Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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If We Were Birds

Written by Erin Shields
Directed by Lee Hannah Conrads
September 13–27, 2014
20% Theatre Company
Nimbus Theatre
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Reviewed by **Clara Hardy**
Carleton College

In late September the state of California enacted a "yes means yes" law, aimed at clarifying the standard for consensual sex. In response to the heightened attention to sexual misconduct on college campuses, Camille Paglia published a provocative opinion piece for Time Magazine titled "The Modern Campus Cannot Comprehend Evil: Young women today do not understand the fragility of civilization and the constant nearness of savage nature," strongly implying that sexual violence is a natural and inalterable impulse of men.

Chorus members Katherine Engel, Tara Lucchino, and Siddeeqah Shabazz. Photo by Blythe M. Davis.

Continuing bad news out of Syria reminded me of the reports last year concerning the use there of mass rape as a weapon of intimidation and control. And i n this context I find myself reflecting on the 20% Theatre Company's recent production of Erin Shields' 2010 play *If We Were Birds*, a powerful dramatization of the tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.

King Tereus (Ethan Bjelland) meets Procne (Jill Iverson), as King Pandion (Dann Peterson) and Philomela (Suzi Gard) look on. Photo by Blythe M. Davis.

Shields' text joins those of Timberlake Wertenbaker (*The Love of the Nightingale*, 1988) and Joanna Laurens (*The Three Birds*, 2000), also dramatic adaptations of the story, based largely on Ovid's version in *Metamorphoses* 6. Ovid recounts how King Pandion of Athens gives his daughter in marriage to King Tereus of Thrace; after some years in this remote country she asks her husband to bring her sister Philomela to visit. Tereus goes to Athens to petition Pandion for this favor, but there falls violently in love with Philomela. When he gets her back to Thrace he tells Procne that Philomela has died at sea; keeping her imprisoned, he rapes her repeatedly, and when she threatens to tell the world of his act he cuts out her tongue. Philomela weaves a depiction of her story into a tapestry which she m anages to have delivered to her sister; Procne then rescues her and wreaks vengeance on her husband by killing their son Itys, cooking his flesh and feeding it to Tereus. When she and Philomela reveal what he has eaten by displaying Itys' head to him, all three are transformed into birds.

It is not hard to see the attraction the myth holds for female playwrights. Most obviously of interest is the figure of Philomela, resisting the silence imposed upon her and reclaiming a voice against her assailant through the female art of weaving. That the story's central relationship is between sisters is also a tantalizing contrast with the more usual mythological focus on fathers and sons. And the sensational

events of the story—rape, mutilation, infanticide, cannibalism—surely also exercise a perennial if morbid fascination.

King Tereus (Ethan Bjelland) meets Procne (Jill Iverson), as King Pandion (Dann Peterson) and Philomela (Suzi Gard) look on. Photo by Blythe M. Davis.

Shields has given her text the form of Greek tragedy, complete with a chorus of women who amplify and comment upon the action. It is, in fact, the addition of the chorus to the narrative taken from Ovid that reveals Shields' central interest in the story, and gives the play its haunting force. Within the world of the play, the six women of the chorus (Conrads added one to Shields' original chorus of five) portray war-captives presented as slaves by Tereus to Pandion, king of Athens. They thus provide part of a larger social context to what could be just a family tragedy (brother-in-law rapes sister-in-law). This context is amply indicated in Ovid's version even if slaves are absent from it: the marriage of Procne and Tereus is part of an economy of war, trade, and the exchange of women which binds civilized Athens to barbarian Thrace politically and militarily. Thus the fate of Procne, taken by Tereus in exchange for his military help, is different only in degree from the (raped) captives made slaves by war. Shields makes the point more explicitly than Ovid, but she has not imported it artificially; it is certainly already implied in the frame Ovid gives the story.

Procne (Jill Iverson) prays to Poseidon. Photo by Blythe M. Davis.

Shields takes this frame—the transaction between Tereus and Pandion that equates military and sexual favors—and elaborates upon it in the scenes between the men. King Pandion is obsessed with the violence of warfare, pressing Tereus for the gory details of battle and indulging in an extended set of metaphors comparing sword to penis: "your Peter the Great, your pork, your ninja, your purple-headed yogurt-slinger . . . " He laughs off Tereus' account of the Theban king's anger at his soldiers' rape of local women ("if we had to pay soldiers in gold, our coffers would be empty"). When Tereus presents the chorus of slaves as his gift to Pandion, it seems only logical that the reciprocating gift must be also a woman ("Girls. Girls! . . . Girls. My girls"). The horrific repercussions of this persistent association between sex and military violence finally come home to Procne when she finds Philomela in the hut: "I knew he needed . . . I knew he had to . . . I thought there was a difference between family and war."

Just as the passages on war reveal the ways state an d interstate structures are implicated in sexual violence, Shields is clearly interested in extending the entire complex forward to our own time. For while the chorus play war-slaves within the world of the play, in the interludes between scenes they give voice to the testimonials of women raped in wars of the twentieth century. Shields drew these from accounts of survivors of conflict in Nanking, Berlin, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzogovina, and Rwanda; Conrads has added Armenia. It was in fact Shields' initial encounter with the use of rape as a weapon of war in the Bosnia-Herzogovina conflict that inspired her to write the play: "I wanted to write a play that explored

the personal viciousness of sexual violence and spoke to the tragic history of perpetual rape as a weapon" (Ue 2013:98).

Chorus members in a movement sequence. Photo by Blythe M. Davis.

Chorus members surround Philomela (Suzi Gard) in the Hunting Cabin as Procne (Jill Iverson) finds her. Photo by Blythe M. Davis.

I saw two performances of Conrads' production; both times some people with me expressed ambivalence about the chorus' narratives and their place in the play overall. The students I brought wondered whether it was, in some way, disrespectful of or untrue to Ovid to import these modern accounts into his mythic narrative. Was the effect primarily to distract our attention from Philomela's story to our own more familiar world? Did the unavoidable anachronisms produced by moving back and forth from the world of myth to the twentieth century mar the integrity of the whole? Interestingly, Shields herself had worried about this issue, and therefore removed all specific markers from the testimonials of each conflict: "At one time in the writing process, I made it clear which character was from which conflict. I found during readings of the piece, however, that my ear would jump at the word 'Nazi' or 'Tutsi' . . . Rather than support the central story, the chorus distracted me and made me long to hear more details about each specific twentieth-century conflict. This was detrimental to th e central story arch" (Ue 2013:101).

Perhaps because this practice of interweaving modern narratives in the context of ancient tragedy is not uncommon (Ellen McLaughlin, for instance, has done this in her workshop/productions of Euripides' *Trojan Women*), I was neither confused nor distracted by the choral interludes. In fact, I found them particularly effective in this context, for two reasons. First, Shields has structured the play as a retrospective narrative, told from the perspective of its ending. Philomela's opening line, in response to the chorus' whispered encouragement of "Speak it, speak it, speak it," is "The gods have sewn my tongue back in." Her unfolding tale of rape and trauma, then, is a survi vor's memory, and the choral testimonials offer recurring if subtle reminders of this. "I believe the only thing that can make trauma bearable is to tell the story" says Shields (Ue 2013:102). This aspect of Philomela's story brings a new and interesting perspective to bear on the theme of voice and silencing: Philomela's ability to "tell the story" is exactly what will reunite her with her sister, much as the chorus' testimonials effect a kind of global sisterhood.

But most prominently, the choral interludes raise the question of metamorphosis—change—in a manner analogous to Ovid's own. As is often the case in the *Metamorphoses*, the transformations at the end of this tale do not alter but rather crystallize and preserve for all time the relations among the three figures and their most prominent traits. Shields has Philomela suggest this notion at the beginning of the play: "Not much has changed, now that I'm a bird . . . especially the size of my fear." This wrenching sense of surface alteration without essential change is replicated in the choral testimonials, which relentlessly repeat the same acts in different places and times. Not much has changed indeed.

And yet there is a difference between our world and Ovid's, and there is a sense in which a feminist sensibility sits uneasily in what is arguably a misogynistic narrative structure. The least successful aspect of both the play and this production was the sisters' rapid turn to vengeance, and the horrific nature of that vengeance. Shields' text tries to prepare for this with the choral interlude following Procne's request

to Tereus to bring Philomela for a visit. After a testimonial involving a woman who fought back and wounded her assailant, each of the members of the chorus declares in violent detail what she would do, given the chance, to the soldiers who raped her. The last says to Procne:

> I will make him pay
> for everything he has done
> for everything he is doing
> for everything he will do.
>
> And you, you will do the same.

Later, as Procne persuades herself to go through with the murder of Itys, she looks ahead to his life as a Thracian soldier, foresees him, like his father, raping and mutilating; as in the line quoted above, past fuses unsettlingly with future. Change is impossible.

Shields, asked why she chose the story of Procne and Philomela rather than any of the other rape narratives in Ovid, replied "Violence begets violence. Everyone is culpable. No one is innocent. The power of this human truth makes us uncomfortable" (Ue 2013:100). The play returns repeatedly to images of blood, which effectively join the ideas of violent sex, military violence, and the chain of vengeance: from a chorus member's plaint "Blood is something you can't control . . . I can't seem to stop bleeding" to Tereus' repeated excuse while he rapes Philomela "It's my blood, you understand . . . it's my blood that will not be deterred . . . it's my blood" to Procne's plea to Philomela that she look at her "with those eyes that have watched the blood stream from your body."

Yet Procne's murder of Itys and the horrific meal she serves her husband were clearly felt in the ancient world to be disproportionate, excessive, and thus typical of the female chaos that ensues in response to male transgression. Medea's response to Jason, Deianeira's to Herakles, Clytemnestra's to Agamemnon, all fall into this pattern, the total effect of which is to show women as more violent than men (see, e.g., Joplin 1991:49), requiring more control.

The play's script struggles against this aspect of the myth, or at least betrays discomfort with it, by shrinking the space given to the sisters' vengeance relative to the rest of the story: Procne's discovery of her husband's savagery, through the murder of Itys and Tereus' meal, to the final metamorphosis, takes only 11 of the play's 77 pages (for contrast, in Ovid's text the same events constitute about forty percent of the whole). The audience has very little time to process the violent impulses of the sisters, and the acts are so extreme that it is almost impossible to maintain the dramatic illusion that has been so gripping through the rest of the performance. Perhaps in recognition of this difficulty, Conrads seems to have decided to heighten the artificiality of the climax. While Itys had been indicated in earlier scenes in a stylized (and very effective) manner, one chorus member supplying baby sounds while Procne cooed to a cloth bundle, at the culminating dinner-scene what Philomela displayed to Tereus and the audience was a clearly plastic doll's head that looked mostly like a Halloween decoration. It was at least my experience that this jolted me out of the world of the play back to a sense of the whole as a performance. But given the text and the subject, it is not easy to see how else the final scene could have played out.

This slight quibble with what is inherently an almost unstageable ending did not in any substantial way undercut the powerful effect of the production. Suzi Gard and Jill Iverson both gave mesmerizing performances as Philomela and Procne. Shields has filled out the sisters' relationship by adding scenes from their late childhood where they display their budding sexual curiosity and playfully rivalrous interactions; Procne's fear and excitement before her wedding and Philomela's loving but naive encouragement are beautifully played, and are especially touching for anyone in the audience who realizes what's coming. Dann Peterson as Pandion and Ethan Bjelland as Tereus were also very strong;

while Bjelland physically was a surprising choice for Tereus (he is wiry and somewhat boyish), the effect was in some ways more terrifying than if he had been a more imposing figure. All six women of the chorus (Laura Mason, Cynthia Hornbeck, Siddeequah Shabazz, Dana Lee Thompson, Katherine Engel, and Tara Lucchino) were superb with what must be very difficult material.

The set, spare but suggestive, centered on the red throne of Pandion (or Tereus, when we were in Thrace); thus the sign of male political power underlying the events was always present. The hut in the woods was indicated by a rolled-on cart surrounded with wooden posts, through which the chorus wove strips of fabric, suggesting Philomela's loom. One of the most effective touches was the tapestry itself, a white sheet spread on the floor upon which members of the chorus pantomimed a stylized dumb-show of Philomela's rape and mutilation.

Shields' play and Conrads' production sparked fascinating and probing discussions afterwards, and have stayed with me in the weeks since I attended the shows. I am grateful to 20% Theatre for bringing this provocative text to life on stage, and I will certainly look for opportunities to teach it in future. Maybe then the world around me will not so exactly reflect the themes of the drama. But that seems, alas, all too unlikely.

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