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Keeping Mum: Towards a 'Voix Maternelle' in Howard Barker's *Wounds to the Face*

by

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STROPHE: Mother.

PHAEDRA: Fuck off don't touch me leave me alone stay with me.

(Kane, p12)

In Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1995) a play which explores the disruptive consequences of transgressive maternal desire, Phaedra speaks eloquently to Freud's objectification of the mother as 'place'. Freud writes:

Love is home-sickness; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before", we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. (Freud 1919, 246)

Kane's Phaedra attempts to break free of the constraints of motherhood - 'fuck off' - but within a few short phrases recognises her traditional 'place' as posited by psychoanalytical discourses - 'stay with me.' Phaedra urges a reaffirmation of her identity as Strophe's mother/place as a means of displacing her desire for the

forbidden - for Hippolytus, her stepson. Thus Kane, one of the most challenging voices of British theatre during the nineteen-nineties who 'emerges as the most far-reaching experimentalist' (Urban, 40) situates her mother in precisely the position Freud describes - as a point of reference for the child. It is this tension between a contemporary British theatre that might be expected to disrupt conservative constructions of role and gender, and a contemporary British theatre that continues to rehearse traditional, Freudian, models of the maternal that forms the basis for this essay.

However, as I will go on to argue, in *Wounds to the Face* (1995) Howard Barker's radical approach to both form and content hints at the possibility of an 'alternative' theatrical construction of the mother, so regularly hidebound in contemporary theatre texts by what I describe as the woman/mother paradox. In so doing, I contend, he has begun to engage with a mode of representation that I describe (after the French feminists) as *voix maternelle*.

Whilst many new writers - Kane included - provide us with provocative, often subversive models of gender and difference, she who is the very touchstone of difference - the mother - remains uncharted (perhaps abjected) territory.

Kane is not alone among contemporary British dramatists in rehearsing traditional psychoanalytic constructions of the mother/child relationship. Two further examples of this phenomenon are *Blue Kettle* (1997) by Caryl Churchill and *The Memory of Water* (1997) by Shelagh Stephenson and I shall further allude to these texts in a moment. However, I should first point out that it is not the purpose of this study to take issue with the validity of feminist theatres, nor to contest the vitality of some new writing for performance. I select Kane, Stephenson and Churchill for the reason that they are perceived to be challenging, innovative dramatists. Rather, if as Domna Stanton suggests: 'woman as/is mother [has] special relevance to the contemporary preoccupation with female difference, and beyond, the problematics of difference itself' (Stanton 159) we might expect to find the mother more centrally placed in the work of these vital new (and in Churchill's case, established) writers.

Instead, I contend, there is a textual 'tendency' to lull us into the belief that what we are presented with is the mother (either as body or metaphor) as central speaking subject. What we are in fact confronted with is a series of mothers who are denied subjectivity and, in turn, textually abjected.

Caryl Churchill's *Blue Kettle*, for instance, appears to explore the fragile definition of the mother as both metaphor and material body. Derek - the central character - tricks a series of elderly women into believing that he is each of their long-lost sons given up for adoption many decades previously. Derek of course is only in it for the potential financial remuneration involved. Churchill's unusual device¹ of randomly replacing dialogue with the terms 'blue' and kettle' begins to render the communication between Derek and his girlfriend increasingly meaningless:

ENID: Is it a con-trick or is it a hangup?

DEREK: It's a con-trick. Which would you rather? It's a con-trick.

ENID: It's not which I'd rather.

DEREK: You've got hang-ups yourself.

ENID: Blue blue blue and see your dad the journalist? No but why won't

you? Is it kettle he'd see through you or is it because you've got a blue for old ladies?

DEREK: It's not the plan.

ENID: I know it's not the kettle but why is it not the kettle, blue is the kettle...

(61)

The more mothers Derek 'collects' the more radically disrupted his language becomes. Indeed, the mothers simply form a backdrop for an exploration of the connections between language, truth and communication – a semantic exercise, we might argue. Fascinating though this is in linguistic terms, we can see that *Blue Kettle* reproduces the traditional Freudian model of the mother-son dyad in which, of course, the son is pivotal. It is the creation and dissolution of **Derek's** identity in context of **his** relationship to **his** 'mothers' that is the focus of Churchill's text. Whilst undoubtedly theatrically experimental in terms of dialogic communication, the text is anything but experimental or innovative in its perpetuation of the traditional positioning of the mother(s) as only ever relational to the child.

The Memory of Water by Shelagh Stephenson apparently centres on Vi – mother of 3 grown-up daughters – who reappears to haunt them on the night before her own funeral. In constructing a narrative around the transmission of the maternal body to the ephemeral Stephenson plays out what I perceive to be a dominant theme in recent dramatic literature: the impulse to deny the mother whilst *apparently* affording her subjectivity. However, in the construction of a narrative in which maternal disembodiment operates as a metaphor for familial disruption rather than, as Carolyn Dever has argued, for innate virtue (Dever 20), the text exemplifies a traditional socio-aesthetic model of the concurrence of 'death' and 'the mother' whilst illuminating the problematics of that model.

What is unusual about several of the daughters' dialogues about their mother is that they speak as her. This poses the question: is she inhabiting or controlling them, or are they rewriting her? I quote the following dialogue at some length in order to interrogate these two possibilities. The two elder daughters are recalling the smell of their mother when she settled them to sleep before a night out:

Mary: It was that perfume she used to wear. In a tiny bottle, she got it in Woolworth's, and on Saturday night when she leaned over to say goodnight, she smelt of cigarettes and face powder and something alcoholic, and this perfume.

Teresa: Phul Nana.

Mary: Phul Nana that was it...the whole room smelt of it.

Teresa: She always said, if you don't wear perfume you'll never find a man.

Mary: You'll never get a boyfriend.

Teresa: And then, frankly -

Mary: Unless you're a nun.

Teresa: You might as well cut your throat with the bread knife.

Mary: Slowly. A woman without a man is, well,

Teresa: Hardly a woman at all.

Mary: Might as well be a fish.

Teresa: Of course, some women -

Mary: Like your Auntie Betty -

Teresa: Aren't bothered.

Mary: Mind you she was never much to look at.

Teresa: Had a friend called Marjorie.

Mary: But we won't go into that.

Teresa: I blame the nuns. (MW 27)

The above is reminiscent of the type of language - that which disrupts traditional 'masculine' linguistic construction - that characterises *écriture féminine*. This duologue resists accepted linguistic restrictions and 'rules' particularly in the use of incomplete phrases and sentences, which are often completed by the 'other'. The speech of the two breaks down the implicit binary opposition in dialogue - you speak, I speak, you speak again - and so evokes a quality of inclusiveness (as opposed to the exclusion associated with masculine language and culture). However, it is the subjugation of the mother that supports this inclusiveness, this power to articulate the feminine self. In speaking their mother's words on her behalf, and in so doing appropriating her individual speech patterns and rhythms, they convert the maternal voice into a daughterly voice. The mother's voice is no longer her own. The text, then, implies the dispensability of the maternal voice and in turn the primacy of the feminine voice. In so doing, it excludes the maternal from the realms of the feminine and, for Vi, this has precisely the opposite effect to that which Cixous suggests - that via *écriture féminine* 'woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display'. (Cixous 1981, 250)

Speaking as her, indeed becoming her, operates here as a form of appropriation so rendering her voiceless, without agency. The mediation of the mother's voice through the daughters has the effect of distancing her from the reader/audience and so situating her in a narratively marginal position. Whilst her uncanny reappearance might, in narrative terms, imply a powerful and disruptive presence - a presence whose maternal voice insists upon recognition - the effect of being spoken by her daughters is to contain that disruption, to make safe the maternal 'threat'.

Kane, Churchill and Stephenson are in their own ways radical, innovative and challenging playwrights. Each, nevertheless, provides evidence of the ways in which the British theatre has not yet found a means to interrogate traditional socio-cultural models of the maternal which are of course rooted in psychoanalytical discourses.

Conversely I would argue that Howard Barker, recently (and perhaps ironically) described by Elaine Aston as a tired male 'politico' and by Elizabeth Sakellariou as a 'political refusenik', has produced a radically 'mother-disturbing' text in *Wounds to the Face* which affords the mother both agency and voice.²

Much psychoanalytic theory places the mother at the centre of its discourse, but largely as a figure or metaphor which anchors the individual's sense of self and concomitantly/subsequently, identity. That is, mother is spoken *about* in terms of how we construct ourselves and is therefore constructed always as other. As Sarah Ruddick notes in her essay 'Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth' 'not only is a mother's voice virtually absent in psychoanalytic tales...the mother herself is identified with "the maternal body" or is herself called "the pre-oedipal mother" as if she, like her child, has yet to become a social, thoughtful being' (Ruddick 32). As Ruddick suggests, not only does psychoanalysis reproduce a mother/child binary in which the child is key, it also implies that the mother's voice is unformed or irrelevant.

Julia Kristeva was one of the first theorists to respond to this dominant psychoanalytical discourse, most particularly in 'Stabat Mater' (1986) and *Powers of Horror* (1982) and it is she who has most powerfully attempted to seek a way of speaking and writing the mother as always and still a woman. However, even she tussles with this ingrained perception of the maternal and often lapses into discussing the mother from the child's perspective. Here, whilst acknowledging the pain of 'disappearing' which is necessarily experienced by the mother in order to enable the child to enter the symbolic order, she urges the mother to make that sacrifice 'which one might repudiate for one's own sake but within which *one must* include the child in order to educate it along the chain of generations' (Kristeva 1986, 183, italics in

original). It would seem that to render the mother a unified agent outside the boundaries of her function of child-bearer and nurturer is fraught with difficulty. Equally Kristeva has yet to effectively address the crucial double-otheredness that the mother experiences – first, she is ‘other’ as woman in the mirror of masculine completeness, and second, in becoming mother she is other than simply ‘woman’.

However, psychoanalysis continues to be posited as an illuminating means of studying constructions of the maternal. Psychoanalytic theories of maternity and the mother have been variously utilized to interrogate representations of the mother in literature (Dever, 2000) and popular culture, (Kaplan, 1993) and to evaluate the sociological and aesthetic implications of maternity (Bassin et al, 1995). However, what has not been fully addressed is the question of how the mother might be written or spoken if she is never central to the narrative that defines her – the mother/child story. In the act of becoming a mother the ‘woman-she-once-was’ is somehow elided or overlooked in both theoretical discourses and dramatic constructions of the maternal. It is the existence of a child that creates ‘mother’ and so defines motherness; equally it is the existence of the child that reinscribes the woman as mother. In this sense then, if motherness is a purely relational construct it is even more urgent that a new position is constructed for this state of being that allows subjectivity for the mother as ‘also-still-woman’.

Howard Barker probes these gaps in psychoanalytical discourses of the mother, both in imbricating woman and mother and in writing a feminine maternal that locates her subjectivity both within and outside of her relationship to her child.

In his exploration of the construction, maintenance and loss of identity in *Wounds to the Face* Barker places the woman/mother paradox at the very centre of the drama. The play consists of a series of apparently unconnected scenes. Many characters appear only once, and the majority interact with others only in their individual scene or ‘picture’. The language as well as the structure of the play presents a disjointed, fragmented world. Time and space are manipulated, so losing their fixity as categories of narrative or historical continuity: the action slides randomly between contemporary England, seventeenth-century France, ancient Greece, and an anonymous eighteenth-century state. A universalised backdrop of post-war devastation slides into and out of focus, serving as a tentative connecting motif.

This text, as I will go on to explicate, is, I believe, one which enables the mother to ‘write’ (or, dramatically) speak herself in the sense that it is not the text that speaks but the mother’s movement within it. She is not subject to the text but the Subject of

it – a phenomenon that Nancy K Miller celebrates in her essay 'Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic'. In her critique of the closing passages of Barthes'

The Pleasures of the Text Miller takes issue with the writer because his 'concept of textuality called the 'writerly' chooses the threads of lace over the lacemaker' (Miller 271). Barker, in these terms, achieves something quite remarkable in this text. Miller agrees that the 'death of the author' has been long overdue, but observes its less welcome corollary of 'delegitimizing other discussions of the reading (and writing) subject' (Miller 271). (Miller is specifically referring to women as writers in her essay but it is apposite to extend her model to mothers as written, and so 'read'). To continue Miller's arachnid paradigm, Barker has woven the mother – as both figure and metaphor - into the fabric of the text whilst at the same time allowing her to loosen and untie some of its structural and narrative threads, most particularly those which bind the mother to her definition as only-ever relational to the child. In so doing, I contend, he has begun to engage with a mode of representation that might be described (after the French feminists) as *voix maternelle*. For Cixous *écriture féminine* is not necessarily 'gendered'; rather it is linked to the capacity of the writer to include or express otherness.³

In the same way, I would suggest, *voix maternelle* is not limited to either the body of 'mother' or her 'voice' – though it might include speaking both/either. Rather it is a way of expressing the containment of an other within the self; it is a celebration of the liminality of boundaries – the possibility of both an interior and an exterior 'both and' as against self/other; it invokes a right to enjoy process, to enjoy 'becoming'. Indeed the maternal itself becomes the emblem of the subject in process rather than simply enabling subject formation through abjection.

Barker constructs this possibility through the figure of The Mother and through the texture of the narrative. The three recurrent figures in *Wounds to the Face* are The Mother, The Soldier (her son) and The Surgeon. The locking of all the other characters into contained and defining scenes or situations imitates the traditional containment of the woman in the role of mother. In *Wounds* it is The Mother who moves through time and space, from scene to scene, reinscribing herself as either mother or woman dependent on the circumstances and context of the scene. This traversing of the fluid boundaries between mother and woman has the effect of drawing together the material body that is the mother and the shadow that is the once-woman.

We are presented, then, with an alternative representational economy that opposes the patriarchal Symbolic order (as described by Lacan and denoting the world of phallogocentric laws and language, a world from which the mother is all but excluded, into which the child moves after severing the maternal bond)⁴ and concomitantly gives voice or agency to The Mother. She is presented not only as Mother but also as Lover and this dual role enables her to interrogate her own, dyadic mother/woman relationship. On discovering that her son – The Soldier – no longer has a face, due to an horrific war injury, she responds:

Then you will need me. For a man without a face will earn no love

From women. On the contrary, they will shudder, and love will

Come from me alone, me the solitary source again!

My breasts tingle!

My breasts...dear one... (WF 53)

At this moment, The Mother is presented as the primeval Mater Dolorosa, the virginal maternal, signified as Kristeva points out in her essay 'Stabat Mater' by 'milk and tears' (Kristeva 173). In patriarchal culture, Kristeva argues, in which women are reduced to the maternal function, these are the mother's only language. However, this depiction of The Mother is immediately problematised as the object of these words, which close the scene, becomes ambiguous. The Lover enters the space and it is left unclear as to whether The Mother's last words are directed at her son or her married lover. She is repositioned as something else 'alongside' mother. This appropriation of another role (indeed, not just lover but adulteress) interrogates the fixing of the concept of 'mother' to any woman who has performed that biological function. To quote Kaplan again, the mother-ness is re-evaluated as 'a mobile part of being...that comes and goes depending on whether I am in relation or not to the child' (Kaplan 41).

I would argue that what we see here is a collapsing of traditional bi-polar mother representations (angel/whore mother, good/bad phallic mother): questioning the binary – refusing to be contained by 'naming', or definition – in turn lends Barker's mother agency. Firstly the Mother has moved seamlessly from consideration of her son's predicament to caressing her lover's body. Textually there is no indication of a 'scene change', nor directions for the mother to move into an alternative space that

contains The Lover: he is 'just there' and she is 'with him'. Secondly, as we see later in the scene, she positions her lover as a child: she 'makes' his identity. 'Sleep now....Sleep and I will wake you. Have I ever let you down? I always arouse you in time' (WF 54) she murmurs, apparently lulling him to sleep but with the sexual self underscoring – interwoven with – the maternal. When he sleeps, she stabs him – non-fatally – in the face. We can interpret this relationship as being as much mother-son as it is lover-mistress. Classically, the former relationship is disrupted and so reconstructed by the intrusive Father.⁵

Here, no father motivates the severing of the original bond – the mother actively chooses to perform this severance in her new incarnation as mother-mistress. This imbrication of mother and mistress, together with the active rejection of the son/lover (pre-empting, we might suppose, abjection) exposes and interrogates the primacy of the child in constructions of the mother. Traditionally, the child must sever the bond with the mother in order to become a separate, individuated Subject. This scene foregrounds the mother, releasing her from the dim shadows of the abject, and allowing her to join the ranks of the choosing agent. In usurping her own ideologically inscribed role she rewrites herself as a woman who resists confinement within the traditional good/bad binary.

Barker's insistence upon the naming of the mother as The Mother is crucial here. She carries the name of Mother with her, but loses her particularised identity as the 'mother of'. 'Mother' as signifier loses its ingrained connection with the signified (remembering here that 'mother' is signified *not* by the body of the woman but by the *child*). She speaks and acts as a symbiotic mother/woman, not separated from her mother-ness but conflating it with her still-woman-ness. This disrupts the limiting definition of 'mother' outlined earlier in which I proposed that the (woman who is now a) mother is redefined solely on the basis of the child(ren) to whom she is biologically/legally connected. The Doubles, about whom I shall say more in a moment, perform an exteriorised version of this 'both and' conflict/potentiality which functions as both mirror and critique of The Mother's interiorised woman/mother conflation.

Barker allows the mother to set up a circuit of exchange both within and outside - that is between herself as mother and herself as still-woman, and between herself as 'both and' and the phallogocentric order. In *Wounds* the latter operates on a variety of levels, but it is The Surgeon who most resonantly evokes an all-powerful patriarchy with its inviolable laws and structures. As a plastic surgeon, dealing almost exclusively

with remodelling the faces of those who are convinced they are not beautiful enough, he is empowered to recreate identities. Pointing to one patient he has refashioned he notes: 'Him I did badly. Him I felt antipathy towards....When one rebuilds the face, one rebuilds the character. It's inescapable' (WF 60). The Mother desperately wants her son to once again have a face - even if not 'his' face - and ultimately she achieves this. She flouts the rules of The Surgeon who tells The Soldier that without 'his' intervention he 'will be forever hideous and sit alone in rooms' and to 'kill yourself if you wish. I would' (WF 53). Instead of subjecting her son to the will of The Surgeon, The Mother does the unthinkable - she gives her son her own face, or rather the version of it that she originally gave him, the one by which he has come to be identified. As The Soldier says: 'Twice she's given birth to me and would do, over and over again' (WF 77).

In excluding the Name of the Father from the formation of her son's new identity she transgresses 'His' rules and conventions: out of this, however, comes not chaos, but hope. With his new face The Soldier is able to claim his bride; together they 'run off, hand in hand' (WF 78) to begin a new life. Meanwhile, The Mother's disavowal of The Surgeon is replayed at a political level: as she walks through the streets, her face bandaged, The Surgeon is being 'encouraged' by a group of young revolutionaries to accept the face as *it is*, as a thing of beauty. The Surgeon, so bound up with his own powers to construct and manipulate identity finds himself unable to agree: as The Mother moves off, the group execute The Surgeon. They, like The Mother, resist the authority of The Surgeon. The Mother becomes an emblem of change, of forward movement. She is neither the static mother wallowing in the constraints of her definition nor the negative-excessive mother whose monstrous spirit engulfs rather than nourishes. Literally, this mother dissents, decides, acts; metaphorically, the *voix maternelle* bleeds out into the collective psyche, urging a resistance to patriarchally dominated constructions of identity.

What I have identified as Barker's *voix maternelle* is about resisting definition. It speaks to and of the ongoing problematic of identity that the woman/mother confronts. The pregnant mother is, as Irigaray has argued 'neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person or as two. She resists all adequate definition' (Irigaray 26). However, this is a position that must be extended to include the now-mother, must be re-evaluated to respond to the 'both and' paradox. It is about critiquing both the process of naming (as mother) and the effect of that process. In this case, naming goes beyond appropriation: it becomes a way of objecting not just the mother but the woman she once was.

This duality or doubleness that is the mother as re-presented by Barker is intricately interwoven with its negative potential in the scene between The Doubles. Two apparently identical figures meet, observe each other and proceed to argue over possession of the face that they share:

FIRST DOUBLE: You have my face.

SECOND DOUBLE: Or you have mine -

FIRST DOUBLE: No, you have my face, I said -

SECOND DOUBLE: Anyone would think I'd stolen it -

FIRST DOUBLE: That may well be the case -

SECOND DOUBLE: Ridiculous! (WF 66)

The two are fragmented physically - part of a potential 'one' - playing out the Kristevan model of the maternal experience: the two are 'a fundamental challenge to the identity' of each other and serve to illuminate the notion of the 'separation and coexistence of the self and an other' (Kristeva 1986b 206). Kristeva uses both these phrases to describe the paradoxical interleaving of completeness and fragmentation that the woman experiences when creating a new and separate being. As the scene closes the Second Double cries: 'Mother...! Oh Mother...!' and the First Double responds: 'Yes, they are to blame! So much to blame for everything!' (WF 66). The First and Second Doubles enact physically the psychic dislocation the woman experiences on becoming a mother. Kristeva's notion of the 'fundamental challenge to identity' has always been associated with the redoubling of the body in the act of creating a new body. I believe that this 'radical ordeal' (1986b 206) of which Kristeva speaks must be re-evaluated - like Irigaray's *This Sex* - to describe (or at least to admit) the cultural and ideological insistence upon the 'split' between woman and mother. The beauty of Barker's scene is that we never know who is who, which is which. Inscribed onto the apparently divided nature of the scene is hybridity, symbiosis, a conjoining of the two. As woman and mother First and Second Double, battling to become a symbiotic mother/woman, are an eloquent model for this alternative reading of Kristeva's analysis of the experience of motherhood: whilst the child may indeed need to separate from the mother in order to achieve subjectivity, the 'mother' must surely retain her definition as 'woman' in order to retain hers.

In his own commentary upon the nature of the double Freud suggests that 'the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person...by *interchanging* himself' (Freud, 1919, 241, my italics). The woman/mother as doubled is seeking precisely this freedom – to interchange herself(s) in order to become 'both and'. Barker's willingness to resist twentieth-century definitions of the mother provide the embryo of an alternative maternal voice – a *voix maternelle* – for a twenty-first century theatre.

ENDNOTES

1 See for instance, Peter Buse's cogent summary of Churchill's oeuvre, 'Caryl Churchill: Critical Perspective' at www.contemporarywriters.co.uk. Buse writes that: 'Churchill opens up a space of interrogation and uncertainty which the audience must occupy.'

2 Elaine Aston discusses the failure of Barker - alongside Howard Brenton and David Hare – to live up to their earlier political achievements in an article entitled 'Daniels in the Lion's Den' which appeared in *Theatre Journal*, 47, 3, 393-403; see also Elizabeth Sakellariidou 'New Faces for British Political Theatre', *Studies in Theatre Performance*, 20, 1, 44-53 in which she is specifically referring to the apparent political apathy of Barker, David Hare and Edward Bond.

3 Cixous describes *écriture féminine* as '...writing (in) the in-between...not fixed...but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another' (Cixous, 353). The 'who' writing is not key – the author *could* be male. Feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner elaborates thus: "[this] psychic mode seemingly typical of women...tends to disregard categories and to seek communion...directly and personally with others". For this latter term we may perhaps read 'others'. (Ortner 37). Please see bibliography for full references.

4 This idea is elaborated by Lacan in a number of his essays and seminars. Particularly enlightening is the chapter entitled 'On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis' in *Écrits: a selection (1977)*. Please see bibliography for full reference. For an illuminating and often ironic unpacking of this key Lacanian notion see McGillis, Roderick. "Another Kick at La/can: 'I Am a Picture.'" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 20 (1995): 42-46.

5 I refer here to the Lacanian idea that 'the symbiosis of the infant with the world, its non-differentiation, is disrupted by the intervention of a third term, that of the patriarchal law, of the Name of the Father.' (Green and LeBihan, 164). Lacan's discourse on the Law of the Father is coherently summed up by Green and LeBihan in *Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook* (London: Routledge, 1997).