label often attached to her work," she responds:

No. because I don't think people know what they mean when they say 'radical feminist'. I don't know how I got that reputation. People used to ask me if I was a feminist, or a feminist writer. Well, of course I'm a feminist, but what does that mean? What's so good about feminism is that it's so broad. (qtd. in Goodman, 1993, 33-34)

2. Argument

In this paper I will try to argue that in **The Grace of Mary Traverse**, which is the story of a young girl, Mary, who seeks knowledge and experience in the male dominated public sphere, Wertenbaker examines how Mary acquires a voice and identity and whether this achievement can be considered a success from a feminist stance.

3. Analysis

Like most of Wertenbaker's plays, **The Grace of Mary Traverse**, too, has a historical setting since the dramatist "uses the past to explore the present" (Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, 143). In an interview, Wertenbaker states that she sets her plays in the past mainly because "[if] you write things in the past, you free them of people's prejudices. You can be more poetic. You tend to be less poetic when it's a contemporary play. You can be more imaginative in the past" (*ibid*). In addition, again in an interview Wertenbaker claims: "People can't see their own times very clearly especially if it is to do with relations between men and women" (qtd. in Roth, 2001, 102). Hence, **The Grace of Mary Traverse** is set in the eighteenth-century. However, as the dramatist asserts in the "Note" to the play, **The Grace of Mary Traverse** "is not a historical play" (n.p.).

The historical setting is used as a metaphor for contemporary times; that is the years which span the first government of Thatcher between 1979 and 1983. Again as Roth states, "this creative estrangement invited contemporary linkages, allowing viewers to re-view gendered relations, class distinctions, and mechanisms of power from more open, as well as historically conscious, perspectives" (2001, 109). Wertenbaker illustrates these contemporary linkages in various ways. First, she establishes an analogy between the protagonist of the play, Mary Traverse, and the British premier of the time, Margaret Thatcher. And the analogy extends well beyond their sharing the same initials. Primarily, it is in her search for political power that Mary resembles Thatcher.

Wertenbaker has stated that her plays like **New Anatomies**, **The Grace of Mary Traverse**, **The Love of the Nightingale** and **The Break of Day** (that is her feminist plays), “often began with a very ordinary question: If women had power, would they behave the same way as men?” (qtd. in Chaillet, 1993, 696). Thus, in **The Grace of Mary Traverse** we observe Mary, who acquires knowledge, hence power as a result of her quest in the outside world. This power, when employed mimicking male conduct, eventually becomes destructive. Wertenbaker states in an interview that “[u]ltimately when Mary gets power, she becomes quite a monster. But I don’t think we know whether women are more peace-loving than men because women have never had the power...Mrs. Thatcher had to run an essentially male country” (qtd. in Bigrigg, 2004, 158). “However, contrary to Margaret Thatcher, who ruled Britain for more than ten years, Mary Traverse cannot create the social change [for better or for worse,] she has dreamt of” (Gömceli, 2006, 117) as she is not given a chance by male politicians, like Mr. Manners, who manipulate her. The analogy continues with another similarity between Mary Traverse and Margaret Thatcher; they are both manly in their conduct (Mary consciously refuses “turn[ing] female”, L.iv.109 and Thatcher is widely known as “Iron Lady” or “Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove”) and unsupportive of their ‘sisters’ not caring to realise that the ‘power’ of one woman is not effective in ameliorating the status of women in general.

While Mary exploits the working-class domestic hand Mrs. Temptwell’s services (hence socialist feminist criticism), and the efforts of the hag who ran for her in the race, she also sexually abuses Sophie, the peasant girl. As for Margaret Thatcher it is worthy to note that the number of female members at the parliament was at a decrease in her time. “In fact, the 1979 election saw a dramatic fall in female members of the House of Commons, to a level only previously seen in the ultra-conservative and anti-female 1950s decade. Even Thatcher’s advisors and Cabinet colleagues remained exclusively male” (Bigrigg, 2004, 197). Similarly, it is claimed that Mrs. Thatcher “is the only prime minister since the war to appoint no woman to her cabinet, she has given fewer government jobs of any kind to women ... According to feminists, we still haven’t got a woman prime minister--not a real one. Mrs. Thatcher is only a surrogate man. She was not interested in being a woman--and she certainly had no particular policies for women” (Toynbee, 1988). Thus, it is observed that women were still in need of equal representation in British politics and their suppression in the political sphere continued.

Another “contemporary linkage” is the fact of women being exposed to rape maybe as much as they were two hundred years ago as was Sophie in **The Grace of Mary Traverse**. According to a research conducted in the 1980s at Cambridge University, “one in five of 1500 women interviewed at Cambridge University had been victims of rape or attempted rape” (Bigrigg, 2004, 167). Hence, the sexual oppression of women is seen to continue as well. Furthermore, by referring to the Gordon Riots that took place in June 1780 in London, Wertenbaker attempts to draw a historical parallel with the Brixton Riots that took place in the summer of 1981 in a small neighbourhood in London. While the Gordon Riots at first started out as an attack on the Catholics, as the events escalated the riot changed its direction and soon affected many others, significantly the working-class as most of the victims were found among them (Archer, 2000, 60). As for the Brixton Riots, they were started mainly by the blacks, another minority who were just as much oppressed both socially and economically as were the Catholics in 1780. Thus, in **The Grace of Mary Traverse** Wertenbaker goes back in time to the eighteenth-century to illustrate the social and political status of women at the time mainly through Mary who is the daughter of Giles Traverse, a politician and merchant.

The play opens with Mary in the drawing room of her father’s house in London, practising her skills at being an ideal eighteenth-century lady for as Bridget Hill states “it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for a woman of the middle-class who could read [the conduct books of her time] to remain ignorant of the model to which she was expected to aspire” (1984, 17). These conduct books praised modesty, passivity, submission, delicacy and chastity as the prime feminine qualities. In fact, in one of these books written by Doctor James Fordyce and entitled **The Character and the Conduct of the Female Sex** (1776), it was claimed that “Providence designed women for a state of dependence, and of submission” (Hill, 1984, 21). Dancing, drawing, singing, playing a musical instrument, being able to speak French were skills that increased the value of young women in “the matrimonial market” (Hill, 1984, 45). Therefore, Mary is observed first practising her conversational skills with her father in the background coaching her. In accordance with the gender roles of her time she learns that while having a conversation with a man she should not ask direct questions and not appear pedantic by voicing a view on a serious issue. Her father warns her that, “To be agreeable, a young woman must make the other person say interesting things” (I.i.68). She also practises walking like a lady; that is walking as if flowing through air. She reminds herself the instructions given by her teachers at school: “You must become like air. Weightless. Still. Invisible. Learn to drop a fan and wait. When that is perfected, you may move, slightly, from the waist only.

Later, dare to walk, but leave no trace” (I.ii.71). Thus, Mary strives to achieve grace by adopting feminine skills and claims “I may sometimes be bored, but my manners are excellent” (I.ii.71). This grace, however, is merely artificial grace. By being reminded of the manners and life style of her late mother, Mary is persuaded to take her up as her role model and abide by the tradition, hence perpetuating it. From Mrs. Temptwell, their servant who has been with them for twenty-five years, Mary learns that her mother complied with the prescribed roles for the women of her time both physically and intellectually as she knew how to walk and how to talk, or rather not talk: she “went in and out of rooms with no one knowing she’d been there” (I.ii.73), and “[s]he was so quiet. . .it took the master a week to notice she was dead” (I.ii.73). Mrs. Temptwell further tells Mary that her mother, who was careful about her reputation and thus willingly remained confined to the domestic sphere, had “wanted to go out once in her life, but she died before . . . she [could enjoy] that one little pleasure” (I.ii.74). Hence, Mary’s mother is portrayed as an emblematic eighteenth-century lady and her father and patriarchy demand that she, too, be invisible and voiceless; that is merely a pleasant presence with impeccable manners but without substance or identity. She is expected to be “ethereal” (I.ii.72).

However, Mary does not quite take after her mother who was content to remain voiceless and without an identity in the confines of her house as “one of the chief beauties in a female character [was a] retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye” (Hill, 1984, 19). Although her father will not let her, Mary wants to study politics; she wants to accompany her father to the meeting of the Antigallican Society (anti-Catholic), and also wishes to go to the theatre with him. “Wouldn’t I do better if I saw a little more of the world?” she inquires (I.ii.70). She can not help being curious about the world outside and asks Mrs. Temptwell, “What’s so different out there?” (I.ii.74). Mrs. Temptwell, for reasons of personal revenge, as her name suggests, tempts Mary to go out into the streets and “glitter with knowledge” (I.ii.74). And so starts Mary’s adventures in the streets of London.

First, they go to Cheapside where Mary notices that the world outside is “nasty”, the streets are “filthy” and the people “ugly” (I.iii.77). She encounters Lord Gordon, who attempts to rape her. Mary desperately cries for help, yet Mrs. Temptwell takes no notice as she wants Mary to experience the cruelty of the outside world as she hates her not for who she is but for what she is, that is, a member of the upper-middle class (IV.ii.155). While Mary is struggling to free herself from Lord Gordon, a peasant girl, Sophie notices them and tries to help, only to be raped by Lord Gordon herself. While watching from a safe distance Sophie being raped, Mary cannot comprehend what she is observing as she has only read about rape in the *books* on Greek mythology. Witnessing it in real life, however, she understands that it is a merciless and savage act, yet an empowering one on part of the man.

Mary continues her quest for knowledge of the outside world in another public domain, a coffee house. She is not allowed into this exclusively male domain on account of her sex. Inside the Universal Coffee House are the distinguished figures of the eighteenth-century, English and foreign, such as the novelist Henry Fielding, the dramatists Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Sheridan, the actor and dramatist David Garrick, the philosopher David Hume, the poet and essayist Dr. Samuel Johnson, his biographer James Boswell, the painter William Hogarth, the Austrian composers Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the French essayist Voltaire, the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi and again the Venetian painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz. The reason why Wertebaker brings, almost in a surrealist manner, these eighteenth-century dignitaries from a variety of fields and has the young boy who is a waiter at the coffee house list their names, at times mispronouncing the foreign ones, is, as the name of the coffee house also suggests, to underline the universality of patriarchy and patriarchal oppression which suppressed the female voice and presence in intellectual, and artistic fields throughout Europe in the eighteenth-century.

Act II opens with Giles, who on Mr. Manner’s advice, conveniently allows it to be known, for the sake of his political career, that Mary, who had actually been missing for three days, “died yesterday, of a bad chill” (II.i.87). The next scene reveals Mary having sex with Mr. Hardlong whom she has hired to teach her about the male body, and later we see her paying Sophie for her sexual favours. Hence, Mary is observed to have acquired male mannerisms which result in her feeling empowered just like men. On the other hand, however, she has lost her primary feminine attribute, that is her maternal sensibility since she is so callous towards the new life that has started growing in her as a result of her licentious sexual conduct: “Damn this leech in my stomach, sucking at my blood, determined to wriggle into life” (III.i.112). She is also angry at Mrs. Temptwell for not helping her to get rid of the baby whom she herself will attempt to kill in desperation after it is born. Mrs. Temptwell, eager to show Mary the evils of the world which will eventually lead to her corruption, takes her to a gambling den where she plays cards with Lord Exrake and takes on Mr. Manners as her rival in a cock fight. She beats both men at the games, feeling further empowered.

Afterwards, again just like a man, Mary prostitutes Sophie, forcing her to perform oral sex on her in return for money. She once again abuses a member of her own sex, this time an old hag who can hardly walk, by making her race for her in a hag race against her rival Mr. Manners's hag. The old hag loses the race, causing Mary to lose all her money. However, when the old woman asks Mary for some money in compensation for her effort in the race, Mary cruelly beats her with a whip and mercilessly continues to do so although the hag begs her to be kind. Mary's final stop in her quest is the political arena. When she hears the poor protesting in the streets the high price of white bread, she decides to support Jack, their leader, in his struggle for better socio-economic conditions for the working-class. Oppressed as a woman, Mary empathises with the misery of the equally oppressed working-class: "I know the humiliation of being denied equality" (III.v.130). She goes to the Houses of Parliament with Jack but, again on account of her sex, she is not allowed to enter at first as the guard stops her saying, "no petticoats" (III.vi.131). Manipulated by Mr. Manners, however, she eventually shifts her focus from fighting for equality for the working-class to targeting the Catholics.

This rebellion against the Pope and the Catholics comes to be known as the Gordon Riots which culminates in the destruction of thousands of people. Disappointed, Mary states, "I didn't want it to be like this. Please believe me. I wanted something good. I had dreams" (III.ix.149). Thus, Mary's dreams for more power, and for leadership in the political world have been shattered. Through Mr. Manners who has the real power in the play, Wertebaker tries to convey that in a patriarchal society "whatever changes, nothing [will] change" (III.iii.123) as power will always belong to men. In the last act of the play, in her distress, to break the vicious cycle of the suffering of women, Mary attempts to kill her baby daughter who is tellingly named after her. The baby is saved from a tragic death by Sophie who draws Mary's attention from the evils of the male world to the wonders of life, such as the softness of "a baby's skin" as she sings "an incredibly beautiful song" which Mary describes as "[a] grace note" (IV.i.156).

4. Findings

As Mary daringly transgresses gender (from female to male) and class boundaries (from upper-class to lower-class), her quest in the streets of London result in her acquiring a voice and consequently an identity. Martha Ritchie argues that Mary, in fact, has multiple identities and multiple voices. Her "fluid identity" and "decentered self" is illustrated "through the many different languages [Wertebaker] has her heroine speak" (Ritchie 406). The same critic further claims that Mary acquires a variety of voices during her quest. First, she has "the voice of the spoiled child" ("I don't like this world. It's nasty," I.iii.77), then "in the gambling-den scene ... she adopts the language of the brazen gambler" ("You may choose the stakes," II.iv.96) ... "By the end of this scene (and Act Two), Mary's voice has become that of the callous master" [towards the hag] ("Look around. Do you see kindness anywhere?" II.iv.109) ... "Act Three also finds Mary using the tongue of the idealistic politico" ("Wrench back from a usurping, base and selfish government what is ours by right," III.v.130) ... "By the end of the play's end, Mary's language shifts her into the pastoral-poet role" (as she longs "to touch the light on the river," IV. iii.159) (Ritchie, 1996, 406-7).

Moreover, Sophie, who functions as a foil to Mary throughout the play, is also observed to have gained a voice. It is claimed that women were taught to behave in agreement with eighteenth-century norms and became "objects of male desire" (Jones, 1990, 27). Sophie complies with the eighteenth-century norms of a woman with her caring and nurturing nature and her maternal constitution. During the Gordon Riots, unlike other working-class ralliers who cry "No Popery", in compliance with her character she shouts "Mothers against the Pope" and "Save the children" (III.vi.143). Sophie's comparatively submissive femininity makes her an object of male desire more so than Mary with her rebellious masculinity. Lord Exrake rejects Mary and pursues Sophie for she is not as "fierce" (II.iv.97) or as "severe" (II.iv.98) as her friend Mary who "frightens" him (II.iv.99).

This peasant girl who, unlike Mary, belongs to the lower-class is doubly oppressed, first on account of her gender, secondly on account of her class. Yet, she has innate wisdom (as Lord Exrake reminds us, "Sophie...means wisdom", III.iv.128) and natural grace. She is not only abused by men but also victimised by the members of her own sex. When Mrs. Temptwell hands her over to Mr. Hardlong in lieu of money, she refuses yet to no avail: "Mrs. Temptwell, you didn't tell me -" (II.iii.92). Similarly, when Mrs. Temptwell tells Lord Exrake that he can have Sophie, she tries to resist in vain: "Mrs. Temptwell, please -" (II.iv.99). Also, she is used as a sex object by Mary to satisfy her own sexual desires and to feel as empowered as a man. However, Sophie grows more self-confident and articulate as the play progresses. She is eventually able to stand up to Mrs. Temptwell and Mary. For instance, when Mary tells her to let go of her baby daughter whom she wants to kill, Sophie refuses and says, "You can't decide for anyone, Mary" (IV.i.155).

She is the one who opens Mary's eyes to the fine marvels of the world in the last scene of the play. And when Sophie sees her lover Jack taken away to be executed it is now Mary, in sisterly solidarity, who consoles Sophie as she "takes Sophie in her arms" (IV.ii.158). At the end of the play, Mary, along with her two female servants Mrs. Temptwell and Sophie, and her little daughter, Mary, is seen to be sitting in the garden of her father's Potteries, with him present as well. Has she been defeated in her quest for a voice? This final scene can be interpreted in two ways. First, one may think that after all that has happened Mary's quest for a voice and an identity has gone to waste as she is back with her father again – though not *in* his house but *out* in the garden. However, Giles has grown old (Mary: "I love your wrinkles, Father", IV.iii.159) and he is not the man he used to be; he has learnt his lesson and is willing to phase out of power for he indicates all four of the women present as the new agents of authority when Mrs. Temptwell challenges him to try throw her off her father's land, he answers: "No. That much I have learned. Other things too...but I'm old.

Speak to them" (IV.iii.159). The sovereignty of patriarchy is no more. In addition, to use Althusserian terminology, when he "hails" his daughter Mary, she responds "There she is" (IV.iii.160) indicating a new Mary, her own daughter, who has not yet been or will be afflicted by "Ideological State Apparatuses" such as "family and education" (Althusser, 1971, 142-3) that will transform her from "a concrete individual to a concrete subject" (Althusser, 1971, 173), that is into an acceptable eighteenth-century lady. For a new world full of love and peace is imminent as a result of the newly-established sisterhood of the now wiser Mary, Mrs. Temptwell and Sophie. Since, a brighter future awaits women as there is no fear of little Mary being oppressed by patriarchal institutions, the ending is optimistic. Thus, in **The Grace of Mary Traverse** Wertebaker, in congruity with radical feminism, may be showing that as long as there is a strong sense of solidarity among 'sisters,' women do not have much to fear.

On the other hand, the same scene can be interpreted in a totally different manner. The peacefully gathered women, with a submissive old man accompanying them, in the idyllic atmosphere of a garden may be nothing but an illusion as Wertebaker may be attempting to subvert the belief that the world will be a peaceful and happy place when women are in control. For, as long as women acquire male mannerisms and become each others' antagonists to secure a better social, political or economic status for themselves only, patriarchal oppression will not cease. In fact, Wertebaker openly opposes this feminist idea by claiming that "[p]ower is power ... women are not necessarily better by nature" (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, 140-141). Correspondingly, Bigrigg supports Wertebaker by claiming that "[w]omen can perform the same acts as men, for good or ill" (2004, 147). Furthermore, subscribing to socialist feminist beliefs she may be distrustful of the idea of sisterhood among women from different classes.

This argument acquires more credibility as the play was written and published at a time when a backlash was experienced in the 1980s as the decade witnessed the decline of second-wave feminism under the Thatcher government. Feminism "r[ose] in the 1960s, flourish[ed] in the 1970s and achieving a clutch of legislative victories, ... d[ied] in the 1980s under the assault of the New Right" (Meehan, 1990, 189). Therefore, in **The Grace of Mary Traverse** Wertebaker may be revealing her distrust of radical feminism. After all, "[w]hat is the point of putting more women into power when they act no differently (or worse than) men? Gone is all that woolly rhetoric about how women are all sisters under the skin. Gone is that curious mysticism of the seventies that dwelled upon some imaginary golden age of matriarchy, where under women's power there would be no hierarchy, no war, no ambition. Gone is the idea that sisters are essentially, genetically, spiritually better than men" (Toynbee, 1988). Hence, a pessimistic ending.

5. Conclusion

At the end of her quest in the outside world, in other words the male domain, the protagonist Mary acquires a voice and identity. Yet, how will she put her new voice to use? Will she support her 'sisters' and in turn be supported by them as she tries to establish a better life for herself and for her daughter? If, yes, a better future awaits women. If, no, patriarchy will continue to rule. However, judging from the little amelioration in the socio-economic and political status of women, it can safely be said that, in the 1980s, during the Thatcher period, Wertebaker seemed right in questioning feminisms, and in the post-feminist era she still seems to remain so.

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