



Crossing the Accepted Sexual Frontiers: Mary Traverse's Faustian Quest in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*

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Abstract

Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse* is about how the heroine Mary Traverse, defying the bounded atmosphere of the patriarchal society represented by her father, crosses the accepted sexual frontiers, ends up bruised and battered but still has a hope for a just world in the future. The paper analyzes Traverse's Faustian quest for power in the public space. With a critical portrayal of the lives of women in patriarchal society, Wertenbaker shows that to gain power, women need to dismantle the ideological biases toward women rather than merely mimicking and appropriating the behaviors of men under the patriarchal ideology.

Key words: Timberlake Wertenbaker; *The Grace of Mary Traverse*; Sexual frontiers; Faustian quest

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Summary

The paper analyzes the heroine Traverse's Faustian quest for power in the public space in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. It is divided into four parts. The first part illustrates that Mary Traverse "traverses" in open spaces questing for knowledge and experiences. The second part delineates her desire for power triggered by

sexual assault. The third part shows her assertion of power through mimicry and the last part is her failure in quest for power. The paper reveals that Mary's Faustian search for knowledge and experience has destructive consequences. But the questing spirit should never be extinguished because "the search for justice should continue."

INTRODUCTION

Timberlake Wertenbaker (1944?-) is a contemporary British playwright. As a leader of the second wave feminist writers, she has contributed a wide range of plays and translations to the canon of women's theatrical work since 1980. She was born in the United States but brought up in the Basque country in the southwest corner of France. Because the French authorities did not allow Basque to be spoken in the schools, Wertenbaker had fostered a precocious consciousness of language, which would be a major theme in her later works. The restricting living atmosphere makes her defiant and unorthodox which to her are basic traits of an artist. "If you accept authority and orthodoxy, you cannot be creative. The whole point of being an artist is to look beyond the received ideas and to question them" (DiGaetani, 1991, p.273). The questioning spirit is consistent in all her plays.

As a resident writer in 1985 at the Royal Court, she wrote *The Grace of Mary Traverse* which has been produced successfully. Considering the play as a woman's rake's progress as many critics do, Susan Carlson (2000) argues that through the play the playwright shows "how Mary Travers's hunger for knowledge and experience forces her to confront restrictive institutional structures of family, class and gender" (p.143). The play is about how the heroine Mary Traverse, defying the bounded atmosphere of the patriarchal society represented by her father, crosses the accepted sexual frontiers, ends up bruised and battered but still has a hope for a just world in the future. It is set in the eighteenth century of England,

but as Wertenbaker (1989) writes in the production note, the play is not “a historical play” and “I found the eighteenth century a valid metaphor” (p.57).

In fact, the play was inspired by the Brixton Riots which were a protest by the local black population against white authority figures when she was living in South London. She later learned that riots were not new in England and in 1780 there were the Gordon Riots which were antipopery riots directed against the government and led by a certain Lord Gordon. After some research, she was fascinated with the period and created a character “crossing the accepted sexual frontiers. I wanted her to be in the midst of the riots, to be where everything gets out of control. That is the ultimate symbol of her transition from private to political power, and of the destructiveness she experiences” (Greene, 2006, p.56). The play results from a mixture of historical facts and her imagination. In the play, Wertenbaker presents her critical portrayal of the lives of women in patriarchal society. To gain power, women need to dismantle the ideological biases toward women rather than merely mimicking and appropriating the behaviors of men under the patriarchal ideology.

1. OUT OF “WOMEN’S PLACE”

In *Woman’s Theatrical Space*, Hanna Scolnicov (1994) points out that “the changing spatial conventions of the theatre are faithful expressions of the growing awareness of the specificity of gender differences and the changing attitudes to woman and her sexuality” (p.1). Tracing the change of the theatrical space from the Greek drama to contemporary plays, she argues that since the question of theatrical space is the question of woman’s space, the change in fact shows the attitudes toward women in different historical periods and societies. Women have been traditionally represented at home. Penelope’s weaving and unweaving while waiting for the adventurous Odysseus has been the archetypal story. However, the dichotomy of female/private and male/public has been severely challenged. Like other contemporary playwrights who dismantled the binarism, Wertenbaker’s plays try to get away from “enclosed rooms to open spaces, and also to get ideas away from the restraints of closed spaces to something wider” (as cited from Wyllie, 2009, p.43).

The name of the protagonist Mary Traverse immediately shows that she is to “traverse” in open spaces questing for knowledge and experiences. Mary is a daughter of an eighteenth century politician, Giles Traverse. To gain the favors of the king and his officials, he trains his daughter strictly to be his “brightest adornment” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.61). Mary is bound inside the domestic sphere to practice grace, which includes good conversational techniques and a graceful carriage, both of which are treated by Wertenbaker ironically. The ironic effect is achieved by introducing a cynical servant

Mrs. Temptwell. Rather than thinking Mary’s walking as ethereal, she replies that “You do look a little ill” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.63). When Mary asks her whether her mother could walk on a carpet and leave no imprint, she gives a “Death suits women” comment as follows:

She went in and out of rooms with no one knowing she’d been there. She was so quiet, your mother, it took the master a week to notice she was dead. But she looked ever so beautiful in her coffin and he couldn’t stop looking at her. Death suits women. You’d look lovely in a coffin, Miss Mary. (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.63)

Having undergone the perils and pains in a society which oppressed women to the extreme, Mrs. Temptwell cannot but have such a cynical attitude toward the efforts of Mary to become a graceful lady. Born in a poor family, she has witnessed the cruelty and atrocity done to her family members and others alike. Her grandma, who because of poverty has no one to talk to but talks to herself, was hanged as a witch by Giles Traverse’s brother. Her father’s farm was enclosed by Giles Traverse to build his factory of potteries. Having no place to go, she has to work as a servant for the Traverse’s for more than twenty years. Seeing that Mary is not content to be a lady in a window who can only gaze at the forbidden outside, she begins her plan of revenge.

Unaware of the intention of Mrs. Temptwell, Mary is eager to go outside to gain more experience to add to her conversation. Like Faust who has made a contract with Mephistopheles to live longer and a richer life in exchange for his soul, Mary makes a contract with Mrs. Temptwell as well to live a life outside the bounded home to which she can never return. The disturbing events, such as rape, gambling and riots that happened after, lead her to realize more of the confinement and powerlessness of women in the society. Despite the conservative ending that Mary accepts the status quo of the society, she has gained a feminist consciousness and political activism to an extent that she has never experienced before.

2. DESIRE FOR POWER TRIGGERED BY SEXUAL ASSAULT

Mary’s experience in the outer space, especially, through witnessing the sexual assault, arouses her desire for power. Mary’s curiosity is tantalized by Mrs. Temptwell when she suggests that there are more interesting things outside than inside the house. Even though her original intention is to gain more knowledge to improve her conversation and thus win the praise and admiration of her father, her desire for power leaves her no way to turn back. However, she is not the only one who has such a desire. Lord Gordon, who is bored with the numbness of the common people, is also impatient to make himself interested and wants to gain power through whatever means. “Nothing. No reaction. No one’s interested. It’s always like this. I greet people, their

eyes glaze. I ride in Hyde Park, my horse falls asleep" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.65). Aware of his mediocrity, he wants to be noticed at the expense of ordinary people.

The encounter of the two makes Mary realize the oppressed status of women. The first time out on the streets, Mary is not accustomed to the filth. Mrs. Temptwell replies that "If you're squeamish, don't stir the beach rubble", which is also used as the quote before the play by Wertenbaker. The quote is from Sappho, the Greek poetess. It implies that the world has its nasty side if looked at closely. For Mary, this is just the beginning. Knowing that Lord Gordon has the intention to rape Mary in order to gain the attention of the people and prove his manhood, Mrs. Temptwell aims not to help. However, a young working-class woman, the poor and similarly innocent Sophie who has come to look for her aunt who has a pitch on the Cheapside saves Mary from being raped, substituting herself as the victim of Lord Gordon. Her scapegoating manifests the tension of desires of Lord Gordon and Mary. The good intention of Sophie destroys Mrs. Temptwell's first attempt to revenge. Mrs. Temptwell looks at the rape coldly but Mary is astonished by the action. She shows her naivety in saying that "Rape? What the Greek gods did? Will he turn himself into a swan, a bull, a shower of golden rain? Is he a god?" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.69). What she reads from the books does not correspond with what she sees with her own eyes. What happens before her eyes makes her realize that women are powerless and men are the ones who have power as she says "the sword is his voice and his will" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.70).

When being asked that there is not so much rape in the society, Wertenbaker replies that there should be people who should take responsibility for those men who are the rapists (DiGaetani, 1991, 272). Some feminists argue, "rape is a direct function of the degree to which women are socially, politically and economically powerless in comparison to men. Not only does rape derive from power differentials, but sexual violence also serves to maintain the status quo" (Ward, 1995, p.22). Sexual assault under the threat of weapon was not uncommon to the ordinary people who have been oppressed and exploited. Such a society imbues them with a sense of powerlessness. In addition, sanctimonious politicians like Mr. Manners are indicative of the rape-supportive society. He seems to have manners when he apologizes that he has disturbed George Gordon. But in fact, he does not show any mercy to the poor people while hypocritically claiming that he only gives money to organized charities. Considering women as objects which should only be treated instrumentally, the rich and the politicians take it as their privilege that they can do whatever they like to them. The world they exist in is one that operates on the basis of male domination, a culture that accepts that accepts and even perpetuates rape.

Like other feminists who consider rape as "a crime of domination and control" and "an extension of commonplace male sexual behaviors which involve the conquest, domination and exploitation of female partners" (Ward, 1995, p.50), Wertenbaker consciously fuses rape into the male-dominated society. Considered as sexual objects, women are always under the male gaze of upper-class men. It seems to them that raping women is another conquest which shows their power. After his sexual assault, Lord Gordon suddenly attains a sense of power which he wants to share with other upper class men in the coffee house. The subjugation of women which is realized through rape strengthens male domination further. Nevertheless, where he sees power, Mary only sees "blood". The violence she witnessed urges Mary to gain power herself.

3. ASSERTION OF POWER THROUGH MIMICRY

The realization of women's subjugated status prods Mary to behave assertively under the disguise of a man. In order not to disrepute her father, Mary goes outside disguised. But she still has no access to places like the coffee house which is traditionally considered only as men's world. In the play, domestic figures like Mr. Fielding, Mr. Goldsmith, Mr. Hume, Mr. Boswell, Mr. Garrick, the Doctor, Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Hogarth and foreigners like Mr. Piranesi, Mr. Tyepolo, Mr. Hayden, Mr. Voltaire, Mr. Leibniz and Mr. Wolfgang are there to have their talk, though the foreigners are not as much listened to as the domestic ones. Using the eighteenth century as a metaphor, Wertenbaker catalogues the prestigious names. The names immediately show that women in history have no voice and power literally because of their lack of penis. At the time of refusal to be accepted to the world of men, Mary's mind is in a contradictory state. On the one hand, she wants to be like a man and hates to be refused. On the other hand, she still holds that "envy is a sin" and hatred is "an ugly feeling" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.71). The contradiction reflects the conflict of her past training to be a graceful lady and her desire to gain more power. Further prodded by Mrs. Temptwell, Mary's desire to "run the world through my fingers as they do" takes the upper hand. Because she "want[s] the world as it is, ... no imitations, no illusions, I want to know it all" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.72). Mary makes a contract with Mrs. Temptwell on the condition that they will stay together and never go back.

Wishing to have power like men, Mary mimics what men do. Just like Lord Gordon who objectifies Sophie, Mary pays Mr. Hardlong to gain sexual pleasure without treating him as a subject who also has his own feelings and needs. But because her training to be passive is still at work, it is Mr. Hardlong who performs the active role

to initiate the sexual intercourse. The feeling of Mary is similar to that of Lord Gordon—having a sense of power. But gaining power in this aggressive way, according to Mrs. Temptwell, is a road to “learn to be a ghost” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.76).

What happens in the gambling scene in a large den in Drury Lane validates Mrs. Temptwell’s words. Since her sudden disappearance from her home causes much trouble for her father’s political career, Mary is claimed dead by her father. Unfettered by the kinship she formerly has, she considers herself as unfathered. The freedom also adds to her fierceness and determinacy to rival for power with men. Despite that, men still hold stereotypical attitudes toward her as Mr. Manners says “You ought not to be here, Mary” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.84).

Her assertiveness and Sophie’s passivity forms a sharp contrast. In fact, in such a society, women are assumed either wild and/or helpless. Her aggressiveness frightens Lord Exrake over whom Mary wins in the piquet scene. Young Robert, Lord Exrake’s nephew, who claims to have written a play depicting the deplorable status of women, considers women like Sophie are helpless and needs to be saved. However, his aim in saving is just for them to “celebrate your chastity” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.84). To him, women need to do whatever things to keep their chastity which is a social normative for women in a male-dominated society.

In the cock fight scene, Wertenbaker surely uses the pun to reflect the power that Mary gains. After humiliating Lord Gordon for not daring to expose his cock to fight with her cock, she ignores Lord Exrake for she thinks that his cock is too old to fight against hers. Just as she formerly uses Mr. Hardlong to get sexual pleasure, she challenges Mr. Hardlong again. Pretending to die at first, Mary’s cock defeats Mr. Hardlong’s cock. However, winning more power causes her to behave more like men, especially in treating Sophie. As a sharp contrast to her, Sophie is preferred by most men. The failed Mr. Hardlong wants the consolation of Sophie, but Mary is quicker. She exposes the private parts to the men who are more prone to imagine and unwilling to look at them directly. Looking at Sophie from men’s point of view, she desires the silent Sophie who has no desires according to Mrs. Temptwell’s words.

However, the urge to win makes her bet all her money on the race of the two hags. To her Mary’s dismay, Mary’s hag loses the race because of illness. She loses all her money and she cannot restrain her anger and beat the hag severely. In fact, she was formerly familiar with the hag, and even gave her money at the when she went out of the church with her father before. The change of her attitude toward the hag makes herself confused. She does not like her former way of life, but her new life living like a man makes her cruel and aggressive. Wertenbaker clearly does not approve either of the two extremes. A woman should not be bounded in the narrow sphere of the house,

but merely imitating the belligerency of men will do no good to themselves and people around. Her questions “are we imitators by nature wishing to do whatever we see and hear? Or is every crime already in the human heat, dormant, waiting only to be tickled out?” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.95) are ignored by Mrs. Temptwell and leave to be answered.

Her resources at the beginning were dissipated by gambling. However, without the money, she has no way to behave like a man. Without any money left, she is reduced to prostitution, retreating to the role of a woman in a man’s world. Tolerating whatever men who come to provide money for their sustenance, she also gets pregnant. Having no other means to get enough money to survive, she entraps her father to where she prostitutes and extorts money from him by intimidating his political career. As Esther Beth Sullivan points out, “she [Mary] is raised from the gutter but not relinquished from the role of ‘Woman’” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.147). To Wertenbaker, wealth is important in determining the life of women. Without money, women’s life will be more difficult.

4. FAILURE IN QUEST FOR POWER

Having experienced much after penetrating into the men’s world, Mary finds it not enough. She even rejects the rounds of “puny, private vice” as experience. Escaping the restricting security of her father, she finds where she lives is also a bounded room. Unable to endure the emptiness of life, she wants to find more. Reflecting on her past experience and her bad treatment of Sophie, she begins to have a real talk with Sophie. Formerly a totally passive girl, Sophie begins to make her voice because of her boyfriend Jack’s love and encouragement. Not like what others claim, she has her own desires which are buried deeply. Sexually harassed by her brother since she was a small girl she has her own ways to survive. “Sometimes I don’t feel I’m there. It could be someone else. And I’m walking in the fields. So I don’t mind much. ... but when I want to, with Jack, I’m there. And then not. It’s not difficult” (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.105). The separation of spirit from her body implies the disruption of any sense of wholeness Sophie might have in a different context. In a culture that fosters rape, Sophie has no choice but to submit in order to survive. Meeting Jack who does not objectify her as others do, Sophie’s buried desires are tapped.

The revelation of Jack’s dream of a new world of equality triggers Mary’s chaotic soul. Thanks to her father’s training efforts for her graceful conversation, Mary is able to talk about the good of the new world eloquently at the prompt of Jack who in contrast to Mary cannot express himself. Jack complains that

I can’t talk. I want to tell people about freedom. I can’t explain it. I have other words” equality, justice, right, but they are rough

stones that won't stand together to make a house. I have a new world, in my head, I can't make it come out....I'm cursed. silent. (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.107)

Still treating Sophie and Mrs. Temptwell as servants, Mary does not understand the real meaning of a new world with freedom for everyone. Her enthusiasm in this new world is just another attempt to gain more power. To realize a new world where all people are born equal as Jack has envisioned, the old one has to be changed or overthrown.

But their aim is not to be achieved easily since politicians like Mr. Manners and Lord Gordon are loyal servants of order, who cherish the credo that "whatever happens, nothing must change" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.103). In order to deflect the spearhead of the mob who can no longer endure the tyranny of the government, Mr. Manners is so insidious that he wants to take advantage of the eloquence of Mary and sacrifice the ordinary people to achieve his stratagem. Misleading Mary and Jack into believing that it is the Catholics who should be opposed, he proposes "No Popery" as their slogan which has nothing to do with their initial plan of a new world. At the same time, Mr. Manners asks Lord Gordon who even does not know the spelling of relief to present a petition—the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act to parliament. Mr. Manners is quite right pointing out to Mary that she "could be very useful" but she has a lot to learn. Because of her ignorance, she leads the rioters not to the new world but death. The death of the innocent people causes Mary to reflect upon her past desire for knowledge and power. She sees through Mrs. Temptwell's intention to drag her into the chaos of the world. Desperate that she cannot change what has happened, she wants to kill her daughter to prevent her from doing hideous acts in the future as she has done which is prevented by Sophie. Additionally, it is Sophie who now gives an in-depth comment on Mary's error. "You don't know how to think, Mary. You think at a distance—too ahead or far back. If you just looked, from near" (Wertenbaker, 1989, p.125). Mary who always has assumptions about the world does not really know the world.

Going back to her father's house, forming a temporarily peaceful community with her little daughter and Sophie, she is still at a loss about the confusing world. The open ending does not provide a solution to the questions Mary has put forward though she wishes a more beautiful and just world which will be striven for by the next generation represented by her daughter Mary. As Wertenbaker words it, "[a]ll a playwright can do is capture and phrase the questions as immediately as possible" (DiGaetani, 1991, p.268). Without providing a

solution, the play "challenges us to define and position ourselves responsibly in a world while conscious of the forces around us" (Carlson, 2000, p.143).

CONCLUSION

Being didactic to some extent, Wertenbaker always believes in "the search for justice" as she makes clear through Mary's mouth. From the play, we can be sure that she does not approve Mary's Faustian search for knowledge and experience which has destructive consequences. But the questing spirit should never be extinguished because "the search for justice should continue" (DiGaetani, 1991, p.268). Though not sure about whether Wertenbaker can cause social transformation directly through her plays, we can never ignore "the power and individuality of Wertenbaker's voice and her commitment to exploring the struggles of women against a society that seems determined to limit their ability to experience and express themselves (Lutterbie, 2002, p.363).

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