

Book Review: *If We Were Birds*

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Book Under Review

Shields, Erin. 2011. *If We Were Birds*. Toronto, ON: Playwrights Canada Press.

Governor General award-winning *If We Were Birds* by Canadian playwright and actor Erin Shields (2011) is a powerful recreation of the Greek myth of sisters Philomela and Procne that inspired Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and many other works. It is an interpretation of how women are treated by men in power that forces the audience to face the violence of war and contemporary political conflicts in which women have been the main victims.

The plot closely follows the ancient myth, with Shields masterfully intertwining satirical moments and horrendous war testimonies of cruelty experienced by women. After her marriage to the warrior Tereus, Procne, daughter of Pandion, the King of Athens, is taken to live in Thrace, forever separated from her younger sister Philomela. After giving birth to a son, Procne longs for Philomela and implores her husband to bring her for a visit. Tereus agrees and goes to Athens to discover that Philomela has grown up to be a beautiful woman. On their way back to Thrace, Tereus violently rapes Philomela in the woods. In order to make sure that she cannot recount the incident, he cuts off her tongue. However, Procne discovers what he did and is determined to avenge her sister in the most brutal way: by murdering her own son and feeding him as a meal to her husband. When Tereus finds out, all three protagonists and the chorus are transformed into birds by the Gods. Instead of setting them free, the transformation perpetuates their pain by preserving the power relations between them. Philomela states clearly at the beginning: "Not much has changed, now that I am a bird...especially the size of my fear" (4).

The all-female chorus—in fact only two out of nine members of the cast are male—is employed in *If We Were Birds* to critique the atrocities committed in war. It consists of slave women whose words were inspired by testimonies of survivors from the conflicts in Nanking (1937), Berlin (1945), Bangladesh (1971), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995), and Rwanda (1994), contributing to a twentieth-century perspective,

without explicit references in the text that would distract from the main plot. The play thus combines two different spheres of violence: the public and private. The unclear distinction between the two is perfectly exemplified in the words of grieving Procne: “I thought there was a difference between family and war” (67).

But what does it mean to be a bird? The final metamorphosis of the characters and the chorus is not experienced as liberation from pain, but rather a break from the cycle of violence. The hybrid creation of human consciousness trapped in the body of a bird is a reflection of reality: despite the transcendence of the silenced victims from suffering to freedom, there is no perfect resolution or escape from the horrors of violence. This Brechtian ending reveals that the purpose of the play is not merely to console the audience or report brutality, but rather to applaud and honour women survivors who lived to tell their stories and just like birds, continue flying.