reason for the play's enduring popularity with amateur performers is the wide range of rich lively roles for women – a trademark element of Daniels's writing – the banter the women share, and the comedy that is not at the women's expense. Yet, as Susan Haedicke points out, the play is also profoundly pessimistic, as the gut women's gentrification into domestic servants removes them from a workplace of relative autonomy back to the doubly repressive setting of the domestic and middle-class mores.[64] Daniels's writing from the 1980s does not offer utopian solutions, despite reviewers' assertions. Its operation through laughter and the rattling of realist structures returns audiences not to individual dilemmas, but to characters sharply aware of their relationship to the political, gendered and social structures that surround them.

TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER

By Sara Freeman

The moment: 1988

In 1988, two plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker premiered in two of England's most important theatre venues. *Our Country's Good* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 10 September and just seven weeks later, on 28 October, *The Love of the Nightingale* became the last show performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the original Other Place in Stratford. Wertenbaker won the Olivier Award for Play of the Year and the Evening Standard's Most Promising Playwright Award for *Our Country's Good*. After *Nightingale*'s move to London in 1989, it received the Eileen Anderson Central TV Drama Award. In short, 1988 culminated as an *annus mirabilis* for Wertenbaker, a development especially unexpected since as the year started she had not even begun work on *Our Country's Good*. This chapter provides a new look at Wertenbaker's three most recognised plays of the 1980s, approaching the plays as they were situated in their moment of first production and engaging anew with why the plays produce strong theatrical impact. From this perspective, the moment

of 1988 takes an even more pointed position for both Wertenbaker and British theatre. For Wertenbaker, the breakthrough of 1988 held particular poignancy because in the previous year she experienced a pause in the consistent level of production she had been enjoying in London venues, with a play a year appearing since 1980, and personally, she had entered what she described as a 'period of deep mourning' after the death of her partner, actor John Price.[1]

In Britain and for British theatre, 1988 also had a different tenor. In 1987, Margaret Thatcher won re-election for the second time and started her third term, but the effects of changes from her earlier terms had already created new conditions, and cultural institutions were adapting even as they were protesting. Historian Peter Riddell notes about the 1980s that the decade almost breaks neatly into two sections: the first half 'culminating in the defeat of the miners' strike in 1984–85', a period when financial reform was most draconian and during which the 'dragon of union power was slain'.[2] As a result, the second half of the 1980s experienced a pace of change both in the labour market and in culture in general that was 'almost inconceivable to someone who did not actually see' how it played out.[3] As Andy McSmith's pop-culture history of the 1980s suggests, especially in terms of technology and class mobility, the Britain of 1979 had more in common with the Britain of 1956 than the Britain of 1989.[4] And cultural historian Robert Hewison expertly charts in *Culture and Consensus: England, Art, and Politics Since 1940* how the 'loadsamoney' juggernaut of the enterprise culture unleashed vigorous reactions and contradictory significations.[5]

What was lost and what was gained in these changes is still being sorted out in Britain and in British theatre, but nevertheless the 'loadsamoney' ethos produced a new vigour and a new terror in British theatre by 1987 and 1988 and that energy meant opportunities even within the radically changed paradigm. Although the RSC's *Carrie* failed to repeat the success of *Les Misérables* (1985), 1988 brought some brisk new developments. Funded by Canadian entrepreneurs Ed and David Mirvish, Jonathan Miller set out to revive the Old Vic with a season of controversially staged classics that year – producing *Andromache*, *Candide*, *Too Clever by Half*, *The Tempest* and *Bussy*

D'Ambois among others.[6] In 1988 Deborah Warner's RSC production of *Titus Andronicus* moved to the Pit in the Barbican and her *King John* opened at the Other Place. In fact, after the continuous agitation of women theatre artists since the 1970s, 1988 saw Ian Herbert reflecting in the 'Prompt Corner' of *London Theatre Record* that the year was notable for the achievements of extraordinary woman theatre directors. Herbert mentioned the trajectories of not only Warner, but also Di Trevis, Jude Kelly, Sarah Pia Anderson and Ireland's Garry Hynes, founder of Druid Theatre Company, who after directing *The Man of Mode* at the RSC in 1988 stayed and directed Wertenbaker's *Nightingale*. Meanwhile, by 1988, the Royal Court, where Wertenbaker had found a home, was primed to make a new statement. After a roiling scandal over *Perdition* in 1987, the Court saved itself by having a hit with Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*, which so perfectly chronicled what had changed in Britain by the late 1980s.[7]

Some of the cultural energy in 1988 stemmed from the investigation and commemoration of 200 years of permanent British settlement in Australia that unfolded in scholarship and commonwealth public life across the year: *Our Country's Good* took part in this and benefited from it. The 1987 publication of both Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore* and Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* connected to this anniversary, which explains why Royal Court Artistic Director Max Stafford-Clark's idea to do *The Recruiting Officer* in conjunction with an adaptation of *The Playmaker*, which he had while rehearsing the Broadway transfer of *Serious Money* in New York, went from an idea to a proposal to Wertenbaker to an in-process workshop within five months (December 1987 to April 1988). *Our Country's Good* opened after only another five months, a very fast turn-around, all things considered.[8]

Wertenbaker's miraculous 1988 therefore coincided with some important trends. Yet her work across the decade maps a curious shape: Wertenbaker's content can seem a bit ahead or a bit behind the moment, anticipating the hybrid, globalised politics of the 1990s while revisiting the gender dichotomies of the 1970s; and yet, as a whole, her mode of working largely encapsulates movements of the decade. Wertenbaker began the 1980s writing for alternative theatres

and expressing a strong woman-centred angle in her work. In particular, across 1980 and 1981 she had a commission from pioneering feminist company Women's Theatre Group, and for them she scripted a Theatre-in-Education piece and her first published play *New Anatomies*. Collaboration and writer's residency with Shared Experience followed: Wertenbaker produced much-admired translations of Marivaux for Mike Alfreds to direct with his group of inventive storytellers.

The absolute marker of Wertenbaker's prospects in the 1980s came when she became a Resident Writer at the Royal Court across 1984 and 1985, a role held by Hanif Kureishi, and Sarah Daniels just prior to Wertenbaker.[9] This position matters in the symbolic economy of the British theatrical scene, but beyond the symbolic realm, it also provided Wertenbaker with an artistic home base for the decade.[10] With the premiere of *The Grace of Mary Traverse* on the Royal Court's main stage in 1985 and the production of her translation of *Mephisto* at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1986, Wertenbaker entered major venues of production and became an artist to be watched.[11] Indeed, in eight years, Wertenbaker had recapitulated the developments of the whole British theatre economy: 1970s alternative theatre artists penetrating the mainstream venues and struggling with the modes of political theatre, new writing and ensemble-based devising in that context.[12]

How, then, did Wertenbaker 'fit' in 1985 as *The Grace of Mary Traverse* gained her even wider attention? What was the nature of her voice and what about that quality demanded that she be watched? How did *Our Country's Good* and *The Love of the Nightingale* extend or disrupt Wertenbaker's encapsulation of that moment, and the trends developing after 1985? It seems apt that Sarah Daniels was Writer-in-Residence at the Royal Court just before Wertenbaker because *The Grace of Mary Traverse* thematically resonates with Daniels's concerns about rape and power within patriarchy: it had been only two years since the controversy over *Masterpieces* when *The Grace of Mary Traverse* opened. Upon re-reading *Mary Traverse* almost thirty years after its premiere, this is one of the startling aspects of it: its fatalism about gender relationships, its brutal imaging of the

terrible traps that young women with both intellect and libido face. This is a way that the play almost feels 'behind' the times reading now: there's an uncomfortable sense that this territory had already been covered, well articulated by writers like Churchill, Daniels and Pam Gems, to whose radical *Camille* Victoria Radin compared the piece in the *New Statesman*, and even by male playwrights like Howard Barker, to whom the RSC was giving a 'season' in the Pit at the same time *The Grace of Mary Traverse* opened.[13] But that vision is shaped by generalisations made in the 1990s about the 'talky' and predictable political theatre of the 1980s to set up a good contrast with the in-yer-face 'explosion' of new playwriting after 1995.[14] In a lived moment, a historical 'plan view' of what will be fresh or passé is not available: artists like Wertenbaker are in the midst of the events and, as Charles Mee puts it, 'the culture writes us first, and then we write our stories'.[15] In the 1980s, it seems, the culture had written artists who needed to write stories about rape, gender, power, witches, pornography and the link of personal liberation to social and political transformation. Wertenbaker's contributions to those stories stirred powerful and revealing reactions, as the reviews to productions of *The Love of the Nightingale* from 1988 through 1991 attest.[16]

The distinctive voice of Wertenbaker's three major plays of the 1980s – *Mary Traverse, Our Country's Good* and *The Love of the Nightingale* – transformed a British marriage of Brechtian approaches to history plays and a Shavian theatre of ideas through a challenging and deeply contextual take on gender, identity and justice. For Wertenbaker's work, the issue of justice cannot be over-emphasised. In an interview with John DiGaetani for the 1991 collection *The Search for a Postmodern Theatre*, Wertenbaker responds to DiGaetani's praise that, compared to plays of the 1970s, her plays are sceptical, not didactic.[17] Wertenbaker counters that she thinks she's 'gone through phases of being quite didactic', and offers a telling reading of how attitudes towards Brecht on that front shift and then shift again. Wertenbaker then asserts that didactic or not, 'the search for justice should not be forgotten'.[18] Wertenbaker's interest in justice (that may never be obtained: the emphasis in her formulation is on the search) stands particularly strong in the major plays of the 1980s, which is

what makes the materialist/Brechtian/feminist way they depict silence, the double-edged sword of knowledge, and the hope of transformation so searing. Wertenbaker believes 'the search for justice should continue' (p. 268), and thereby her plays entertain an ongoing humanist debate with Western intellectual history and the genre of tragedy. Wertenbaker's theatrical continuation of that debate makes clear through her exhilarating deployment of historical metaphor and literary intertext the absolutely non-metaphoric injustices troubling the contemporary world.[19]

As a playwright coming to prominence in the 1980s, Wertenbaker made theatre pieces that linked to hot cultural conversations about class and gender, race and cultural hybridity, the representation of England's 'heritage', the after-effects of Empire and developments in 'state-of-the-nation' drama. Across her career, it matters that Wertenbaker's own identity and intellectual commitments dislocate from British tradition, so her translatorial, multilingual and international ethos positions her somewhat differently in the decades of British playwriting. A perspective that David Hare or David Edgar sought to develop in the 1990s, for instance, by undertaking projects like *Pentecost* or *Via Dolorosa*, Wertenbaker nurtured from the beginning.[20] But in the 1980s in particular, Wertenbaker's work mattered because as post-war culture continued to fragment, her plays hailed a potent idea of British theatre as a place for vivid illustration of debate, provocative argument and cultural reaffirmation.

The plays: brisk sensuality

Wertenbaker's plays possess a spareness that belies the thickly contextualised realm of signification they activate. On the page, the plays present a clean look: the words are precise and eloquent. There are big ideas, but an economy of clauses and commas. Phrases turn firmly. Sentences are sharp. Periods dominate. The historical or mythic settings of the plays, the way they rework the conventions of existing dramatic genres and their dense intertextual references contrast against this spareness to produce a pleasurable frisson that might best

be described as 'brisk sensuality'.[21] This brisk sensuality defines Wertenbaker's voice and it provides fertile theatrical moments to be magnified by actors, directors and designers. The fresh readings of the plays unfolded in this section attend to production history, discussing Wertenbaker's collaborators in the first staging of the plays and the context in which the plays were staged. The elements of close reading that also inform these analyses track techniques of her dramaturgy, especially how Wertenbaker evolved a skill with large group debate scenes alongside her professed love of monologues and how her plays contrapuntally contrast debate with silence.

The Grace of Mary Traverse

The Grace of Mary Traverse concerns a privileged young woman who, in defiance of her wealthy father, leaves her eighteenth-century drawing room in hopes of gaining experience. She gambles, prostitutes herself and others, reads philosophy and foments rebellion. Her encounters with the economic, political, sexual and moral systems of her society provide her a hard-earned knowledge and a different type of grace than the gentle conversation and smooth deportment she once strove to learn. The show opened at the Royal Court Theatre on 17 October 1985, just after *Aunt Dan and Lemon* by Wallace Shawn had closed, and while Upstairs *God's Second in Command* and *Basin*, both by Jacqueline Rudet, traded places.[22] Danny Boyle directed.

At that point Boyle was a Royal Court associate artist who had recently worked with Joint Stock on Howard Barker's *Victory: Choices in Reaction*, but he would go on to be famous for films such as *Trainspotting* (1997), *28 Days Later (*2003) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008).[23] Having Janet McTeer play the role of Mary Traverse pivotally shaped the success of what Boyle and Wertenbaker set into motion. Alongside analysis of Wertenbaker's content and conceits, the reviews for *Mary Traverse* overflow with fascination for McTeer. In the *Financial Times*, Michael Coveney enthused at the greatest length:

> Mary herself is literally straining for the off, bursting at the seams, busting out of her crinoline. Janet McTeer, making her London debut, is quite simply astonishing, the most extraordinary new actress I have seen way beyond even Juliet Stevenson. Martin Hoyle's reports on this page of her Royal Exchange, Manchester, work were no idle trailer. Close your eyes and you hear Vanessa Redgrave, singing along her vowels and animating all she says with urgency and passion. Open them and you see a tall, willowy young woman full of grace and movement, total assurance and natural timing.[24]

McTeer had made her professional debut in *Mother Courage and Her Children* in Nottingham only the year before and *Mary Traverse* sensationally brought her to the attention of the London theatre scene.[25]

The sensation emerged in part because of McTeer's skill and her voluptuous beauty (the photos included with Coveney's review, and Michael Billington's in the *Guardian*, for instance, feature McTeer with neck extended, eyes and mouth wide, cleavage bursting), but also because Wertenbaker's script gave McTeer two theatrically indelible scenes to play. These two scenes would test the mettle of any actress and they carry the punch of the play's exploration of gender. The first such scene, the third of Act Two, places Mary across the room from a Mr Hardlong. She purchases his services in order to gain initiation into desire and its practice. Mary, fully clothed, observes a naked Mr Hardlong as he persuades her to take her lesson. Then, plunging in, Mary delivers a *tour-de-force* monologue built around geographic imagery of Welsh mountains and the Bay of Biscay where she describes the knowledge of pleasure she gains.[26] The script never suggests that intercourse be mimed and it seems central to the distancing effects this scene introduces around the subject of sexual autonomy and knowledge that Mary stays fully clothed,[27] but it remains a scene of astonishing revelation: the sensuality of Mary's monologue kindles a fire that collides against the stage picture of separated bodies. This contrast is further driven home by the final turn of the scene, which comes when Mr Hardlong spends his payment from Mary buying the services of Sophie, the innocent and recently raped

working-class girl Mary has taken from the streets to be her servant. The crux: Mary asked Mr Hardlong to serve her pleasure. Mr Hardlong wants Sophie to serve his. When Mary declares, 'I would do that too. Mr Hardlong. I would advocate a community of pleasure. Teach me what to do and I will,' he replies, 'It's too late, Mary: you would have to learn to ask for nothing.'

The second intense, boundary-pushing scene *Mary Traverse* provides for its lead actress comes at the top of Act Three, where Mary, her state now reversed, plies her trade as a prostitute with Sophie in Vauxhall Gardens. Mary discovers her father, who thinks she is dead, starting a transaction with Sophie. Mary, masked, takes over the job and while manually bringing her father to climax also reveals to him who she is and calls him to account for all that her Faustian experience thus far has taught her about gender, power and recognition. Her speech, as she 'unbuttons' and 'massages' him, echoes Caliban's to Prospero. Giles asks if she must talk so much and she responds, 'It's my father who taught me to talk, Sir. He didn't suspect he'd also be teaching me to think. He was not a sensitive man and didn't know how words crawl into the mind and bore holes that will never again be filled' (pp. 116–17). With the way the speech develops an image of knowledge working like venereal disease, the point crystallises. Mary, unlike Sophie, 'knows' what is at stake in these exchanges (p. 115): it is not just pleasure or money or bread, it is also agency, autonomy and freedom.

Indeed, throughout the play, the pliant and blank Sophie serves as Mary's foil, her inarticulacy in opposition to Mary's silver tongue, her submission against Mary's dominance, her apparent lack of ideas and needs causing her to be desired by all the men who populate the play, but her abject state providing a distinct demonstration of the reason Mary must 'die' to her old life (accomplished by that orgasm scene) and try to find if there's some way to be both a woman and a human being. Yet, for all the vibrancy of this contrast, silence, which is always central to Wertenbaker's figuration of agency, is not Sophie's tactic. Instead, it is Jack, Sophie's lover and a working-class organiser, who in this play provides the silence that prefigures that of Liz Morden in *Our Country's Good* and Philomele in *Love of the Nightingale*.[28]

Jack appears in the play for the first time in the scene immediately following Mary's 'seduction' of her father. *The Grace of Mary Traverse* has four acts, and the interval comes between Act Two and Act Three: it marks, roughly, the play's transition from anatomising the social construction of gender and class to the play's exploration of what happens in the pursuit of material and political liberation, given those constructions. Jack brings with him a discussion of 'bread and liberty' that helps move the action of the play toward its third act culmination in riots and fourth act climax of public execution (p. 140). Jack finds his political match in Mary. He has something to say, and she has the means to say it (p. 129). When their combined voices fail to achieve their intended end, his final silence at the scaffold defies the commodification of using his last words to endorse anything, commercial or philosophical (p. 158). His protest is total.

In the first production the actor who played Jack (David Beames) had played Mr Hardlong the act before, and the world where Mary goes with Jack also demonstrates how class and gender hierarchies ghost utopian attempts at liberation so they can easily be redirected and recuperated by dominant systems. After Mary and Jack begin to agitate publicly, Lord Gordon and Mr Manners quickly target them. Then, in Act Three, scene eight, Wertenbaker provides a scene seemingly out of time, a 'midnight conversation: the last stages of a drunken dinner' that allows almost all the characters to debate together (pp. 137–8). Do they share a common cause? Initially, Mary's skill with conversation gave Jack's thoughts wings, but in this scene the cry of 'bread and liberty' twists with the manipulation of Mr Manners to become a cry for gin and against 'popery'. The way Mary falls in love with her own rhetorical skill makes her vulnerable to Mr Manners's Mephistophelean suggestion, so that suddenly, she finds herself advocating an anti-Catholic position and the revolution she and Jack dreamed of is recuperated by those in power to help reinforce the social order they want to see preserved. As the outcome, Jack is executed to the strains of Schubert's Adagio in E flat major, the 'Notturno', a punctuating use of classical music that signifies rather differently than the use of Beethoven at the end of *Our Country's Good*.[29]

The riots that consume the end of Act Three in *The Grace of Mary Traverse* are nominally the Gordon Riots of 1780, which in history were inspired by anti-Catholic sentiment. Interestingly, Wertenbaker's depiction of Lord Gordon repurposes the historical figure who headed the Protestant Association as a character also in conflict about his gender, just as Mary is about hers. This Lord Gordon (first played by Tom Chadbon, an actor best known for his later role as Lenny Monk in the TV series *Crown Prosecutor*) spends his first appearance on stage trying to figure out how best to play the social role demanded of an aristocratic man. Act One, scene two and Act One, scene three therefore serve as specific counterpoint to each other, contrasting how Mary practises the 'invisible passage of an amiable woman' and Lord Gordon prays, 'Oh God, please make me noticed, just once' (pp. 71, 74).

Lord Gordon's quest to be noticed (it is for this reason he rapes Sophie after Mary ignores him) turns into the pursuit of political power, so that as Mary and Gordon each attempt to rewrite their social identity across the first half of the play, they both come to foment political protest in the second half. Mary and Lord Gordon both misunderstand what their 'liberation' depends upon (the suffering of others), a lesson Mrs Temptwell's character history confirms. As the play reveals Mrs Temptwell's pursuit of revenge on Mary's father for his role in enclosing public lands where her family lived in order to build his fortune, it tells of the torture and execution of her grandmother as a witch in the process of clearing those lands. Mrs Temptwell, played at the Royal Court by Pam Ferris, tries to teach Mary about the cycle of revenge, even as she tries to trap Mary in it.

Wertenbaker clearly declares that *Mary Traverse* is 'not a historical play' in her note at the beginning of the script (p. 66). Despite the use of period costumes and wigs, the design of the first production relied on suggestion and minimalism in a way that reinforces Wertenbaker's description of the 'eighteenth century as a valid metaphor' by making the scene of the play not a fully detailed reality, but a framework (John Barber describes Kandis Cook's set as 'scaffolded').[30] Especially in the second half, the play invokes imagery related to atom bombs, the

holocaust and contemporary sexual politics unknown in 1780. Jay Gipson-King persuasively reads these anachronistic aspects of *Mary Traverse* as metahistorical commentary that preserves a revealing alternative history.[31] Wertenbaker describes in her introduction to *Plays One* that she conceived the play influenced by having lived in a neighbourhood close to the site of the 1981 Brixton race riots (named for the unrest which took place in and around Brixton Road).[32] In addition to the actual Gordon Riots, Wertenbaker's use of the 1780s also invokes the coming French Revolution, and the recent American Revolution. Reminiscent of those historical revolutions, what lit Lambeth aflame in 1981 was not only generalised high unemployment and racial tension, but the pointed implementation of an aggressive law-enforcement policy called Operation Swamp 81 that allowed police to search subjects based on suspicion of wrongdoing. In April 1981, across only five days, plainclothes police searched over 900 people in Brixton on these grounds.[33] Yet, if the Brixton riots sent Wertenbaker looking for a metaphor by which to discuss the role of popular uprising in the pursuit of liberty and economic equality, it is worth noting that the crushing of the riots in *Mary Traverse* presents a bleak view of collective action that also seems to encapsulate the failure of the miners' strikes of 1984–85.

The collapse of the National Union of Mineworkers strike in March 1985, six months before the show opened, provides a chronologically more immediate connection to the sense of waste and defeat at the end of Act 3 than Brixton does. However, in a topical convergence of life and art, nineteen days before *Mary Traverse* opened, a new 'uprising' occurred in Brixton, in response to an invasive police search for a black man that resulted in the accidental shooting of his mother, which trigged looting, fires and the death of cameraman David Hodge in the mêlée.[34] *Mary Traverse* feels deeply of its time, capturing this jagged, tinderbox feeling about public order. Still, the Royal Court's *Mary Traverse* didn't stage race as part of its given dynamics. In the first productions of *Our Country's Good* and *Love of the Nightingale*, black performers were cast in such a way as to convey significance even in the absence of explicit dialogue about race, but no black actors were used in *Mary Traverse*'s first production. While the

Brixton riots inspired *Mary Traverse*, overall the play evinces a more thematic concern with gender and labour than with race relations. This may simply be an initial result of adopting the eighteenth century as the locus for the metaphor, and when *Our Country's Good* returned Wertenbaker to the same century, her feminist-humanist debate with the continuing heritage of that time period and its philosophy sharpens about race considerably. Powerfully, as Brechtian history plays engaged in a neo-Shavian debate about equality and liberty, both *The Grace of Mary Traverse* and *Our Country's Good* stage the late eighteenth century as a moment that provocatively elucidates the tensions of liberal democracy and late postmodern capitalism.[35]

Our Country's Good

As *Our Country's Good* took shape, an Australian theatre company made a mid-year tour of London, bringing a play about the colonial displacement of indigenous peoples in Australia to England. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust sponsored the Marli Biyol Company's performance of Jack Davis's *No Sugar* in a 'walkabout' production at the Riverside Studios in June 1988.[36] The first part of a trilogy written in 1985, *No Sugar* presents full force a post-colonial view of England's role in Australia. Some critics have wished *Our Country's Good* engaged more wholeheartedly with this view, rather than just suggest it through its use of a lone aborigine as chorus, who foretells the coming destruction once he figures out that the First Fleet's arrival is not a dream.[37] *Our Country's Good* dramatises how a production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* came to be staged in Australia in 1789 by convicts and Marines who populated England's first penal colony there. *Our Country's Good* probes the divide between authority and transgression, with a strong focus on the convict women Liz Morden, Mary Brenham and Duckling Smith, but equal investment in the officers Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark (director of the play), Captain Arthur Phillip, Major Robbie Ross and Midshipman Harry Brewer. The play works in post-Brechtian epic

mode, laying fragments of the colony's activities side by side in scenes that assemble as a complex composite picture.

Within this structure, the play insists on a conversation about gender and race across historical and colonial contexts, but it cannot be the work a writer with indigenous heritage would write. Despite its status as a history play 'like' *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, *Our Country's Good* doesn't include unsettling anachronistic references that shatter the illusion of the historical quite so immediately. But *Our Country's Good* set out to be a play about 'now' as much as the 'then' of its setting. The script's preface about Wertenbaker's visits to prison theatre projects and reproduction of letters from convicts to her about their transformational experiences acting in those programmes confirm this concern with the present country and its good. The dream vision of the play, I think, is that England should work for a painful, useful self-consciousness and change its structures, not that English people can relocate to colonial territories to get the freedom they can't get at home, as post-colonial critique of the play suggests. Indeed, in the moment of the premiere, the play was so successful in advocating the potential for the inclusion of otherness to transform a nation for the better that it fed a general affirmation of the arts as a means for making that change. After a decade of Thatcher's leadership and seismic changes to the way Britain conceived of itself, this idea about art, nation and identity hit home, while offering not just the desire for, but also the means of, self-examination and reinvention.

Such an excellent body of commentary already exists on *Our Country's Good* that it seems unnecessary to belabour the text's structural or thematic dynamics, or to provide a comprehensive reading of its characters.[38] Additionally, the workshop and rehearsal period for the show receives nuanced documentation in *Letters to George* and the case study on the play in *Taking Stock* by Max Stafford-Clark and Philip Roberts. *Our Country's Good* became a famous piece by being toured extensively, being produced worldwide, translated into many languages and made into a set text for British school exams. Now it needs to be rediscovered in the historical specificity of its premiere. Reading the play now and thinking about the decade it so effectively capped calls forth an excavation of the way the play's dramaturgy and

production choices coincide with the tandem production of *The Recruiting Officer*, the thrilling theatrical opportunities *Our Country's Good* offered artists and audiences, and the play's ideologically complex combination of critique and affirmation.

At the time it opened, *Our Country's Good* was entirely enmeshed with the production of *The Recruiting Officer* that opened before it, used the same actors, and which ran concurrently with the show even after it transferred to the West End and during a tour to Sydney in 1989. In other words, at no point in 1988 or 1989 was *Our Country's Good* performed without *The Recruiting Officer* running in rep. This pair of productions created a significant comment on colonial history, and at the same time the project also commemorated and 'took on' Bill Gaskill's staging of *The Recruiting Officer* twenty-five years before. When Stafford-Clark's production of *The Recruiting Officer* opened in June 1988, the reviews record that the play began in a bolder way than might be expected for eighteenth-century comedy. Jim Broadbent, playing Kite (and soon to play Harry Brewer playing Kite), began while house lights were still up, delivering his recruiting speech to the audience and tossing roses to them: the play's martial and marital images landing in the audience's lap.[39] This wasn't a gorgeous picture frame version of *The Recruiting Officer*, with Broadbent's stringy, plastered-down hair and harangue of the audience, and with Peter Hartwell's 'featureless tuppence-coloured' set providing only a parish pump and 'paintings of old Shrewsbury on a cyc'.[40] Gaskill's production had won attention for being inspired by Brecht's staging, but in 1988 it was as if Farquhar were being staged as a Caryl Churchill play, the more grumpy reviews suggested. Jim Hiley enjoyed how the approach replaced 'sputtering wit and over-rehearsed conceits' with a cast able to convey 'feelings, crisply voiced' and 'subtle, absorbing' characterisations, while complaining good-naturedly about the patchwork of accents presented.[41] The cast was doubled in roles in a way that the *Daily Mail* hated and *Time Out* mocked, including having Linda Bassett, who played Melinda (and soon Liz Morden playing Melinda) cross-dressed to be Thomas Appletree.[42] Still, the overall intellectual reaction to *The Recruiting Officer* found the show to be vivifying: the 'sharpness and force' of the

piece won praise and the 'troubling and intriguing' aspects of Farquhar's social critique hit home.[43]

If these critics had known what was to come in *Our Country's Good*, what might they have understood about the choices in *The Recruiting Officer*? *Our Country's Good* also has an aggressive opening, accomplished not with direct address, but by showing a contorted human body being punished. The show opens with Robert Sideway being whipped: if this is staged vividly at all, it requires a bloody-backed actor in torment for at least seven counts of the lash.[44] When he is untied, he is left in a crumpled mound on the ground, a stark embodiment of the other convicts' fragmented descriptions of life in the hold of the transport ship. Meanwhile, characters in *Our Country's Good* speak in Devonshire, Irish, Scots, Madagascan and lower- and upper-class London dialects, plus a decision is required about how the aborigine will sound. Since the actors were incubating one show as the other opened, it is no wonder that the dialects in *Recruiting Officer* ranged a bit freely. By the time both shows were up, for instance, Mark Lambert, because he played both Robbie Ross and Ketch Freeman, had to be able to move between Scots and Irish during *Our Country's Good* alone, and then turn around and play Judge Balance, the role Laurence Olivier had seemingly perfected for Gaskill in 1963! Meanwhile, the doubling of roles in *Our Country's Good* suggests ways of reading the doubling in the Farquhar as a matter of meaning-making as well as economy. In Wertenbaker's play, the doubling foregrounds the status hierarchies in the officers' ranks and among the prisoners, it highlights patterns or disjunctions in alliances and conflicts, and embodies the play's central idea that humans become the social roles they are allowed or forced to play. These same ideas applied to *The Recruiting Officer* must have helped the production's sense of edge.

Looking at the two productions, with their shared cast, Michael Billington felt they made a compelling case about 'what could be achieved if the Royal Court could afford a permanent ensemble'.[45] This sense of the plays together calling out to what might still yet be achieved by British theatre at the same time as they nod to the best of the British theatre tradition, classical and contemporary, pervades the

reviews for *Our Country's Good*. Notably, the critical praise of both Farquhar and Wertenbaker's plays lauded the way the lively productions *augmented* the social critique to be found in both texts: part of the joyous reception for both plays came from the way they challenged easy ideas about honour, truth and justice. 'It is worth seeing both plays: the effect is exhilarating, like being party to a private correspondence,' wrote Kate Kellaway in the *Observer*. 'This is not as self-indulgent as it sounds, for *Our Country's Good* is about theatre's power to spill over into life and overtake circumstance.'[46] It was ideologically important that there was dialogue within the plays and dialogue between the plays. For *Our Country's Good*, the staging of debates in order to open up social issues forms the key structural strategy that secures this inter-play.

Debate scenes, in fact, form the backbone of the play, around which explode the other highly theatrical scenes of whipping, visitations by the dead, late-night confessions, seductions, couplings, fist-fights between women convicts and preparations for executions. In *Our Country's Good* the most memorable intimate scenes come when Ketch Freeman measures Liz Morden for hanging, when Duckling mourns over Harry Brewer's recently dead body, and when Ralph and a cross-dressed Mary Brenham practising her role in the play take off their uniforms for each other. What actor or director could resist these scenes? Yet their impact derives in part from momentum earned by the beautifully structured, extremely funny and intelligent debate scenes where the play's plot weaves and surges. Debate begins on a small scale in Act One, during scene three, which is titled 'Punishment'. In addition to launching the debate about rehabilitation and condemnation, the scene provides a near perfect example of Brechtian *gestus*, as the officers debate how to best to maintain order for the 'good of the colony' while they shoot birds for sport. The recreational shooting juxtaposed against the idea of hanging convicts for stealing provisions demonstrates the officer's prerogative and critiques their blindness eloquently. Three scenes later this small debate results in a large-scale debate among the assembled officers of the colony. Scene six is where 'The Authorities Discuss the Merits of the Theatre'. All ten of the actors used in the show are on stage at the same time in this scene and

its overlapping, jovial, multi-focal beginning gives way to a sharply focused showdown between Major Ross and Ralph. On the way there, Wertenbaker scripts an elegant intervention for every officer character that puts another viewpoint into play, motivates actions and reactions, and builds suspense about what will happen with the play-within-the-play. Wertenbaker's skill with multi-focused, large group scenes allows for the subtle development of ideas and the exhilarating construction of dramatic tension.

Matching the scene of authorities debating is a scene that shows what happens when the convicts debate. Scene eleven, 'The First Rehearsal', also requires all ten actors, though it is not initially clear that it is a debate scene. But the scene allows the convicts to trade ideas instead of blows, an important step. Like Act One, Act Two also stages a small debate between two people (scene two, 'His Excellency Exhorts Ralph'), a scene of debate among the convicts (scene seven, 'The Meaning of Plays'), and a debate among the authorities (scene ten, 'The Question of Liz'). Act Two, scene ten provides a crucial turning point in the play: it is the place where debate, silence and monologue collide. Liz Morden's silence in this scene – she refuses to speak about the attempted escape she is accused of conspiring in – provokes the debate among the officers about whether to cancel the play. Her choice to speak at the end of the scene demonstrates the necessary effects of the debate. Liz is persuaded by Phillip's argument that 'you cannot get to the truth through silence', and she chooses to speak (p. 268).

It is not that Liz is incapable of speech, as revealed by the show-stopping top of Act Two monologue Wertenbaker created for her in canting talk of the period. Like Mary's speech with Mr Hardlong, and Niobe's meditation on her conquered homeland during Tereus's rape of Philomele in *Love of the Nightingale*, Liz's underworld aria demonstrates Wertenbaker's affection for the monologue as a set piece. 'I like monologues,' Wertenbaker told Ned Chaillet. 'I think they are an unused and rather beautiful form of communication.'[47] Liz's monologue and her famous eloquent final line in 'The Question of Liz' both turn on the issue of speaking when it matters (p. 271). Indeed, both instances in the play where convicts speak back to power, as it

were, occur in the midst of debate scenes. Liz's statement, after a long silence, that she 'didn't steal the food' breaks the silence that overtakes the convicts five scenes before, when the brave way the convicts began to speak their lines from the play, rehearsing a scene to deflect Ross's abuse of Sideway, Dabby and Mary, triggers an even more brutal punishment for Arscott (pp. 271, 251–3).

Importantly, the actress who played Liz Morden in the premiere of *Our Country's Good* contributed to the final decision about how the trajectory of 'The Question of Liz' resolved. Linda Bassett, an incredibly versatile actress who had appeared in Wertenbaker's *Abel's Sister* in 1984 and acted in numerous Royal Court and Joint Stock productions, including *Serious Money* just before *Our Country's Good*, is now also well known for many television and film roles, including parts in *East is East* (1999), *The Hours* (2002), *Calendar Girls* (2003) and *The Reader* (2008). Bassett becomes the centre of gravity when she is on stage: her serious face and her light energy yet resolute choices ground the roles she plays. Wertenbaker describes how during the rehearsal process Bassett and Broadbent had improvised a scene 'about whether Lizzie would decide to talk or not'. Then, one night, Bassett made a midnight call to Wertenbaker. 'I was about to talk,' she said, and Wertenbaker took counsel from that instinct.[48] Bassett's stature as an artist and authoritative contribution to the process are reflective of the overall make-up of the cast, which contained not only Bassett and Broadbent, but also Stafford-Clark and Wertenbaker repeat collaborators like Lesley Sharp, Ron Cook, Nick Dunning and David Haig, who won an Olivier for his portrayal of Ralph Clark.

Among this cast stood Alphonsia Emmanuel, another rising star like Janet McTeer. Emmanuel is a Dominican-born actress of colour. In 1984 she had been in the RSC's production of Pam Gems's *Camille* and in 1985 she appeared with Kenneth Branagh and Josette Simon in an RSC *Love's Labour's Lost*. Casting Emmanuel as Duckling Smith, the 'she-lag' kept by midshipman Harry Brewer, capitalised on an emerging acting talent and foregrounded questions of race, without direct dialogue necessitating it. Emmanuel's presence thereby worked alongside and beyond the presence of the aborigine character and the Madagascan character 'Black' Caesar, both played by African-born

actor Jude Akuwudike (who had just graduated from RADA in 1987 and who like Emmanuel has gone on to an active career on London stages as well as in film and television). Emmanuel and Akuwudike's double-casting as officers within *Our Country's Good* provides further resonance. Emmanuel playing George Johnston voiced the insight that most of the convict women had only committed small crimes, while Akuwudike, as Watkin Tench, expressed the most vitriol about the 'savage' inhabitants of New South Wales. Meanwhile, Emmanuel was playing Lucy, the lady's maid in *The Recruiting Officer*, her race giving special punch to Duckling's line 'I'm not playing Liz Morden's maid' (p. 227), and Akuwudike was playing Scruple and Justice Balance's servant. Thus, this colour-conscious casting which successfully foregrounded certain issues was also a double-edged sword that still delivered actors of colour to servant roles in classic pieces.

Tracing the actors in *Our Country's Good* also points up what happened to the play as the show was toured, revived and transferred to the West End. Broadbent, Bassett, Emmanuel, Haig and Sharp, who played Mary Brenham, left the show before its revival at the Royal Court in August and September 1989. This turnover is natural given the rhythms of an acting career. But as these actors were replaced, the cast, especially in the case of the women, got younger and then prettier. Clive Russell replaced Jim Broadbent. Suzanne Packer replaced Alphonsia Emmanuel, maintaining the presence of an actress of colour in Duckling's role. Julian Wadham stepped into Haig's boots to play Ralph. Initially Kathryn Hunter replaced Bassett as Liz Morden, a move that capitalised on Hunter's unique sense of contained violence. But by the time the show had transferred to the Garrick, Caitlin Clarke replaced Hunter. The production photos featuring Clarke as Liz Morden and Amanda Redman as Mary Brenham, for instance, convey a more conventionally sexy take on these two characters than in photos featuring Sharp and Bassett, whose brisk sensuality emerged from bold and direct action, rather than from cleavage.[49] As with its engagement with issues of race, colonialism and class, *Our Country's Good* activated a discussion of gender that was ideologically complex: even as the play critiqued dominant systems, it still moved in those systems' significations of power.

Our Country's Good affirms ideas about love and liberty even while struggling with how economic and discursive systems seem to necessitate injustice. This paradoxical combination forms the play's strength and its ongoing appeal. An unresolved, yet satisfying, movement between interrogation and affirmation in a piece of theatre serves feminist, humanist and post-colonial goals while speaking directly to postmodern audiences. In the scene titled 'John Wisehammer and Mary Brenham Exchange Words', Wertenbaker never lays out a word without giving it a complex match: there's friend and country followed by abjection and injustice; boldness and shame meet each other; lonely and loveless contend with luck and latitudinarian. Pairing these words together, the play finds language, as it has found stories, which can hold hope and condemnation at the same time.

Love of the Nightingale

Because Wertenbaker's plays unfold with a sensuality in language – it is never clearer than in the major plays of the 1980s how much she, like Wisehammer, loves words – they also insist on the sensuality of the body. Pointedly, all three of the plays discussed here pause to ponder the anatomy and linguistics of the cunt to potent effect. *Our Country's Good* famously opens with a monologue invoking the experience of the convict ship hold where Wisehammer inquires 'at night what is there to do but seek English cunt, warm, moist, soft, oh the comfort, the crannies of the crooks of England' linking cunt to countryside and homeland (p. 185). In *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, Mary insists that, just like men, part of what she pays Sophie for is pleasure. While Sophie goes under her skirt and brings her to her second orgasm on stage, Mary's monologue challenges men not to feel disgust and denies that her vividly described recesses represent a void (p. 106). In *Love of the Nightingale*, Philomele suffers violation that invades both her language and her female anatomy. After Tereus rapes Philomele, Niobe washes her face and genitals and the dialogue between them conjures Philomele's wild words against Tereus that will result in her losing her tongue.[50] The play works from the Ovidian

version of the Greek mythic tale about the Athenian princesses Philomele and Procne. Procne, the elder, is married to Theban king Tereus and she asks him to bring her sister to visit her in Thebes. He transports her to Thebes, but never delivers her to Procne, cutting out her tongue to keep her silent after the rape. Later, when Procne and Philomele reunite, they revenge themselves by killing Procne and Tereus's son, Itys. Then, to end the cycle of revenge, all three are turned into birds.

Prior to that scene of washing, in counterpoint to Philomele's screams and eventual, enforced silence, Niobe delivers a gorgeous, aching monologue where she remembers the lemon trees of her childhood home, an island conquered by the Athenians. Jenni George, the actress playing Niobe, stole the show, according to Catherine Wearing's review in *What's On in London*, with that monologue of 'excruciating exactness, tact, and brilliance'.[51] That George is a 'mountainous black woman' adds another layer to this description of colonisation and drives home the male chorus's contention that the play is not a 'myth for our times' about men and women, but rather that 'if you think of anything, think of countries, silence' (p. 315).[52] George's blackness also casts in relief the increasingly anachronistic promptings of the female chorus in the play's penultimate scene, including 'why do white people cut off the words of blacks?' (p. 349). George's presence in the cast, along with that of Claudette Williams playing Iris, Tony Armatrading as the Captain and Patrick Miller in the male chorus again presents a colour-conscious signification that expresses the ideological complexity of the play's project.

Still, when *Love of the Nightingale* opened in Stratford, in many reviews its content took second place to its status as the last play in the Other Place before it closed. Many opening-night critics paused to consider the legacy of the Other Place, to remember Buzz Goodbody, and to ponder the RSC's limping new plays policy. When Jane Edwardes wrote in her review in *Time Out* that the play was a 'fitting' finale to the Other Place, she was invoking the space's associations with experimental theatre, with women's work, with agitational content.[53] *Love of the Nightingale* did exemplify those concerns, so it celebrated the goals of the Other Place. However, logistics also

couched those characteristics within the RSC's remit as a huge institution dedicated to classical work. As with *Our Country's Good* and *The Recruiting Officer*, it is important to note how *Love of the Nightingale* was enmeshed in the RSC's production schedule. When the play opened in Stratford, it was up against *The Plantagenets*, the nine-hour cycle by Adrian Noble conflating the *Henry VI* plays with *Richard III* playing on the RSC mainstage. This made quite a contrast with *Nightingale's* ninety-minute, intermission-less running time. Concurrently, Cicely Berry was rehearsing a *King Lear* project slated to open in 1989 that used a significant number of *Nightingale's* actors – out of the sixteen in Wertenbaker's show, eight were simultaneously investigating and developing *King Lear*. Thus, Richard Haddon Haines channelled King Pandion while also playing King Lear; Joan Blackham as June and Jill Spurrier as Helen in the female chorus also took on Goneril and Regan; Peter Lennon played Tereus while rehearsing for Albany; and David Acton, Patrick Miller, Edward Rawle Hicks and Stephen Gordon were in the male chorus while preparing to play Cornwall, the Fool, Oswald/France and Old Man/Doctor respectively.[54] A subterranean intertextual conversation with *King Lear* cradled *Love of the Nightingale's* production.[55]

Indeed, between *Nightingale's* Other Place production in Stratford and its opening in London in 1989, nine months later, three of the actors involved with *King Lear* had left the cast and the event had been 'rethought and restaged'.[56] In Stratford, the production used classically inspired costumes and, apparently, a lot of dry ice to create effects.[57] Hynes's original staging, with choreography by Ian Spink, included 'music, masks and mimed movement' and was found to be both 'engrossing' and 'imaginative' but also 'halting and rather precious'.[58] By the time the show was remounted in London, no choreographer is credited although there is a credit for fights, and Iona McLeish had replaced Ashley Martin-Davis for 'décor'.[59] Under McLeish, what had a been a classically clothed classical adaptation became a show in modern dress set on an ancient-looking set that recast classical adaptation as a type of cultural archaeology not unlike the actual archaeology surprising theatre historians in 1989 with the discovery of the remains of the Rose and the foundations of the

Globe. Wrote Charles Spencer, 'Iona McLeish's set features the ancient stones and damaged mosaics of an archaeological site, pierced by a modern steel girder. Miss McLeish might merely be suggesting that the play's themes are timeless, but I suspect that she is also making her own silent protest about the probable fate of the Rose Theatre.'[60]

Though Rhoda Koenig eviscerated the London production in *Punch*, calling it an example of a clichéd and outdated genre that should be named 'A Lot of Mythical People Running Around Screaming', the rest of the reviews of this remounted production reflect a level of contested intellectual and emotional engagement that directly channels the tension between the ancient and the contemporary, the spare and the poetical, the violent and the philosophical that define the play's text, and its 'rethought' visual and conceptual presentation.[61] Like *Miss Saigon* and Declan Donnellan's production of *Fuente Ovejuna*, which both also opened in 1989, *Love of the Nightingale* asked for a new consideration of political and sexual oppression in vividly theatrical terms.[62]

The intense theatricality of *Love of the Nightingale* proceeds not only from its meta-theatrical sequences, but also from its bold juxtapositions and its Ovidian imagery. The play-within-a-play in *Love of the Nightingale* works in a different manner to the one in *Our Country's Good* because it is performed rather than rehearsed during the course of the exterior play.[63] During the Hippolytus play, the emphasis rests on the group discussion and the revelations about individuals for the audience watching the show, while Wertenbaker's reworking of the Hippolytus/Phaedra myth develops as a foreshadowing of what will happen between Tereus and Philomele.[64] Despite the meta-commentary it offers, the Hippolytus play is not the most meta-theatrical element of *Nightingale's* action. Philomele's re-enactment of her rape and disfigurement by Tereus with life-size dolls during the Bacchanal walks an even more dangerous line in the play, showing a moment where theatre is the means of telling the truth about actual events, a way of witnessing for justice. The play's final transformation, when Philomele, Procne and Tereus turn into birds, also offers the opportunity, depending on staging, to become a final meta-theatrical wonder, one that could be accomplished through

movement alone, but which seems to have been accompanied by actual bird costumes in the Stratford premiere.[65]

The bird transformation functions as one of the script's most stark juxtapositions as the play smashes from a scene of confrontation into choral narration into a seemingly impossible transformation. Elsewhere in the script, similar brusque movements between choral narration or debate and scenes of intimacy or personal confrontation form the play's rhythm and produce laminations of moments, as when the play moves directly from Tereus kissing the now-tongueless Philomele at the end of scene sixteen to scene seventeen's meditation on mourning and desire where Procne tries to get Tereus to kiss her (pp. 338–41). The imagery of the play, meanwhile, evokes strong sensory experiences, centring on animals (tigers, serpents, dogs) and natural phenomena like water, phosphorescence and earthquakes. The birds that materialise at the end of the play fulfil an image from scene four, where Echo speaks of the 'beating of wings', after the chorus warns Procne not to ask Philomele to come to Thrace (p. 300). The sound of the birds' wings that Echo evokes haunt the play until the birds appear and play out the final scene, where Itys poses unanswerable questions to them. Questions have been thematised throughout the play as well, as when Philomele's conversation with Tereus fails because he does not allow her to ask questions, or when questions are described as being 'like earthquakes'. 'I wouldn't want to live in a world that's always shifting,' says the Male Chorus, forming an image that captures the chthonian force and political implications of questions. When Philomele-the-nightingale finds it impossible to completely define right and wrong in the final scene, Itys still presses on: 'Didn't you want me to ask questions?' he says (p. 354). Wertenbaker's plays press on: you cannot get to the truth through silence, and you cannot find justice without questions.

An assessment: interrogative affirmation

Once *Love of the Nightingale* opened in London, Paul Arnott wrote that Wertenbaker joined 'the band of playwrights' who have had two

productions playing in London at the same time. This convergence of her work helped spur critical interest in her, but the first range of scholarly assessments of her work struggled with how to position theatre that probed such crucial questions but which didn't seek to shatter traditional modes of representation and often affirmed more about European culture, literature and history than expected. Wertenbaker's intelligent and dignified work carried deeply provocative insight, but it didn't emerge from a radical aesthetic or politics. By 1999, Keith Peacock wrote in *Thatcher's Theatre* that,

> in critical terms, Wertenbaker proved to be the most significant new dramatist of the 1980s. Her work, with its liberal humanistic viewpoint, suited the tenor of the times. Although it could not be considered oppositional, it raised moral concerns regarding education, justice and the treatment of women in patriarchal society, in a manner that provoked sympathy but did not fundamentally threaten or provoke its audience.[66]

Apparently, being the most significant new dramatist of the 1980s is not as simple a piece of praise as it might seem! Like Ann Wilson's reading of 'theatre, colony, and nation' in *Our Country's Good* which cannot quite resolve whether Wertenbaker improved the regressive politics in Keneally's source-text or reinscribed worse narratives, Peacock's conclusion contains a compliment but continues with apprehension. His commentary nags with a worry about the popular and the cutting edge, as opposed to the institutional and already culturally legible. And in the theoretical discourse of the 1980s and 1990s humanism could be a dirty word, prior to its reclamation after rereadings of Edward Said's oeuvre in the wake of his 2003 preface to a republication of Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* emphasising his unwillingness to relinquish the humanist tradition.[67]

Wertenbaker contended in her interview with DiGaetani that 'you have to accept that as a playwright, you have a certain moment, and then you go out of fashion, and then you come back into fashion' (p. 268). The key dynamic of Wertenbaker's work rests in its interweaving of interrogation and affirmation, a combination that leads to an

emphasis on debate and questioning, and encodes the belief that great value lies in the search for justice. The interrogative aspect of her work, and the focus it brings to moral issues, is the strength of Wertenbaker's work. Geraldine Cousin developed a sophisticated reading of *Love of the Nightingale* as an 'interrogative play' in *Women in Dramatic Place and Time*, for instance, and Ann Wilson lauded this questioning drive in Wertenbaker's work from *Our Country's Good* to *Dianeira* almost fifteen years later.[68] The affirmative aspect of Wertenbaker's work, however, paradoxically, can unsettle analysts of her work. Here the impact of DiGaetani's title finds its mark. His volume is called *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre*, and his interview with Wertenbaker seems ghosted by a larger overall question about her work in the 1980s and beyond: is Wertenbaker a postmodern writer? Can she be, if her plays stay within a verbal signifying tradition and there is a humanism at the core of her philosophy, even if feminist and post-colonial insights recognisably influence it? The interrogative fits a postmodern paradigm and aesthetic. But affirming the worth of culture and its institutions and affirming community as a human bailiwick is more difficult to characterise as a function for postmodern theatre.

Yet, across the 1980s, reviewers writing for newspapers develop a vocabulary about postmodern aesthetics that reveals the potential for affirmation to fit into an understanding of postmodernism in British theatre in the 1980s. In 1985, for instance, Milton Shulman wrote about *Mary Traverse* as a type of 'fable', a word that could sound dismissive (and Nicholas de Jongh uses it this way in his commentary on *Love of the Nightingale* in 1989). But fable also conjures associations with Brecht's theorisation of *die fable* structuring a play and invites comparisons with his evolution of 'parable' plays. When *Our Country's Good* opened, Michael Billington praised it for both this 'parabolic' aspect and for its 'bracing optimism': 'It makes for a wonderful evening's theatre,' he wrote, 'a Brechtian parable with an optimistic conclusion.'[69] This chimes with reconsiderations of Brechtian dramaturgy in the light of postmodernity, like Elizabeth Wright's 1989 volume *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation*.[70] As *Love of the Nightingale* opened, the word pastiche, so central to a

description of postmodern aesthetic strategies, got applied to Wertenbaker's work, with both positive and negative overtones.[71] Billington, for one, embraced this about *Nightingale's* structure: 'what is intriguing about the play is that it belongs to the newly-popular genre of narrative drama: heavily influenced by Peter Brook [. . .]. Intellectually I was reminded of Pinter: stylistically, of *The Conference of the Birds* in that I felt I was being confronted by an ancient myth and then allowed to unravel its meaning.'[72] Wertenbaker's reworking and reconfiguration of forms is here being recognised for the way it can de-centre and disturb audiences while providing discovery and optimism.

As Wertenbaker's oeuvre has increased after the 1980s and theoretical vocabularies have continued to shift, it is possible to see in her work a type of Saidian humanism that depends on being able to move between an inside view of culture to an outside view of culture.[73] The cross-cultural and translational aspects of Wertenbaker's work, discussed in the most recent phases of scholarship about her, manifest in the plays of the 1980s no less than the plays of the 1990s and beyond. *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, *Our Country's Good* and *Love of the Nightingale* are dynamic cultural objects that embody and bridge the theatre trends of the 1980s through interrogative affirmation. Approached as historical artefacts of Britain in the 1980s, they reveal a great deal about the culture from inside. As they are still staged today, they provide ongoing movements that allow views from outside in and inside out. Between these poles, the debates and questions continue.