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Author(s)	Kakiguchi, Yuka
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“Sweet Mother Earth!”:

The Unnamable Feminine in *Waiting for Godot*

Yuka Kakiguchi

“Sweet mother earth!” says Estragon (82). But this speech, which expresses a feeling of affection, sounds strange in *Waiting for Godot*. For such a feeling is incompatible with and inadequate for *Godot*, where the world is full of absurdity and characters are sunk in apathy. For example, Martin Esslin describes “essential features of the play” as “the uncertainty,” “Godot’s unreliability and irrationality” and “the futility” (56). Consequently, there should be no room for sentimental expressions like the above in *Godot*. In spite of that, the speech is uttered, which shows that it is remarkable and well worth an analysis.

You may not recognize the significance of the speech “Sweet mother earth,” regarding it as a mere cliché because we can easily trace the association between the earth (nature) and the mother (women) back to the time of the Greeks. Susan J. Hekman analyzes this association, and indicates its “specific historical and ideological origins” (118) and its unfairness to women that they are also associated with ignorance, whereas men with culture or knowledge (111-112).¹ Her indications are very important, but I will only point out the problems here and return to our subject. Surely, “Sweet mother earth!” is a banal phrase. But, it seems of great significance to note the object of Estragon’s affection: he lovingly calls out the mother. In the light of the context in which it is uttered, it is certain that this affection for the mother has a great important meaning.

The context is that there is no mother, even no woman who is able to become a mother, and that it is "a patriarchal world" that is created in *Godot*, even though it "does not work" because of Godot's absence (Cousineau 8). Mary Bryden also describes masculine features of the play:

... his [Beckett's] first published play, *En attendant Godot*, presents a resolutely masculine troupe of male wayfarers, a further wayfarer with male servant, and a male messenger boy who, with his brother, works for a macho-sounding Mr Godot. (*Women* 80)

In such a context, male characters think highly of maleness and expose their plain disgust for the female, which seems to be appropriate for *Godot*. In other words, Estragon utters the words about what should not be spoken of, namely the feminine.

Then, is Estragon a mere exception in the play? He is not. He does not always express such an affection for the mother conspicuously: it is only in this speech that he surely puts his affection for the mother into words, and even the word 'mother' uttered by Estragon cannot be found anywhere. The rest is silence, complete silence. We quoting him and changing his context a little, Michel Foucault refers to silence as follow:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name; the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse ... than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. (309)

Hence, silence in *Godot* must also say something and can be interpreted "alongside the things said," "Sweet mother earth!"

And according to Foucault, it seems likely that silence in the play is the result of prohibition against naming the feminine and that Estragon's "discretion" functions in the relation to other characters. The purpose of this study is to consider silence and prohibition in the play, and to show that the unnamable feminine appears from them.²

I In Silence

What is said in silence? The play moves forward, centering on the appointment with Godot in spite of its futility, and the main act is waiting for Godot. Estragon, however, often forgets to do so. Besides, he blurts his fear that he may be bound by Godot: "We're not tied?" (19). In short, Estragon has an inclination to deviate from Godot.

Before examining Estragon's deviation in detail, we must clarify what Godot is. But we have few clues to answer the question. For one thing, Godot never comes; for another even Vladimir and Estragon, who should have made an appointment with him, know nothing but his name. We know only the name, 'Godot.' As to this issue, Cousineau's mention is useful:

It is also worth remarking the tremendous power exercised by the mere mention of Godot's name. . . . Godot's existence is "proved" not by the physical evidence of the senses but by the abstractions of language. (83)

Godot, which puts Vladimir and Estragon under control by the power caused by being named, is a signifier without a signified. In contrast, the feminine, which "is forbidden to name," is a signified without a signifier. Thus we can assert that Godot has the opposite nature to the feminine, though both of them are apparently absent equally. Such a contrast is found in association: whereas the feminine is associated with the earth,

Godot with the sky. Cousineau says, "... Vladimir and Estragon look ... to the sky, as though it were Godot's abode" (83). And besides, it should be added that, as have been touched on, Godot has the masculine nature.

We will return now to the subject. Estragon's deviation from Godot is expressed by his physical activities and his body itself, not by his words. His repetitive act is to sit down on the mound, which makes his close and firm touch with the earth possible. Taking account of the fact that Estragon connects the earth with the mother in his speech "Sweet mother earth," this can be interpreted as his contact with the mother.

Next, I would like to focus attention on Estragon's feet because they are the parts of the body which not only touch the earth directly but keep the whole body apart from it. Estragon appears to have some troubles in his feet. For example, he says, "... I have stinking feet" (46). He always has a pain in the foot and has been struggling with his unfit boot all along: "*Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before*" (9). Even when he exchanges his boot for someone else's, it never fits him well:

VLADIMIR. Let's try the other [boot]. (*As before.*) Well?

ESTRAGON. (grudgingly). It fits too.

VLADIMIR. They don't hurt you?

ESTRAGON. Not yet.

VLADIMIR. Then you can keep them.

ESTRAGON. They're too big. ... I suppose I might as well sit down. (69-70)

There does not seem a boot on earth that fits Estragon perfectly. In a word, no boot, which prevents him from coming into direct contact with the earth, is necessary for him. His

feet may be even unnecessary in order to sit down on the mound and keep as close a relation with the mother. In fact, Estragon does not stand upright in his mental image: "All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud!" (61). He feels he has "crawled" like an infant with a deficiency of his feet.

We will turn now to Estragon's other expressions of deviation in his infantilism. The first point to be discussed is his language.³ While Vladimir sometimes speaks a monologue ranging to almost 20 sentences (90-91), Estragon's speech is remarkably brief: it is usually composed of only one sentence or a few words. He does not seem to be good at constructing long difficult sentences. His vocabulary is also poor:

VLADIMIR. They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON. Like leaves.

VLADIMIR. Like sand.

ESTRAGON. Like leaves.

Silence. (62)

Here, Estragon and Vladimir are playing a word game, but it does not continue. For, as the above, the other words do not occur to Estragon, and the game ends in silence with his repetition. They, without learning a lesson from Estragon's failure, replay it three times, but the end is the same at all times. More interestingly, Estragon is unable to understand any figurative meanings:

VLADIMIR. So there you are again.

ESTRAGON. Am I? (9)

It is easy to give examples of this kind. Dina Sherzer interprets the above exchange precisely:

Vladimir's utterance is a speech act of greeting and has to be understood as a whole; instead Estragon interprets it at

a more superficial syntactic level and focuses on the literal meaning of the verb *to be*. (135)

Since, as she points out, Estragon's language ability may be on a "superficial syntactic level," figures of speech are not available for him. To sum up, these features of Estragon's language prove his poor linguistic ability. It is as if he is an infant who has just begun to speak.

The next discussion concerns Estragon's inclination to sleep: he so often falls asleep, sometimes in a "foetal posture" (70), and his hours of sleep become longer and longer. And then he has a dream. According to Sigmund Freud, we "think essentially in images" in a dream, whereas we think "in concepts" in a waking state (1: 49). Thus, Estragon's having a dream brings him into contact with what cannot be conceptualized, the unnamable. Freud also recognizes its "'regressive' character" (2: 542). Estragon is waiting for Godot, that is the authoritative signifier, and going to regress through an infant to a fetus in a mother's body, where the unnamables are alive and he will be released from any signifiers. That is to say, the destination of Estragon's deviation is the unnamable feminine.

It should be clear that Estragon demonstrates his deviation from Godot in the various ways and that they eloquently speak of the feminine in silence. And at last, from silence, the feminine appears.

II Prohibition

Here, we have to remember again the definition of silence by Foucault: "the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name; the discretion that is required between different speakers." We can assume from it that some discretion or some prohibition are imposed on Estragon or on the text by other characters. Silence is the result of these conditions, and then

Estragon, being forbidden to name or speak of the feminine, is forced to express his affection for it by no words or by the hackneyed phrase "Sweet mother earth!" Hence, we need to consider silence in relation to different characters.

It is important to note other characters' masculine nature and their attitudes toward the earth, the mother, which is overlapped with the feminine, to clarify the context which imposes the discretion on Estragon. Vladimir, who is Estragon's inseparable partner, seems to hold a strong connection with "macho-sounding" Godot (Bryden, *Women* 80). While Estragon is going down, Vladimir so often looks up at the sky, where Godot is expected to live. And he sometimes exposes his masculinism. When Vladimir says, "all mankind is us" (79), "he is not using the term generically" (Linda Ben-Zvi 10). His "all mankind" means only men, not including women. And we see his identity depends only on being male:

POZZO. Who are you?

VLADIMIR. We are men. (82)

We can also recognize his masculinist thought in his attitude to the earth. He "*spits*" to it as if he wanted to pollute it (13). We cannot find in this insulting act the slightest affection for the earth which Estragon has. Or rather, we may know Vladimir thinks the mother disgusting and contemptible.

It is Pozzo who states such a thought in a definite expression: "this bitch of an earth" (38). Ben-Zvi says about this phrase that "... it indicates the coalescence of nature and the female, both denigrated by the phrase..." (10). Here, I would like to add the explanation as to the character of Pozzo: he is the most masculine and authoritarian man in the play except Godot. Vladimir and Estragon at first take Pozzo for Godot, judging from his manner: he behaves and speaks arrogantly or

cruelly; he is or was the master of the land and the slave, Lucky; he possesses or had possessed various things – a large amount of food, a pipe, a coat, a watch, a stool and a whip that anyone else does not have. And more importantly, he does not sit down on the earth directly because of his stool, which means his rupture with the unnamable beyond repair. And Pozzo, falling into a decay, condemns women as the source of men's agony in the world: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (89). Vladimir echoes it in "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps" (90). It is certain that both of them have a very strong hatred for women because their "parturient organs are thus seen as weapons of death, for in giving birth they simultaneously issue an unavoidable expiry date," though this condemnation is surely unjust (Bryden, 'Gender' 152). Thus, Vladimir and Pozzo surrounding Estragon speak and act, based on their maleness or masculinism. Hence, among different characters, Estragon has to act with discretion in speaking of the feminine lest his affection for it is seen through by them.

As I have already said, there is prohibition as well as Estragon's discretion in the play. The first actual prohibition is against Estragon's deviation: Vladimir's reiterative phrase, "We're waiting for Godot." It is uttered every time Estragon forgets to wait for Godot and is going to deviate from it to the feminine. Consequently, Estragon cannot help restoring his connection with Godot which is about to break off, even if for a little while.

The second is the prohibition against speaking of women:

ESTRAGON. (*voluptuously*). Calm ... calm ... The English say cawm. (*Pause.*) You know the story of the Englishman in the brothel?

VLADIMIR. Yes.

ESTRAGON. Tell it to me.

VLADIMIR. Ah stop it!

ESTRAGON. An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual goes to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one, or a red-haired one. Go on.

VLADIMIR. STOP IT! (16)

Vladimir obstinately refuses to continue Estragon's story of the Englishman in the brothel. It seems to show that he is a decent feminist, but we can understand immediately the truth is the opposite in the light of his aversion to the female. Namely, this rejection is that of speaking of women and having them appear by telling the story. For Vladimir, women are ones that must be completely negated, more accurately, ones that must be absent, not be. Additionally, I would like to mention that the fact that there is no woman in the play is the prohibition by the text itself. Women's presence is doubly forbidden by Vladimir and the text. If not so, women seem to be deprived of their value of existing by being abused continually.

However, in spite of various prohibitions, the feminine never disappear. Vladimir cannot cease to repeat the prohibition, "We're waiting for Godot." Or rather, as time goes on, more frequently he has to issue it. To put it reversely, he always feels the existence of the feminine and is suffering from its invisible presence. Foucault also says that prohibition causes "a steady proliferation of discourse" (302). Namely, Vladimir's repetition of "We're waiting for Godot" forbids and proliferates discourse of the feminine at the same time. The same thing can be said of prohibition against women: Vladimir and Pozzo often abuse women bitterly in order to repress them, which causes, as a

result, "a veritable discursive explosion" of them (Foucault 301).

Vladimir blurts this paradoxical situation in spite of himself: "I once knew a family called Gozzo. The mother had the clap" (23). The word "mother" which he utters only once is associated with venereal disease, by which he intends to deprive the mother of her value and repress her. But the fact that the family name whose "mother had the clap" is "Gozzo" relates the things more than that. "Gozzo" is a combination of Godot and Pozzo, both of whom have remarkable masculine features. That is to say, Vladimir suggests here that the mother is irresistibly going to invade the male-only family and that she will infect all members including himself with her disease and finally drive them to death.

It should be clear that the unnamable feminine appears from silence through prohibition.⁴ However hard characters and the text itself try to forbid the feminine, they cannot exclude it. Or rather, prohibitions against the appearance of the feminine cause "a steady proliferation of discourse" about it. It may be not too much to say that the feminine overwhelms characters or us with a strong impression and influence equal to Godot. Thus, when it includes silence as well as the things written, discourse of the text has been completed. It is namely that the feminine, having been buried under silence, is one of the indispensabilities of *écriture*. Estragon's deviation to the feminine, therefore, is not a mere deviant act any longer, but an inevitable and indispensable one. On the other hand, Vladimir and Pozzo result in revealing the limits of their masculinist discourse. They set limits to their own discourse by abusing and forbidding the feminine. In concluding, I should note that when the feminine appears, the unjust masculinist order that

man is norm and woman is deviation is easily undermined, and devalued women can retrieve their value from darkness of the earth.

Notes

1. For the full analysis of the association between nature and women, see Hekman 105-151. Luce Irigaray also analyzes Plato's allegory of the cave in this relationship (243-364).
2. Cousineau also examines the feminine in *Godot* from the point of "the poetry of concrete movement and gesture" (9). His essay is very useful for me, but I do not agree with him on the point that he uses the concept of "the familial triangle" to analyze the text, even if it is "the 'symbolic' family" (87). For it means that we accepts the presumption of the paternal law.
3. For the analysis of language in *Godot*, see Andrew Kennedy 130-144 and Aspasia Velissariou.
4. It may be possible to say that the feminine has appeared for a while in Lucky's language with no punctuation and the broken syntax, I will only suggest their connection here because it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that. For the interpretation of Lucky's language, see Jeffrey Nealon 523-525 and Velissariou 54-55.

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