

Constructing the Subject: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*

Mary Karen Dahl

While her orientation is left-wing and her topic is generally politics, contemporary playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker breaks with an extensive British postwar tradition of writing socialist or working class plays. Her interest is less in supporting a collective effort or party than in investigating possible routes through which individual men and women might become agents of social and political action. She explores these issues in the theatre not because she expects the performance of her plays to provoke spectators to "go out and make a revolution," but because she thinks theatre

can make people change, just a little, by forcing them to question something, or by intriguing them, or by giving them an image that remains with them. And that little change can lead to bigger changes. (Chaillet 554)

She also assumes that those she now addresses resemble those who populated theatres of ancient Greece in which "the number of seats corresponded to the number of adult males with voting rights." Her theatre, she asserts,

is for people who take responsibility. There is no point in trying to attract idiots. Theatre should never be used to flatter, but to reveal, which is to disturb. (Chaillet 554)

Wertenbaker's pointed reference to Athenian democracy suggests a perhaps nostalgic image of theatrical performance conceived on the terms Simon Goldhill lays out in *Reading Greek Tragedy*: "Before the citizen body, the city's discourse was treated to the radical critique of tragedy, its divisions and tensions were explored" (78). The image assumes spectators who directly influence the course of political events; it led me to wonder how Wertenbaker herself represented political and personal agency in her own dramatic characters.

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With this question in mind, I was struck by a curious overlap: Wertebaker's play *The Grace of Mary Traverse* represented social and political relations in ways that recalled Louis Althusser's analysis of how ideology shapes individual subjectivity in his now canonical essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."¹ The play seemed to offer a text through which to interrogate the process Althusser describes as interpellation: What might it look like? What kinds of material behaviors might reflect its dynamic? I undertook an exploratory conversation between the philosophical and theatrical texts, with myself in the role of inquiring reader/critic/mediator. As I read the texts together, the conversation became a quest for political agency, first, at the level of theatrical representation and, second, at the level of action in the world. How does the playtext represent individual men and women? As constructing themselves? As being constructed? If so, by what or whom? Were characters shown as recognizing the ideological forces shaping them, as changing their positions within familial, societal, and political structures? Could their actions disrupt or displace the status quo? In other words, what kinds of social and political relations were laid out through the playtext?² What revelation or disturbance might the play contribute to the ordinary world spectators inhabit? And finally, could Althusser's system accommodate the relations set out in the play or any expectation of spectatorial agency?

The Grace of Mary Traverse, first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1985 under the direction of Danny Boyle, traces one young woman's attempt to perfect, then escape and replace, the particular kind of subjectivity society prescribes for her. It opens with Mary self-consciously exercising the faculties she has been brought up into as a woman of good breeding (conversation, delicacy, physical grace). It follows her as she escapes her father's London house and plunges into the male world of sexual, financial, and political power. She experiments successively with gambling, whoring herself and others, championing the people in Parliament, and instigating a popular rebellion. Her Candide-like quest to acquire knowledge through experience brings pain, disillusionment, and massive destruction. The play ends with Mary, her female servants, her baby daughter, and her father gathered in a garden in the family Potteries. This coda affirms Mary's attempts to dislodge the cultural forces that have shaped her and offers the hope that one day we will understand and "know how to love this world" (130). Mary's grace has changed from that which is defined by style and breeding into that which the playtext indicates might be earned through a process of inquiry. Mary moves into a state of grace that allows her to glimpse happiness in the future, perhaps for her daughter, appropriately called "little Mary." Whether this leap of faith takes her outside ideology is a question, among others, the text leaves unresolved. And the means remain unspecified through which (1) understanding will be achieved, and (2) the material conditions Mary rejected as she undertook and pursued her journey will be changed.

In an essay on Bertolazzi and Brecht, Althusser writes that "uncriticized ideology" is "the mirror [a society or age] looks into for self-recognition, precisely the mirror it must break if it is to know itself" (*For Marx* 144); in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," he proposes that ideology "'recruits' subjects" or "'transforms' individuals into subjects" by a process of "interpellation" or "hailing" (*Lenin and Philosophy* 174; hereafter ISA). From this point of view, Wertebaker's playtext shows the process through which Mary Traverse concretely attempts to break the mirror that has defined her identity and come to know herself and the forces that operate on her. In more general terms, the play holds up ideology to view in an attempt to force spectators to admit ideology's existence and function. If Althusser suggests societies break the mirror of ideology to know themselves, I suggest that the play questions the processes through which men and women may effect changes in existing power structures. Whether or not this "holding up to view" effectively breaks the mirror so that a society comes to know itself remains to be seen. In the discussion that follows, I shall look more carefully at (1) the operation of ideology, as demonstrated by the familial, societal, and political institutions represented by characters in the play; (2) the difficulty of shattering or redirecting institutionalized power, as demonstrated by Mary's education in the appropriation of power; and (3) the problem of agency that my fictional conversation with Althusser and Mary Traverse throws into relief.

For the purpose of this essay, then, *The Grace of Mary Traverse* offers a concrete representation of how Althusser claims ideology works on men and women. The playtext does this by developing images and character relationships that demonstrate significant institutions through which the process occurs. These institutions are discussed by Althusser as part of his more general analysis of the Marxist theory of the state: He first proposes that there is a state apparatus that can be distinguished from state power (ISA 140). He then makes a further distinction between kinds of state apparatus:

. . . the State Apparatus contains two bodies: the body of institutions which represent the Repressive State Apparatus on the one hand, and the body of institutions which represent the body of Ideological State Apparatuses on the other. (ISA 147-48)

What he means by the term "apparatus" becomes clearer when we look at examples of the two kinds he identifies: RSAs include such institutions as the government, administration, army, police, courts, prisons, all of which directly exercise the state's power and rely on the state's superior violence for their effectiveness. ISAs include churches, schools, labor unions, culture (from novels, poetry and theatre to sports), and media, most of which are in private hands, but support the state. Both RSAs and ISAs function by a combination of repression and ideology: RSAs function "predominantly" by repression, secondarily by ideology. ISAs function "predominantly" by ideology, secondarily by repression.

From examples he gives in the course of the essay, it seems to be the case that the process of hailing subjects is effected through agents of both kinds of apparatus—policemen, priests, teachers, and—most pertinent to Wertebaker's play—parents (142-45).

Wertebaker's playtext begins by concretizing what Althusser might call the family ideological state apparatus. The setting is late eighteenth century. About 1780, to be more precise. We see "*the drawing room of a house in the City of London.*" The protagonist, Mary Traverse, "*sits elegantly, facing an empty chair. She talks to the chair with animation. GILES TRAVERSE stands behind and away from her.*" Mary is practicing the art of conversation under her father's tutelage. She speaks of nature, and of a trip her imaginary (male, of course) visitor has supposedly taken to Wales. As she traverses the (we soon discover) treacherous territory of decorous (that is, graceful) discourse, she approaches, then avoids numerous pitfalls. Her self-censorship discloses the rules: "a young woman" poses no direct questions; makes no mention of sensitive body parts (breasts or bowels); and admits to no "unwomanly" emotions. She must neither express her desires nor speak of "thrilling" at the thought of being lowered into a salt mine with "no more than a fragile rope between oneself and utter destruction" (60). Her father first silently monitors her performance, then carries her education further. He suggests that topics involving patriotism will revive the most languid conversation. She suggests going out to the theatre or into the world to gain knowledge that will provide matter for her conversation: He forbids it; he "has given her enough to see in the house" (61).

As Mary is restricted in speech, so she is confined to the territory of her father's house. The parent teaches appropriate behavior; the child internalizes the rules; the home is the site of training and monitoring.³ A second scene develops the image of censorship and imprisonment to its logical conclusion.

MARY, alone, walks back and forth across the carpet. She stops occasionally and examines the area on which she has just stepped.

Almost.

(She walks. Stops and examines.)

Yes. Better.

(She walks again. Looks.)

Ah. There.

(She walks faster now, then examines.)

I've done it. See the invisible passage of an amiable woman. (62)

.....
 You must become like air. Weightless. Still. Invisible. Learn to drop a fan and wait. When that is perfected, you may move slightly, from the waist only. Later, dare to walk, but leave no trace. . . . I am complete: unruffled landscape. I may sometimes be a little bored, but my manners are excellent. And if I think too much, my feet no longer

betray this. . . . What comes after, what is even more graceful than air? (62-3)

The "amiable"—the socially conformable—"young woman" is silent, passive, invisible, leaves no trace, not even a memory (62).

In other words, the process Althusser terms "hailing" is actualized in Wertebaker's character relationships. The father speaks to Mary, she "recognizes" herself as the one called or hailed, and responds by adopting the role in which he hails her. Giles effectively constructs Mary as a subject who will perform as society dictates. Or, if I paraphrase in terms adopted from Althusser, Mary recognizes herself when her father hails her and, as a result, is "inserted into the practices governed by the ritual" of the family apparatus (ISA 91). Well-played, "the daughter" is essential to the perpetuation of the ruling order Giles stands within. She is the wife and mother the order requires. That she is this role is confirmed when the peer, Lord Gordon, asks to marry Giles's daughter without ever having been presented to her (74). As long as she has the generic qualities fitting her type—that is (according to Lord Gordon), as long as she is pretty and clever (as her father has said), but is not too clever, will not talk at breakfast, and will look up to her husband (74)—she must be desirable.

Mary's subject status as figured in her actions (self-censorship and physical erasure) and in her circumstance (imprisonment) is, then, initially one of subjection. The process of hailing is so effective, the parental voice so thoroughly internalized, that even after leaving home, becoming a prostitute, seducing her father, then blackmailing him into providing her with half his wealth so that she is at last comfortably financially independent, she comments that his disapproval "still can make the world grow cold" (100). The statement brings sharply into focus Althusser's thesis that, in Michele Barrett's succinct summary, "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (100). Despite her gains in knowledge, Mary cannot fight completely free of the view of herself she finds in and through her father's eyes.

Mary senses her subjection. This statement hints at whatever optimism the play allows by pointing to the ambiguity of the term "subject." Althusser isolates the opposition that is most useful for my purpose. He writes: "In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his [or her] submission." He then mobilizes the duality for his own explication of how ideology operates. When all functions smoothly, ". . . the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he [or she] . . . shall (freely) accept his [or her] subjection . . .*" (182). The state and its apparatuses remain intact.

But Wertebaker's play reveals a fundamental limitation in Althusser's discussion. Mary refuses to become the freely consenting subject of her

subjection. She resists. She seems to be one of Althusser's "bad subjects" who on occasion might "provoke," as Althusser says, "intervention" by some "detachment" of the "(repressive) state apparatus" (181). The conflict between individual initiating subject and individual subjected is implicit in Mary's claim that "if I think too much, my feet no longer betray this" (63). Mary not only thinks, she thinks differently, in ways other than her education supports. Althusser makes no clear provision for such cases. As Michele Barrett observes, even "within Marxism generally, perhaps the most typical (non-Althusserian) response was to regard [his] argument as unduly functionalist—in stressing the smooth reproduction of the ideological relations of the social formation Althusser had left no room for resistance, contestation and struggle" (97).

So, despite her father, Mary wants out of the house. She escapes into the world, searching for knowledge through experience. In my own quest for enlightenment, I looked into Webster's and found that her name describes her journey, but in an unexpectedly double sense that captures not only the course of the path she takes, but the impulse that drives her. That "traverse" indicates "a route or way across or over" was no surprise. Mary certainly could be seen as following the "zigzag course of a sailing ship with contrary winds" or "a curving or zigzag way up a steep grade." She could even be said "to pass through: penetrate (as light rays traverse a crystal)." But as a verb, to traverse also is "to go against or act in opposition to (oppose, thwart)" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*). Reading on, I found that the notion of resistance to what has been previously established or stated recurs in the array of significations. With this in mind, even the journey image captured by Mary's name took on dynamic physicality. Traversing a slope became an act of resisting gravity, surmounting the obstacle nature presents, asserting an independent will against what is. Traversing crystal became an act that required light rays to actively enter, penetrate, another (also resistant) medium. The discovery that the term applies to an aggressive maneuver in the sport of fencing confirmed this combative nuance (*Webster's New World Dictionary*).

Initially enticed by her (appropriately named) servant Mrs. Temptwell with tales of other women who thought to venture out, at each stage Mary wants to cross into male domains. She wants to penetrate spheres both physical (first, their clubs, later their parliament) and experiential (desire, risk, violence, command). She seems to be trying to conquer their external and internal territory. An encounter with a serving boy who says he can come and go anywhere he likes propels her into the initial Faustian bargain.⁴ The working class Mrs. Temptwell helps her enter the male realms of gambling, sex, sport, and prostitution. But when she exhausts Mrs. Temptwell's access—"This isn't experience," Mary says, "this is another bounded room"—she looks again towards male dominions: "They must have more than this. . . . They go to war. . . . Or they dream of new worlds. They let their imaginations roam freely over the future, yes, they think about the country, and then they rule the country" (106). She plunges into politics, channelling her ability to converse into an ability to

convince. In this, the male world of class privilege and political power, she has a new guide, Mr. Manners.

Implicit in Mary's change of guides is a notion that the individual can resist subjection sufficiently to move between various positions as she responds to various concrete experiences. (Whether this amounts to stepping outside ideology is a question I will leave aside for the moment.) Althusser assumes class structure and class struggle: Any social formation contains a plurality of ideologies. Althusser writes, "ideologies are not 'born' in the ISAs but from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experience of the struggle, etc." (186). Mary's two mentors configure competing ideologies within the social formation the play represents. Mary's first guide, Mrs. Temptwell, is motivated by a class hatred of Giles Traverse based in her own family's experience. Her father and Giles were originally neighbors, equals. Giles rose in the world, bought land and dispossessed her father (75); he made his own brother a magistrate. That brother subsequently caused Mrs. Temptwell's grandmother to be executed for witchcraft (100). She now executes vengeance on Giles by stealing and ruining his most precious possession, his daughter (112). She craves destruction: She begins the play with a personal hatred towards the Traverses for what they did to her family; she learns to hate them for who they are, their kind: "I know all we need is your death. . . . Then there can be a new world" (126).

Posed against Mrs. Temptwell is Mr. Manners, who enforces the existing distribution of power. He is a friend of Mary's father and represents the very effective collusion of Althusser's Ideological and Repressive Apparatuses. Mr. Manners embodies the interactive relationship between the family ISA and the government RSA. Manners make the "amiable" young woman that is so necessary to perpetuating the ruling classes. The character Mr. Manners articulates power's rules and demonstrates his proficiency in exercising it. "Real power," he asserts, "prefers to remain invisible" (101). "Power always moves from behind. Let the bodies move forward" (119). From behind the scenes, he orchestrates the Gordon riots in order to ensure "forty years of rule and order." "There is nothing so cleansing as massive death" (122). He lives to preserve the status quo: "I'll do anything to keep the rules safe, not only for myself, but for the good of the world" (122). For him "order [is] the very manifestation of God in the universe" (102). Lord Gordon justifiably describes him as "The man most feared in Parliament" (101).

At a finer level of detail, Mary encounters a series of hailings and demonstrates a series of ongoing evaluative acts. When she first raises the rebellion, she is "drunk with what [she's] done: glory!" (119). But, as Mr. Manners tells her, "Power . . . is a brilliant master." She is "useful" but she has "a lot to learn" (118). He would instruct and incorporate her fully, but she rejects him. Her father tells her she has become "accountable" (122). She accepts that valuation: "I am human," she says. "I know the world. I've shared its acts." She takes up her first position towards her experience: "And I would like to pour

poison down the throat of this world, burn out its hideous memories" (125). Her first choice replicates those of Mrs. Temptwell and Mr. Manners. The two, voices of class hatred and its other face, class privilege, effectively reinforce one another: each relies on violence, each provokes Mary to despair. She will destroy her own baby daughter.

Another of Mary's servants, the country girl Sophie, intervenes, arguing that Mary still "thinks at a distance—too far ahead or far back." She needs to look "from near" at morning light or touch a baby's skin. When Sophie sings, Mary finally shifts her stance (125-27). In the next scene, Sophie's lover is hanged, and Mary reflects Sophie's attitude back to her: "We will grieve, but we won't despair" (129). As light traversing crystal changes—splits into colors, redirects its path—Mary changes. By the final scene, she seems to have entered into a newly reciprocal learning process that crosses class lines. Mary affirms her need to understand; Sophie asserts the need to remember what we know. That the two women together represent the future is confirmed by Mary's father: "I'm old. Speak to them" (130). In their ongoing exchange of knowledge and experience lies the potential for breaking Althusser's metaphoric mirror of ideology. "When you told me the world was made up of little particles, Mary, I cried for days," Sophie says (129). Whether the tears were of sorrow or wonder she does not explain, but her image of the world, and consequently of herself in the world, is shattered and reformed. The play suggests that, however limited the possibility of grace, it arrives through this process.⁵

Mary, then, is "hailed" by her father (the patriarchal family and ruling class), by Mrs. Temptwell (the working class), and by Mr. Manners (the government and ruling class). Her ability to recognize herself as the one hailed, to be recruited, and then to reflect on and resist the consequent subject position is the source of my interest in the text. Mary's resistance may be predicated upon other hailings (for example, by Sophie), but whatever the prompt, I am left asking, Who hears? Who evaluates?⁶

The character both illustrates Althusser's description of interpellation and its inadequacies. On the one hand, the play demonstrates the immense obstacles facing any who would disrupt the status quo. In this, it coincides with the most restrictive implications of Althusser's system. Under Mr. Manners's subtle guidance, Mary directs her eloquence at inflaming the Protestant masses' superstitious hatred of the Pope. A mob forms and storms Parliament, then, subject to rumors that the distilleries belong to Catholics, rush to Holborn, where they fall victim to drunkenness and flames (120).⁷ When they start towards the Bank of England, Mr. Manners causes soldiers to shoot them down. Mary exercises power, but ignorantly (124). The forces that subjected her, and that subject the masses, remain intact.

On the other hand, to the extent that the character represents an escape from Althusser's system, she points towards the possibility of a resistant, mobile subjectivity unaccommodated by Althusser. Mary's motives are other than those of her guides. She becomes a leader, and in doing so, crosses not only gender,

but class lines. She finds common cause with those she has not been educated to acknowledge and commands the rhetoric of freedom and equality on their behalf. Just as a "traverse" can signify "[s]omething that crosses or [something that] lies across," a Mary named Traverse could be a bridge, perhaps between classes, or from the past into the future, as well as an obstacle that others, perhaps those who seek to contain her, encounter.

Althusser set out to initiate "the beginning of a scientific [i.e., subjectless] discourse on ideology." He argued that

To recognize that we are subjects . . . only gives us the 'consciousness' of our incessant (eternal) practice of ideological recognition . . . but in no sense does it give us the (scientific) *knowledge* of the mechanism of this recognition. It is this knowledge [of the mechanism of ideological recognition] that we have to reach, . . . while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e., subjectless) discourse on ideology. (ISA 173)

While I find a "scientific" understanding of the mechanisms through which ideology operates a curious option, as it implies that scientific investigation can occur outside those very ideological apparatuses (state funding, University laboratories, Philosophy and Theatre Departments) Althusser has persuaded me operate so powerfully, Althusser's desire to break with ideology compels me. Reading Wertenbaker's play through Althusser, I find it affirms the (1) longing to, and (2) difficulty of, standing outside ideology.

Reading Althusser through Wertenbaker, however, I would suggest that the play points to significant lapses in his vision. Most important, he does not describe resistant subjectivity in any way that allows me to account for the actions Mary undertakes. Not because she is a real person or operates within a realist theatrical mode, but because Wertenbaker has represented action within the frame of the play that resonates with me, detonating an affirmative pleasure-filled response, while at the same time allowing me to note the difficulties and questions the text trails behind it. When I visualize the character moving through the positions I outlined earlier, I find myself asking "why?" Why does she move? What impels her? What if we are always already operating within ideology? What constitutes the subject? What selects (and how) from among the array of choices, even admitting they are shaped by competing ideologies? I can hardly expect characters in a play to explain this. But the representation of resistance at least provokes me to acknowledge the question and the resonance resistance finds in my reception of the playtext. It seems to me that Althusser himself implies a similar response when he claims the need to "break with" ideology, to find the science of ideology. His own resistant impulse is unaccommodated within his theory, although the general framework of

interpellation remains a powerful metaphor for the terrible force of enculturation left unexamined.

Notes

1. Others have noted the same potential congruity. The current essay is based on a paper I delivered at the 15th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, "Crossing the Disciplines: Cultural Studies in the 1990s," in Oklahoma City, October 19, 1990. Since that time, Ann Wilson has shared with me an unpublished discussion of *Mary Traverse* that uses Althusser's definition of ideology, and Esther Beth Sullivan read a paper linking the play and Althusser at the 1991 annual meeting of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.
2. The way culture acts to shape subjectivity is central to both *The Love of the Nightingale* and *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. The former directly models and ironically comments on theatre's ability to intervene in men's and women's attitudes and decisions.
3. I explore the Foucauldian resonance of the play in the extended version of this essay.
4. As Susan Carlson and Ruby Cohn each indicate, Mrs. Temptwell's seduction of Mary mimics Mephistopholes's seduction of Faust. The parallel emphasizes the important question of whether and how grace arrives.
5. Thanks to Juliet Willis for seeing that Sophie's reaction points back to Althusser's image of breaking the mirror.
6. Barrett describes analogous questions raised by psychoanalytic theorists as they attempt to reconceptualize the status of the subject 114.
7. I have serious reservations about the playtext's representation of the working class mob as superstitious and easily manipulated by those who speak well. The text allows agency to individual working class characters, but subsumes them in a mob as if mass hysteria inevitably mysteriously overwhelmed agency. What would happen if the play (and politically active intellectuals) acknowledged the strategic value of crowd actions that James Scott describes in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* 140-52?

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