

The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours

Patricia Klindienst

Aristotle, in the Poetics (16.4), records a striking phrase from a play by Sophocles, since lost, on the theme of Tereus and Philomela. As you know, Tereus, having raped Philomela, cut out her tongue to prevent discovery. But she weaves a telltale account of her violation into a tapestry (or robe) which Sophocles calls "the voice of the shuttle." If metaphors as well as plots or myths could be archetypal, I would nominate Sophocles' voice of the shuttle for that distinction.

--Geoffrey Hartman

Why do you [trouble] me, Pandion's daughter,
swallow out of heaven?

--Sappho

I do not want them to turn
my little girl into a swallow.
She would fly far
away into the sky
and never fly again to my straw bed,
or she would nest in the eaves
where I could not comb her hair.
I do not want them to turn
my little girl into a swallow.

--Gabriela Mistral, "Miedo" (Fear)

In returning to the ancient myths and opening them from within to the woman's body, the woman's mind, and the woman's voice, contemporary women have felt like thieves of language, staging a raid on the treasured icons of a tradition that has required woman's silence for centuries.¹ When Geoffrey Hartman asks of Sophocles' metaphor "the voice of the shuttle": "What gives these words the power to speak to us even without the play?" he celebrates Language and not the violated woman's emergence from silence. He celebrates Literature and the male poet's trope, not the woman's elevation of her safe, feminine,

domestic craft--weaving--into art as a new means of resistance.² The feminist receiving the story of Philomela via Sophocles' metaphor, preserved for us by Aristotle, asks the same question but arrives at a different answer. She begins further back, with Sappho, for whom Philomela, transformed into a wordless swallow, is the sign of what threatens the woman's voiced existence in culture.

Written while Klindienst was still a graduate student at Stanford, this essay has been translated into several languages and has never been out of print since it was originally published in *The Stanford Literature Review* 1 (1984): 25-53. It has been translated into several languages and it taught in the US, UK, Europe, and Asia. It has been reprinted several times, including:

Rape and Representation, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda A. Silver (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 35-64.

Literary Theory: An Anthology, ed. Rivkin and Ryan, Blackwell Publishers 1998.
Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World, ed. McClure, Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

It can also be found online at at Alan Liu's groundbreaking web site, Voice of the Shuttle: <http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/research/klindienst.html> or <http://vos.ucsb.edu/myth.asp>