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Als meus pares, Isabel Rabascall Puig  
i Enric Monforte Tena, amb afecte.

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#### INTRODUCTION

This study has its origins in a lecture I attended in 1990. The lecture was given by Professor Pilar Zozaya and it was part of

a seminar on women writers who had been neglected by the literary establishment. The seminar was the first one on women's studies held at the University of Barcelona. The talk I attended in the spring of 1990 was on the subject of a British playwright I had never heard about. Her name was Caryl Churchill and the play discussed was *Top Girls*. There was something so engaging in Professor Zozaya's talk that, almost immediately, I started developing an interest in the playwright and, especially, in the play referred to. This thought would eventually lead me to consider the possibility of devoting a significant part of my life to undertaking postgraduate studies. And I did. First at New York University, where I achieved an MA in Comparative Literature, and then at the Universitat de Barcelona, where I continued with my doctoral studies leading to the completion of a PhD in English literature. All the while, whether in Barcelona, in New York City, or in my visits to London, I developed and refined my interest in the theatre of Caryl Churchill. Unfortunately, I was never able to see any of her plays in a live performance. On most occasions, I did not happen to be in London at the time the plays were performed, or, even worse, there was no way on earth to find tickets available. I remember two especially painful occasions when a play would open the day after my departure, having to face the dreadful dilemma of losing my airplane ticket or missing the play. Economy won. Anyhow, I finally got the chance of watching two video recordings of two of her plays. The first one, *Cloud Nine*, at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, in

New York City. The second, *Top Girls*, in a video version that was broadcast by the BBC in 1991 and that thankfully was made available to the general public. Quite incredibly -and this reinforces the ephemerability intrinsic to the art of theatre, there is not anything else available in video form from any of the plays Ms Churchill has written so far (at least in London and New York, the two places I have thoroughly traced). However, in January 1999 I had the honour and the pleasure of attending two rehearsals of one of her latest plays, *Blue Heart*, before an international tour and a second run in London would take place. Attending the rehearsals in a freezing warehouse in North London, sitting with Caryl Churchill herself and director Max Stafford-Clark, witnessing their creative process, watching him directing the actors, watching her give some comments on the results of the rehearsals, gave the situation a feeling of unreality. Was I sitting with two of the people who had so decisively contributed to the shaping of what was known as contemporary British drama? Was I having tea with them? Ms Churchill being totally averse to giving interviews, I was not very lucky in being given one. However, director Max Stafford-Clark agreed to talk to me and we had quite a long conversation after one of the rehearsals that I have included here as an appendix.

The next thing to consider refers to the approach to Caryl Churchill and to the plays analysed. Caryl Churchill enjoys quite strong popularity in certain select circles in Britain and in the United States, but unfortunately she is not very well-known

outside an English-speaking context. In both countries there is a lot of research being done in university departments of English. Yet, outside this context, it is only the theatre-goers that regularly attend the Royal Court Theatre in London, the ones that will know her better. Ms Churchill could be known on a greater scale by two of her plays. The first one is *Top Girls*, that was broadcast by the BBC and that has recently being declared by Michael Billington as one of the best ten British plays of the century.<sup>1</sup> The second one, *Serious Money*, is probably the most popular of her plays, being the only one successful enough to be performed in London's West End.

On the other hand, some of her plays have also being shown in the United States (mostly in New York City with British actors, but there are also a number of other productions being undertaken by professional companies -such as Eureka Theatre- or university theatre groups -like the one at Ohio State University). Contrary to the case in England, Churchill's most successful play in New York City was *Cloud Nine*, that ran for two years at quite a prestigious theatre in Greenwich Village.

Apart from these instances of success, the fact is that Ms Churchill is not that well-known by the general public. In Spain, there is not one single play written by her to have been performed. I find this quite unbelievable and also an example of shortsightedness on the part of the local impresarios.

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<sup>1</sup> See Billington, Michael. "Ever Ever Land". *The Guardian: Arts*. 3 September 1997: 14-5. See also the interview with Max Stafford-Clark in the appendix.



It was quite difficult to decide on the plays to be analysed, but I finally selected the three that appear here, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, and *Blue Heart*, for a number of reasons. The first one was that I wanted this work to deal with contemporary British drama, thus I decided to concentrate on plays belonging to the last twenty years. I also wanted to analyse plays that were in touch with the context in which they had been produced, that were a representation of their times.

In this sense, there is a clear path that can be followed starting with *Cloud Nine*, a play conceived in the late seventies, just before Thatcherism emerged. The play is a clear example of the atmosphere that could be perceived in the Britain of the 1970s in some sections of the population, a more alternative culture that searched for new possibilities regarding politics and personal relationships, and that explored different forms of counter-culture. Even though there are some sections of the play that present us with the threat of the Victorian past, the outcome is one of optimism in front of oppression and danger, a belief in the capabilities of the community to overcome such dangers. Such a belief is, in my view, characteristic of the revolutionary times in which the play was written, with the feminist and the lesbian and gay movements shaking English society. This is the reason why I will give the play a definite emphasis on gender issues.

Analysing *Top Girls* after the commotion depicted in *Cloud Nine*, we experience a definite move in time. The play is a clear representation of the Britain of the 1980s, in the sense that the

threat of Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party is depicted as characterised by a lethal power to annihilate any sense of community and socialist organisation of society. The move towards radical capitalism that swept Western societies in this decade is thoroughly exemplified in the play through the fight between two sisters from the working class that have evolved differently in life: one stays within her class of origin but the other manages to ascend in society through the absolute sacrifice of her roots. Due to the bleak envisioning of the future the play effects, its mood is much darker than that of *Cloud Nine*.

The third play to be analysed, *Blue Heart*, follows the other two in the sense that it can be seen as representative of its time (i.e. the 1990s). In this sense, the atmosphere of danger that appeared already in *Cloud Nine* but was overcome by optimism and strength, and that reappeared in *Top Girls*, this time with much more fury and foreseeing devastating consequences, is here fully shown. After the strain inflicted on the country by a series of Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997, and also due to the movement towards radical Capitalism that the West has experienced, the final atmosphere we are presented with is one of total gloom. In this sense, on the part of Churchill there is a withdrawal into a world where language and the word seem to have lost their healing power -or maybe what she is doing is to reflect the world she perceives precisely as a consequence of the realisation of the inability of language to lead anywhere. The picture of this decade is thus pervaded with nihilism.

Another reason why I decided to work on these three plays was because they are also very representative of different aspects of Churchill's work. Thus, *Cloud Nine* is important for two reasons, firstly, because it is the very first play she did with Joint Stock Theatre Group, and consequently is an example of her work with companies, so relevant in the 1970s. The play is also significant because it was Churchill's first great success in Britain and especially in the United States. *Top Girls*, apart from probably being her best play to date, also exemplifies her consolidation as a playwright, that definitely took place in the 1980s, when her other big success, *Serious Money*, was written and performed. The 1980s also mark then her commercial success. The last play, *Blue Heart*, is characteristic of Churchill's career in the 1990s in that it clearly shows her concern with exploring language, and even her pessimism about the use of language in society. This can also be seen in her increasing collaboration with dance and movement companies.

The three plays chosen, therefore, exemplify Churchill's span as a dramatist, and this is also the reason why I have decided to limit my analysis to three plays. They contain in themselves some of the topics that pervade her work, namely the struggle against systems of oppression the individual and the community have to face, the establishment of alternative ways of living by oppressed people, a concern about the dispossessed, an analysis of power structures in order to find ways of disrupting them, an analysis of the present through the past, or viceversa, a realisation that

the systems of oppression affect all areas of society, even those considered to be private, and the endless search for an identity.

Another factor I found interesting was that the three plays have been directed on stage by Max Stafford-Clark. Bearing in mind the collaboration in time between playwright and director I also think that this is relevant for the influence their work has had in the current configuration of British drama. This is also why I interviewed Stafford-Clark and why I have included the interview as an appendix. Finally, the last reason to have dealt with these three plays and not others -however difficult it was to leave out some I really like- has been on the very basis of personal enthusiasm. I find the three plays analysed here amongst the finest of contemporary British drama.

As to the structure of this work, I have organised it as follows: Chapter I analyses the relationship between Feminism and Theatre since the late 1970s and traces its development paying special attention to issues such as the different type of feminisms that have appeared since the late seventies - concentrating on the analysis of materialist feminism, the presence of men in feminist studies, the systems of representation existing in contemporary society, the role of the spectator both in the cinema as well as the theatre and its implications for the production of meaning. The chapter will close on a consideration of the importance of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht for a feminist theatrical practice.

Chapter II gives a short outline of the context against which

the plays were conceived. Thus, some information is given as to the socio-political and economic situation in England after 1979, when Margaret Thatcher acceded to power.

Chapter III will pay attention to the figure and oeuvre of Caryl Churchill as a woman playwright, locating her in the context of her times and analysing her relation to feminism and socialism. Finally, some connections will be made between her work and that of Bertolt Brecht.

The next three chapters are devoted to a thorough analysis of the three plays above-mentioned, that is, chapter IV will be devoted to the analysis of *Cloud Nine*, chapter V will concentrate on *Top Girls*, and chapter VI will deal with *Blue Heart*. This work is a theoretically-informed approach to the plays under consideration, so what I have done is to apply a number of theories that I have deemed convenient to three texts, always treating the text as the main source of information. My approach is quite an eclectic one, thus I draw on some of the theories from French feminism, from poststructuralist feminism, from cultural materialism, from semiotics, or from film theory.

As stated before, the appendix consists of the transcription of the interview I carried out with director Max Stafford-Clark in the Out of Joint headquarters in London. I decided to include it here because I thought it would be particularly interesting as a proof of the relationship between himself and the playwright.

Finally, some conclusions will be drawn from the different chapters. The point to demonstrate will be how a gender and

politics-oriented approach to theatre can help to subvert some of the patriarchal and conservative assumptions implicit in traditional theatre.

Barcelona, December

1999

## **CHAPTER I.**

### **FEMINISM AND THEATRE**

This chapter will look closely at the relationship between feminism and theatre by tracing the different tendencies that have appeared since the 1960s and that have shaped feminist theory and the array of feminisms that exist nowadays in the Anglo-American world, even though it will also take elements belonging to French Feminism when deemed necessary. After a consideration of the presence of men in the Feminist movement due to the biological sex of the writer of this study, a special emphasis will be placed on the definition of socialist or materialist feminism. The chapter will also offer a thorough consideration of the prevailing systems of representation to analyse how women have been and still are defined and constructed by contemporary power structures with "devastating effects" (Aston 1995, 129). The next step in the chapter will be a consideration of spectatorship in the theatre (and the cinema) and the implications according to gender divisions. Thus, the player/role relationship that is generated by any performance or screening will also be dealt with in relation to a close examination of the mechanisms that govern spectatorship from a feminist psychoanalytic consideration, namely the role of the "gaze" and its lethal effects on women. In this respect, some examples taken from film will be analysed. Finally, some consideration will be given to the role played by Bertolt Brecht in the devising of a feminist theatre, and its contrast with the Stanislavskian approach to theatre will be explored. The

consideration of Feminist literary and film theory in the shaping of a Feminist drama will also be taken into account. The chapter will end with some conclusions drawn in relation to the practice of feminist theatre.

Theatre is a sign-system, but it is also a system of representation that has traditionally been appropriated by men. As such, it has always adopted a phallogocratic position and point of view, -the phallogocentrism that will be further analysed in Chapter VI. According to this position, it appears that "the female has [always] been constructed as a man-made sign in her absence" (Aston 1995, 16). Patriarchy, based on a very strict system of binarisms by which its ideology is shaped, has established as necessary the definition of woman as "Other" from man. Being placed from the very beginning in a marginal position, being defined by its difference from the outset, it will inevitably appear in this way in the broader systems of representation that make up society. Therefore, theatre, being one such system, will contribute to such a depiction.

Indeed, theatre has always been a male realm, starting from the classics. This is probably why, when Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own*, she related the beginning of women writing with the writing of novels and the birth of the middle classes in Britain. Other arts, such as drama or poetry, were considered more "elevated" and therefore more appropriate for men, as they had been in their hands for longer. Besides, it was also considered that the novel required less concentration. As she puts it when she refers to George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Charlotte



Brontë and Jane Austen:

Yet by some strange force they were all compelled, when they wrote, to write novels. Had it something to do with being born of the middle class, I asked; and with the fact, which Miss Emily Davies a little later was so strikingly to demonstrate, that the middle-class family in the early nineteenth century was possessed only of a single sitting-room between them? If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain, -'women never have an half hour ... that they can call their own'- she was always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. (Woolf 1945 [1928], 67)

One of the objectives of a feminist practice of theatre will be, therefore, to show and deconstruct the social "construct" known as "Woman", to subvert and contest the maleness implicit in such a construction, and to underline the absence of the female as a way to vindicate a subject position for her, instead of the relegation to being an object. Another objective would be to occupy a traditionally male-only field and start making space for other voices to be heard, thus following the ground-breaking work started by Virginia Woolf.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the fact that, contrary to other literary forms, theatre can be approached in a double way: as text and as performance. Both aspects of theatre can be seen as complementing each other, as Keir Elam states:

[T]he written text/performance text relationship is not one of simple priority but a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful *intertextuality*. Each text bears the other's traces, the performance assimilating those aspects of the written play which the performers choose to transcodify, and the dramatic text being 'spoken' at every point by the model performance -or the *n* possible performances- that motivate it. This intertextual relationship is problematic rather than automatic and symmetrical. Any given performance is only to a limited degree constrained by the indications of the written text,

just as the latter does not usually bear the traces of any *actual* performance. It is a relationship that cannot be accounted for in terms of facile determinism. (Elam 1991 [1980], 209)

It is precisely because of this that theatre semiotics appears as an invaluable tool to study the performance context: "Semiotics offered an understanding of the theatrical text as a sign-system, and, moreover, provided a 'language' for the study of plays in performance" (Aston 1995, 4). The importance of a feminist appropriation of semiotics should also be taken into consideration, since it may allow us to explore further into the cultural code of the sign, its ideological imprint, and to understand everything that controls the connotations of the sign in the culture. In this case, "Woman" can be approached as a sign to be deconstructed. Following the terminology used by Elam (1991 [1980]), this work will approach three dramatic texts written by British playwright Caryl Churchill and will analyse them bearing in mind that, as we have seen, any dramatic text is actually a blueprint for its production on stage.

Bearing in mind then that theatre comprises both what we can call dramatic text and performance text, it is clear that, from a feminist position, some clues as to how to approach both of them will be needed. Furthermore, the fact that feminism reached theatre at quite a late stage in its configuration and development should be taken into consideration, so any borrowings to theatre come from other fields that had already received the influence of feminism, such as literature, psychoanalysis, or film. As Gayle Austin states when talking about possible ways to move forward:

I can say that in my experience it is easiest [sic] to apply feminist literary criticism to the written play and feminist film theory to performance, but the "conclusion" merely restates the obvious and does not push the field to go beyond. It may ultimately be more revealing to use the theories in exactly the opposite configuration. The fields of social science seem about equally applicable to both drama and performance. (Austin 1990, 94)

It is necessary, then, to look for ways of approaching both texts from a feminist perspective. What seems clear from the outset is that the two ways will have in common a questioning of the canon (literary, theatrical, cinematic) as a construct of patriarchy. In this sense, the emphasis will be put on how to re-read or resist the different texts. As for the dramatic text, the written text, I would like to place emphasis on the two concepts that have just been mentioned in connection to the questioning of the literary canon. On the one hand, an attitude of resistance. This concept comes from North-American critic Judith Fetterley. In her ground-breaking book *The Resisting Reader*, she starts by explaining how women have always been made to adopt a male perspective on femaleness that emphasises their powerlessness in front of the male establishment:

Though one of the most persistent of literary stereotypes is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the *immasculation* of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny. (Fetterley 1978, xx)

Having established that, Fetterley introduces a different concept of reader, one based on the (female) reader as being endowed with the characteristic of resistance to the traditional way according to which she has been taught to approach texts:

Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be

to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us. (Fetterley 1978, xxii)

The resulting attitude seems to be, then, one of combining a defence against male *immasculation* with the exorcising of the male mind implanted in all women, that will very often make them internalise the most conservative aspects of patriarchal thought. This strategy brings to mind Virginia Woolf's words about the lack of a tradition for female writers in her book *A Room of One's Own*. She places a special emphasis on the need to overcome bitterness and anger in order to produce a literature that is worthwhile:

Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at *Antony and Cleopatra*; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare. (Woolf 1945 [1928], 68)

In these lines, Woolf makes reference to Jane Austen, but she also mentions another writer that managed to achieve the same effect as she did: Emily Brontë. Only the two of them seem to have been able to put together the fight against the *immasculation* mentioned above with the refusal to assent, the resistance, the exorcising:

But how impossible it must have been for them not to budge either to the right or to the left. What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Brontë. It is another feather, perhaps the finest, in their caps. They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue. (Woolf 1945

[1928], 75)

The second aspect I would like to take into consideration when approaching the written text is the re-reading of texts, also a consequence of the questioning of the literary canon. I would like here to bear in mind the words from Catherine Belsey, a British cultural materialist critic:

A more constructive strategy is to treat English as a site of struggle, to generate a new critical discourse, to re-read the great tradition not for the sake of valorising it, but in order to release its plurality. I have argued elsewhere that texts are plural, and that their meanings are *produced* by bringing to bear on the raw material of the work itself discourses pertinent to the twentieth century. (Belsey 1982, 130)

These would then be the two strategies that have been put forward in a feminist consideration of the approach to the dramatic text: resistance and re-reading. To a certain extent, the two of them can be applied to the performance text, but there is still something missing which will come from film studies: The field of psychosemiotics. Psychosemiotics is a combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, and feminism. It started being used in feminist film criticism, but it also proves extremely useful for theatre. According to Gayle Austin: "[I]t analyzes the relationship of film to individual identity through, among other techniques, a very close reading of all the elements present in each frame of film" (1990, 75). The analysis Austin propounds could be extended to theatre, and the close reading of the frames would be, in the case of theatre, a detailed analysis of all the elements present in the configuration of the stage picture.

Before continuing with the discussion on how theatre as a

system of representation can be approached from a feminist perspective, some consideration is needed as to the different types of feminism that have appeared so far in Britain and the United States. Since the beginning of the modern feminist movement, in the 1960s, there have been different tendencies in the strategies to overthrow patriarchy. These strategies can be reduced to three main periods: Liberal or bourgeois, radical or cultural, and socialist or materialist. Liberal or bourgeois feminism deals with the achievements made by women through the times. Its main arguments consist of the equality between men and women and the reform of the system, so that the ideology of individual success can be applied to both men and women. Radical or cultural feminism maintains that women are a separate class from men and that, in some respects, women are superior. However, women should also be on equal terms with men, and therefore obtain the same material benefits from borrowing their code of action. According to Gayle Austin, this tendency: "[S]tresses [the] superiority of female attributes and [the] difference between male and female modes; favors separate female systems, [and considers the] individual [as being] more important than the group" (1990, 6). This makes quite a change from the liberal perspective: Female attributes are seen as superior to male attributes, and therefore female systems formed by female individuals should be created. Finally, socialist or materialist feminism makes quite a shift from the previous two. Assuming that feminism is the political alternative for women, the materialist perspective applies a socialist political analysis to the situation of women, considering women as a

social group equal to men. Thus, the main objective of materialist feminism would not only be the equality of men and women in society, but also their union in a progressive political action. From a materialist perspective, biological differences between men and women are not excessively important. However, what is of the utmost importance are "material conditions of production such as history, race, class [and] gender" (Austin 1990, 6). Finally, another element that differentiates the materialist perspective from the others is the predominance of the idea of the group in contrast to that of the individual.

Together with this division of feminisms into three main groups, there are other aspects that have emerged and that deserve consideration especially from a materialist perspective, namely the awareness of "working-class women, women of ethnic backgrounds of all classes, lesbians, and so on, ... [of their] different experiences of oppression" (Aston 1995, 78). Indeed, from a materialist perspective one does wonder why the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s "tended to overlook ... the historically determined material conditions of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (Aston 1995, 78). K. Harriss expands on this point:

Lesbians in the movement pointed to the fact that heterosexual women had dominated and defined the agenda on sexuality ... Black women wrote about how they had been silenced, and challenged the racist assumptions behind the almost universally accepted white feminist positions on violence against women, the family and reproductive rights ... Women with disabilities, Jewish women and other 'identity groups' began to raise issues particular to their experience and, like Black and lesbian women, claimed their own right to organize autonomously. (1989, 35-6)

This questioning has given rise to the emergence of several sub-groups in the different fields, especially in Britain and in the United States. However, the interesting point here is that this has happened precisely because of the realisation of the historically determined conditions above-mentioned. This is why this chapter will pay special attention to the main aspects of materialist feminism. However, before going into the next section, some consideration should be given to the theorisation of gender that has taken place since the 1980s and that has become one of the most powerful new tendencies in the new devising of feminisms. In this sense, Judith Butler, one of the most interesting thinkers in the field, has argued about the "troubling" acquisition of gender and has questioned the existence of a stable feminist subject from a poststructuralist perspective. In her own words:

Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely contrary to feminist aims? To what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix? If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal. (Butler 1990, 5)

This brief survey of feminisms cannot conclude without some reference to French feminist theory, especially since it is going to be widely drawn upon in this work. The main emphasis of this theory is placed on its use of psychoanalysis in order to understand how the subject is constructed in society. To this aim, it will centre on a feminist appropriation of the works of



Sigmund Freud and especially on Jacques Lacan's re-framing of Freud. Thus, an essential connection will be established between subjectivity and the linguistic sign-system of language. Examples of the application of French feminist theory to literary works can be found especially in chapters IV and V.

The next step in this discussion relates to the actual position of some men who consider themselves as feminists and intend to do some theoretical work in the field. I find this consideration particularly relevant, since I am a male academic writing a thesis on a female playwright and drawing on a substantial amount of Feminist theory. The matter of positionality therefore becomes essential. Bearing in mind the North-American, British and French milieus, the men interested in joining feminism have found an almost unanimous hostility from the group of radical or cultural feminists, who consider feminism as a female prerogative and do not recognise a male perspective. Feminist reluctance to the presence of men in their field is due to the belief that women are a different entity. However, such a supposition presupposes the existence of a commonality between women. It is important therefore to notice that not every woman is a feminist, and that being female does not necessarily presuppose being a feminist. As Toril Moi put it: "I will suggest that we distinguish between 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Moi in Belsey and Moore 1989, 117).

Having established this, the fact that according to radical or cultural feminists men should stay away from feminism shows

an -in my opinion- absurd sense of collectivity that can very easily (mis)lead women to wrong and unreal assumptions. Bearing in mind the fact that the world is becoming more and more fragmented, building a feminist ghetto does not seem to be the most feasible way to help women solve their problems. If, with some lucidity, one has to recognise that the feminist struggle is never going to end, one of the only things left to do is to try to unite forces and fight back. Leaving out a few men who feel sympathetic and wish to participate in the feminist cause is a luxury the feminist movement internationally cannot afford.

From this we can see more easily what male feminists suggest. As feminism is amongst other things a struggle against sexism, it would help to understand that sexism in itself is not only intended against women, but also against men -against those men that do not fall into the patriarchal and therefore sexist category of maleness, but also against the men that theoretically can benefit from it in the highest degree, since a number of anxieties are going to emerge as a consequence of having pressure upon them to impersonate the gender role society requires them to adopt. If modern societies are based on a capitalist system that is so-completely male and which uses patriarchy as the base from which oppression is exerted, it is clear, therefore, that women will be the main victims of the system. However, men will eventually become victims as well, both those more on the margins and also the men that follow patriarchy and that are theoretically the beneficiaries of its application, not realising that sexism is ultimately destructive for themselves as well. In this respect, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

has explored what she calls "male homosocial bonds", meaning the relations of friendship between men with a high component of sexism and homophobia:

In these male homosocial bonds are concentrated the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence; all are fully structured by the logic of paranoia. At the same time, however, these fantasy energies are mapped along the axes of social and political power; so that the revelation of intrapsychic structure is inextricable from the revelation of the mechanisms of class domination. (Sedgwick 1985, 162)

And, following Sedgwick, Craig Owens has established how male homophobia can be related to sexism and be equally destructive for both straight and gay men:

That the single most important contribution to the redefining of the terms of this struggle should have been made by a *feminist* writer is highly encouraging. By demonstrating that male homophobia is directed at both gay and straight men, and by demonstrating that it affects women as well. (Owens in Jardine and Smith 1989 [1987], 231)

Bearing these words in mind, the position of men in feminism should then follow a deconstruction of the way patriarchal ideology has been internalised by the individual, an awareness of the structures that govern phallographic thought and the construction of discourses. Once these have been dismantled, the next task is to adopt marginal positions in order to decentralise the centrality of the main/male voices. One of the possible ways of action is learning to read in a different way, echoing the different tendencies we traced before in the case of reading/viewing a dramatic text and a performance text. In this sense, Elaine Showalter proposes reading as a feminist:

Reading as a feminist ... has the important aspect of offering male readers a way to produce feminist criticism that avoids female impersonation. The way into feminist criticism, for the male theorist, must involve a

confrontation with what might be implied by reading as a man and with a questioning or a surrender of paternal privileges. (Showalter in Jardine and Smith 1989 [1983], 126-7)

In order to have a more in-depth view of the concept of materialist feminism, one should take into consideration the definition theorist Jill Dolan gives:

Materialist feminism deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations. ... [It] inquires into the flux and material conditions of history. It views women as historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by race, class and sexual identification. Rather than considering gender polarization as the victimization of only women, materialist feminism considers it a social construct oppressive to both women and men. (1988, 10)

The deconstruction of the "mythic subject Woman" can be seen as a critique of the prevailing systems of representation that objectify women by transforming her into "Woman". It could also be a criticism of a more essentialist view of women defended by radical or cultural feminists, whose rendering of women as mythic[al] subjects can have quite useless effects to boot. The materialist view treats the problem in a different way from its counterpart positions. By looking at women as a class, following Marxist theory, and locating women in the heart of a struggle whose basis is economic, the materialist position deals more directly with realistic problems, instead of musing on abstractions which, at the same time, have proved to be conservative (as in the case of radical or cultural feminism). To speak in terms of class implies the existence of a collective group. Therefore, the concept of woman as an individual ceases to exist in terms of feminist and political analysis. Finally, Dolan's last point on "gender polarization" becomes subversive

within the context of feminism in the implicitness of its assumption to consider gender as a social construct. And she expands on this: "In materialist discourse, gender is not innate. Rather, it is dictated through enculturation, as gender divisions are placed at the service of the dominant culture's ideology" (Dolan 1988, 10). Furthermore, as a direct contraposition to radical or cultural feminism, which sees the actual gender construct as only affecting women, Dolan establishes that materialist feminism looks further and sees that social constructs oppress both sexes. She makes it clear then that gender divisions are an ideological construct that serves the interests of the ideology in power. And she ends up by saying that:

Far from reifying sexual difference, materialist feminism works to understand how women have been oppressed by gender categories. It attempts to denaturalize the dominant ideology that demands and maintains such oppressive social arrangements. (Dolan 1988, 11)

Dolan denies an intrinsic essentialism inherent to the construct "Woman" -which the radical or cultural tendency would vindicate- through the use of the plural "women", and in her open call to subvert the "naturalness" of phallographic discourses. Thus, gender and sexuality are seen by her in terms of politics, closely related to the mechanisms that govern the exertion of power. A disruption of these patriarchal power structures will necessarily entail a previous disruption taking place in the gender and sexuality spheres. (Dolan's notions can in this way be related to the poststructuralist Foucauldian analysis of power relations).

The next point to take into account is a consideration of

spectatorship in the theatre and in the cinema. An exploration of the implications according to gender divisions will also lead to the feminist analysis of the relationship established between player and role. In this sense, Jill Dolan is clear in saying that "theatre creates an ideal spectator carved in the likeness of the dominant culture whose ideology he represents" (1988, 1).

She is also clear in her using of the pronoun "he" instead of the double possibility "s/he". Actually, she mentions before this statement that the ideal spectator in our theatre (she refers concretely to North American culture and can therefore be easily transposed to a Western environment) is thought of as being "white, middle-class, heterosexual and male" (1988, 1). Dolan's notion of the ideal spectator brings immediately to mind its European counterpart, Umberto Eco's "model reader". According to Eco, every author (if we can still use such terminology in our postmodern world) writes with an hypothetical, ideal reader in mind. However, this "model" reader should be understood not as a "perfect" reader, but as one implicit or embedded in the text. The difference between Dolan's "ideal spectator" and Eco's "model reader", though, is that the latter, in spite of being a biological male, does not take it for granted (at least in his formulation of the concept) that modern readers/spectators are biological males as well. Eco does not define from the very outset a specific gender construct:

To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with

the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them. (Eco 1981 [1979], 7).

To go back to Dolan, she concludes by saying that the identification between the ideal spectator (with the characteristics we have seen) and the dominant culture "is the motivating assumption behind the discourse of feminist performance criticism" (1988, 1). Thus, one of the aims of feminist criticism will therefore be the deconstruction of the mechanisms that make the (white, middle-class, heterosexual and male) canon possible through an awareness of its workings. Such deconstruction will take place in two different ways. On the one hand, through an analysis of traditional systems of representation, such as the ones based on Aristotle's heritage to theatre-making. On the other hand, through a thorough understanding of the player/role relationship and of the effect it has on audiences.

The traditional systems of representation have used Aristotle as the starting point from which to develop a particular patriarchal expounding of theatre-making:

Theories of theatre and drama generally acknowledge the primacy of Aristotle. The Aristotelian ideal is one of structural and stylistic unity based on a narrative plot that builds progressively to a climax and resolution, presenting an instructive example of character development. It is one which has pervaded drama throughout its history. Challenges to it -e.g., romanticism or expressionism- have invariably carried the implication of protest against authoritarian power and assertion of a need for social change. (Kritzer 1991, 2)

Kritzer's words bring to mind the structure that many plays have followed especially since the Renaissance, when there was a revival of interest in the classical tradition. In this sense, we can establish a parallelism with the popular five-act

structure of plays at the time, which would present a dramatic pattern based on the following steps: Preparation, when the conflict is established and that would correspond to Act I; Rise or Rising action, when tension increases and that would correspond to Act II; Climax, a moment in the play when tension explodes, breaks loose, and that would correspond to Act III; Fall or Falling action, when tension decreases and that would correspond to Act IV; and finally a Conclusion, when the final closure takes place and that would correspond to Act V.

A feminist conception of theatre, on the other hand, has established as a starting point the importance of questioning Aristotle's ideas, beginning with pointing out the striking resemblance between the Aristotelian model of dramatic structure with male sexuality and with phallic modes of pleasure that actually "'glorify the phallus' centre stage" (Aston 1997a, 6). This model is the one we have expounded in the above-mentioned paradigm, which interestingly mirrors the process of masculine erection, ejaculation and return to flaccidity. The parallelism between the two, the awesome realisation of how one follows the other, is what Amelia Howe Kritzer refers to when she says that:

From a socialist-feminist standpoint, the Aristotelian ideal can be seen as confirming patriarchal ideology and the power of traditional elites, as well as validating a phallic paradigm of creativity. (Kritzer 1991, 2)

The resemblance between the traditional structure of plays and the modes of oppression patriarchy makes use of, centred around the presence of the phallus as a transcendental signifier in contemporary society, also brings to mind Elizabeth Grosz's analysis of the 'come' or 'ejaculation shot' in pornography. As



she puts it:

Pornography, at least in part, offers itself to the (male) spectator as a form of knowledge and conceptual/perceptual mastery of the enigmas of female sexuality but is in fact his own projection of sexual pleasure. The come shot is thus no longer an unmediated representation and demonstration of his pleasure (as one would expect): it becomes an index of his prowess to generate her pleasure. His sexual specificity is not the object of the gaze but remains a mirror or rather a displacement of her pleasure (or at least his fantasy of her pleasure). (Grosz 1994, 199)

This position can very easily create a *gestus* "which indexes the wider social context in which female pleasure is displaced by the male fantasy of female sexuality and desire" (Aston 1997a, 34). Another parallelism that could be established here would be with Edward Said's theories about the Orient, and how it has always been defined by the West. Following Aristotle and endowing dramatic structures with an ejaculatory potential is as if readers/spectators can share in the pleasure of the shot with the patriarchal playwright, but always as a male fantasy of female pleasure.

The second position from which a questioning of the traditional systems of representation can be put forward is by analysing the relationship between player/role. In this respect, Amelia Howe Kritzer establishes an interesting similarity between this opposition and gender division in society as working together to contribute to the maintenance of patriarchal subjectivity:

The doubleness of theatrical representation has traditionally been used to reinforce the masculine/feminine opposition fundamental to patriarchal subjectivity. Theatre's player/role opposition mimics the division and hierarchization of masculine and feminine. The player is real, while the role makes visible the false man -i.e., the feminine- that must be repressed in the attainment of

subjectivity. Stage parlance, which places the player 'in' a role, confirms the penetrable, 'feminine' quality of the role, as well as the unitary, 'masculine' quality of the player. (It should also be noted that the player appears 'out of character' for the curtain call at the end of a performance.) (Kritzer 1991, 9)

Following Kritzer's words, we can establish a dichotomy between two paradigms. On the one hand, we would have the Actor/I/Masculine/True Man. On the other hand, we would have the Role/The "Other"/Feminine/False Man. Kritzer expands on this:

Theatre replicates the experience and repression of doubleness that makes possible the discourse of man. Patriarchy, as has been noted, constructs subjectivity as a unity which has as its emblem the phallus. Theatre reifies the substance/shadow or true/false division inherent in the demands of patriarchal subjectivity. This division, with the binary, hierarchized opposition between true man and false man (player and role) has governed traditional theatre. Theatre assures the audience, through enactment of the player/role relationship, that true man -unitary man- exists. The false man of the role reinforces the construction of the subject as phallic unity by offering the concept of the role as an 'other' upon which tendencies or qualities that threaten this wholeness can be projected. (Kritzer 1991, 9-10)

I will exemplify this last point making reference to film. In contemporary Hollywood cinema, identification between player and role tends to occur more frequently in the case of actresses. Their male counterparts, though also recurring to identification -precisely to emphasise the "penetrable" quality of the false man, of the feminine, and therefore feeling more affirmed in their own masculine subjectivity- very easily detach themselves -and are also detached by the audience- from the character once the show is over. It is interesting to mention how this point can be exemplified with the case of straight actors playing homosexual roles, that in many cases -especially in the United States- leads to some kind of public justification

of the fact of having played such a role. In the case of Tom Hanks playing a terminally-ill Aids patient in Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winner "Philadelphia", the fact that Hanks needed to make a mention of his wife in the Oscar ceremony adds to my argument, as if he needed to make clear once more that the role is something to be detached, that is useful only in so far it allows the patriarchal subject to show up. Another example appears in the case of the film "Fatal Attraction", directed by Adrian Lyne and starring Michael Douglas and Glenn Close. Mr Douglas, -"true man", apart from interpreting the role of a family man who happens to make a mistake by sleeping around with the wrong woman -thus portraying the pillar of the nuclear family and therefore liable to the condescension and sympathy coming from male audiences- was always identified as such and therefore as Michael Douglas. On the other hand, Ms Close, -"true woman" or, more strikingly, "not-man", as a consequence of playing a mentally-disturbed woman that would put in danger the blissful existence of a white, middle-class, straight household, was insulted in the streets of New York City, precisely as a consequence of the malleability of the "false man", thus proving that "a woman playing a role would be not-man enacting false man, and the reassuring value of doubleness would be lost" (Kritzer 1991, 10). According to this, the presence of women in the theatre/cinema must change radically if the attainment of a subjectivity other than phallic is wanted. There is another element that needs some consideration in our analysis of spectatorship and of how this is constructed through the establishment of a phallic paradigm: The concept of the "gaze".

A thorough consideration of the concept can be found in chapter IV, but at this point, suffice it to say that through the use of the male gaze the female body is objectified in the different systems of representation. This process will bring with it a re-enactment of Jacques Lacan's "Mirror Stage" that will eventually lead to the affirmation of male subjectivity. I would like to give some examples of the workings of the gaze in contemporary Hollywood film. Indeed, the straight male spectator identifies himself with actors such as Michael Douglas, Bruce Willis or Mel Gibson. Through this identification, together with the continuous symbolic repetition of the Mirror Stage, he will create his "ego-ideals" and will affirm his male subjectivity. When they seduce the actresses, the "false men", the male spectator will join in in the seduction. As a consequence of this, actresses will receive the gaze and, therefore, will become objects. This constant reassurance of the male subjectivity of the straight male spectator is being transferred to other sectors of society, always male. Thus, we can find in the last years the creation of black male icons -such as Denzel Washington or Wesley Snipes- who will play exactly the same role in the configuration of a black male subjectivity.

What about women and other minorities? If we are to follow the psychoanalytic process of the gaze, the only way out left to such groups is perversion. In both cases, the identification also takes place with the straight male character, which carries with it a perversion. In the case of women spectators, they will identify with the male actor on the screen (or in the theatre) and therefore they will participate in the seduction of the

actress. In the case of gay and lesbian audiences, this will carry with it the occupying of a heterosexual position. The conclusion seems to be the utter impossibility for anything other than heterosexual men to occupy a subject position in the current systems of representation. There has been in recent years an attempt at the creation of a female subjectivity in film, in the case of the character of Catherine Trammell in the film "Basic Instinct", directed by Paul Verhoeven and starred by Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone. Trammell, depicted as a perverse heroine, represents in the film the threat of emasculation of the actor (in this case, a mention should be made of Ms Stone's -and here I seem to be negating her a subject position through my identification of actress and character-famous leg-crossing, with the corresponding implicitness of a fear of castration, of the mirror). Unfortunately, the attempts to create a female subject did not succeed, and the film became another Hollywood product that reaffirmed the maleness inherently attributed to the spectator.

The last point in my consideration of the relationship between feminism and theatre can be found in the adoption of a theatrical practice based on the theories of Bertolt Brecht in contraposition to those of Constantin Stanislavsky. Whereas the latter emphasises identification between actor and character through a psychological approach to character, Brecht amplifies the identificatory process and, at the same time, offers more possibilities in the sense of a political consciousness leading to social change. He is characterised by "his persistent antagonism to closed systems of representation and his emphasis

on constructing a specifically *socialist* paradigm" (Reinelt 1996, 82). Such a construction will carry with it the idea of political revolt as a necessary step in the changing of a given state of affairs in society.

Bearing in mind Brecht's subversive presence in the theatre world, I would like here to show how his work has proved to be of a seminal relevance for feminist theory, especially in relation to his use of *Verfremdungseffekt* (A-effect), the "not ... but", his concept of historicization, and the *gestus*. Some clarification on the concepts is here needed. First, he defines *Verfremdungseffekt* as follows: "[The] A-effect consists in turning [an] object ... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected" (Brecht 1964, 143). This effect has proved extremely useful for a feminist consideration of gender, as Elin Diamond has put it:

A feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender, to *reveal* gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices, usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect. (Diamond 1997, 46)

Secondly, Brecht also refers to the "not ... but":

When [an actor] appears on stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one of the possible variants ... Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. (Brecht 1964, 137)

The feminist explanation of this concept deserves more space. According to Elin Diamond, in her linking of this feature to sexual difference:

The Brechtian 'not ... but' is the theatrical and theoretical analogue to 'differences within'. As such it ruins classical mimesis: the truth-modelling that produces self-identical subjects in coherent plots gives way utterly to the pleasure and significance of contradiction -and of contradictions that, at any given moment, are emerging but unseeable. One might argue that Brecht's notion of 'the alternative' in the 'not ... but' should not be read as postmodern difference, that his theatre writing is not Derrida's *écriture*. But Brechtian theory leaves room for at least one feature of *écriture* -the notion that meaning is beyond capture within the covers of the play or the hours of performance. This is not to deny Brecht's wish for an instructive, analytical theater; on the contrary, it invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility -for Brecht a crucial possibility- that signification (the production of meaning) continue beyond the play's end, even as it congeals into action and choice after the spectator leaves the theater. (Diamond 1997, 49)

Through the use of the 'not ... but', then, a consideration of the repression of sexual difference is offered to the feminist spectator. This can provide her with an awareness of the mechanisms of repression that can eventually prove empowering.

The next point is the notion of historicisation, the use of which will allow the reader/spectator to understand "women's material conditions in history" (Diamond 1997, 49). According to Bertolt Brecht:

When our theatres perform plays of other periods they like to annihilate distance, fill in the gap, gloss over the differences. But what comes then of our delight in comparisons, in distance, in dissimilarity -which is at the same time a delight in what is close and proper to ourselves? (Brecht 1964, 276)

Historicisation is thus seen as a way not to "fill in the gap". In this sense, what Brecht was advocating has resonances of the Cultural Materialist critical approach, in that contradictions are exposed and studied, and gaps are shown and analysed. As Jonathan Dollimore puts it in the introduction to his influential revision of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama:

[W]hereas traditional criticism reads for coherence, materialist criticism begins by reading for incoherence or, as it might better be called, *discoherence*, a term I invoke in its now obsolete seventeenth-century sense of incongruity verging on contradiction ... A materialist reading, though it would reject idealist concepts of coherence, does not thereby subscribe to the (residually idealist) notion that all is ultimately incoherent, random, arbitrary or whatever ... From a social, political, and historical point of view, the discoherent [sic] is always meaning-full [sic]; always readable. (Dollimore 1989 [1984], xxii)

Elin Diamond expands on Brecht's idea, although she also believes that some gaps can ultimately be "pernicious" (Diamond 1988b, 172). She defines the concept of historicisation, saying that:

[T]o historicize is to bring into view the material conditions and human contradictions within a play's events, enabling the spectator to understand those events as the result of specific conditions and choices which might have been changed, which have changed, which the spectator might change ... Historicization implies a way of seeing that admits instability and difference into the margins of one's sight. It casts doubt on the capacity of the I/eye to define, delimit, integrate, or exclude objects in the material world. (Diamond 1988, 161-2)

Thus, power is given to the capacity of the spectator to intervene in the present state of affairs, to provide her/him with an understanding of the conditions of life in the past and the possibilities of subverting them in the present. Finally, it introduces the possibility of the existence of a different type of gaze (as has been stated before, this concept will be further developed in chapter IV). It is quite straightforward that in approaching drama and history in such a way we are implying ourselves deeper in the process, and this may have repercussions. It might be for this reason that doing this type of history play has been defined as "doing dangerous history" (Keyssar 1988, 135).



Finally, some more attention must be paid to the notion of the *gestus*. According to Patrice Pavis:

*Gestus* makes visible (alienates) 'the class behind the individual, the critique behind the naive object, the commentary behind the affirmation.... [It] gives us the key to the relationship between the play being performed and the public. (Pavis 1982, 42)

From a feminist position, Elin Diamond adds:

[T]he *gestus* signifies a moment of theoretical insight into sex-gender complexities, not only in the play's 'fable', but in the culture which the play, at the moment of reception, is dialogically reflecting and shaping. (Diamond 1997, 53)

Precisely because of the insight it affords the female spectator, the *gestus* is also seen as enabling a feminist spectatorship to take place, and hence it acquires relevant connotations for a feminist appropriation of theatre.

To conclude this brief survey of feminism and theatre, an idea that seems to have emerged repeatedly is that one needs to be aware of his/her positioning in order to make a political analysis of any situation. What feminist theory has underlined in the recent past in connection to theatre and cinema is that there should be a more thorough theorisation of new ways to define a subject position for the female spectator. In this sense, a disruption of the self/other opposition upon which patriarchal subjectivity is based makes itself indispensable. As Amelia Howe Kritzer propounds:

Feminist theatre must attempt to deconstruct the socially constructed wholeness of the gendered subject. To do so, it must break down the masculine/feminine opposition reified in the player/role division, theatricalizing the possibility of a subjectivity based in multiplicity and relationality rather than binary opposition and separateness. (Kritzer 1991, 11)

Through the disruption of the patriarchal gender binary in

theatre and film, feminists would have a valuable space in which to keep exploring for the attainment of subject positions in society. The conquest of these two essential systems of representation in contemporary Western societies by feminist individuals would prove invaluable for the different type of visibility it would afford them. A visibility that would finally enable feminist people to look back in the eye at the male gaze with all its intensity. And everybody knows that looks can kill.

## CHAPTER II.

### THATCHER'S ENGLAND.

This chapter will offer a succinct account of some of the main developments that have taken place in England in the last twenty years, concentrating mainly on the political and economic. It will thus emphasise how the accession to power of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 decisively contributed to a new configuration of the country as a whole. My particular stress on the figure of Mrs Thatcher is significant for the purposes of this work, since the three plays that will be analysed came into being in the late 1970s, in the 1980s and in the 1990s, and many of the concerns they show are a direct result of the socio-political and economic atmosphere of the times. I also believe that some consideration of the socio-political and economic context in which the three plays were produced will contribute to a deeper understanding of the plays in themselves and to their appraisal in the light of a different society, the society of the late 1990s. Conversely, by approaching the plays from a different society in place and time, the texts themselves can also shed some light on the conditions of our society and help us to understand it better. As Alan Sinfield puts it, in his definition of literature as intervention:

Literature ... is involved in the process of self-understanding in the past and present. Sillitoe responds to the factory system, Lessing to the position of women, Murdoch to the existentialist movement, by developing, through the refractive lenses of literary conventions, constructions of conceivable lives. These are, inevitably, interpretations and evaluations of perceived possibilities in the real world. And these constructions are not just responses, they are

interventions: their publication feeds back possible images of the self in relation to others, helping society (some sectors more than others) to interpret and constitute itself. The social identities so formed in recent history dominate our current perceptions. (Sinfield 1983, 1)

The immediate context to the three plays analysed in this study is the years preceding and following the Conservative victory in the 1979 election in Britain. By considering the plays as possible •interventions• in their own time my aim is to shed some light on possible ways to "interpret and constitute" our own societies in the late 1990s.

The immediate background to *Cloud Nine* is an increasing pessimistic atmosphere at the end of the decade of the 1970s, that is in this way contrasted to the explosion that took place in many different areas of society in the late 1960s. In fact, as a consequence of this push:

Britain in the 1970s witnessed a profound change in the consciousness of women as a group. Perhaps for the first time changes in law, in publishing and the media, in the arts, in attitudes to public morality and in social habits combined in a relatively short period to alter radically the base from which women viewed their lives. (Naismith 1991 [1982], xxvi)

This emphasis on the figure of women in the England of the 1970s was propelled from three basic fields. The first one was publishing, that developed from the launching in the British market in 1970 of the books *The Female Eunuch*, by Germaine Greer; *Sexual Politics*, by Kate Millett; and *Patriarchal Attitudes*, by Eva Figes; through the appearance of four feminist journals in 1972, or through the creation of The Virago Press (1973) and The Women's Press (1975).

The second field relevant to the taking off of women in English society is legislation. Thus, in the 1970s, a number of Acts of Parliament were passed, all of them contributing to the normalisation in the incorporation of women to society. Such Acts were: The Abortion Act (1967), The Divorce Reform Act (1969), The Equal Pay Act (1970), and The Sex Discrimination Act (1975), which led to the creation of the Equal Opportunities Commission. To these Acts should be added the free availability of contraceptives on the National Health Service in 1974, as well as the passing of the Employment Protection Act, specially devised for pregnant women.

Finally, the third field that emphasised the figure of women was the work of the Women's Liberation Movement, especially concerned with the right to self-determination. To this end, several pressure groups were created to support the interest of women in their own areas of employment (e.g. Civil Service, Industry, Medicine, Broadcasting).

It is in this atmosphere that we should approach *Cloud Nine* (1979), a play that still contains the energy and enthusiasm characteristic of the society of the late 1960s and 1970s, but also a play that already points to the appearance of some threat, one disguised as a remnant from the Victorian times but also identifiable with the Thatcherism to come.

In May 1979, the Conservative Party won the elections in Britain, after two different Labour governments, led by Harold

Wilson and by James Callaghan, and put Britain in Tory hands from 1979 to 1997. Probably the main change that the accession to power of the Conservative Party brought with it in 1979 was that, for the first time ever in British history, a woman was to become Prime Minister. Margaret Thatcher thus became responsible for the direction of the country -she had also been the first woman ever to be elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975. Mrs Thatcher will also be remembered for having established a Conservative party record of being in power for 18 years, in a succession of governments that she led from 1979 until 1990, and that the next Prime Minister, John Major, continued until 1997. This eighteen-year period of Conservative rule can in this way mirror another long period of rule, the one between 1951 and 1964, with the governments of Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan. The charismatic personality of Mrs Thatcher can be appraised in the fact that she stood on her own in the government for eleven years (1979-1990), almost the same amount of time that in the past was occupied by the three above-mentioned Prime Ministers (1951-1964).

As has been said before, the atmosphere that pervaded England in the late 1970s was one of pessimism and gloom in the face of what more and more people perceived as growing weaknesses of the country. These weaknesses had actually developed since the beginning of the decade and can be summarised as:

[P]roblems of low investment in manufacturing industry (British banks had a very poor record compared to their

German or French counterparts), lack of long-term consistency in Government economic policy, a mixed economy that put too much emphasis on large units, whether public or private, and gave no encouragement to small business enterprises, inflexible practices and vested interests in marketing, in the professions, in the unions, and among the workers. (Marwick 1990 [1982], 278)

The results of such weaknesses were a very high inflation, monetary restraints and unemployment. This is also to be added to what became known as the "winter of discontent", due to:

[T]he excessively high number of days lost to industrial action (higher in 1979 than in the year of the General Strike, 1926), the irritations caused to the public, and above all the inconvenience inflicted by strikes on the part of formerly rather docile public employees ... and the discontent of higher-paid workers who resented Government attempts to hold down pay settlements to the official norm of 5 per cent. (Marwick 1990 [1982], 270)

To this should also be added the fact that industrial action was taken against "the policies of statutory limits on wage increases and of the 'Social Contract', which promised welfare benefits ... in place of cash increases, and wanted a return to the 'free collective bargaining'" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 270).

It is to such a stage picture that Margaret Thatcher arrived in 1979, and it is in the context of her winning the election that we should approach *Top Girls* (1982), the next play in my analysis. She immediately embodied the New Right in the United Kingdom, and her first steps in the government promptly gave out the idea of coming to an end with the concept of welfare-capitalism, based on the economic theories of Milton Keynes, and very popular in the political and economic spheres of the country from the end of the Second World War until the late 1970s. Welfare-Capitalism defined

the basic concerns of the Welfare State as "social security, medical services, housing, and education" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 353). Indeed, Mrs Thatcher's political and socio-economic strategies were to follow a more savage trend of radical capitalism, that was going to make itself felt through a quick and systematic curtailing of the main areas upon which the Welfare State is built.

Thus, the Conservative government passed a Housing Act in 1980 that headed unequivocally towards radical capitalism, encouraging private ownership, private building, and the advice "to make the renting of accommodation a purely market-place transaction" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 358). In this way, State responsibility would disappear on the grounds of its being theoretically unnecessary at that point in history. Similarly, a Social Security Act was passed in 1986, encouraging the private sector in health care and thus leading to the collapse of the NHS (National Health Service) through a clear Americanisation of the system. As for education, the 1988 Education Reform Act, through a shift of control from towns and county halls to the government, also established a similar movement towards privatisation in schools, to a system more similar to the running of a business than to anything else.

Mrs Thatcher thus opposed the Welfare State and propounded instead what was to be known as the "Enterprise Economy", based on the most ruthless capitalism. She blamed the 1960s (especially the



part of the decade that coincided with the Labour governments) for having been the origin of a moral loss of the country:

Permissiveness, selfish and uncaring, proliferated under the guise of the new sexual freedom. Aggressive verbal hostility, presented as a refreshing lack of subservience, replaced courtesy and good manners. Instant gratification became the philosophy of the young and the youth cultists. Speculation replaced dogged hard work. (Thatcher in Sinfield 1989, 296)

To such a matter of state, she opposes the Britain of the 1950s, that she sees as "old-fashioned ... clean and orderly" (Thatcher in Sinfield 1989, 296), or even Victorian Britain, emphasising thus the concepts of "tradition, family, religion, respectability and deference" (Sinfield 1989, 296) and contraposing them to the stress on collectivity and community feeling characteristic of the left. As she herself said: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families" (Thatcher in Naismith 1991, xxxvii). Thus, Mrs Thatcher is going to defend ardently a new individuality that will be related to a sheer competitiveness at the social, political and economic levels. This enterprise culture is based on the fact that "individual initiative and freedom would replace dependency" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 311). The dependency referred to is the one from the government, that according to Thatcher should not interfere with any economic decisions taking place in a "free market-place" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 311). Something which was therefore of paramount importance was to encourage the development of small businesses, as a clear example of this enterprise culture. In this sense, reductions in direct taxation would take place, as part of

the above-mentioned encouragement.

It is in the light of Mrs Thatcher's emphasis on individualism and the enterprise culture that *Top Girls* proves extremely relevant. As will be seen in chapter V, Marlene, the main character in the play, establishes a process of identification with Margaret Thatcher's ethos that will take her to strictly adhere to her politics. In this sense, she will defend a ruthless system where there is no room for the dispossessed, people like her sister Joyce or Angie, her own daughter, that she had to abandon to start a new life in the city. This play is imbued with a more sombre mood than *Cloud Nine* in that it reflects the tone of the decade of the 1980s, a decade characterised by a return to radical capitalism.

Mrs Thatcher's first move when she won the 1979 election was "to adhere strictly to the principles of monetarism and to ruthlessly curtail public spending" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 271-2). The immediate consequence of such moves was an extremely high increase of unemployment and inflation, followed by a strong de-industrialisation of the country. Also as part of her policy to promote individual initiative, Mrs Thatcher's government fought against the power the Trade Unions held from the Labour government times, and started to elaborate on a number of Acts to cut down on their influence. This materialised in three Acts that were passed in Parliament. The first one was the 1980 Employment Act, by which secondary picketing and actions related to it were made illegal.

The second one was the 1982 Employment Act, that "made union funds liable to actions for damages in the event of strikes being undertaken outside the strict letter of the law" (Marwick 1990 [1982],272). The third one, (but the first to refer to the unions by name), the Trade Union Act, was passed in 1984, and it made "secret ballots compulsory in trade union elections and prior to any industrial action" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 280). These Acts, together with the influence of unemployment and the devastating effect of the economic recession, made British Unions much weaker than in previous times.

Following the enterprise culture politics, one fact that was sooner or later bound to happen was the privatisation of public national industries, following Thatcher's idea that industry should be self-supporting. Thus, between 1983 and 1987 the following industries were purchased by private buyers: Jaguar cars, British Telecom, British Aerospace, Britoil, Cable and Wireless, The Trustee Savings Bank, British Gas, British Airways, and Rolls-Royce. This could also be tied in with the growth of what would be known as IT (Information Technology), that would be seen as the next step after industrialisation. In this sense, the business related to "computers and electronic office machinery, telecommunications, and electronic video and satellite equipment" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 315) experienced a great expansion at the time.

While all this was taking place, two serious problems were

also afflicting Britain. On the one hand, a one-year long miners' strike, that put to the test Mrs Thatcher's endurance of the miners' ordeal mainly to avoid the closing down of collieries. The other element worth commenting on is the spread of urban riots throughout the country, starting in 1980 in Bristol and Brighton and continuing in cities such as London, Liverpool or Birmingham. It is clear that, while on the one hand, privatisation and the enterprise culture were offering sections of the population the possibility of earning much more money than before, a substantial section was totally devoid of opportunities by their very belonging to the working classes, entering in a cul-de-sac situation that would prevent them from the possibility of change. In many cases, another element to be added to the urban riots that afflicted many poor areas of the cities was race. To unemployment and bleak future prospects should be added the discrimination of people because of their racial heritage. In this sense, the fact that it was precisely in the late 1970s, with the accession of the Conservatives to power, that a neo-fascist upsurge took place should be borne in mind. This was probably a reaction to the increase in the rate of immigration into Britain that had taken place in previous times, particularly between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s, when there was a massive arrival in Britain of immigrants from Commonwealth nations, especially India, Pakistan and the Caribbean, and a combination of unemployment and recession factors. The result of this was the creation by Enoch Powell of

the National Front in 1966, that propounded a return of the immigrants to their places of origin and was very active in the spreading of xenophobia in the country. As Powell said in 1965: "We should not lose sight of the desirability of achieving a steady flow of voluntary repatriation for the elements which are proving unsuccessful or unassimilable" (Powell in Kureishi 1986, 11). It is Powell's spirit that was brought back in the late 1970s, coinciding with Mrs Thatcher's accession to power. This was the cause for an increase in the number of attacks suffered by Black people, Asian people, and Gays and Lesbians in the streets of Britain's big cities by gangs of skinheads. As Hanif Kureishi explains:

And then, in the evening, B.B. took me to meet with the other lads. We climbed the park railings and strolled across to the football pitch, by the goal posts. This is where the lads congregated to hunt down Pakistanis and beat them. Most of them I was at school with. The others I'd grown up with. I knew their parents. They knew my father. (Kureishi 1986, 11)

Some mention should be made here of the extremely conservative policy of the government led by Mrs Thatcher also in relation to social issues dealing with the position of women in society and to the situation of Lesbian and Gay people. This position took form in 1988 in the passing of Clause 28 of the Local Government Act. According to this, any intent of "promot[ing] homosexuality" (Sinfield 1989, 299) on the part of a local authority was made illegal, thus banning the presence in local authority theatres and libraries of the work of writers such as E.M. Forster, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, Thomas Mann,

Christopher Marlowe, Plato or Tennessee Williams, amongst others. The Clause did not take effect after all, but its very being conceived points towards an active demonisation of the topic, in this case affecting Gay and Lesbian people, but very probably at some other stage the target would be women in their relation to working conditions, salary scale, rights of abortion, and so on. At a broader level, the Tory government has fundamentally attacked "the institutions associated with welfare-capitalism, the labour movement and middle-class dissent" (Sinfield 1989, 306), such as "trades unions, big-city local authorities [through the dismantling, for example, of the Greater London Council in 1985], council housing estates, nationalized industries, education, the BBC" (Sinfield 1989, 306).

To conclude, Alan Sinfield mentions the existence of a specific danger implicit in Thatcherism:

The larger danger of Thatcherism lies not in its moments of triumph, but in its eventual failure to satisfy or control the emotions it arouses. The rhetoric of law and order and victimization of subordinate groups, with which it attempts to make plausible its social and economic policies, provoke forces of retribution and stimulate expectations that may find terrible kinds of satisfaction. (Sinfield 1989, 307)

Nevertheless, the fact that, ideologically, Mrs Thatcher was in tune with US President Ronald Reagan (1981-89), also contributed to the fact that Thatcher's regime led to a very stable economy throughout the 1980s. At the social level, the 1980s also brought with them a new urban denomination: the "Yuppie" (Young Upwardly Mobile Professional). However, the price to be paid by society was

a bigger division between social classes, with the more affluent at one end of the scale, and an increasing number of dispossessed at the other. On the part of the opposition, Mrs Thatcher was widely criticised for making these new divisions in British society, divisions that have become more and more difficult to overcome. Nowadays, Baroness Thatcher pays complimentary visits to her friend, fascist General Augusto Pinochet, in his golden cage in the vicinity of London, where he waits for and tries to avoid extradition to Spain for the alleged crimes committed during the process of Chilean military dictatorship. She has become a staunch supporter of the General, thus also showing her loyalty to his help at the time of the Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982.

Mrs Thatcher was followed in power by John Major, but he never reached the same standards of popularity as the "Iron Lady", a popular nickname that she earned as a consequence of her toughness in dealing with certain aspects of political life (cf. miners' strike). Never quite managing to meet the standards of his predecessor, Mr Major was in power until 1997, and his term of office coincides with a decline in the popularity of the Conservative party, and with a progressive increase of the Labour party, that would lead to Tony Blair's victory in May 1997. And it is precisely in 1997 that *Blue Heart* was written.

*Blue Heart*, the play that closes the analysis on Churchill, should also be approached bearing in mind the period in which it was written: the last years of Mrs Thatcher in power. The

atmosphere of gloom that pervades the play throughout can then be understood as the result of eighteen years of Conservative rule following radical capitalism that, working hand in hand with a strict form of patriarchy, leads to the total disruption of language in the play, to the utter loss of the belief of the validity of language as an instrument of communication. By drawing on elements coming from the Theatre of the Absurd, it is as if Churchill were depicting fin-de-siècle English society in quite a gloomy way. It is for this reason that Tony Blair's victory and the accession to power of New Labour introduces a new, slightly more hopeful element in the English social scenario.

All the way through, we find the recurrent words by Sinfield: The consideration of literature as "intervention" in a given society. By taking the Thatcherite context into account in our approach to these works by Caryl Churchill we can reach a deeper understanding of them, but at the same time they can also shed some light on the society we live in, and help us to understand it better and maybe even to intervene in its configuration.



### CHAPTER III.

#### CARYL CHURCHILL: A WOMAN PLAYWRIGHT

This chapter will give a brief outline of the situation of women playwrights in Britain in the last quarter of the twentieth century and will concentrate on the life and career of Caryl Churchill as an example of one such playwright. It will also explore her relationship with politics, feminism and the influence of German playwright Bertolt Brecht's postulates on her work.

The presence of women playwrights on the English stage has always been very scarce, this being due to the traditional predominance of male writing in the field. It is not until the decade of the 1950s, when dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, John Osborne and Arnold Wesker were producing outstanding new plays, that the apparent immobility that seemed to permeate the theatrical arena is shaken. Even though the playwrights mentioned so far are male, the innovation in the field of drama characteristic of this decade can also be considered a watershed for women playwrights in the sense that it paves the way for a different depiction of society, a depiction that would give way to other playwrights to appear. It is symptomatic that soon after Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* opened in England, we had a play written by a woman that would also describe dark aspects of society. This play was *A Taste of Honey*, and the female playwright was Shelagh Delaney. The year was 1958.

However, it is in the sixties that we witness a bigger jump taking place, through the presence of Ann Jellicoe and her play *The Knack*, that would point forward to the direction of the "swinging London" of the times. It is also in this decade, in 1968 concretely, that theatre censorship is abolished in Britain. The importance of the sixties can nevertheless be found in the emergence, in the last years of the decade and especially in the early 1970s, of a number of companies -some of them openly agit-prop groups, others more concerned with subverting social values at the level of gender and sexuality- that were related to the upheaval caused by a number of movements that appeared in the context of the commotion caused, among other things, by the events of May 1968 in Paris. The creation of companies was also of the utmost importance due to the fact that it created a need to have plays to be performed. It is in connection with this that an "outstanding innovation" took place, namely the fact that "for the first time in the history of British drama, theatre groups began commissioning women to write for them" (Zozaya 1989, 18). It is also in connection with the re-assessment of society that was propounded by the political upheaval in Paris, that we can locate the emergence in England of the feminist and gay movements. As for the feminist movement, that was articulated in the Women's Liberation Movement, organising its first national conference in 1970, three sources must be mentioned:

[T]he student movement; ... the position of working-class women through a series of industrial disputes during 1968;

... [and] middle-class women able to express the discontents prompted by the frustration of unrelenting housewifery. (Wandor 1986 [1981], 12)

The results of the conference were highly satisfactory. As Michelene Wandor puts it:

[B]y the end of the weekend four basic "demands" had been formulated: (1) Equal Pay. (2) Equal Education and Opportunity. (3) 24-Hour Nurseries. (4) Free Contraception and Abortion on Demand. The demands were a simple expression of desires for material change to improve the position of women. The demands also made a clear link between women's relationship to (a) material social production; (b) the family; (c) individual sexual choice. This new wave of feminism aimed to embrace all areas of experience, and to draw attention in a new way to the relationship between the social and sexual division of labour. (Wandor 1986 [1981], 13)

As for the gay movement, it took shape in 1970, when the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed in Britain. Like the feminist movement, it also focused on ways to avoid oppression:

In the GLF this change revolved around three basic concepts: first, the idea of "coming out", of being open about one's homosexuality, of rejecting the shame and guilt and the enforced "double life", of asserting "gay pride" and "gay anger" around the cry "out of the closets, into the streets". Secondly, the idea of "coming together", of solidarity and strength coming through collective endeavour, and of the mass confrontation of oppression. And thirdly, and centrally, the identification of the roots of oppression in the concept of sexism and of exploring the means to extirpate it. (Weeks in Wandor 1986 [1981], 18)

It is precisely in the shadow of such movements that we can locate the sprouting of companies such as The Women's Theatre Group, Gay Sweatshop, Monstrous Regiment or Joint Stock. And it is in the light of such an emergence that consideration must be given to the relatively increasing number of new plays that appeared at the times. In this sense, and as Patricia Waugh has put it,

"[f]rom 1970 to 1985, new writing formed 12 per cent of all plays performed on the main stage of London's and regional repertory theatres: between 1985 and 1990 this fell to 7 per cent" (Waugh 1995, 200).

The increase in the number of plays, which was undoubtedly triggered by the social awareness that the emergence of the above-mentioned movements brought about, is worth considering. However, equal consideration deserves its decline, undoubtedly a consequence of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government's policy. Lizbeth Goodman has expanded on this point:

These statistics suggest that playwrights faced an uphill battle to get their work produced towards the end of the twentieth century, when arts funding was being cut by a Conservative government so that many repertory theatres closed and many London theatres reverted to producing plays with tried and tested success rates, including transfers from Broadway and the revival of "classics". This trend, coupled with the increasing popularity of cinema and home video in the period, added an element of commercial pressure on playwrights to write plays likely to capture the public imagination: a pressure which tended to mitigate against the success of what were (and are) considered "minority" areas of theatre, including women's theatre. (Goodman 1996a, 230)

It may be for this reason -added to the one related to the inherent quality of the plays themselves- that, out of the emergence of women playwrights in England in the 1970s and early 1980s, only a few -such as Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems- have achieved a consolidated position.<sup>1</sup> To these women writers, we must add others that have appeared in the late eighties and afterwards, such as April de Angelis, Sarah Kane, Liz Lochhead, Phyllis Nagy,

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<sup>1</sup> Other playwrights worth mentioning are: Sarah Daniels, Nell Dunn, Catherine

Rebecca Prichard, Sue Townsend or Timberlake Wertenbaker amongst others. It will be up to the politics prevalent in Britain in the years to come, to their relation to the world of the Arts, to each of the playwrights concerned and to the specific quality of their works that we will see what remains of them in a few years' time.<sup>2</sup>

The few women playwrights mentioned here reflect a reality far from blissful. In connection with this point, Lizbeth Goodman states that:

[T]he work of women represents only a small percentage of new work produced, even at the 'radical' Royal Court [Theatre]. According to the long-term Artistic Director at the Royal Court in the 1980s, Max Stafford-Clark, the percentage of plays by women rose from 8% in the 1970s to 30% in the 1980s: 'still not 50%, but a sizeable increase which reflects what was happening to women in the period' ... The 1980s ... were years of rapid advancement for women in many areas of the business world, but one which saw little corresponding advancement in organized child-care systems or benefits for working mothers. In this climate the idea of the 'superwoman' emerged. (Goodman 1996a, 230-1)

Bearing this idea in mind, let's approach the work of a playwright who already belonged to the 8% mentioned by Stafford-Clark in the 1970s and who has progressively achieved an uncontested solid position in current British drama.

Indeed, Caryl Churchill is probably one of the most prestigious women playwrights Britain has ever had. It is clear that the word "prestigious" is here used with snobbish reminiscences coming from historically elitist sections of society

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Hayes, Bryony Lavery, Mary O'Malley, Jacqueline Rudet and Michelene Wandor.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Sarah Kane, in my opinion one of the most gifted playwrights of recent times, committed suicide earlier this year. Her work will nevertheless remain as one of the most invigorating contributions to British drama ever.

such as the Academia or the small fringe theatres that evolved in Britain from the protective umbrella of the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square. It was at the Royal Court that such ground-breaking plays as *Look Back in Anger* first opened, stirring the theatrical and the non-theatrical worlds in 1956. Indeed, Osborne's play stirred the middle and upper class theatre audiences of the time by making them face a reality traditionally ignored by the theatre. That play also became the standard of the "angry young men" group, that denounced the less than idyllic atmosphere in the England of the time. It was to such a venue that Churchill, as one of the "handful of women" (Goodman 1996a, 230) that joined the rupturistic flavour of the group, came progressively into being as a stage playwright, since it was also at the Royal Court where Caryl Churchill had her first professional stage production - *Owners*, at the Theatre Upstairs- in 1972. Finally, it was also in this theatre that Churchill became the first woman writer in residence and where most of her plays have been staged in London. However, even though Churchill's plays reflect the heritage of a social realism that comes from the Royal Court, it is also true that she established her own style in a very distinct way:

The Royal Court writers in the 1960s and 1970s were almost exclusively men, dedicated on the whole to social realist theatre. From the post-war period onwards, social realist theatre aimed to represent issues of concern in society, to offer characters at odds with that society and to challenge the increasing mood towards capitalist economic and political systems. Churchill was greatly influenced by this school of thought. Her 'socialism' (her politics) is related but not identical to the 'social realist' techniques of many of her contemporaries, such as Arnold Wesker and John Osborne. Her

work is not 'social realist' ... [r]ather, her socialism intersects with her views on the status of women in society and her theatre offers a unique mixture of 'realist' scenes with surreal exchanges between mythical, even fantastic, characters. (Goodman 1996a, 231-2)

Caryl Churchill has divided her career in three distinct phases:

I wrote a lot when I was a child, and it settled to writing plays when I was at university. I wrote stage plays first which were done when I was a student. I then went on writing all kinds of things including a whole lot of short plays which were done on the radio. If I try and divide what's happened into stages, there's the stage that happened in '72 when I started having plays professionally done in the theatre. After that I didn't really go on with radio. Then there's another change in '76 when I started work with companies for the first time: that was the year I started with Joint Stock and worked with *Monstrous Regiment*. And then *Cloud Nine* is another stage because that's the beginning of plays which started being more successful and being done in America and being more widely done in other countries. (Churchill in Truss 1984, 8)

Taking Churchill's words as a starting point, I would like to expand her three-layered classification into five stages, which I will briefly comment on in this chapter, bearing in mind that, sometimes, the borders between the different stages are somewhat blurred. Thus, the first stage would be her writing plays at university and her subsequent writing of radio plays in the first years of her marriage, which I will consider as a formative stage. Then, as she puts it herself, would come her professionalisation as a playwright, with stage plays being performed at professional venues by professional casts. This stage would be followed, again as she establishes herself, by her starting to work with professional companies. The fourth stage would be characterised,

following her words, by the success of *Cloud Nine* in 1979, from which other successes would follow, hence making Churchill one of the leading playwrights of her generation and progressively of British drama as a whole. Finally, I would add a fifth stage, characterised by her increasing flirting with other forms of artistic expression, such as music and dance, that encompass a move towards a deconstruction of language in her latest plays. This goes together with her first experiences in the field of directing. This somewhat arbitrary division of Churchill's work into five different stages will be interspersed with a rumination on the main themes we can find in her plays, and it will be followed by the relationship that can be established between the playwright, feminism and the work of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht.<sup>3</sup>

The first stage I would like to consider, then, will be what I will label as her formative years. Churchill was born in London and spent her early childhood there -with a parenthesis in the Lake District during the war years. From the age of 9 to the age of 16 she moved to Montreal with her family. After that, she went back to England, where she attended Lady Margaret Hall, at the University of Oxford. She started writing when she was a child, basically "[s]tories and poems" (Cousin 1989, 3), but it was at university that she developed her skills in writing plays. After

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<sup>3</sup> All information concerning Churchill's biographical outline comes primarily from Aston 1997, x-xii, and from Fitzsimmons 1989. I will also include a chronological outline of her plays at the end of the chapter.



university, she got married to a barrister and spent time at home bringing up three children and writing plays for the radio. On the one hand, radio had a huge popularity in Britain after the Second World War, and so it was a medium to be taken into consideration by any playwright in the making. As Churchill has stated: "As a child, I was of a generation who grew up with radio, not television. Television was around at the end of my childhood, but I don't remember it ever being important at all (Cousin 1989, 3-4). On the other hand, the solitary confinement related to writing plays for the radio made it the best medium to work in if one happened to be at home taking care of the family, as was Churchill's case, who was writing plays and raising her three boys at the same time. Later on, she defined those years at home as a "politicizing experience" (Aston 1997a, x), possibly in the light of her facing life from the domestic sphere and the bringing up of her children interspersed with her experience of a number of miscarriages. The real working world seemed quite far away, represented by her husband, who would leave home early in the morning and come back late at night. It is in this first stage of her career that her first plays are given student productions. This is the case of *Downstairs* (1958), *Having a Wonderful Time* (1960), *Easy Death* (1961) and *You've No Need to be Frightened* (1961). After that, her radio plays are progressively broadcast: *The Ants* (1962, her "first professional radio play" [Aston 1997a, x]), *Lovesick* (1966), *Identical Twins* (1968), *Abortive* (1971), *Not*

*Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971), *Schreber's Nervous Illness* (1972), and *Henry's Past* (1972). Some recurrent themes in these plays are the analysis of the power structures of marital and familial relations, schizophrenia and madness. This upsurge of radio plays comes together at this point with her writing of an unperformed play, *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (1972), that also deals with madness, but in the context of colonial war, and with another of her plays, *The Judge's Wife* (1972), being broadcast on BBC television.

The second stage in my classification of Churchill's career corresponds to her professionalisation as a playwright, and with the fact that her stage plays were performed at professional venues by professional casts. Indeed, her play *Owners* (1972) becomes her first professional stage production, being performed at the prestigious Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, in London. *Owners* immediately establishes Churchill as a playwright endowed with a gift for comedy and for black comedy in particular. This play about ruthless real estate agents and dispossessed people also situates her in the Joe Orton mode and it already shows some issues that are going to appear in her future work, such as the concern with authority and power structures. Soon after that, her radio play *Schreber's Nervous Illness* (1972) is given a stage performance at the King's Head Theatre, in London. She nevertheless continues writing for the radio, and her radio play *Perfect Happiness* (1973) is broadcast. At this point, her play

*Owners* opens in New York in 1973, thus becoming her first play ever staged in the USA. Another play, *Turkish Delight* (1974) is broadcast on the BBC. It is also in 1974 that she becomes the first woman writer in residence at the Royal Court Theatre, which can also be considered as a watershed in her career and in the world of British drama as a whole. Another of her plays, *Save it for the Minister* (1975), on sex discrimination, is broadcast on BBC television, but her moving towards the stage progressively advances. This can be seen in two more of her plays opening at the Royal Court Theatre and at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs respectively: *Objections to Sex and Violence* (1975), a play about revolution and violence, and *Moving Clocks Go Slow* (1975), a science-fiction drama. Meanwhile, *Perfect Happiness* (1973) is given a stage performance at Soho Poly, in London.

The third stage corresponds to Churchill's starting to work with professional companies. This takes place in 1976 and the companies are Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment, two of the companies that emerged as a consequence of the upheaval that shook France in 1968.<sup>4</sup> Her association with both companies will prove extraordinarily rewarding in the long run, both in personal and professional terms. Joint Stock will stage her *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, on tour, and at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London. Such

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<sup>4</sup> Joint Stock Theatre Group was an alternative company founded in 1974 by Max Stafford-Clark, William Gaskill and David Hare. Monstrous Regiment was a feminist-socialist company founded in the mid-1970s by Chris Bowler, Gillian

collaboration will also signal the beginning of her working with the company and will establish a very especial rapport between Churchill and one of the company's founding members, Max Stafford-Clark. The play will also become one of Churchill's "classics" about life and power relations at the time of the English civil war, in the seventeenth-century. *Monstrous Regiment* will stage her *Vinegar Tom* (1976), performed at Humberside Theatre, Hull, on tour, and at the ICA and the Half Moon theatres in London. This play about the persecution of witches in seventeenth-century England and the oppression of women in current societies will also follow on the popularity of the previous one and will thus contribute to her consolidation as a playwright. Her working with the companies is also relevant because it puts her more in touch with the so-called "fringe scene", that is characterised -at least in the case of these two companies- by a different way of working, by a different conception of theatre and by a different approach to the staging of plays. As Churchill explains:

There's usually a workshop of three or four weeks when the writer, director and actors research a subject, then about ten weeks when the writer goes off and writes the play, then a six-week rehearsal when you're usually finishing writing the play. Everyone's paid the same wage each week they're working and everyone makes decisions about the budget and the affairs of the company, and because of that responsibility and the workshop everyone is much more involved than usual in the final play. It's not perfect, but it is good, and I do notice the contrast with more hierarchical organizations and feel uncomfortable in them. (Churchill in Betsko 1987, 78-9)

Churchill appreciates the change with more traditional ways of

working in the field of drama and shall take advantage of it in the occasions when she shall work with these companies. After the experience with the two companies mentioned above, though, she shall return to a more traditional, solitary way of working in her next play, *Traps* (1977), performed at Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, in London. She also contributes to a touring cabaret piece, *Floorshow* (1977), that will also signal the beginning of her research into other artistic expressions that make a greater use of music and movement. Another of her plays, *The After-Dinner Joke* (1978), is broadcast on BBC television. Meanwhile, she writes the still unperformed play *Seagulls* (1978).

The fourth stage will be characterised by her achievement of professional success. This comes at a polemical moment, when her television play on the Northern Ireland conflict, *The Legion Hall Bombing* (1979), is broadcast on BBC television after censorship, an event that will motivate Churchill and director Roland Joffe's withdrawal from the credits. Success will start taking place in 1979 with the opening of her play *Cloud Nine* at Dartington College of Arts, on tour, and at the Royal Court Theatre in London. This play also opens in New York in 1981, where it will have a highly successful two-year run that will result in its winning an Obie award in 1982.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, *Three More Sleepless Nights* (1980) is staged at the Soho Poly and at the Royal Court Theatre

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<sup>5</sup> *The Village Voice* Obie Awards, created by the prestigious New York City publication *The Village Voice*, encourage the growing Off Broadway and Off-Off Broadway theatre movement.

Upstairs and *Crimes* (1981) is broadcast on television. In 1982, her play *Top Girls* is staged at the Royal Court Theatre and subsequently transferred to New York. This is Churchill's second play to date to win an Obie award (1983). Her next play, *Fen* (1983), opens at the University of Essex Theatre and is shown at the Almeida and Royal Court Theatres in London, before being transferred to New York. In 1984, her play *Softcops*, once again an analysis of the exertion of power over humanity, this time based on the theories of Michel Foucault, opens at the RSC headquarters at the Barbican, London. Churchill's experimentation with other forms of artistic expression not necessarily based on the text appears again in her next collaborative project, a performance art production entitled *Midday Sun* (1984), shown at the ICA in London. She wins the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *Fen*.<sup>6</sup> In 1986, she co-writes *A Mouthful of Birds* with David Lan, which will be performed at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, on tour, and at the Royal Court Theatre. Her next play, *Serious Money*, about life in the City, will be another watershed in her career, since it has been her only play so far to have transferred to London's West End. It opened at the Royal Court Theatre in 1987 and subsequently transferred to the Wyndham's Theatre. From a commercial perspective, then, this has been the most successful of her plays in Britain. It also transferred to New York in 1988, where again it has become her only play to be shown on Broadway. However, the

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<sup>6</sup> In the USA, a prestigious award for English-speaking women playwrights.

huge British commercial success did not happen in the States. 1987 is also marked by Churchill's winning of several theatre awards, including a second Susan Smith Blackburn Award for *Serious Money*. In 1988, two more plays are shown on television, *Fugue*, broadcast on Channel 4 television, and *The Caryl Churchill Omnibus*, broadcast on BBC television. Finally, her play *Icecream* (1989), a dark comedy on the cultural contrast between England and the United States, opens at the Royal Court Theatre with a companion piece, *Hot Fudge* (1989) performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs.

Finally, the fifth stage will be characterised by her moving away from more traditional text-based theatre, that will show in her flirting with other forms of artistic expression, such as music and dance. This stage is also characterised by a progressive deconstruction of language. Bearing in mind nonetheless her former incursions in the field, as we have seen in the case of *Floorshow* (1977), *Midday Sun* (1984), *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) and *Fugue* (1988), I have chosen to emphasise the temporal coincidence of this last stage with the decade of the 1990s. Hence the performance of *Mad Forest* (1990), a play about life in Romania at the time of the revolution against Ceausescu, at the Central School of Speech and Drama and the Royal Court Theatre in London, and at Bucharest's National Theatre. This play subsequently played New York (1991). Also in 1991, her play *Lives of the Great Poisoners* is performed in Bristol and at the Riverside Studios in

London. *Top Girls* is broadcast on BBC television. In 1994, her play *The Skriker*, characterised by a highly sophisticated use of language, is staged at the Royal National Theatre in London. She also translates Seneca's *Thyestes*, that is staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. In 1997, *Hotel* is performed at The Place Theatre, in London. *This Is a Chair* is also shown at the Royal Court Theatre at the Duke of York's, and *Blue Heart* opens at the Royal Court Theatre at the Duke of York's. Finally, and as yet another example of Churchill's restlessness concerning the theatre world, she has directed her first play in 1999.<sup>7</sup>

I would like at this point to expand on the relationship that can be established between Caryl Churchill, feminism and the work of Bertolt Brecht. Churchill is somewhat reluctant to admit the use of labels to define herself and her work, but, as will be developed in chapter IV, she has accepted being called both a "feminist" and a "socialist" (Churchill in Fitzsimmons 1989, 4). As such, she could be included within the contemporary feminist trend of British drama. She has expanded on this point:

[I know] quite well what kind of society I would like: decentralized, nonauthoritarian, communist, nonsexist -a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives. But it always sounds both ridiculous and unattainable when you put it into words. (Churchill in Aston 1997a, 54)

She thus approaches her topics with a definite concern about

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<sup>7</sup> The play chosen is Wallace Shawn's *Our Late Night*. It premièred 20 October 1999 at the New Ambassadors Theatre in London, as part of the Royal Court Theatre's final burst of activity before returning to its Sloane Square home the following year.



political issues such as gender relations, class struggle, and sexual orientation, with a firm belief that all are closely intertwined. All of this being permeated by a combination of "socialist feminist strategies with Brechtian techniques" (Reinelt 1996a, 86). Churchill acknowledges Brecht's influence on her work:

I don't know either the plays or the theoretical writings in great detail but I've soaked up quite a lot about him over the years. I think for writers, directors and actors working in England in the seventies his ideas have been absorbed into the general pool of shared knowledge and attitudes, so that without constantly thinking of Brecht we nevertheless imagine things in a way we might not have without him. (Churchill in Reinelt 1996, 86)

The Brechtian techniques that we can trace in Churchill's works are the recourse to historicisation, the use of an epic structure, the use of cross-casting at several levels, and the use of the social gest. Churchill employs historicisation -a concept that has been introduced in chapter I- in plays such as *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*. All of these plays share the presence of a historical setting. This may be due to her intention to "elucidate contemporary attitudes and assumptions in terms of their historical perspectives" (Brown 1988, 41); in other words, to reach a better understanding of the present through an analysis of the past, of how the past has evolved into our present. The playwright is thus concerned with the analysis of how systems of oppression work both through an analysis of those systems and also through the effect oppression has on individuals. The use of history is thus essential.

Another Brechtian technique that we find in Churchill is the use of epic structures. Such structures "rupture the seamlessness of traditional structure" (Reinelt 1996, 89) through the creation of "realistic fragments of life and ... the[ir] alienat[ion] ... through skillful juxtaposition and arrangement" (Reinelt 1996, 89). Churchill has made use of this technique -"découpage", in Roland Barthes' terms- on a number of occasions, but namely in two of the plays which are included in this study: *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*. In the former by the juxtaposition of two different historical periods in the two acts of the play. In the latter through the combination of reality and unreality.

The third Brechtian technique that Churchill employs is the use of "multiple casting and cross-gender and race casting to alienate character and reveal social construction" (Reinelt 1996, 89). In this case, the use of a multiple casting for both *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*, and the use of a cross-gender and cross-race casting in *Cloud Nine* definitely prove this point. The main objective is the reader/audience's comprehension of the political message of the play, the analysis of the situation Churchill is depicting. In this sense, such a reading is also relevant for feminism, since it underlines the fact that any subjectivity is nothing but a construct. Finally, the use of cross-casting "establishes the most graphic example of the Brechtian spectatorial triangle in British contemporary theater. The actor demonstrates the character-as-socially-constructed to the

spectator in a very literal way" (Reinelt 1996, 90).

The last Brechtian technique used by Churchill is the social gest, the *gestus*. This concept has already been dealt with in chapter I, so suffice it to say now that it has been defined as:

The explosive (and elusive) synthesis of alienation, historicization, and the 'not ... but' ... [It is] a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau, by which, separately or in a series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator. (Diamond 1997, 52)

Thus, as an example of *gestus* in *Top Girls*, Janelle Reinelt has mentioned the dress that the professionally super-successful Marlene offers as a present to her "niece" Angie. The fact that in some sections of the play we realise that the dress clearly does not fit any longer expresses the distance between the two worlds represented by the two females and foregrounds the ultimate oppression suffered by Angie.

To further the discussion on the playwright's accent on feminism[s], it should be mentioned here how Caryl Churchill has very often challenged the traditional dramatic structure of plays. We will see this in the three plays that this study will approach, but this is a trend that appears in many other plays written by her, such as *Vinegar Tom* and *A Mouthful of Birds*. In other cases, she divides the play into sequences, thus avoiding a division between acts and scenes typical of written drama. This is the case of *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* or of *Softcops*. As Pilar Zozaya has put it in relation to the latter play, "[i]t is a continuous flow of action that shifts from one subject to another,

from one group of characters to a different one without a clear progression" (Zozaya 1989, 264). Maybe what she is showing with such a deconstruction of form is her willingness to investigate new ways of dramatic expression that escape more conventional ones. As she has put it herself:

I do enjoy the form of things. I enjoy finding the form that seems best to fit what I'm thinking about. I don't set out to find a bizarre way of writing. I certainly don't think that you have to force it. But, on the whole, I enjoy plays that are non naturalistic and don't move at real time. (Churchill in Kay 1989, 42)

Such challenge to the rules that govern drama could nevertheless be interpreted as a defiance, as a search for a different kind of form, one more identified with a feminist conception of theatre and the world. Thus, it has been suggested that what Churchill does is to reject the "forms" and the "assumptions" inherited by Aristotle, because she has recognised the "'maleness' of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax" (Churchill in Betsko 1987, 76). She chooses "fragmentation instead of wholeness" (Kritzer 1991, 2) and, in the same way as Brecht, "eschews the Aristotelian evocation of pity and fear in favour of stimulating new understandings of specific social situations through 'astonishment and wonder'" (Kritzer 1991, 3). In the same way, it has been said that:

[Churchill's] work signals a rejection of the traditional function of the history play as a "passive, 'feminine' reflection of an unproblematically 'given', masculine world". Instead, it asserts for itself the active role of intervention in the present. (Kritzer 1991, 84)

These lines seem to be reminiscent of H el ene Cixous's analysis of the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal thought is based. Churchill, however reticent she seems to be about the use of labels -less so in the recent past- is definitely a feminist playwright. Not only does she challenge Aristotelian conceptions of theatre and the traditional role of the history play, but she also questions some of Brecht's postulates. It is as if the playwright were advocating for a different conception of theatre, one which escapes the masculine domain perpetuated from the classics.

It is in the light of Churchill's analysis of the main systems of oppression to which people are subjected that I would like to close this chapter. Such an investigation shows how, as in the case of Russian dolls, the systems of oppression are manifold and express themselves in different areas of the many public and private spheres that conform our lives and society: From gender relations to the family, from the workplace to the configuration of the State. Churchill's world glides from a clear concern with "mental states, lovesickness, schizophrenia" (Churchill in Aston 1997a, 46) to another with an "anticapitalist, state of England sort of thing, usually in a rather negative and sad mode" (Churchill in Aston 1997a, 46). The outcome, for the time being, seems to be her "deformation or explosion of the word, of language, the sign-system through which we mediate and make sense of the world ... [her] 'unfixing' the boundaries of illusion and

reality" (Aston 1997a, 80). Such an outcome may have both an optimistic and a pessimistic reading. An optimistic one would maintain that through such a deconstruction other more feasible and just ways of ruling society would appear. The pessimistic reading would just state that such a blowing out of the word is the only response to the meaninglessness of the fin-de-siècle/millennium world we have encountered. This quote by Elaine Aston that I have chosen to close the chapter puts the two views together: "What emerges is a Churchillian landscape which is characteristically 'frightening', greedy, corrupt, violent and damaged, and is populated with oppressed groups -particularly of women- marked by powerlessness, division and dispossession" (Aston 1997a, 1). Yet, as Aston concludes: "In making visible the hidden realities of an unequal world ... Churchill invites her spectators to share in the utopian possibility of an 'upside down world' - a veritable 'Cloud Nine'. (Aston 1997a, 1)

## A CHRONOLOGY OF PERFORMED PLAYS

PLAY	WRITTEN	PERFORMED (s=stage, r=radio, t=television)
Downstairs	1958	1958 s
You've No Need to be Frightened	1959?	1961 r
Having a Wonderful Time	1959	1960 s
Easy Death	1960	1961 s
The Ants	1961	1962 r
Lovesick	1965	1966 r
Identical Twins	?	1968 r
Abortive	1968?	1971 r
Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen	?	1971 r
Schreber's Nervous Illness	?	1972 r
Henry's Past	1971	1972 r
The Judge's Wife	1971?	1972 r
Owners	1972	1972 s
Moving Clocks Go Slow	1973	1975 s
Turkish Delight	1973	1974 t
Perfect Happiness	1973	1973 r
Objections to Sex and Violence	1974	1975 s
Traps	1976	1977 s
Vinegar Tom	1976	1976 s
Light Shining in Buckinghamshire	1976	1976 s
Floorshow (contributor to)	1977	1977 s
The After Dinner Joke	1977	1978 t
The Legion Hall Bombing	1978	1979 t
Softcops	1978	1983 s
Cloud Nine	1978	1979 s
Three More Sleepless Nights	1979	1980 s
Crimes	1981	1981 t
Top Girls	1980-2	1982 s
Fen	1982	1983 s
Midday Sun (with Geraldine Pilgrim and Pete Brooks)	1984	1984 s
A Mouthful of Birds (with David Lan and Ian Spink)	1986	1986 s
Serious Money	1987	1987 s

Fugue (with Ian Spink)	1987	1987 t
Icecream	1988	1989 s
Hot Fudge	1989	1989 s
Mad Forest	1990	1990 s
Lives of the Great Poisoners (with Ian Spink and Orlando Gough)	1991?	1991 s
Top Girls	1980-2	1991 t
The Skriker	1993?	1994 s
Thyestes (translation)	1994	1994 s
Hotel	1996?	1997 s
This is a Chair	1997?	1997 s
Blue Heart	1997?	1997 s



## CHAPTER IV.

### ORGASMS AND ORGANISMS: *CLOUD NINE* AS THE DISRUPTION OF THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

*Cloud Nine*, the first of the three plays in our analysis and one of Caryl Churchill's most representative works, was first staged in 1979, when the traditional ideology of sexuality and gender was being questioned in London and elsewhere. The play is relevant in the sense that it signalled a definite change in Churchill's career as a playwright. As she mentioned in chapter three, we can actually talk about a pre-*Cloud Nine* phase and a post-*Cloud Nine* phase in her work. The importance of the play is related to the success it achieved. After being staged in London it was produced in New York City, where it ran for two years. This was the first of Churchill's plays to cross the Atlantic, and it should also be considered bearing in mind its tremendous success in the United States. Churchill's career was, in consequence, promoted to the fore. It is interesting to remember at this point that, following the British tradition of politically-conscious (alternative) theatre, Caryl Churchill wrote the play for Joint Stock Theatre Group in 1978. As has been seen in chapter three, the way the group worked consisted of, first of all, conducting a workshop with the actors, director and playwright, on a specific subject. Then, the playwright would write the play on his/her own. Finally, rehearsals would take place, during which it was quite customary for the playwright to rewrite parts of the play.

As Caryl Churchill explains in the introduction to the play, the topic for the three-week workshop for the production

of *Cloud Nine* was on sexual politics. The actors and actresses, with different sexual orientations, discussed issues of their own sexuality, sexual roles and their relation to education and society. As Churchill says: "[T]he starting point for our research was to talk about ourselves and share our very different attitudes and experiences. We also explored stereotypes and role reversals in games and improvisations, read books and talked to other people" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 245). Indeed, *Cloud Nine* deals primarily with the issue of sexual politics, and this makes us think that Caryl Churchill speaks from a very definite feminist perspective. Kate Millett defines the concept as follows:

[A] disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordination. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of "interior colonization" has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power. (Millett 1990 [1969], 24-5)

As we have previously seen, Churchill seems to be a bit reticent about the use of labels to define her work or her personal position in life. However, in her own words: "[I]f pushed to labels, I would be prepared to take on both socialist and feminist, but I always feel very wary" (Itzin 1980b, 279). In this play, one can find elements that support Churchill's adherence to socialism and feminism.

The title of the play, *Cloud Nine*, is a reference to extreme happiness and excitement. It comes accidentally from the Joint Stock workshop. As mentioned above, actors/actresses talked in public about their own "attitudes and experiences" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 245). Amazingly, the caretaker of the place where rehearsals were held decided that she also wanted to participate in the "strange" experiment, as Caryl Churchill explains:

She wanted us to sit down and drink our tea and not stand about making a lot of noise. But she gradually became friendly. And finally she came forward, voluntarily, with amazing braveness [sic], and did what each of us had done in turn -which was to sit on a chair in front of everybody else and talk about her childhood and her life. She had come from a large, poor family, had married at sixteen, and had a very violent and unhappy marriage, with no pleasure from sex at all ... and after thirty years she had remarried. She told us in quite a bit of detail how she and her new husband gradually got their relationship together. Finally she said: "We may not do it as often as you young people, but when we have our organisms [sic], we're on Cloud Nine. (Kritzer 1991, 128)

There is no reference to any such "Cloud Nine" in the text until the very end of act two, scene three. That is to say, until almost the end of the play (there is only one more scene to go). I will comment more thoroughly, later on, on the use of songs in the play as an alienating device, but suffice it to say now that, at that point, the whole company sings a song called "Cloud Nine", which completely interrupts the flow of action and which calls for total sexual anarchy. Nevertheless, at this point, the relevance of the fact that Churchill awards the opportunity of speaking (in the sense that she takes the title of the play from her words) to a working-class woman and makes her discuss her own sexual experience should be stated. This can

obviously be related to the effect of gynocritics, a form of feminist criticism devoted to "the study of women's writing; the relating of that writing to female experience; and the development of critical theories and methodologies appropriate to women" (Eagleton 1995 [1991], 227). The fact that Churchill gives the voice to a working-class woman would thus demonstrate, once more, Churchill's commitment to a specific feminist politics. It also makes her materialist position clear, as the oppression of an uneducated, working-class woman comes to the fore, linking sexual oppression with class exploitation.

The first act of the play is set in colonial Africa, and it depicts the relationships within a white British family composed of a husband (Clive), wife (Betty), two children (one of each sex) (Victoria and Edward), and the wife's mother (Maud), along with a black servant (Joshua), a governess (Ellen), a widow (Mrs. Saunders) and an explorer (Harry Bagley). What Churchill purports to represent with this setting is "the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression, which [Jean] Genet calls 'the colonial or feminine mentality of interiorised repression'" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 245). Thus, in the play, colonial oppression will be exemplified by the power exerted by the British Empire over the (in this case) African colonies, represented by the character of Joshua, or over Northern Ireland (in Act II), represented by the character of Bill, the soldier. Sexual oppression is seen through all the characters in the play, with the possible exception of Clive, as the clearest representative of the Empire (although it could be said that he himself is sexually oppressed too). Apart from him, all forms of

sexuality that deviate from a very rigid and specifically patriarchal heterosexual norm (female sexuality involving pleasure, homosexuality, lesbianism, non-patriarchal heterosexuality) are completely repressed. This can also be related to Edward Said's analysis of the similarity between the Orient and the "other", to the fact that the Orient is an "European invention" (Said 1978, 1), in the same way as the female is a male invention, created by the patriarchal systems of representation. The relationship between the West and the East, then, "is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1978, 5). By the same rule, it could also be said that the same applies to the relationship between male and female and that both aspects are clearly shown in the play. In this respect, a similar point will be made in connection to the play analysed in chapter V, *Top Girls*.

To go back to Act One, the plot unfolds as the natives are organising a rebellion, which will be a constant threat throughout the act. This rebellion can also be seen as a metaphor for the "other" rebellions that will be shown in Act II. In fact, the representation of power in Act I (through the institutions of Empire and Family) can be said to be under a constant threat by alternative ways of living. Thus, in Act I, the audience witnesses Clive, the husband, as he makes clear his ideology of control and ruling of his family. Showing a downright misogyny, Clive makes his wife respect him while at the same time he commits adultery with the widow, Mrs. Saunders, a more liberated and independent woman, who has come to the

house in search of help and protection against the natives. Clive also exerts repression over his son Edward, who is not manly enough for Clive for he prefers his sister's dolls to other toys, thus showing "disturbing" signs of attraction towards feminine ways of behaviour. Betty, Clive's wife, tries very hard to be the submissive wife, but finds it extremely difficult due to her attraction to Harry Bagley, an explorer more interested in her son and the black servant than in her. She also plays her role in the construction of the Empire through the education of her son and daughter, Edward and Victoria. Victoria is brought up as the perfect doll she is expected to be to the extent that she is played by a dummy. Maud, Betty's mother, also plays the role of representative of the ideology of the Empire. She keeps surveillance of the family and, concretely, of her daughter Betty, preventing Betty from having an affair with Bagley and thus trying to maintain the status quo.

Besides the family, there are two servants. Ellen, the governess, is a white woman who happens to be in love with Betty, who, in turn, cannot even believe that lesbianism exists. Joshua, the black servant, serves the family and is the example of the colonized native who embraces the culture of the oppressor. He acts as a spy for Clive, thus supplying information that otherwise would not be available to the father of the family. Joshua and Betty are the perfect examples to illustrate Genet and Said's ideas mentioned above. They exemplify the "interiorised repression", the link between "colonial" and "sexual" exploitation, and the fact that both

have been invented by Clive, the patriarch.

The second act takes quite a large leap and is set in London one hundred years later, although, for the characters, only twenty-five years have elapsed. Only two of the characters present in the first act appear here: Betty (the wife) and Edward (the son). Victoria (the daughter) finally takes part in the action as she is no longer a mere dummy. The reader/audience sees them in their relations with the new characters in the play. Betty, the mother, has just left her husband and has moved to London with the intention of starting a new life by herself. She meets her children and realises that there is a new order of things: Edward, having the name of a king, is a closeted "queen" who works as a gardener and adopts a traditionally "feminine" role in his relationship with another man. Gerry, Edward's lover, is a working-class man who enjoys casual sex, cannot stand Edward's "femininity" and does not seem to be interested in creating traditional strong ties with anyone either. Victoria is trying to match her not-so-happy marriage with the possibility of a job transfer to Manchester and with a new relationship with another woman. Lin, Victoria's new lover-to-be, is a divorced working-class woman with a female child, Cathy, and a brother serving in the army in Northern Ireland. Martin, Victoria's husband, is a progressive male who would prefer his wife to be less progressive, but who, at the same time, tries hard to adjust to Victoria's development as an individual. Tommy is the name of Victoria and Martin's son, although he never appears on stage. Through the act, Betty rents a flat, finds a job and develops a new sort of relationship with

herself and consequently with her son and daughter. Edward comes out of the closet after Gerry leaves him and goes to live with Victoria, Lin, Cathy and Tommy, trying to create an alternative way of living. Towards the end of the act, Gerry appears again and the audience sees that they will possibly continue their relationship, only in very different terms. Victoria also leaves her husband and takes the offer of working in Manchester. Martin tries to adjust to the new way of living.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the play in itself, a very important element has to be highlighted: Churchill makes use of specific theatrical techniques that show the influence of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. This ties in with the fact that, following the terminology brought about by British theatre theorists Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Cloud Nine* is a radical play. Aston and Savona create a "developmental model" (Aston and Savona 1991, 12) consisting of three phases, each one corresponding to a specific historical time. Thus, they make a historical division of drama into classic, bourgeois and radical. What is termed classic drama covers the period from the beginnings of drama (VIthc BC) to the XVIth century. This period is marked by an "overt self-presentation of the actor as actor and by a set of functionalistic performance conventions" (Aston and Savona 1991, 91). Bourgeois drama comprises from the XVIIth to the XIXth centuries and it is marked by:

[T]he naturalistic project which sought to represent life on stage with a photographic exactitude ... [and to] blur distinctions between the actor and the role. The spectator position thus constructed is both voyeuristic and identificatory. (Aston and Savona 1991, 91-2)

Finally, radical drama centres on the XXth century and it



is in turn:

[M]arked by an anti-illusionistic aesthetic posited upon the foregrounding of the means of representation in order to maintain a critical distance between spectator and performance ... [T]he spectator is again accorded an active role. Performance is offered frankly as performance, and the lure of emotional identification, on the part of both actor and spectator, with fictional constructs is in consequence countered. The attention of the spectator, rather, is now directed outwards, from the enactment to the social reality inscribed therein. (Aston and Savona 1991, 92-3)

*Cloud Nine* is, then, a radical play because it belongs to the XXthc and maintains at all times this 'critical distance' between the reader/audience and the dramatic/performance text. According to the above-mentioned theorists, radical drama relies for its effectiveness on the process of defamiliarisation. This process has its origin in Russian Formalism. According to the Formalists, "art exists to reawaken our perception of life, the means to achieving this posited as the process of defamiliarisation" (Aston and Savona 1991, 7). The effect of such a technique is to render things "strange" (Aston and Savona 1991, 7), unfamiliar. This brings to mind the "effect of alienation" (Aston and Savona 1991, 7) propounded by Brecht: "A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (Brecht 1964, 192). The main aim of this effect is to challenge the naturalist tendency prevailing in bourgeois drama, the psychological depth given to the characters of dramatic/performance texts and the identification between the reader/audience and the roles played by actors/actresses. The outcome of all this would be "to highlight the rules and conventions governing theatrical construction" (Aston and Savona

1991, 31), but at the same time "making strange the sign-systems of theatre" (Aston and Savona 1991, 7). In this way, the conclusion is clear:

Because of the way in which [radical] plays disrupt textual expectations and discomfort or unsettle the reader, the space between the writing and the reading in which meaning is produced is made visible. (Aston and Savona 1991, 33)

Brecht's engagement with politics makes him use the A-effect in order to foreground the political situation, the 'social reality', he is interested in changing. As part of this process, the role of the audience is also to become more active, in that it will participate in the production of new meaning instead of giving an automatised response to what it is watching.

It is then by laying bare the process, by showing how meaning is created, that a different kind of drama can appear. Churchill makes use of several devices that show her indebtedness to Brecht's theatrical deconstructions and that inscribe the play in the radical phase. However, some of these devices also inscribe the play in a materialist feminist discourse. A closer examination will enable us to list the following features: The play makes use of cross-gender, cross-race and cross-generational devices to carry its meaning; there are also doublings in the cast; there are chronological disruptions; songs are used at specific points in the play; the play refuses structurally to conform to the traditional theatrical pattern set by Aristotle.

As to the use of cross-gender, cross-race and cross-generational devices, we realise from the outset that in Act I,

Betty is played by a man in drag, Edward is played by a woman also in drag and Joshua is played by a white actor. Besides, the character of Victoria is played by a doll, a dummy. In Act II, the character of Cathy is played by an adult man. These cross-gender, cross-race, and cross-generational elements in the casting are precisely the ones that bring *Cloud Nine* nearer to a materialist feminist position. In this connection, from the perspective of production, Gayle Austin notes some trends to follow in staging productions from a more general feminist perspective. This is what she points out when talking about Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*:

A feminist director might cast the sons in *Salesman* with female actors, to point-up the absence of daughters in the play. A completely cross-gender cast would show a three-woman triangle given prominence, pointing up the absence of such triangles in plays and the lack of mother-daughter engagement of any kind in the American dramatic canon. A racially mixed cross-gender cast would also disrupt expectations about whose "American dream" is being presented in the play. (Austin 1990, 50-1)

Although one could talk about the existence of a mother-daughter engagement in the American theatre (since this is the national reference given by Austin), thinking about plays such as Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* or Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother*, the existence of such an engagement is meagre in relation to the bulk of American plays, in which the relationship between father and son has always loomed much more largely. This is precisely what Austin is criticising here.

Bearing Gayle Austin's words in mind, *Cloud Nine* is exemplary even in a more subversive sense. Whereas Austin is talking about deconstruction of plays written in a certain way

(i.e. following the prevailing patriarchal canon) Churchill introduces deconstruction in the very fundamentals of the play. For example, by using cross-gender devices in the characters of Betty, Edward and Cathy. Thus, by presenting the character of Betty as played by a man in drag, the ideological value of this character is completely subverted. An example of this could be seen in the New York production of the play at the Lucille Lortel Theatre de Lys, in which the actor playing Betty gave a vision of her based on the artifice and caricature of most drag shows. In this way, what Betty represents (i.e. the values of faithful wife and strict Victorian mother) is totally undermined. Apart from this, and as Churchill states in the introduction to the play, "Betty does not value herself as a woman" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 245) and consequently she does not have the body of a woman but the body of a man in drag. In the same way, having Edward played by a woman also helps to underline and subvert the ideological construct patriarchy attempts to exercise over people. Edward shows very disturbing signs of 'effeminacy', as Clive puts it in the play. Clive may devote all his efforts to build some kind of traditionally masculine behaviour in his son. However, what the audience sees all the time on stage is an actress in drag. And this is what makes the message subversive. No matter how hard Clive tries to build the Edward he wants, the audience will always see the body of a woman in drag on stage. As to the character of Cathy, we are in front of a double device: On the one hand, a cross-gender one; on the other hand, a cross-generational one. Cathy, a naughty five-year-old girl that sings scatological and

precocious songs all through Act II, is used, on the one hand, to provide the reader/spectator with a contrast to the Victorian children of Act I and, on the other hand, to undermine the patriarchal figure of Clive from Act I, since it is the same actor playing Clive who plays Cathy in Act Two. The effect on the audience of an adult man (curiously resembling Clive) playing a five-year-old girl is actually hilarious. And this is also very subversive. The patriarch becomes a naughty girl thanks to Churchill's wit. We can say therefore, that through the use of cross-gender devices, the playwright is emphasizing the construction of gender roles. According to Elaine Aston: "The 'offside' body which disrupts the symbolic ... is a key focus in the sexual politics of *Cloud Nine* which takes the body as a critical site of gender representation" (Aston 1997a, 31). Through not showing bodies, or through the invisibility of some of the bodies in the play, Churchill is disclosing the structures that make these bodies unseen, she is offering "a way of representing the marginal and the absent in dominant systems of representation" (Aston 1997a, 2). This takes us to theorist Judith Butler, who establishes the connection between gender and performativity. According to her,

Gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject that it appears to express ... [its] performance constitutes the appearance of a 'subject' as its effect. (Butler in Fuss 1991, 24)

Butler, as a poststructuralist, problematises the existence of such a thing as a Cartesian subject. If there is no stable subject, there can be no equivalent notion of gender. She explains this further in relation to drag:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. (Butler in Fuss 1991, 21)

If there is no original for gender, the subject that appears as a consequence of the process of imitation will be an effect for which there is no original, and thus the artificiality of gender will be emphasised. In the play, by having Betty played by a man in drag in Act One we see a clear disconnection between Betty as a biological woman and the effect her being impersonated by a male actor produces, and thus the critique of traditional "feminine" ways of behaviour is conveyed. By seeing Edward played by a woman in Act One, and thus emphasising an "effeminate" behaviour, we are also able to see the gap between the two genders and the corresponding foregrounding of their artificiality. Finally, by seeing Cathy played by an adult man in Act Two, we see the lack of symmetry between a child's behaviour and an adult one, and this also emphasizes the strangeness of the overall effect. In all cases, we can see the performative element of gender. None of them are real, all are using it as a construct.

Another example of the deconstruction undergone by Churchill is through cross-race devices. In this way, having Joshua played by a white actor helps to underline precisely what cannot be seen, the repression of any race component different from the white one. In this sense, and as with Betty, "Joshua [does not] value himself as a black" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 245), and, therefore, what the audience sees is a white actor

playing a black character.

Another element that links Churchill with the principles established by Bertolt Brecht is the doubling of actors/actresses. The cast for the production of the play consists of seven people, and each of them plays two different characters. This fact once again makes the identification between audience and actor/actress, so common in naturalist theatre, difficult. Moreover, it allows for more complex and sophisticated readings of the play. There are several possibilities of doublings that are hinted at by the playwright herself in the Routledge introduction to her plays, but here I am going to concentrate on the doublings that were made in the original production of the play, at Dartington College of Arts, and at the first London production at the Royal Court Theatre.

In June 1979, Clive and Cathy were performed by the same actor, in this way, the audience could see how the ruthless patriarch of Act One became the "naughty" little girl of Act Two. This can largely be perceived as a clear demystification of patriarchy. Betty in Act One and Edward in Act Two were performed by the same actor. In this way, the submissive, effeminate man, who could also be considered a "not-man" (Kritzer 1991, 10), becomes an independent, free gay man. The actress playing Edward in Act One also plays Betty in Act Two, showing in this way how the unmanly child becomes a woman. This could also be understood as still another turn in the Oedipus triangle, which ties in very well with Churchill's undermining of the patriarchal basis of society. In effect, if, by following French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the entrance of the child

into the Symbolic Order is marked by the identification with the father and the submission to his Law, we could read in the identification Edward/Betty a reversal of the complex, since it is an actress, a woman, the one playing both roles. In this way, this particular subversion of the bond between Edward and Betty could be strengthened and understood as an attack on the basis of patriarchal society and the systems of representation that construct woman as Woman, as an object. The actress playing Maud also plays Victoria, in this case, the patriarchy-enforcer becomes the true materialist feminist in the play, as will be seen. The actress playing Mrs.Saunders and Ellen also plays Lin. These three characters share a common trend: marginality, and their trebling allows the reader/audience to notice the complex coexistence of characteristics such as independence, lesbianism and a working-class identity. The actor playing Joshua in Act One plays Gerry in Act Two. We see in this way how the colonised becomes a promiscuous gay man, mirroring the parallelism between colonial and sexual oppression, but with a definite twist of freedom in the case of Gerry. Finally, Harry Bagley and Martin are played by the same actor, showing how the gay-on-the-margins becomes the "marginal" straight.

In the production at the Royal Court Theatre, the doublings varied. Clive was doubled by Edward, showing how the patriarch becomes an openly gay man who comes to sleep with his sister and thus demolishes the very basis of Western sexuality: The incest taboo. Betty was played by the same actor as Gerry, through which we could see how the dependent, effeminate man becomes the uneffeminate, independent gay man. Edward was played by the



actress playing Victoria. Here we could see how the unmanly boy became the true materialist feminist of the play. Maud and Lin were also played by the same actress, thus satirising how the patriarchy-enforcer becomes the working-class lesbian. Mrs. Saunders and Ellen were played by the actress playing Betty, thus establishing a connection between the straight independent woman and the lesbian who finally become the "real" woman at the end of the play. The actor playing Joshua also played the role of Cathy, ironically showing how the colonised becomes the "naughty" girl. Finally, Harry and Martin were kept as in the original production.

The third element in this list of characteristics shared between Brecht and Churchill is the use of chronological disruptions. The most important one is the fact that more than one hundred years elapse between Acts One and Two. However, for the characters only twenty-five years go by. This can be related to the defamiliarising element intrinsic in XXthc radical drama, to the alienation techniques propounded by Brecht to make the jump from the traditional theatre of his time, to the "laying bare" of the device and, therefore, of the ideology of the text.

Another element relating Churchill to Brecht is the use of songs at specific moments in the play. Songs are also very effective in creating a psychological distance between the audience and the actors. Let us mention as an example another play by Churchill, *Vinegar Tom*. The play is set in the XVIIth century, and a number of songs are interspersed in the text. The peculiarity here is that, according to the production notes, the songs should take place "in the present" (Churchill 1985, 132)

and the actors/actresses ought to perform them "in modern dress" (Churchill 1985, 133). The outcome of this would be to underline the distancing between themselves and the audience, to prevent in this way any kind of naturalistic psychological identification between performer and the reader/audience, contributing to the de-automatised reception of what happens on stage and therefore to the directing of the reader/audience's attention to the workings of the device in itself and, finally, to the creation of meaning.

There are four songs in Act One, which deal respectively with the Empire, Christianity and the Oedipus complex, one of the bases of Western civilisation. The first opens the play, with the whole "Family" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 251) (including Ellen and Joshua) singing together "Come gather, sons of England" in praise of the imperial duty to colonise other countries. The song has clear undertones of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and refers to English "pride" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 251), to those who "From bush and jungle muster all who call old England 'home'" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 251). After references to Queen Victoria and to the British domain in Africa and Canada, the song finishes with these words: "The forge of war shall weld the chains of brotherhood secure;/So to all time in ev'ry clime our Empire shall endure" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 252). The "chains of brotherhood" will be kept through the exertion of power. This somewhat oxymoronic expression deserves some attention, since it brings to mind the "Great Chain of Being", a metaphor coined in the Middle Ages, conceived to support the ruling ideology of the time,

Providentialism, and used to refer to a universal hierarchy created by God and with Him at the very top, followed by the angels, man, higher animals, lower animals, vegetals, minerals and the four elements (earth, wind, fire and water). According to Providentialism, the universal hierarchy (a macro-hierarchy) was related to other hierarchies (micro-hierarchies) at the level of the state and the family. Thus, there is a correlation between the three main power structures (Church, State and Family), which were created as early as medieval times. This powerful triad is the one that has evolved through time and determined the structure of contemporary society. Thus, in the case of the play under discussion, the British Empire imposes its rule and Christianity on the natives in the same way as Clive, the patriarch, imposes his law on his family.

The second song closes the second scene of Act One. Joshua, the black servant with white skin, is taught a Christmas carol by Ellen, the governess, and sings it to the family. The very fact that it is Ellen, a working-class lesbian, who teaches him the song is symptomatic, since it shows that she herself has internalised the dominant ideology of repression. It also exemplifies Churchill's (and Genet's) words in linking "sexual" and "colonial" oppression. Ellen has been colonised as a woman, as a member of the working class and as a lesbian. However, she, in turn, colonises Joshua by teaching him a totally alien Christmas carol, "In the deep midwinter", which inscribes itself in a clear Christian tradition, talking about utterly unfamiliar snowy winter landscapes, pondering on presents to give to a newly-born infant (the "him" mentioned) and concluding that one

should give one's "heart" to him (Churchill 1985 [1979], 272).

The third song in Act One takes place at the end of scene three, when Edward, the unmanly son, confronts Joshua when the latter abuses his mother in quite a vulgar way ("You've got legs under that skirt ... And more than legs" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 278). For the first time in the play, Edward takes on the role of "manly" son and, curiously enough, is immediately obeyed by the servant. Edward avoids his mother's grateful embrace with a laconic "Don't touch me" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 278). Following this exchange and as a closure to the scene, the whole company sings "A Boy's Best Friend". The song can be interpreted as an ironic depiction of the Oedipus complex as located at the very basis of Western sexuality. This is exemplified in the reluctance with which Edward reacts, as if he were realising what is expected from him. The song revolves around the Oedipus complex, stating how few friendships can compare to a mother's affection for her son: "How few the friends that daily [in life] we meet./Not many will stand in trouble and in strife,/With counsel and affection ever sweet./But there is one whose smile will ever on us beam,/Whose love is dearer far than any other" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 279). The action to be taken, according to the song, is to comfort and protect her: "Then cherish her with care/ And smooth her silv'ry hair" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 279). Churchill's attack on an essential element at the basis of Western sexuality is related to her devastating critique of patriarchy and the patriarchal family. And since the family is the tool used by patriarchy to perpetuate its rule, it comes as no surprise that Churchill ironically targets her irony at this

institution. In the same way, and relating this to what was said before in relation to a correlation between hierarchies (Church, State and Family), it becomes clear that, in being loyal to one's mother, we will also be loyal to Queen and Church.

Act Two is slightly different as to the use of songs, and it is clearly contrasted to Act One. While the first act was characterised by the praise of the Empire and of the patriarchal family, Act Two will deconstruct the validity of such power structures and will propose alternatives. The songs in Act Two call for action. The main one is "Cloud Nine", which is sung by the whole company at the end of scene three. This song unambiguously praises a state of total freedom that brings about happiness. This is hinted at in the opening line: "It'll be fine when you reach Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312), followed shortly by "Be mine and you're on Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312). This Cloud Nine state could be related with Lou Reed's song "Walk on the Wild Side" -a cultural icon from the 1970s that deals with sexual liberation on the fringe, because of the warning that is issued in one of the lines: "Better watch out when you're on Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312). This warning can be related to a "dangerous" (Fitzsimmons 1989, 51) quality that seems to take hold of the characters all through Act II, and which is specially embodied in the character of Betty, bearing in mind her change through the act and her soliloquy on female masturbation. The "dangerous" element also appears in the depiction of nature: "Mist was rising and the night was dark" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312), where the darkness of the night suggests uneasiness and a

tearing down of the "radiant" conventions of Act I. The first line of the song points also to what has previously happened in scene iii, namely Edward, Lin and Victoria's invocation to Isis, a female goddess. In this sense, several female characteristics appear through this first line: Night, darkness, nature and a hint at sexuality. Another aspect the song concentrates on is the use of drugs and its link to sexuality: "Smoked some dope on the playground swings/Higher and higher on true love's wings" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312). There is also lesbianism, in a reference to Lin and Victoria's relationship: "Who did she meet on her first blind date?/ The guys were no surprise but the lady was great/They were women in love, they were on Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312); homosexuality, in a reference to Edward and Gerry's relationship: "Two the same, they were on Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312); the pleasurable use of sex without any distinction of age, especially when women are older than men, as a reference to Betty's cruising of Gerry at the closure of the play: "The bride was sixty-five, the groom was seventeen,/They fucked in the back of the black limousine./It was divine in their silver Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312); and finally a demand for a total sexual/emotional chaos, as exemplified in the play in the relationship between Lin, Victoria, Edward, Cathy and Tommy: "The wife's lover's children and my lover's wife,/Cooking in my kitchen, confusing my life./And it's upside down when you reach Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312). Apart from this, there is also a reference to the passing of time, specifically twenty-five years that go by and that can be interpreted as showing the

chronological disruption device used by Churchill and as mirroring the time elapsing in the age of the characters between Acts One and Two: "Twenty-five years on the same Cloud Nine" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 312).

Apart from "Cloud Nine", the main song in Act II and the one giving its name to the play, there are several other songs in this act, all of them sung by Cathy, the "naughty" girl. Thus, scene one opens with Cathy, "clinging to Lin" and singing the following song: "Yum yum bubblegum./Stick it up your mother's bum./When it's brown/Pull it down/ Yum yum bubblegum" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 289). This first song is particularly striking because, apart from opening Act II, it is the first time we witness Clive's transformation from one act to the other. The fact that the actor who played Clive, the patriarch, is now playing Cathy and singing a scatological song about explicit anal intercourse, after Clive's treatment of homosexuality in Act One, is outrageous. Other songs in scenes one and two also deal with scatological subjects (farts) and sexuality: "[G]reat balls of fire" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 289). Another song in scene two is also devastating in the sense that it deconstructs the opening lyrics of a well-known rock opera: "Georgie Best, superstar/Walks like a woman and wears a bra" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 305), by presenting the figure of Jesuschrist as a transvestite and by introducing in this way a critique of Christianity and linking it to the praise of contemporary sexual and gender anarchy in the act. Cathy's last song, opening scene four of the act, can be read in the same lines. On the one hand, it is a glorification of the nuclear

family: "When we are married,/We'll raise a family./Boy for you, girl for me" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 313). However, the final emphasis of the song lies in sexuality, as can be seen in the loudly uttered "SEXY" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 313), capitalised in the dramatic text. It is through a liberated use of sexuality, then, that the nuclear family and consequently patriarchy might be disrupted.

The last element in my analysis of the play that could be regarded as a direct inheritance of Bertolt Brecht is the questioning of the traditional structure of plays. In relation to this, Amelia Howe Kritzer defends the existence of a contemporary feminist drama that challenges "the standards and conventions of Aristotelian drama" (Kritzer 1991, 2). Her words further develop some ideas expounded in the previous chapter:

Churchill rejects both the forms and the underlying assumptions of Aristotelian dramaturgy, having recognized the "maleness" of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax. Her plays offer fragmentation instead of wholeness, many voices instead of one, demands for social change instead of character development, and continuing contradiction instead of resolution. (Kritzer 1991, 2-3)

Churchill seems to be looking for a more 'female' dramatic shape. In this sense, in *Cloud Nine* we definitely find "fragmentation" and "many voices", since we are dealing with a group of people. A clear demand for a "social change" can be inferred through the use of working-class characters. At the same time, the treatment of characters is also contradictory, but this reflects the inevitable contradictions that shape our lives in present-day society. There is still conflict, but the way to solve it is definitely new, far away from the traditional



catharsis, so dangerously resembling the male ejaculation shot. There is certainly no climax in the play. At the end of Act One, the destruction of patriarchy is hinted at through Clive's faked death, but no catharsis takes place, for there is no sound of the bullet being shot by Joshua, with the complicity of Edward. In Act Two, Betty's final recognition of the joys of masturbation does not close the play, which would have provided it with a more definite sense of closure and with this climactic end so looked for in theatre productions.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to proceed now to my analysis of the play proper. Caryl Churchill, talking about the differences between the two acts that shape it, says: "The first act, like the society it shows, is male-dominated and firmly structured. In the second act, more energy comes from the women and the gays" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 246). In this sense, the ideology of patriarchy and the Empire is identified with maleness and with forms of male domination, which correspond to Act One, whereas Act Two deals with the destruction of the Empire and its ideology, as well as with the creation of alternative lifestyles that are more reflected through groups traditionally oppressed. However, Churchill is clever enough not to fall into easy, Manichaeic dichotomies.

Churchill's deconstructive intentions are clear when making her characters speak at the very beginning of Act One. Betty, played in the New York production in a highly-stereotypically

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<sup>1</sup> This is indeed what happened in the New York production of the play, at the Lucille Lortel Theatre de Lys. Director Tommy Tune decided to move Betty's soliloquy to the end of the play for climactic purposes. Caryl Churchill agreed to the changes, although later she declared her preference for the original version.

feminine way, presents herself as follows:

I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life  
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.  
I am a man's creation as you see,  
And what men want is what I want to be. (Churchill 1985  
[1979], 251)

The impression of these words on an audience that sees a male actor dressed as a woman, a transvestite, is hilarious, especially bearing in mind the lines she delivers, totally conforming to the male rule of society. The audience then realises that the woman cannot be seen because she does not exist. She is regarded as an invention of her husband and therefore only exists as such. Apart from this, these words also emphasize the notion of "Woman" as a cultural construct. At this point, the concept of the "gaze" -first introduced in chapter one- should be considered. According to it, "Woman" is seen as a sign built by patriarchal ideology and thus representative of its values. Churchill plays with this concept at the very beginning of the play, when Clive, Betty, Joshua and Edward address the male gaze of the audience through the words "as you see". There is, therefore, an open recognition on the part of the performers of the maleness of the audience.

To explain in more detail the concept of the "gaze", it could be said that females are objectified by the male gaze and, in consequence, become "Woman" in the prevailing systems of representation. How one arrives at this objectification has a psychoanalytical response. Jacques Lacan explains that, once the girl has entered the Symbolic Order that distinguishes between subject and object, she is assigned the place of object (or lack). She is then "the recipient of male desire, passively

appearing rather than acting. Her sexual pleasure in this position can thus be constructed only around her own objectification" (Kaplan 1983, 26). Women are objectified, then, as a consequence of the existing systems of representation. Following British theorist Laura Mulvey, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey in Mast 1992, 750). As a consequence of the patriarchal ideology of society, the cinema or theatre audience is considered as being intrinsically male, even though theorists such as Jill Dolan work on the construction of a female audience. As such, the male spectator will look at woman from an active position, as a sexual object or as a fetish. This would be related with the fact that, from a psychoanalytical perspective, the female may problematise the male, since she epitomises the fear of castration. According to Mulvey,

She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (Mulvey in Mast 1992, 753)

Mulvey and Kaplan also relate the identification of the male audience with the male protagonist of a film with what Lacan calls "mirror phase". This phase takes place when the baby identifies itself in a mirror as a being independent of the

maternal body. This identification or recognition implies its passing from the Imaginary Order to the Symbolic Order, a passing also defined by language acquisition, the identification with the Father and the acceptance of the Law represented by him. According to Kaplan and Mulvey, the identification between the spectator and the male protagonist of a film brings about a constant repetition of the "mirror phase", a constant access to the Symbolic Order, to a subject position. Kaplan says that "[t]he idealized male screen heroes give back to the male spectator his more perfect mirror self, together with a sense of mastery and control" (Kaplan 1983, 28). And it is this position the one negated to women and the one vindicated by feminist theorists. Women, symbols of objectification as a consequence of conservative social and cultural systems of representation, can try to make the gaze theirs and feminise it. However, in order to achieve this, they will need to "de-eroticize" it (Kaplan 1983, 28).

To continue with the analysis of the play, the impression the audience has with Betty's words takes place again with Edward. His lines as he presents himself are: "What father wants I'd dearly like to be./ I find it rather hard as you can see" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 252). Since he is portrayed as being effeminate, besides being played by an actress, his answer to his father's wish to make a man of him are symptomatic. He is obviously trying to accommodate himself to the "Law of the father", in Lacanian terms.

Joshua, the black servant, is played by a white actor to underline his submission and conformity to the established

order. Joshua's words -reminiscent of William Blake's "The Little Black Boy"- are also clear:

My skin is black but oh my soul is white.  
I hate my tribe. My master is my light.  
I only live for him. As you can see,  
What white men want is what I want to be.(Churchill  
1985 [1979], 251-2)

Thus, all three characters submit to the established patriarchal order from the very beginning. Edward submits to his father, Betty to men in general and Joshua to white men. The meanings here multiply if we bear in mind that some of the characters are played by actors/actresses in drag. Thus, Edward submits to his father both as a homosexual and as a woman. Betty submits to men as a woman and also as a man. Joshua submits to white men as a black person and also as a white man.

As has been said before, the first act is clearly male dominated. Churchill describes it as being "speedy, brightly coloured ... structured as a conventional dramatic experience, and dominated by men" (Fitzsimmons 1989, 47). In this Act, Clive is the utmost figure of control, since he dominates everything and everybody within the household and the colony, as a sexual and imperial patriarch. At the beginning of the play, he, as a husband and father, introduces his family in this way:

This is my family. Though far from home  
We serve the Queen wherever we may roam  
I am a father to the natives here,  
And father to my family so dear. (Churchill 1985 [1979]  
251)

By saying this, Clive is affirming the patriarchal structure society is based on. As a "father" he is both the representative of the British Empire and the head of the family. In this sense, he proves to have and transmit what Elin Diamond calls the

"monolithic, history-erasing habits of the I/eye of Empire" (Diamond 1988b, 162). With this play on words, the concept of Empire plays to possess and destroy what exerts resistance against it. By colonising other countries, the British Empire was trying to extend its power and supremacy around the world and at the same time destroy any sort of peculiarities the colonised countries may have had. Clive expresses these ideas surreptitiously when he talks to his son Edward:

You should always respect and love me, Edward, not for myself, I may not deserve it, but as I respected and loved my own father, because he was my father. Through our father we love our Queen and our God, Edward. Do you understand? It is something men understand. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 276)

Thus, introducing Edward to the world of men, Clive links the concept of patriarchy to the ultimate patriarch, God. It is men's world on earth and it will be men's world in heaven. However, there is also the ironic paradox that the Queen of the Empire is a woman.

Clive's exemplary introduction of his family ends with the following couplet: "My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be, / And everything she is she owes to me" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 251). These words show clearly that Betty is his invention. In the first act, Betty is exercising one of the main functions of women under a patriarchy: Her power for reproduction. She raises Victoria and Edward and respects her husband. In this sense, women in a patriarchy are important citizens, basically because they can provide the system with new material that will assure its continuity. Apart from this, Betty is for Clive an example of the female, a world he makes use of but does not really

understand. As he says to her: "Women can be treacherous and evil. They are darker and more dangerous than men. The family protects us from that, you protect me from that. You are not that sort of woman" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277). He also refers to a "dark, female lust" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277) as another intrinsically female characteristic. It is striking how Clive's words can be related to Hélène Cixous's analysis of women -drawing on Freud- as a dark continent, as Africa:

Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a "dark continent" to penetrate and to "pacify" ... Conquering her, they've made haste to depart from her borders, to get out of sight, out of body. The way man has of getting out of himself and into her whom he takes not for the other but for his own, deprives him, he knows, of his own bodily territory. One can understand how man, confusing himself with his penis and rushing in for the attack, might feel resentment and fear of being "taken" by the woman, of being lost in her, absorbed or alone. ( Cixous 1980 [1975], 247)

There is something definitely dangerous and menacing about the female that must be controlled. Once more, we have a parallelism established between colonialism and female sexuality. In this case, the male penetrating the dark continent -in the same way as the colonisers penetrating Africa in the name of the Empire, tends to "get out of sight", to disappear into that which embodies the dangerous, the fear of castration. And this puts him in a very difficult position that he deeply dislikes and from which there is no way out. This is why Clive leaves Mrs. Saunders's bed and goes out onto the verandah after making love to her, and, more to the point, this is why he "disappears completely under [Mrs. Saunders's] skirt" (Churchill

1985 [1979], 263) in the open air encounter between the two.

Going back to Clive's introduction of his wife, Betty seems to know what is expected from her. Thus, echoing her husband, she says: "We're not in this country to enjoy ourselves" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 254). She tries to live according to Clive's standards, and sometimes finds it dull: "I always seem to be waiting for the men" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 258). When she is rejected by Harry Bagley, the explorer to whom she has proposed, she starts questioning her own desires: "I want more than that. Is that wicked of me?" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 268). However, the process proves to be slow, as she scolds her son Edward into some traditionally masculine behaviour: "Shouldn't you be with the men, Edward?" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 274). Betty is completely dominated by her husband and she seems to acknowledge this fact all through the act.

We can establish a clear connection between Clive's exertion of power in the name of imperial duty, his ruling over the family unit and his taming of the female threat. After having had some of the servants flogged, he talks about his feelings toward Africa, that can be related to his feelings about femaleness:

You can tame a wild animal only so far. They revert to their true nature and savage your hand. Sometimes I feel the natives are the enemy. I know that is wrong. I know I have a responsibility towards them, to care for them and bring them all to be like Joshua. But there is something dangerous. Implacable. This whole continent is my enemy. I am pitching my whole mind and will and reason and spirit against it to tame it, and I sometimes feel it will break over me and swallow me up. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277)

Africa is Clive's enemy in the same way as femaleness is his enemy. As the ruler of the Empire in Africa, he has to tame



the natives in the same way as he has to tame Betty at home, to make her into the submissive wife. Recalling Jean Genet, colonial and sexual exploitation are once more linked.

The existence of a female darkness will make Clive try to dominate the women in his life: Betty and Mrs. Saunders. Therefore, and however unfaithful he may be to Betty with Mrs. Saunders, he is furious when he learns through Joshua that Betty may be unfaithful to him, as he lets her know: "It would hurt me so much to cast you off. That would be my duty" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277). He also mentions, a little before: "I would be hurt, I would be insulted by any show of independence" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 258). Nevertheless, he feels strongly attracted by Mrs. Saunders and has sexual intercourse with her frequently, as he tells her: "Since you came to the house I have had an erection twenty-four hours a day except for ten minutes after the time we had intercourse" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 263), or, as he tells Harry Bagley later on in the act: "I suddenly got out of Mrs. Saunders' bed and came out here on the verandah and looked at the stars" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 282). However Clive feels about women, he does not seem to have many problems in using them sexually, possibly as a way of contrasting the intense fear of castration he experiences. As he tells Mrs. Saunders in a rapture, precisely when he ends up by disappearing under her skirt:

Caroline, if you were shot with poisoned arrows do you know what I'd do? I'd fuck your dead body and poison myself. Caroline, you smell amazing. You terrify me. You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous....I came...I'm all sticky. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 263-64)

But when Mrs. Saunders complains, saying that she has not

reached orgasm, Clive rejects her: "Caroline, you are so voracious. Do let go. Tidy yourself up. There's a hair in my mouth" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 264).

Clive also dominates Harry, as he forces him to get married to Ellen as soon as he learns in his own flesh that Bagley is a homosexual. Thus, the repression of women as human beings is linked in the play to the repression of homosexuality. When Harry makes advances towards him, Clive is horrified:

My God, Harry, how disgusting. I feel contaminated. The most revolting perversion. Rome fell, Harry, and this sin can destroy an empire. A disease more dangerous than diphtheria. Effeminacy is contagious. How I have been deceived. Your face does not look degenerate. Oh Harry, how did you sink to this? You have been away from England too long...You must repent...You must save yourself from depravity. You must get married. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 282-3)

All through the act, Clive also tries to suppress any kind of ambiguous behaviour in his son Edward. When Edward is first discovered with Victoria's doll, Clive tries to silence it: "Yes, it's manly of you Edward, to take care of your little sister. We'll say no more about it" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 257). Later on, he chooses to blame the women for his son's behaviour: "You spend too much time with the women. You may spend more time with me and Uncle Harry, little man" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 276). He is evidently at a loss as to what to do when faced with such behaviour, and will keep disguising the unequivocally 'effeminate' signs Edward sends him as examples of 'correct' behaviour towards his parents. Everything will come to an end, however, in a dream-like way, when at the end of the act Edward does nothing to stop Joshua's killing of Clive, thus symbolising the rebellion of the oppressed.

The character of Harry Bagley also has interesting connotations. Repressing his homosexuality, he feels attracted towards Betty maybe as a possible escape from bigotry. However, he ends up imposing the repressive ideology on her, and thus, becoming the representative of patriarchy in her eyes: "I need you to be Clive's wife ... You are a mother. And a daughter. And a wife" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 268). Harry tries very hard to adhere to the patriarchal ideology that keeps the idea of Empire going by praising Clive as a patriarch: "The empire is one big family" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 266), and: "I have my duty to the Empire" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 281), but, at the same time, he finds that there is no place for him within the structure. He thus has to run away to the jungle, living away on the fringe and having sex with the male natives. Another disruption he effects on the structure of patriarchal society is to have a sexual relationship with Clive and Betty's son, Edward.

Clive's behaviour towards Harry, Betty, and Edward brings to mind John M. Clum's idea about the existence of a "destructive trinity of homosociality, sexism and homophobia" (Clum 1988, 96). As was introduced in chapter one, the word "homosocial", according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is "occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex" (Sedgwick 1985, 1). Homosociality refers, then, to male friendship as a fundamental part of patriarchy and it is also present in the play. It goes hand in hand with sexist and homophobic behaviour. An example of homosociality would be Clive and Harry's relationship before the latter turns out to be a

homosexual. Clive says to Harry: "Friendship between men is a fine thing. It is the noblest form of relationship" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 282). This is contrasted to the presence of women, and in this respect Clive is still clear in his misogynistic opinion:

There is something dark about women, that threatens what is best in us. Between men that light burns brightly...Women are irrational, demanding, inconsistent, treacherous, lustful, and they smell different from us. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 282)

Clive's reference to a different smell might be interpreted as a hint at his fear of castration. He is demonising women, making them the "Other". He needs them, though. All this leads, therefore, to a clearly homophobic attitude, which Clive constantly expresses referring to his son: either by using the adjective "manly" several times when he desperately tries to provide him with virile attributes, or by saying things like "a boy has no business having feelings" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 266). In connection to this, Sedgwick's words appear once more as relevant, exemplifying the connection between sexism and homophobia:

[H]omophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, and perhaps transhistorically so. By "misogynistic" I mean not only that it is oppressive of the so-called feminine in men, but that it is oppressive of women. (Sedgwick 1985, 20)

In sum, and as the representation of the misogyny inherent to homophobia, Clive dominates his wife, making her behave like the Victorian "angel in the house". He dominates his children as he forces them to submit to established heterosexual behaviour and to be perfect dolls. He dominates Mrs. Saunders as he uses her sexually and dismisses her afterwards. He dominates Harry,

forcing him to get married to keep up appearances. He dominates Ellen as a servant. Finally, he obviously dominates Joshua as a servant and as a native.

As was said before, the first act is male dominated, but some of the women characters contribute with their behaviour to the perpetuation of this system of repression. Betty, for example, by being submissive to Clive and Maud, and also by repressing Edward when he shows "feminine" tendencies. As she tells him:

Dolls are for girls...You must never let the boys at school know you like dolls. Never, never. No one will talk to you, you won't be on the cricket team, you won't grow up to be a man like your papa. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 274-5)

Later on, when Clive lets Betty know that he has learnt about her and Harry's affair, she breaks down, admitting her fault and blaming herself instead of making an analysis of what her husband intends to do:

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Forgive me. It is not Harry's fault, it is all mine. Harry is noble. He has rejected me. It is my wickedness, I get bored, I get restless, I imagine things. There is something so wicked in me, Clive...I am bad, bad, bad- (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277)

Finally, when Ellen makes advances at her, she lectures her on acceptable behaviour: "[W]omen have their duty as soldiers have. You must be a mother if you can" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 281). When Ellen, on her wedding day, asks her about sexuality with a man, Betty shows her own ignorance by saying: "You just keep still ... Harry will know what to do ... Ellen, you're not getting married to enjoy yourself" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 286).

Maud perpetuates the system of oppression by keeping

masculine control of the situation and by repressing Betty's tendencies through Clive. She knows her place: "The men have their duties and we have ours" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 257). She also keeps the learning process going on, as she tells Betty: "You have to learn to be patient. I am patient. My mama was very patient" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 258). When Betty shows preoccupation for the uprising, Maud says: "You would not want to be told about it, Betty. It is enough for you that Clive knows what is happening. Clive will know what to do. Your father always knew what to do" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 274).

Mrs. Saunders plays an interesting contrast to both Betty and Maud. Being a widow, she has reached a state of independence that she seems to enjoy, and at the same time she has learned how to deal with masculine power. However, she foresees that the patriarchal system will not allow her presence as an independent woman and therefore she sees no other solution but to leave: "I can't see any way out except to leave. I will leave here. I will keep leaving everywhere I suppose" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 274). In this sense, it could be said that, independent though she is, she is not really challenging the established order of things. However, she also has a race consciousness, as she asks Joshua after he has flogged the rebel natives: "You don't mind beating your own people?" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 276). Maud dismisses her by saying: "She is alone in the world" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 274). Clive also sees her as an alien who does not fit in his world: "Mrs. Saunders is an unusual woman and does not require protection in the same way" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 280). Finally, when Harry Bagley asks her to marry him, her

answer is clear: "I choose to be alone ... I could never be a wife again. There is only one thing about marriage that I like" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 283-4). She enjoys sex without masculine control, and this is something very few men can bear.

The analysis of the characters would not be complete without making further reference to Ellen and Joshua, the servants. Ellen, the governess, has no other choice but to marry Harry Bagley. She is forced, among other things, by class. She is then doubly oppressed (apart from being a woman) by being from the working class and by being a lesbian. When Clive insinuates that Betty could be friends with Ellen, Betty's response is clear: "Ellen is a governess" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 254). Maud is also ready to define the limits of relations. Commenting on Ellen's behaviour when taking care of the children, she says: "You let that girl forget her place, Betty" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 258). Finally, when she confesses her love to Betty, Betty's reaction is immediately one of dismissal: "You don't feel what you think you do. It's the loneliness here and the climate is very confusing. Come and have breakfast, Ellen dear, and I'll forget all about it" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 281). Betty's reaction exemplifies the point that, if homosexuality is condemned in a patriarchal society, lesbianism is actually unthinkable. According to Judith Butler:

Oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability. Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable. (Butler in Fuss 1991, 20)

As for Joshua, the black servant, he has submitted

completely to the white man's values, and one of the ways this is made clear is through the use of religion. As an example of colonisation, he embraces the Empire's religion. He tells Clive: "Jesus will protect us" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 260) when the rebellion starts. He also describes the creation of man and woman to Edward in the following terms: "God made man white like him and gave him the bad woman who liked the snake and gave us all this trouble" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 280), thus showing his interiorisation of Christianity. Joshua also breaks the links with the other natives. When telling Clive of a possible rebellion taking place under his own roof, led by the stable boys, he says: "They visit their people. Their people are not my people. I do not visit my people" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 266). He also embraces the homophobic dominant ideology by harassing Edward: "Baby. Sissy. Girly" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 278), but reacts in a completely submissive way when Edward confronts him assuming a masculine and authoritative position: "Yes sir, master Edward sir" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 278). The irony of Joshua's situation is that he will be forever the black servant, the barbarian, the native, the "Other", in spite of his efforts to be part of the white society and of Clive's homosocial intriguing complicity with him and against his wife -as can be seen in Clive winking at Joshua with complicity instead of scolding him for having been impertinent to Betty, and therefore indirectly humiliating her. In scene iv, after learning that Joshua's parents are dead, Clive says: "Do you want to go to your people?" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 284). By saying this, Clive makes clear that Joshua will never belong to the white



society, that he will always be regarded as an inferior. Churchill makes his position still more pathetic by making him say: "Not my people, sir ... My mother and father were bad people ... You are my father and mother" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 284). Clive does not really know what to say after this and, using one of his prerogatives as the master, he gives Joshua the day off, not before ordering him to fetch some drinks, making clear once more that he is the black servant.

Thus, the first act comes to its conclusion. Clive and Betty are to continue being "happily" married. Maud will continue living with them and keeping an eye on Betty. Harry and Ellen get married to be able to keep up appearances society leads them to build. Mrs. Saunders goes back to England. It is also at the closure of the act that the rebellion the natives were planning seems to have reached its peak, coinciding with the wedding ceremony of Ellen and Harry. The latter enacts an hilarious marriage speech, which is barely audible through the sound of drums, praising the family, the Empire, and the institution of marriage:

My dear friends -what can I say- the empire - the family - the married state to which I have always aspired - your shining example of domestic bliss -my great good fortune in winning Ellen's love -happiest day of my life. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 287)

The context to these words ironically undermines the very message they are trying to transmit. Harry Bagley, the gay explorer, ends up married to Ellen, the lesbian governess. They are also supposed to follow the example of Clive and Betty, only that Harry knows very well about Clive's infidelity. The hypocrisy of Victorian society is represented in the speech.

Harry's speech is contrasted to another one by Clive, emphasising the very same things from a different perspective:

Harry, my friend. So brave and strong and supple.  
Ellen, from neath her veil so shyly peeking.  
I wish you joy. A toast -the happy couple.  
Dangers are past. Our enemies are killed.  
-Put your arm round her, Harry, have a kiss-  
All murmuring of discontent is stilled.  
Long may you live in peace and joy and bliss. (Churchill  
1985 [1979], 288)

Clive's speech may be read in two different ways, both leading to the same concept, which is the relationship established between colonial and female sexual exploitation. Clive starts by establishing clearly differentiated characteristics for Harry ("brave", "strong", "supple") and Ellen (shy). However, these characteristics are nevertheless false. We know that Harry is neither brave nor strong. He is certainly not supple. If he were, he would have fought for Edward instead of submitting to the authority of Clive the patriarch. We also know that Ellen is not shy, since she herself makes advances towards her mistress Betty, with no regard to the dangerous consequences of such an action. It is because of this that Clive's speech can be read from two different perspectives. When he refers to the "dangers", to the "enemies" and to some "murmuring of discontent" he can be referring, on the one hand, to the triumph of the white coloniser over the stirring. However, on the other hand, his words can also be interpreted as putting down the dangers related to dissident sexualities and as emphasising the necessity of conforming to Victorian conventions.

The very end of the act is relevant: While all this is

taking place, Joshua, quite surprisingly, effects a faked killing of Clive with the passive complicity of Edward. As the extra-dialogic stage direction puts it:

*While he is speaking JOSHUA raises his gun to shoot CLIVE. Only EDWARD sees. He does nothing to warn the others. He puts his hands over his ears. (Churchill 1991, 288)*

Thus, the end of Act I presents us with a faked destruction of patriarchy, with the imaginary death of the patriarch in the hands of two characters on the margins: His black servant and his homosexual son (played by an actress and consequently also representing women). Clive is to be shot while preaching the virtues of an already decadent Victorian way of life. The fact that his son witnesses the attempted killing and does nothing to prevent it from happening also adds to the idea of the play undermining patriarchy and the concept of the nuclear family. Another aspect that can be seen as relevant is the fact that Edward, at this point, is the only one to "see". He is, at the end of Act I, the representative of a different kind of "male gaze", a gaze that at this point will do nothing to prevent the toppling of patriarchy from taking place. Edward sees at the end of the act, and quite symptomatically he refuses to listen and covers his ears. Churchill is also at this point putting her critique of a male structure of plays into practice. Hence, the audience does not hear the shot of the gun -probably because it never happens, and instead the act closes with a "BLACK" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 288). Hence, the climax is prevented from taking place.

Clive's faked killing can also be interpreted as a reenactment of the ancestral Oedipal triangle (with the

connotations seen before). Edward the son gets rid of his father, who blocks his way to his mother. In this way, Edward intends to go back to the Imaginary Order, to find himself again in a state of fusion with his mother and thus he wants to unmake the step into the Symbolic.

The second act of the play is radically different from the first. Churchill wanted the act "to be dominated by women and gays and change, and to be unsettling - not to meet the audience's expectations. To catch them offguard" (Fitzsimmons 1989, 47). Act II is when rebellion takes place, the same rebellion that was a threat all through Act I and that now cannot be contained. The whole action takes place in a London park, in different seasons of the year. The audience sees from the very beginning some of the changes the characters have undergone. Betty has just left her husband and moved to London, which proves that the killing at the end of the previous act never took place. Victoria is married to Martin and they have a son, Tommy. Edward works in the park as a gardener and lives with his lover Gerry in quite a traditional way. There is also another character: Lin, a divorced white lesbian with a child. Act II is then characterised by a definite element of subversion, a subversion that concentrates on the time frame. In other words, between Acts I and II one hundred years have elapsed, however, the characters only age twenty-five years. This is not "linear time", a patriarchal development of time, and takes us to Julia Kristeva's concept of "women's time". According to Kristeva, in order to disrupt the Symbolic Order, related to patriarchy and meaning, and go back to the Semiotic,

related to a pre-Oedipal state and also referred to as *chora* or "receptacle", what is necessary is:

[An] *insertion* into history and the radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time on an experiment carried out in the name of the irreducible difference. (Kristeva in Belsey 1989, 198)

To amplify this point, and this time according to Elaine Aston:

The continuity of linear history is, therefore, displaced by a historical memory of sexual politics; the past is physically marked in and on the body of the performer, present. (Aston 1995, 32)

Although the whole act is seen as portraying the evolution of a group of people, a special emphasis is given to the character of Betty. Throughout the act, she is progressively going to find herself through a flat and a job. Living on her own and earning her own money she is going to come to terms with herself. Her development is seen as it takes place: In scene i, talking to Victoria, she says with frivolity: "I'm finding a little flat, that will be fun" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 295). However, in scene ii, she breaks down:

I'll never be able to manage. If I can't even walk down the street by myself. Everything looks so fierce ... It's since I left your father ... Everything comes at me from all directions ... I'm so frightened. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 298)

Later on in the act, she is a bit better, but talking to Lin she still shows signs of her upbringing complaining about the fact that now she has to do things for herself. When Lin asks her whether she has any women friends, she answers: "I've never been so short of men's company that I've had to bother with women" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 301). Betty makes clear that she does not like women very much:

They don't have such interesting conversations as men.

There has never been a woman composer of genius. They don't have a sense of humour. They spoil things for themselves with their emotions. I can't say I do like women very much, no. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 301-2)

At this stage in the play, she is still the model of the education she has received, patriarchal education that makes women despise themselves and look at men as being "better", with no political analysis whatsoever. It is not until scene iv, the last one, that the audience sees the shift in her trajectory. She seems to be very happy about the accomplishments she has achieved. Talking to Cathy, she expresses the enthusiasm of a child when she describes her job and the fact that she earns her own money: "[I]t really is great fun" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 314). She also argues with the ghost of her mother, as if wanting to prove her independence from her: "I have a job. I earn money" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 316).

Betty's main distinction at the end of the play is the discovery of her own sexuality, which will reaffirm her identity as a woman. As we see in scene iv:

One night in bed in my flat I was so frightened I started touching myself. I thought my hand might go through space. I touched my face, it was there, my arm, my breast, and my hand went down where I thought it shouldn't, and I thought well there is somebody there. It felt very sweet, it was a feeling from very long ago, it was very soft, just barely touching, and I felt myself gathering together more and more and I felt angry with Clive and angry with my mother and I went on and on defying them, and there was this vast feeling growing in me and all round me and they couldn't stop me and no one could stop me and I was there and coming and coming. Afterwards I thought I'd betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them. And I cried because I didn't want to be. But I don't cry about it any more. Sometimes I do it three times in one night and it really is great fun. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 316)

The discovery of her own self through the affirmation of her sexuality is painful and scary, but it brings her into touch with herself both literally and metaphorically. It is now that Betty becomes an independent person, it is now that she has come to terms with herself. From this moment on, her life will really be in her own hands. Coming to terms with her own life and sexuality, she will be able to accept her son and daughter's sexuality and also to envisage alternative ways of living, as is seen through her proposal to live together with Victoria, Edward, Lin, Cathy and Tommy. She also makes advances at Gerry, Edward's boyfriend, who is considerably younger than her. It is by talking to him that she starts finding out what she likes: "I like listening to music in bed and sometimes for supper I just have a big piece of bread and dip it in very hot lime pickle" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 319). Overcoming fear, she will learn how to create a different way of living: "I was married for so many years it's quite hard to know how to get acquainted. But if there isn't a right way to do things you have to invent one" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 319). At the closure of the play Betty will have learnt how to 'invent' a 'right way'. Her clumsy first attempt at relating to a man other than Clive will not work precisely because it is a first attempt. It is actually too early for her to overcome years of repression and to tear down walls of bigotry. However, out of her failure to cruise a gay man, she realises the facts she has avoided facing all through the act, namely, that her son Edward is a homosexual and that he is having a sexual relationship with his own sister and with his sister's girlfriend. Another proof of Betty's change at the end

of the play is the reaction to acknowledging the truth about her children: "Well people always say it's the mother's fault but I don't intend to start blaming myself. He seems perfectly happy" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 320). By rejecting putting the blame on herself she is emphasising the change she has experienced all through the act. Betty is finally taking responsibility for her own life and learning how to live on her own. Another thing that is hinted at at the end of the play is the possibility of creating alternative relationships to the ones established by having the nuclear family as a model. After it being made clear that Betty and Gerry will not have a sexual relationship, the exchange between the two is relevant:

GERRY: I could still come and see you.

BETTY: So you could, yes. I'd like that. I've never tried to pick up a man before.

GERRY: Not everyone's gay.

BETTY: No, that's lucky isn't it. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 320)

Thus, the last exchange between Gerry and Betty hints at the possibility of both of them creating a different kind of relationship between man and woman. In this case, a friendship that will also overcome class and age differences. It is also clear from the exchange that Betty will try again, and the possibility of her succeeding is also present in their words.

The very last scene of the play also shows the final appearance of Clive's ghost from Act I and the symbolic embrace between the two Bettys. After Gerry leaves, Clive comes back to lecture Betty on the acceptable Victorian behaviour for women, only he comes too late:

You are not that sort of woman, Betty. I can't believe you are. I can't feel the same about you as I did. And Africa



is to be communist I suppose. I used to be proud to be British. There was a high ideal. I came out onto the verandah and looked at the stars. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 320)

Clive's words echo his previous words in Act I about Betty dangerously resembling Mrs Saunders and thus following the model of woman as something dark and dangerous, as the real "terra incognita". Since Betty has changed over the play, she ends up by embracing this image of woman. She also embraces the "female lust" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277) referred to by Clive in Act I by resorting to frequent masturbation and to a more active way of relating to men. And this makes her powerful. Clive's patriarchal world seems in this way to come to an end at the close of the play, and the end of his masculine prerogatives and of his ruling of the nuclear family is also related by him to England's loss of the colonies. According to him, not only has England lost Africa, but Africa has also become communist. Moreover, the fact that Clive refers to the verandah of the house in Africa is also significant from my point of view. Actually, all the scenes but two in Act I take place on the verandah. The verandah can thus be taken to represent some kind of shelter from the inside of the house, that in turn can represent a female characteristic, a vagina-like or a womb-like space. In this sense, the fact that Clive comes out "onto the verandah" can be seen as subversively relevant. He does so in the same way as his son Edward comes out of the closet in Act II or in the same way as his wife and daughter come out of very repressive relationships and constraints in their lives. Another parallelism is established in this way between Acts I and II.

However, Betty, Edward, and Victoria reach further than Clive, and, not surprisingly, all the scenes in Act II take place in a park. The verandah from Act I has become a wide, open space that has been tamed. In this sense, it is relevant that the only scene in Act I to take place outside of the house and the verandah develops in an "open space". It is in the open space that Clive practices a cunnilingus on Mrs Saunders, which allows him to hide under her skirt. That is to say, Clive succumbs at this point to the lust caused by the female element, which at the same time terrifies him, since it is the same "dark female lust" that will "swallow [us = patriarchy] up" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 277), the same lust that embodies the fear of castration. However, this can only take place out of the house (or out of England, in Africa). In this sense, it is also very relevant that the totality of Act II, when the characters are back in England, takes place in another open space, a park. It is at this point, then, that Clive misses the verandah, representing the Empire and the power of patriarchy. The Clive at the end of the play is condemned to wander in a London park, only this time he is not offered the shelter/threat of female genitalia.

Such female genitalia takes shape at the very end of the play in the embrace between the two Bettys. As the stage direction states: "Clive goes. Betty from Act One comes. Betty and Betty embrace" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 320). This embrace is relevant in several ways. On the one hand, it shows how the Betty from Act II has accepted herself, how she has become politically aware. On the other hand, she is also embracing the

man in herself and, consequently, the existence of a male sexuality within her. At another level it could be said that at the end of the play Clive is literally and metaphorically swallowed up by the embrace between the two Bettys. Since, according to Marc Silverstein's (1994) reading of Luce Irigaray, this embrace comes to represent the female genitalia and a specific female Imaginary, we could conclude by saying that in the play the cunt/vagina swallows patriarchy. In this way, the end of the play is definitely female, together with the references to homosexuality and to a more progressive heterosexuality. In Luce Irigaray's words:

[A] woman touches herself by and within herself directly, without mediation, and before any distinction between activity and passivity is possible. A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two -but not divisible into ones- who stimulate each other. (Irigaray in Marks and Courtivron 1980, 100)

The play closes then with a representation of a female vagina, thus emphasising the pervasive presence of femaleness as an element of subversion and dissidence. The embrace between the two Bettys underlines a non-phallographic way of relating sexually. As Elaine Aston puts it: "The final image of the split self uniting offers women the possibility of a subjectivity beyond the objectification of the gaze" (Aston 1997a, 37). Apart from this, the fact that the Betty from Act I can be played by the actor playing Edward in Act II (according to the cast used in the first production of the play at Dartington College of Arts) also emphasises the heterosexual component of the embrace, but in this case the reader/audience will see another kind of

heterosexual intercourse, one different from the aggressive and phallogentric behaviour shown by Clive in Act I, or from the one shown by sexually-obsessed Martin in Act II. However, to complicate things further and to add to the "playful chaos" mentioned by Churchill, the fact that what we see on stage at the end of the play is the embrace between a woman and a man in drag is somewhat disturbing. Nevertheless, the very last scene can still be seen as a definite assertion of the female sexual organ as a direct contrast to the male one, powerful all through Act I. As Cixous puts it:

Woman for women.- There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other -in particular, the other woman. In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter ... Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was "born" to her. Touch me, caress me, you the living no-name, give me my self as myself. (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1980 [1975], 252)

Victoria also experiences a shift in Act II. She is married to Martin, but has problems in the relationship with him. In the first two scenes she is still feeling the consequences of having been brought up as a doll (the dummy from Act I). Consequently, in Act II she "still finds it hard to be seen rather than heard" (Fitzsimmons 1989, 52). Concerned about the possibility of a transfer for a year to Manchester in her job, the anguish she feels about it prevents her from uttering a single word, for the education she has received has not prepared her for such situations. Martin, her husband, does all the talking, which tends to be depressing for Victoria and which, at the same time,

shows his weak points in relation to his wife, his surreptitious ways of putting Victoria down:

You take the job, you go to Manchester. You turn it down, you stay in London. People are making decisions like this every day of the week ... I don't want to put any pressure on you. I'd just like to know so we can sell the house ... Life nowadays is insecure... Do you think you're well enough to do this job? You don't have to do it ... There's no point being so liberated you make yourself cry all the time ... I'm not putting any pressure on you but I don't think you're being a whole person. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 299-301)

In the play, Martin is the progressive heterosexual male who has lived through the revolution of the 1960s. In fact, when in the invocation scene in the park at night, Victoria, now living with Lin, Edward, Cathy and Tommy, approaches him with the words "Hello. We're having an orgy. Do you want me to suck your cock?" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 310), Martin's remark, quite symptomatically, is "Well that's all right. If all we're talking about is having a lot of sex there's no problem. I was all for the sixties when liberation just meant fucking" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 310). Seen from this perspective, Martin's position in the play acquires very relevant undertones. He is used by the playwright to emphasise once more the feeling of loss of the heterosexual male in the particular society. Martin has just received the same kind of patriarchal education as all the other characters in the play, irrespective of the class they belong to. Since in Act II all the characters are trying to find their bearings in a different, less certain and more menacing world, Martin is the representative of searching for a different kind of heterosexual masculinity. However, in order to find it, he has to get rid of his previous education, that acts as a burden

for him and prevents him from changing. Thus, he is against Victoria leading an independent life and taking the job offer that will take her to Manchester. In this case, Victoria's independence can be interpreted as a challenge to his authority as a male (even though he is a progressive one). Besides, he tends to feel guilty about Victoria's search and blames it on his sexual performance. In fact, Martin is obsessed with sexuality in a way that shows us that he feels extremely insecure about it:

What it is about sex, when we talk while it's happening I get to feel it's like a driving lesson ... So I lost my erection last night not because I'm not prepared to talk, it's just that taking in technical information is a different part of the brain and also I don't like to feel that you do it better to yourself. I have read the Hite report. I do know that women have to learn to get their pleasure despite our clumsy attempts at expressing undying devotion and ecstasy ... My one aim is to give you pleasure. My one aim is to give you rolling orgasms like I do other women. So why the hell don't you have them? (Churchill 1985 [1979], 300-1)

According to Churchill, "Martin has all the theory of having given [power] up while keeping it in practice" (Fitzsimmons 1989, 53). However, he feels that he has to change somehow, that the education he has received is not valid anymore. He is not certain as to the way to follow, though. He also realises about a special link that can be established between women, a link that makes him uneasy: "I think women have something to give each other. You seem to need the mutual support" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 301). In this sense, it is quite symptomatic that, towards the end of the play, he actually changes. He can start relating in a different way to Edward, Lin and Victoria herself. He will take care of his son Tommy,

establishing a more nurturing relationship with him, even though this is something difficult for Martin: "I don't like to say he is my son but he is my son" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 313). Martin will represent, then, a different kind of heterosexual masculinity, a masculinity that will learn how to care and will try to ease the obsession with a patriarchal kind of sexuality, a sexuality based on the image of the phallus as a transcendental signifier. This is a change if we take into consideration Martin's previous words:

Did you know if you put cocaine on your prick you can keep it up all night? The only thing is of course it goes numb so you don't feel anything. But you would, that's the main thing. I just want to make you happy. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 300-2)

Therefore, the change undergone by Martin in his last appearance in the play is notorious. He takes care of Tommy and Cathy, gives Tommy medicines and tries to establish a more affectionate relationship with him: "Sometimes I keep him up watching television till he falls asleep on the sofa so I can hold him" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 318). He also tries to understand what is going on around him and to find an alternative to patriarchal masculinity. His words are relevant: "I work very hard at not being like this, I could do with some credit" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 318).

To go back to Victoria, she has built her own politics of existence, but her politics are merely theoretical. Her meeting Lin will change her life. Previous to that, her relationship to men is unfulfilling, to say the least. She openly acknowledges that she does not have a good relationship with her father, "I don't get on too well with my father either" (Churchill 1985

[1979], 291). Her depiction of her relationship with her husband Martin is not very different: "Oh, fine. Up and down. You know. Very well. He helps with the washing up and everything" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 291). When she meets Lin in the park, she questions Lin's attitude about men saying: "You have to look at it in a historical perspective in terms of learnt behaviour since the industrial revolution" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 292). She also hints at the fact that Lin allows her daughter Cathy to play with guns: "They've just banned war toys in Sweden" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 291). The problem with Victoria is her inability to apply her political attitudes about life to herself. However, as the act unfolds and she establishes a relationship with Lin and later on with her own brother, she learns to make the leap between theory and practice. Victoria is clear in scene iii about the relationship between sexuality and power structures, when she says to Lin: "You can't separate fucking and economics" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 309). With these words, Victoria is positioning herself as the real materialist feminist within the microcosm of the play. Victoria's change can be best explained through her establishing a relationship with Lin, the working-class lesbian, and with her brother Edward. In doing so, her relationship with her husband is also going to change for the better. There is certainly a change in the type of relationship Victoria and Lin have established, as can be seen through the following exchange:

VICTORIA: Would you love me if I went to Manchester?

LIN: Yes.

VICTORIA: Would you love me if I went on a climbing expedition in the Andes mountains?

LIN: Yes.



VICTORIA: Would you love me if my teeth fell out?  
LIN: Yes.  
VICTORIA: Would you love me if I loved ten other people?  
LIN: And me?  
VICTORIA: Yes.  
LIN: Yes. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 302)

The pressure that characterises Martin and Victoria's relationship is completely missing in the one between Victoria and Lin. At the same time, a different but nonetheless much more powerful erotic component can be figured out from the exchange between the two. Churchill seems to be showing us a different way of relating sexually to one another. And this way only seems to be possible at this point in the play through the love between women.

Scene iii must also be taken into consideration. Lin, Victoria and Edward go to the park in the middle of the night to make an invocation to Goddess Isis. Victoria acts as a priestess:

Goddess of many names, oldest of the old, who walked in chaos and created life, hear us calling you back through time, before Jehovah, before Christ, before men drove you out and burnt your temples, hear us, Lady, give us back what we were, give us the history we haven't had, make us the women we can't be. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 308)

Victoria, the theorist, is making a call to a lost tradition, to a remote past far beyond patriarchy. She wants to inscribe her self (and herself) in history and, at the same time, she wants to become a woman. However, this idea of woman is totally independent from what phallogentric society presents us with and which is seen through Cathy's constraints received from society, which forces the female child to dress according to the standards of patriarchal society. Victoria's claim for a different type of woman can also be seen as a way to fight the

effects the different systems of representation have on women. Victoria's Goddess will be the "Goddess of breasts ... of cunts ... of fat bellies and babies. And blood blood blood" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 309). The emphasis on female attributes and specifically on the blood related to menstruation and giving birth is significant, bearing in mind the demonisation that has legendarily been attributed to the former female physiological function. Therefore, we are witnessing a call for intrinsic female characteristics that have traditionally been demonised by patriarchal systems of representation. Victoria's undermining goes further than that into a total call for the death of patriarchy:

And the women had the children and nobody knew it was done by fucking so they didn't know about fathers and nobody cared who the father was and the property was passed down through the maternal line-. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 309)

We can relate this to the change experienced in the relationship between Victoria and Betty. At the beginning of the act, Victoria states the impossibility of such a relationship: "Ten minutes talking to my mother and I have to spend two hours in a hot bath" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 292). However, as the act advances a definite change takes place. There are and will be problems between mother and daughter, but some of them can be solved. The status of their relationship can be changed:

VICTORIA: I don't want to live with my mother.

LIN: Don't think of her as your mother, think of her as Betty.

VICTORIA: But she thinks of herself as my mother.

BETTY: I am your mother.

VICTORIA: But mummy we don't even like each other.

BETTY: We might begin to. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 317)

The relationship between the two women acquires different

connotations. The fact that alternative links to the patriarchal apparatus can be established as a way of subversion and response to the main order emphasises the preponderance of the female element at the end of the play. The fact that Victoria ends up by calling her mother by her name is significant: "Betty, would you like an ice cream?" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 318). Thus, the daughter will move from the dummy of Act I to the independent woman of Act II, while the mother will move from a dependent type of motherhood to becoming an independent entity, both coming to share a common femaleness.

Victoria and Betty's accomplishment at the end of the play can also be related to H el ene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa". Cixous states that:

[When a woman speaks] ... She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech, even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectified", generalized: she draws her story into history. (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1980 [1975], 251)

This is exactly what both Betty and Victoria do in Act II of the play. Betty in a more literal way through her descriptive speech on masturbation and Victoria through the invocation to the female goddess in scene iii. Both of them through effecting changes in their lives that will allow them to lead different lifestyles. They are definitely drawing their stories into history.

Edward undergoes the same process as his sister. He starts the act as a closeted homosexual having a relationship with a working-class man following very traditional standards. When

Gerry, his lover, questions him about his attitude, which tries to emulate a traditionally stereotypical feminine behaviour, Edward is not able to analyse it and reach a conclusion:

EDWARD: Everyone's always tried to stop me being feminine and now you are too.

GERRY: You're putting it on. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 306)

Gerry is the one underlining the idea that femininity is nothing else but a "cultural construct", the idea that "one isn't born a woman, one becomes one" (Moi in Belsey 1989, 122). Edward, a biological male, has not been born a woman. What he calls "feminine" is nothing else but a social construct, a pattern "of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms" (Moi in Belsey 1989, 122). Since he does not fit into the typical male stereotype, the only way out seems to be to adapt to a typically female one, and in this way to follow patriarchal binary thought.

It will be through the development of the act and through his relationship with Lin and Victoria that Edward will also be able to apply a political and sexual analysis to his life and thus overcome his fears. Coming out of the closet, identifying himself as a 'lesbian', and thus overruling completely gender distinctions, he builds a new ideology that will enable him to keep the relationship with Victoria and Lin going and at the same time will permit him to retake his relationship with Gerry under different terms. In this way, not only is the traditional stereotype of a heterosexual couple destroyed through the depiction of Clive and Betty all through the play, but also the two children of the nuclear family will establish a sexual relationship between them, demolishing the very basis of Western

sexuality. Thus, Edward will also come to terms with the heterosexual man in him. This is the exchange:

EDWARD: I like women.

VICTORIA: That should please mother.

EDWARD: No listen Vicky. I'd rather be a woman. I wish I had breasts like that, I think they're beautiful. Can I touch them?

VICTORIA: What, pretending they're yours?

EDWARD: No, I know it's you.

VICTORIA: I think I should warn you I'm enjoying this.

EDWARD: I'm sick of men.

VICTORIA: I'm sick of men.

EDWARD: I think I'm a lesbian. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 307)

Lin and Gerry are two white working-class characters that serve as contrast to the white upper-middle class characters that are more frequently encountered in the play. Both of them, but especially Lin, lack the political consciousness necessary to build their own positions in life. However, they are also seen as a breath of fresh air in contrast to the constraints the other characters suffer.

Lin shows a very lucid side when facing Victoria and showing how Victoria is reproducing patriarchal patterns of oppression over her. When Victoria, the theorist, attacks her about her lack of intellectual activity, Lin replies: "...but I'm good at kissing aren't I? ... [Y]ou're worse to me than Martin is to you" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 303). The fact that an illiterate, working-class woman realises the extent of the systems of oppression present in Western societies is definitely relevant. Her intelligence allows her to realise how Victoria is exerting the same kind of power over her as Martin exerts over Victoria. Women as a class are oppressed by men, but women can in turn exert oppression over other women. Churchill shows here how oppression can be exerted both at the level of gender and at

the level of class.

Lin starts the act by stating her hatred of men: "I hate men ... I just hate the bastards" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 292). A working-class divorced lesbian with a child, she is somehow grateful to her husband for allowing her to keep their daughter Cathy. It is through her rearing Cathy that Churchill is going to show the artificiality of gender conventions and the fact that femininity is a construct. In fact, the child refuses to wear jeans to school because she is mistaken for a boy. As Lin says: "I've bought her three new frocks. She won't wear jeans to school any more because Tracy and Mandy called her a boy" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 299). Cathy herself suffers the pressure society places on her, and she transmits it to her mother: "You've got to wear a skirt. And tights" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 299). The notion of beauty takes the form of Betty's earrings, that Cathy tries on, and which automatically give her a "feminine" status according to the standards of beauty of patriarchal society. Cathy wants her ears pierced as a way to assimilate those standards and become a "woman". However, this will also bring limitations with it, and one of them is that she will not be allowed to join the "Dead Hand Gang", which the boys in the park have created and which can also be taken as a metaphor for women's repression and queer bashing.

Lin's progression through the play consists of her gradual change in her relationship towards men. From her initial hatred she moves into a more understanding attitude towards Edward and especially Martin, so by the end of the play she has also learned something: "Don't make me sorry for you, Martin, it's

hard for me too. We've better things to do than quarrel" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 318). In this sense, Lin has moved from a very conflict-ridden relationship with a heterosexual man to different sorts of relationships with other men, whether homosexual or heterosexual. However, I think that it is precisely her stating the necessity of establishing a different relationship with Martin, a straight man, a relationship that may entail a deeper understanding, that signals the main change in her.

Gerry is the other working-class character that appears in the play and that causes a big impression on one of the upper-class characters. He establishes a relationship with Edward which, later on, he interrupts, only to resume it at the end of the play. Gerry represents casual sex and playful promiscuity as an alternative to phallogentric sexuality and hypocritically monogamous heterosexuality. In fact, his monologue in scene ii (which originally opened the second act of the play, as a clear contrast to the sexual attitudes of Act I) is relevant in this sense:

The train from Victoria to Clapham still has those compartments without a corridor. As soon as I got on the platform I saw who I wanted. Slim hips, tense shoulders, trying not to look at anyone. I put my hand on my pocket just long enough so that he couldn't miss it. The train came in ... I sat by the window ... I stared at him and he unzipped his flies ... So I stood up and took my cock out. He took me in his mouth and shut his eyes tight ... He was jerking off with his left hand, and I could see he'd got a fairsized one ... I was getting really turned on. What if we pulled into Clapham Junction now ... I felt wonderful. Then he started talking. It's better if nothing is said ... He said I hope you don't think I do this all the time. I said I hope you will from now on ... I saw him at Victoria a couple of months later and I went straight down to the end of the platform and I picked up somebody really great who never said a word, just smiled. (Churchill 1985 [1979],

297-8)

At the beginning, Gerry does not want to create any ties with another man. His idea of a relationship is totally different from the one having the nuclear family as a model. This is why his relationship with Edward fails when Edward tries to follow the traditionally feminine model established by his mother. Gerry refuses to play the game: "I'm not the husband so you can't be the wife" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 307). He prefers a more active and less constrained sexuality, with his flings on trains, parks or saunas. However, once Edward changes, moves in with Lin, Victoria and the children, and renounces his former constraining gender identity, they seem to find another way to continue with the relationship, a way different from the traditional patriarchal and phallogentric heterosexual model.

In the same way as in Act I the character of Victoria was played by a dummy, representing the doll a girl had to be in Victorian times, and, therefore, the invisibility of women, in Act II we have an equivalent with the character of Tommy, Victoria and Martin's son. Tommy remains unseen all through the act. I think this is to underline the change experienced by males throughout the play. Tommy, in this sense, represents the future of maleness, the sense of helplessness and loss that is better reflected in the character of Martin.

Contrary to Michelene Wandor's opinion, according to which the second act of the play "lacks any sense of class (and socialist) dynamic" (Wandor 1986 [1981], 171), I believe that the sense of class is present through the characters of Lin and Gerry, and also through the appearance of the ghost of Lin's



brother, killed in Northern Ireland. They are seen as politically feeble but with more strength to fight in the world. Churchill juxtaposes a more sophisticated concept of ideology (represented especially in Victoria) alongside the struggle of daily life at grass-roots level (represented in the working-class characters).

Bill, Lin's brother, is a soldier fighting in Northern Ireland. In this sense, he is the mirroring element in Act II to the colonial settlement of Act I. The Africa of Act I has become the Northern Ireland of Act II. Churchill seems to be saying then that both are the colonies, Africa the XIXthc colony and Northern Ireland the XXthc one. However, the parallel between the two shows striking differences, as we can see through the representatives of each of them. Clive represents the coloniser in Africa and we have seen how he plays the role of the father in the newly-colonised country. We have also seen how he applies the Protestant double standard to sexuality, thus condemning his wife for the possibility of having an affair with Harry Bagley while at the same time Clive is having sexual intercourse with Mrs Saunders. Bill, on the other hand, represents the coloniser in Northern Ireland, but his outrageous monologue in scene iii becomes crudely relevant as to the definite changes undergone by the Empire. After being killed, his ghost appears to Lin, Victoria, Edward and Martin, when they are in the park in the middle of the invocation to goddess Isis. When asked about his presence there, Bill's words are relevant:

... I've come for a fuck. That was the worst thing in the fucking army. Never fucking let out. Can't fucking talk to Irish girls. Fucking bored out of my fucking head. That or

shit scared. For five minutes I'd be glad I wasn't bored, then I was fucking scared. Then we'd come in and I'd be glad I wasn't scared and then I was fucking bored. Spent the day reading fucking porn and the fucking night wanking. Man's fucking life in the fucking army? No fun when the fucking kids hate you. I got so I fucking wanted to kill someone and I got fucking killed myself and I want a fuck. (Churchill 1985 [1979], 311)

The ethos of the Empire, reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden", is thoroughly torn apart in Bill's words. The representation of England in Northern Ireland is reduced to a continuous swinging between fear and boredom, on the one hand, and resorting to pornography and masturbation on the other. The elevated duty to the Empire, what Clive was desperately trying to teach Edward all through Act I in order to make a man out of him, is reduced in Act II to a decadent and degraded shambles. The picture we are given of Northern Ireland is even worse than the one of Africa. At least, in Africa, Harry Bagley could have sexual intercourse on the side with the natives, as we saw in Act I when he suggested to the servant Joshua that they should "go in a barn and fuck" (Churchill 1985 [1979], 262). It is also in Africa where Clive, the master, had sex with Mrs Saunders, both in an open space and at his own place. However, Bill is symptomatically denied access to any kind of sexual intercourse, he cannot even talk to the Irish girls and has to resort to masturbation as the only way out for his urges. The situation of the British Empire in the late XXthc is therefore depicted as grim and gloomy. And this doom and gloom is shown through the character of Bill. Quite significantly, it is not clear either which of the actors/actresses plays this character. He is in this case the

English representative in the colony, but in contrast to Act I, he belongs to the working class. As a working-class man, he is exploited by the Empire because of his class and through his repressed sexuality. Once again, Churchill depicts the decadent situation of the British Empire and puts it at the same level as sexual exploitation. It is also significant that the soldier appears immediately after the invocation to the goddess Isis, when patriarchy has been completely questioned. In this sense, the emphasis on female characteristics is parallel to the depiction of the remains of the Empire as effete. Another parallelism can, of course, be established between England and Ireland, by considering the former as the coloniser and therefore male and the latter as the colonised and consequently female.<sup>2</sup>

Churchill is definitely insisting on the necessity of creating new ways of relating between people, and the beginning of all this comes through a questioning and a change of the values inherited through patriarchy. A subversion of the concepts of traditional sexual values and behaviour seems to be the only way out. In this sense, she is also criticising certain types of homosexual behaviour in the sense that they repeat traditional roles. Subversion may come from a different, less constrained reading of sexuality and gender, together with an acute political awareness of the reality of our lives and of the mechanisms of power. By this I mean everything related to patriarchy: The family, the state, and religion. This awareness

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<sup>2</sup> On the personification of Ireland as a woman, see Cairns and Richards 1988, Cullingford 1990 and Kearney 1985 (1984).

must affect all kinds of people: Men and women, homosexual or heterosexual, from all social classes and races.

This ideology has inherent materialist feminist characteristics, in the sense that it deals basically with men and women together, as human beings with no deep biological differences between them, and as both being oppressed by patriarchy. It also stresses the material conditions of production such as history (through the colonial and post-colonial settings), race (through Joshua's invisible black skin), class (through Ellen, Joshua, Lin and Gerry) and gender (through Betty and Cathy's blatantly constructed gender, through Ellen's *invisible* lesbianism, through Harry and Edward's forbidden homosexuality, through the shifting of the roles in Act II). Finally, it shows the development of a group (the whole set of characters in Act II) through the individual development of each one.

Maybe the main flaw of the play is the lack of the race element in Act II. Since the author included almost everything possible to underline the non-linearity and the fragmentation of the act (from female masturbation to incest, from *ménage à trois* to casual sex and the creation of alternative families), it seems to me that having introduced a non-white character would have added subversive elements to the play. Maybe Lin or Gerry could have been portrayed as Black or Asian. In this sense, the act lacks political awareness in its development. Especially when one thinks that the action takes place in such a multi-ethnic city as London. However, the pervasive and powerful message that reaches the reader and the audience is a feeling of

collective coming out. Coming out as men and women, as feminists, homosexuals, heterosexuals and/or socialists. This is, in my opinion, the ultimate conclusion of the play. A conclusion that subverts patriarchal power structures and disrupts the Symbolic Order thanks to the craft and commitment of Caryl Churchill.

## CHAPTER V.

### IRON MAIDENS, DOWNTRODDEN SERFS: *TOP GIRLS* OR HOW WOMEN BECAME COCA-COLA EXECUTIVES

When Edith Cresson was appointed Prime Minister of the French Government in early 1991, there was a favourable reaction in progressive European circles. When, a few months later, she started talking in her interviews about matters such as homosexuality and sexism, things changed dramatically for the worse. I remember reading an appalling interview carried out some years before, in which she expressed her opinions on what she defined as the intrinsic gayness of British men. To Edith Cresson, homosexuality was an old tradition in Britain, an example of this being the fact that she did not feel either observed or assessed by British men when she walked in the streets of London. Ms Cresson told the interviewer how bad she felt when she was not being acknowledged as a (theoretically beautiful) woman. In other words: harassed. I was so baffled reading the news that the first thing I did afterwards was call a close friend of mine, French and feminist. The comment once we got over the shock was: "Is it really worth having a woman in such a position when, in fact, she is behaving herself in a way few men in politics would dare to behave nowadays? Is it really a step ahead in the feminist struggle?" The answer, evidently, was (and is) "no".

Taking into consideration Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*, written in 1982, Edith Cresson is, therefore, a "top girl", one of "them", in the sense that she is a woman who has achieved a high position in society and who has automatically

shown a disregard towards other people in defenceless situations. Speaking from a position of power, from a privileged position, automatically gives her influence over other people's lives. The problem that appears is that, being a woman and belonging to the French socialist party, one expects Ms Cresson to show some kind of awareness of the situation of the dispossessed, of people who have traditionally been in a position of subjugation and oppression. I am thinking at this point, and in the light of the anecdote with which I started this chapter, of women and homosexuals. Being a woman herself, Ms Cresson should know about the inferior situation that has been experienced by many of her kind throughout history. However, she chose to try to perpetuate this very oppression by riding unquestioningly on the train of sexism and sexual harassment and, on the other hand, by using a clearly homophobic discourse in order to put forward her argument. In so doing, Ms Cresson revealed a political consciousness somewhat at odds with some points in the political creed of the party she professes to belong to. Even though her unfortunate words were uttered in 1991 and she may have changed her views since then, it seems as if, being a woman and having achieved a position of power in a world of men, the only resort that is left to her -and that she chooses wholeheartedly- is to put down other women and minorities in order to keep her position in the capitalist hierarchy. This is the price she has to pay in order to keep what she achieved in the France of the 1990s. As we are going to see, the similarities between Cresson and Marlene, the newly-promoted executive in Churchill's play, are

more than striking in terms of the toll to be paid for social and economic advancement.

Relating the opening anecdote to the play under discussion, in an interview with Emily Mann, Caryl Churchill explains that when she wrote *Top Girls*:

Thatcher had just become prime minister; there was talk about whether it was an advance to have a woman prime minister if it was someone with policies like hers. She may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister but she isn't a comrade. And, in fact, things have got much worse for women under Thatcher. (Churchill in Betsko and Koenig 1987, 77)

Margaret Thatcher and Edith Cresson, as Prime Ministers of their respective governments, are both "top girls", and therefore not "sisters" nor "comrades", but more likely "them", and, therefore, enemies. Thatcher's case seems to be more straightforward, as she had openly adhered to a right-wing political discourse. The case of Cresson, however, is more likely to lead to misunderstanding. As has been said before, by having embraced a liberal perspective in the French socialist party, people could expect her to introduce changes in relation to the position of women and to the handling of minorities. Practice has shown us that this is not necessarily the case in such circumstances. However, these types of disappointments have far worse consequences when they have their origin in the ranks of a left-wing party, theoretically more concerned with these type of issues. In the case of our alien ladies, the words "sister" and "comrade" seem to exclude the word "them", and I will try to explain here why.

*Top Girls* was first staged in 1982. The first London production opened at the Royal Court Theatre in the month of



August and was a great success. Later in the same year, it was transferred to New York City. In February 1983 the production returned to London and to the Royal Court Theatre, and simultaneously the first New York production opened, again at the Public Theater (nowadays known as Joseph Papp's Public Theater). This New York production probably coincided with the highly successful run of Churchill's *Cloud Nine* at the Lucille Lortel Theatre, in Greenwich Village. This is a remarkable fact since, on the one hand, it shows how Churchill achieved a second major success in the United States in a very short period of time and, on the other hand, how both plays were performed at the same time in New York City. *Top Girls* can also be considered as Churchill's first big success in her native United Kingdom and the beginning of her deserved status as a prestigious playwright worldwide. In this sense, the play was a watershed in Churchill's career and consolidated the new line in playwriting started by her and that accomplished a first success with *Cloud Nine*. Besides, the fact that her plays were being performed in the two theatre meccas of the Western world and in theatres characterised by an aura of intellectual rigour and experimentation attests to this fact.

When Churchill started working on *Top Girls*, she had two "predominant ideas" in mind: "those of dead women coming back and women working" (Naismith 1991 [1982], 1). These are in fact the two main topics of the play, which are closely intertwined. The "dead women" from the past appear in Act One, which takes place in a restaurant on a Saturday night and shows us the celebration dinner Marlene organises on behalf of her recent

promotion to Managing Director at the employment agency she works in with five famous women from history, literature and art: Isabella Bird, who "lived in Edinburgh [in the XIXth century and] travelled extensively between the ages of 40 and 70" (Churchill 1982, i); Lady Niho, a Japanese woman from the XIIIth century who "was an Emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan" (Churchill 1982, i); Dull Gret, "the subject of the Brueghel painting, 'Dulle Griet', in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils" (Churchill 1982, i); Pope Joan, who "disguised as a man is thought to have been Pope between 854-856" (Churchill 1982, i), and Patient Griselda, "the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in "The Clerk's Tale" of *The Canterbury Tales*" (Churchill 1982, i). During the course of the night the women glide from what is supposed to be a pleasant reunion of achievement to a desolate realisation of and complaint about the part of themselves they have had to give up in order to achieve in a man's world.

The presence in Act One of these "dead women from the past" can be significantly related to the character of Marlene, since she epitomizes the gap between past and present. It could then be said that the old Marlene, the working-class girl prematurely pregnant who left her home village to make it in London, the Marlene from the past, has died and been replaced by a ruthless one. Therefore, what emphasises the meaning of the play at this point is the fact that the Marlene in Act One is metaphorically more dead than alive, in this way being more

thematically connected to these illusory women.

In Act Two, the reader/audience is first introduced to Marlene's work environment through an incisive job interview conducted by her. Subsequently, the reader/audience is introduced to Angie, Marlene's unrecognised daughter and her younger friend Kit and finally, to the difficult relation existing between Joyce, Marlene's sister and the one who has kept Marlene's daughter, and Angie. The scenes that are set at the employment agency where Marlene works show, in a very dynamic way, the exchanges between Marlene and two work colleagues, Nell and Win. They also show Angie's turning up in the agency escaping from her home village and looking for shelter in her aunt; the plea of Mrs Kidd -wife to a male colleague of Marlene who was her direct competitor to the post of Managing Director- to Marlene about resigning from the post and thus handing it over to her hurt husband Howard; and Win and Angie's exchange, in which Angie enquires about the requirements for working in the office. Interspersed in the last scene there are two more job interviews, conducted by Win and Nell respectively, which underline the ruthlessness of the "top girls'" world.

Act Three is concerned with the encounter between the two sisters, Marlene and Joyce, and Angie. The encounter takes place at Joyce's house in their hometown. During the course of the evening, the two sisters quarrel in a cathartic whirlwind of recrimination exchanges which make evident their opposite views on life and their utterly unreconciled positions. However, this catharsis is left without an ending or

resolution. The play's dénouement is truncated in the same way as the lives of the women are also truncated and crooked. This device of the unresolving of the catharsis could also be interpreted as one of Churchill's feminist stances of denying the masculine pattern of plays inherited by Aristotle, which was seen in chapter one.

Before starting with the analysis of the play proper, we should once again outline a number of characteristics that inscribe the play in the tradition of radical theatre (Aston and Savona 1991) and that show how Churchill has continued in her line of Brechtian heritage by further exploring and making use of the techniques of defamiliarisation, and consequently avoiding any kind of identification between the reader/audience and the actor, so prevalent in naturalist theatre. I will briefly mention three of them: Dramatic shape and the use of chronological disruption; the all-women cast and character names; and the use of dialogue and the specific layout employed by the playwright, which, due to its utter innovative nature, has become another of the prominent features of her theatre.

From the perspective of dramatic shape, *Top Girls* consists of three acts. This is the structure Churchill had in mind when first writing the play and the one she is fond of. However, she acknowledged the possibility of introducing changes, as she explains in a production note to the play:

*Top Girls* was originally written in three acts and I still find that structure clearer: Act One, the dinner; Act Two, Angie's story; Act Three, the year before. But two intervals do hold things up, so in the original production we made it two acts with the interval after what is here Act Two, scene two. Do whichever you prefer. (Churchill 1982, iii)

In spite of the playwright's advice for a division into two or three acts, most companies have opted for a two-act structure when dealing with the performance text (Elam 1980), probably bearing in mind its standard length and Churchill's reckoning that two intervals can actually hinder the process of communication, in the sense of making it slower. Thus, the play, in performance, tends to be divided into two acts: Act One consists of three scenes and Act Two of two scenes. However, since in this chapter I will be analysing the dramatic text, I shall make reference to the dramatic shape consisting of three acts. (Churchill 1982)

A relevant aspect of this particular division concerns the device of chronological disruption. Hence, I,i, the restaurant scene that shows us the dream-like dinner party celebrated by Marlene and the five women from history, literature and art above-mentioned on the occasion of the former's recent promotion to Managing Director, takes place on a Saturday night in 1980. II,i, a scene that develops at the "Top Girls" employment agency and an introduction to the subsequent scenes unfolding in that setting, takes place on the following Monday morning and shows Marlene at work. II,ii, however, reverses to the previous Sunday afternoon and introduces the characters of Angie, Kit and Joyce, the counterpart of Marlene. II,iii takes place again on the Monday morning at the employment agency and introduces the characters of Nell and Win, the other "top girls" working with Marlene. Their exchanges at work are interspersed with the interviewing of two job candidates; with

the appearance of Mrs Kidd, the wife of one of the employees who was expecting the promotion given to Marlene and who asks her to give the post up, and most importantly, by Angie's visit to the office on her way out of the grim little village Marlene herself left in the past. Act III unfolds on a Sunday evening but "a year earlier" (Churchill 1982, ii), so the action is here probably set in the mythical year 1979, the year when the Conservative Party won the general election and Margaret Thatcher took over as Prime Minister. The act deals with Marlene's visit to Joyce and Angie, the sisters' subsequent quarrel, and their (final) parting. It is this last scene of the play, then, the one that comes chronologically before all the others, and which therefore makes II,iii, and, more specifically, Angie's visit to the office, more illuminating. This chronological disruption, as I said before, works as a way of fulfilling a very specific function as a preventive of any kind of uncritical identification between the reader/audience and the actor/actress on stage. As Elaine Aston and George Savona have put it, in our times "[t]he spectator is ... positioned, by the conjunction of 'radical' text and anti-illusionistic performance aesthetic, at a critical remove from the dramatic fiction" (Aston and Savona 1991, 46). Besides, and as we have seen in the previous chapter, chronological disruption also serves -and more so in the case of this play- to underline the laying bare of the device and, consequently, the working of the ideology behind the text. In doing so, it conveys in a powerful way the devastating critique of capitalism and capitalist regimes that the play puts forward.

In another sense, it can also be used to exemplify a more feminist reading of the play by preventing a climax from taking place and thus by occupying a diametrically opposed position to the structure inherent to tragedy postulated by Aristotle. As Christopher Innes has stated:

Combining surreal fantasy with Shavian discussion, documentary case-histories, and naturalistic domestic drama (complete with kitchen sink and ironing-board), *Top Girls* breaks out of conventional methods of portraying life on the stage, and suggests new ways of seeing reality ... creating a dynamic that is liberated from cause-and-effect logic. (Innes 1992, 466)

This leads us to the next point in our discussion. Looking for a specifically feminist form (or at least for a form that tries to escape from the conventions and postulates of a patriarchal system), the fact that Caryl Churchill uses an all-women cast becomes relevant. There are sixteen female characters in the play that are performed by seven actresses, and this fact contributes to the above-mentioned "remove". Similarly to what happened in *Cloud Nine* in the case of cross-gender or cross-race roles, the fact that the actresses in *Top Girls* have to double or treble roles prevents us from identifying with them and, consequently, focuses the attention of the reader/audience on the political message of the play. This is another characteristic that relates the play to a specific tradition of radical theatre in the twentieth century and that -more specifically- inscribes it in the heritage of Bertolt Brecht. Thus, the woman-only cast illustrates the subject matter of *Top Girls* and reinforces the "[d]econstructive representation" (Aston and Savona 1991, 46) made evident through the "[p]erformance mode" (Aston and Savona

1991, 46) of the play as a radical one. Since the play deals with the oppression of women by men in a capitalist regime, but at the same time with the oppression of women by women as an inevitable consequence of being part of that very regime, having a female cast emphasises the workings of capitalism. It also shows how women have interiorised the workings of a capitalist and patriarchal ideology. However, Churchill avoids a too facile attack on men and men's oppression over women. In doing so, the discussion shifts from gender differences to a more illuminating analysis of class strife and economics. An example of this would be Isabella Bird, the Scottish traveller, who can afford to travel because of her class and also because she takes on the "manly" role in relation to her sister Hennie, who stays at home and waits for her return. Another example can be found in the case of Marlene, who sacrifices her own daughter and family in order to escape from her working-class origins.

As has been stated in the previous paragraph, the fact that seven actresses perform the sixteen roles in the cast also implies that there must necessarily be doublings and treblings of roles, and so once more the naturalistic identification between reader/audience and actor will be avoided. At the same time, the total absence of male characters in the play can serve to underline the fact that their presence is not necessary as patriarchy enforcers, since the women have already interiorised male behaviour and applied it to their everyday lives. Nevertheless, Churchill also shows the reader/audience the subjection of these women to men and to traditionally



masculine ways of behaviour, however much they think they have cut their links with them. In fact, the references to male characters, relatives or colleagues, illustrate this last idea, as we shall see.

Marlene, the ambitious woman, who, at the beginning of the play has just achieved the post of Managing Director in an employment agency, is the only character performed throughout by the same actress. All the other actresses double or treble roles, as has been said before. The fact that the character of Marlene is only played by one actress remains a moot point that might obey the fact that Churchill wants to emphasise the ideological contrast between her and the rest of the characters. In this way, by showing her in a Stanislavskian way and therefore making her prone to generate identificatory processes, but also surrounding her with characters that are performed in a Brechtian style, the reader/audience could be more aware of the ideological content of the play. Aston and Savona analyse the contrast in the different approach to character in this way:

As offered to the spectator by the actor-in-role, character involves three distinct levels of operation. The actor plays a character that functions (1) as a psychological construct, (2) as a thematic symbol and/or ideological 'key', and (3) as a mirror-image of the individual spectator. It will be apparent that these categories are not mutually exclusive, that they are offered as generalisations, and that they may well operate simultaneously. (Aston and Savona 1991, 47)

In Marlene's case, any of these three levels might apply. On the one hand, she could be seen as a "psychological construct", and thus prone to generate acts of identification à la Stanislavsky on the part of the reader/audience. On the

other hand, and in what would be a Brechtian move, she could be used to represent and convey a conservative ideology and thus fulfil a didactic aim.

This last point seems to be Churchill's intention. The reader/audience should therefore follow a perfectly identifiable Marlene treating her as an "ideological 'key'" throughout the play and, in this way, become aware of Marlene's inner workings and therefore of the inner workings of the society she lives in and that she represents, to the point of having become a sort of "cultural emblem" of it<sup>1</sup>. This would be more related to a Brechtian perspective, in the sense that the emphasis would be placed on the "[s]ocial context" where these women live; on the "[d]econstruction" of the process of identification with the actor, stressing instead the possibility of analysing the situation from a different ideological perspective; and on the "[i]deological contestation" of the established power, instead of an utter communion with its main tenets (Aston and Savona 1991, 47). Therefore, an incisive analysis of the mechanisms of capitalist society, class struggle and "inter- and intra-sexual oppression" (Aston 1997a, 39) would come to light, not for the reader/spectator to identify with Marlene and follow her example, but quite on the contrary, for him/her to analyse the socio-political, economic and gender workings of contemporary Western society and maybe find possible ways of dissidence, transgression and subversion. This point makes this specific

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<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing these words from Alan Sinfield. In his book *Faultlines* he uses them to refer to the character of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

reading of *Top Girls* a cultural materialist one, as can be seen in Jonathan Dollimore's analysis of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama:

[T]o contain a threat by rehearsing it one must first give it a voice, a part, a presence - in the theatre, as in the culture. Through this process the very condition of something's containment may constitute the terms of its challenge: opportunities for resistance become apparent, especially on the stage and even as the threat is being disempowered. (Dollimore 1989 [1984], xxi)

The "threat" Dollimore makes reference to is, in this case, Capitalist ideology with all its connotations. The idea of "containment" can be seen in the fact that Marlene and what she represents are totally *dis-covered* in the play. The questioning of Marlene, that comes mainly from her sister Joyce, does not lead the reader/spectator to any kind of liberation from or joyous unmasking of the ideology she represents. However, as Dollimore puts it, this very unmasking can work as an element of disruption, by showing how the structure works and offering in this way a precious insight into the possibilities of its disestablishment.

The actress playing Isabella Bird, the XIXth century Scottish traveller, also plays Joyce, Marlene's sister, and Mrs Kidd, Marlene's male colleague's wife. This trebling is relevant in the sense that the actress is able to give life to three very different ideological positions within the play. On the one hand, and as has been observed, Isabella Bird was an independent woman who travelled extensively throughout the world and managed to have egalitarian relationships with men, but at the cost of leaving her sister Hennie at home in Scotland. Joyce, on the other hand, belonging to a lower social

class, chose to stay at home in the bleak East Anglian village the sisters came from, to go through an unsuccessful marriage, to take care of her sister's daughter and endure a series of low-paid jobs. In this way, a mirror-like image can be established between these four characters. Isabella left her sister Hennie to travel around the world, in the same way as Marlene left her own daughter and her sister to move to London and travel to the United States. The perfect counterpart would be Mrs Kidd, representing the archetypal housewife totally dependent on her husband and perfectly capable of defending his position in the world if necessary. The fact that it is the same actress who plays the three characters avoids any identification between the reader/spectator and the actress/character from taking place and draws our attention to the mechanisms of control, to an analysis of how capitalist, patriarchal ideology works.

The characters of Lady Nijo and Win are played by the same actress. We see in this way how a concubine, a woman totally submitted to men, living close to a state of slavery and expelled from the palace when no longer necessary, becomes a ruthless executive who, at the same time, seems to lead quite a miserable private life, taking up married lovers and hiding in the back seat of their cars in order not to be seen by the neighbours. Win does actually exert oppression over other women and she does not seem to value herself very much either.

The fact that the characters of Dull Gret and Angie are played by the same actress is especially relevant. Both characters belong to the working class and are not endowed with

a good command of the language. As Elaine Aston has observed: "Unlike the voices of the middle-class women which dominate the linguistic space, 'dull' Angie, like Gret in Act One, is relatively silent" (Aston 1997a, 41). In fact, it could be argued that Angie's silence stands to a certain extent for her inability to cope with the reality of her life, for her impossibility to elaborate a discourse that allows her to confront society on her own terms. Gret's case is different though, since her spare use of words all through Act One gives way to a final powerful flow that will prove to be potentially devastating.

Thus, Dull Gret, leading an army of women in a painting by Brueghel and the protagonist of the final disruption of Act One, represents a possible toppling over of patriarchy, as we will see later. The fact that the same actress plays Angie, Marlene's not-so-bright daughter and the clearest victim in the play, is illuminating. In fact, Dull Gret is paradoxically not dull at all, whereas it could clearly be said that Angie is. In consequence, she is not going to lead any women to liberation. Churchill seems to be making the point that a radical change of the structures of society should be made by the dispossessed. This is what Dull Gret represents in Act One and what Angie should represent in Acts Two and Three. However, the grim conclusion of the play seems to acknowledge the impossibility of such a change. Marlene, the one bold enough to escape, joins the dominant discourse of oppression. Joyce, more politically conscious, limits her attacks to scratching Mercedes with her ring. Finally, Angie, the most defenceless of them all, is

depicted as completely devoid of any kind of political consciousness, and thus limited to her role of bearer of the oppression.

There is yet another doubling in the characters of Pope Joan and Louise. Pope Joan, a female Pope in the IXth century who managed to go unnoticed for a couple of years and who was stoned to death when discovered, is depicted together with a woman in her forties who has been neglected at work and feels frustrated after having devoted her whole life to it. In this way, both the transgressor and the follower of rules are shown to be done out by society.

Another trebling can be found in the case of the characters of Patient Griselda, Nell and Jeanine. Again, we witness a variety of types: Patient Griselda also suffered a slave-like treatment on the hands of her husband, who made her believe he had deprived her of her sons just for the sake of exerting oppression over her. Nell, on the other hand, works as a contraposition to the previous character, being another of the women executives we come across in the play, and behaving in quite a bold way. Finally, Jeanine is a woman who embodies the doubt between a professional life and a private life.

The last trebling to take place in the play is the one involving the Waitress, Kit and Shona. This last trebling is also relevant, in the sense that the three characters belong to the working class and embody different positions within it. Thus, the silent waitress in Act One might exemplify the exertion of power by women over women, and underlines in this way the political and ideological nature of such an oppression.

Kit, on the other hand, is a bright working-class girl who wants to become a nuclear physicist, what would probably give her tools to evade her class destiny. Finally, Shona is a working-class woman who tries to escape her fate by deceiving Nell into giving her a job at one of the interviews, but who lacks the necessary cultural background to achieve her aim.

Another aspect that appears to be relevant and that must be mentioned here is the question of character names. According to Aston and Savona, character names are relevant because they can be considered as printed information about the characters themselves. As they put it: "[T]he names of dramatis personae signify in a number of ways that bear on the informational function of character" (Aston and Savona 1991, 45). They later amplify this point:

Veltruský reads the names of the characters as authorial 'annotations', suggesting that, where there is a causal link between name and character, the appearance in the printed text of the character's name before all of her/his speeches 'automatically adheres its meaning' and so conditions the response of the reader. (Aston and Savona 1991, 80)

In the case of the character names in the play, they exemplify the whole discussion about class struggle and economic strife that underlies it. Thus, a four-group classification could be established. There would be first of all the group of women from the past. In this group, maybe the most significant name would be that of Isabella Bird, the Scottish traveller. Her surname brings to mind the very idea of travel, of flying from one place to another. It can also be considered as a reference to the several characters in the play (Marlene, Lady Nijo, Win, Angie, Jeanine and Shona) who long

for escape from their reality and fly to other, sunnier lands. Finally, it is also an ironic and sexist reminder of the slang word for woman, as Win utters the word in II,iii: "Your aunty's a smashing bird" (Churchill 1982, 64). The name of Lady Nijo can be regarded as ironic in the sense that she was actually a concubine, so the word "Lady" would not really apply to her at all. Dull Gret would be another relevant name. Since we have seen how this character represents the working class, the very name Gret can also be understood in this line. Furthermore, Churchill is here endowing it with another characteristic: dullness. The implication seems to be that both the working class in a capitalist society and women in a patriarchal order are characterised by an intrinsic dullness, by a total submission to the rules established by the power structure. However, the possibility of revolt, of disruption of the established order, seems to be in their hands, as the very Dull Gret shows with her example. The name of Pope Joan plays with the very ambiguity present in its phonetic sound, and thus toys with the confusion between the names Joan and John, underlining in this way this ambiguity and showing how, through the difficulty of distinguishing between the phonetic sound of one name and the other, or between one gender and the other, the absurdity of Pope Joan's destiny acquires more tragic undertones. Patient Griselda is defined by the adjective preceding her name. She is also characterised as being utterly obedient to her husband, as we shall see through her tragic ordeal. Finally, the character of the waitress -who might also be included in this group- is also significant because she is



the only character who does not have a name. By being a character without a name, by being unnamed, she may be seen to represent the anonymity and consequent lack of identity of the working class. At the same time, she may also represent the oppression of women as a class, and particularly the internalisation and repetition by women of models of oppression inherited from the patriarchal and capitalist establishments - what Aston calls "intra-sexual oppression" (Aston 1997a, 39), - since all the women in Act One can be said to exert some power over her.

The second group in the classification in relation to character names would refer to the specifically working-class names. This group would include the following characters: Marlene, Joyce, Angie, Jeanine, Kit and Shona. In this sense, the fact that information about their class background can be given through their very names is worth mentioning. In the case of Marlene, it has been stated that her name "is mostly a working-class name in Britain" (Naismith 1991 [1982], xli). Even though this might not be evident at first sight, be it a text or a performance, the fact that such a central information is conveyed in this way to the reader/spectator -through the simple indication in the printed text, or by hearing it as said by another actress- is nevertheless striking. Thus, Marlene, a name that might also echo Marlene Dietrich, probably a working-class icon who would represent the power of a country to rise from the ashes and rebuild itself, in the same way as Marlene builds a new life for herself in the new world -new in terms of her trip to America and in economic terms-, can in this way be

identified from the very beginning as taking part in the literal and metaphorical class struggle that the play presents us with. Her sister Joyce, on the other hand, seems to be far from enjoying life, having four different cleaning jobs with people she really hates. Angie, a diminutive of Angela and also representative of her diminutiveness in society, is Marlene's unrecognised daughter and reminiscent of a song by the Rolling Stones. She is the clearest example of a defenceless working-class person in the play, as can be seen in her very inability to articulate a coherent linguistic discourse, not to mention politics. The name Jeanine could be interpreted as having a French origin, and also underlines the yearning to be elsewhere that appears repeatedly in the play. Kit would be a short form of Kitty, a diminutive of Katherine, but she is endowed with more strength than her friend Angie. Finally, Shona is immediately identified by her Irish name, and she also shows in her interview with Nell in II,iii how she has not been able to overcome the class barriers that prevent her from leading a different, more middle-class-oriented kind of life.

The third group in the play would correspond to middle-class characters, and the most obvious ones are here Mrs Kidd (defined this way in the cast, even though she introduces herself as Rosemary Kidd), her husband Howard Kidd and Louise. In this case, Howard is Marlene, Nell and Win's colleague at work and the one who was expecting the promotion given to Marlene. He is depicted as belonging to the middle class, and consequently he has a wife who behaves according to middle-class standards. As Bill Naismith states, "Mrs Kidd is the only

modern character in the play who has a surname. She is identified absolutely in relation to her husband, whose name she has taken" (Naismith 1991 [1982], xli). I would also like to argue the fact that no other character has a surname, which could be seen as a way of emphasising the lack of names for women and hence the lack of female identities. Furthermore, the fact that Mrs Kidd takes her husband's name - a name that, on the other hand, is endowed with an intrinsic maleness- can also underline the fact that the acquisition of an identity in present-day society can only come through the embracing of patriarchal values and through the struggle against people in inferior positions to one's own. Mrs Kidd does not show any joy towards Marlene as a consequence of the fact that she has achieved a higher position at work. On the contrary, she comes into the office to vindicate her husband's position, which at the same time will safeguard her own position in society. We are not talking here, then, about women as a class -as some materialist feminist critics would argue, but rather about the existence of a microcosm of classes within the word "Woman", each class oppressing the other. All of them struggling to survive. Finally, Louise is the last character that can be included into the middle-class section. She is quite obviously a middle-class woman, who has worked in a position of semi-responsibility all her life and who has been neglected by her superiors.

The last group in the play according to the division of character names corresponds to the characters of Nell and Win. According to Bill Naismith:

Win and Nell are more difficult to place; their names are socially ambiguous. They represent the new class, based on capitalist enterprise, which is accessible to the aspiring Marlene. (Naismith 1991 [1982], xli)

Since Marlene has got "what it takes" (Churchill 1982, 86) and fully embraces the dominant ideology, she will be able to join this "new class" and become not only a colleague, but also the new boss of Nell and Win. Their social ambiguity, the fact that we do not know about their origins from the information given in the play, can also be seen as a parallel of the ethics behind the "American dream", the fact that anybody has access to their specific dream as long as they follow a very clearly drawn line of political behaviour.

Another characteristic that relates Churchill to radical theatre and to a Brechtian tradition concerns the use of dialogue and the specific layout devised by the playwright.

Quoting Bill Naismith:

*Top Girls* includes different social groups in contemporary Britain and recognises changes that are occurring within the traditional parameters. The social background of the modern characters is always significant and their speech shows what this is. (Naismith 1991 [1982], xli)

The play shows how the way we speak gives information about us, in the same way as our name can also be used as a tool to control our lives. Some of the working-class characters in the play show through their speech the impossibility of articulating a minimally coherent discourse that allows them to escape from the material and ideological constraints of their everyday lives. The best examples to be used are the ones of Dull Gret and Angie. In the case of the former, she utters single words all through Act One: "Pig" (Churchill 1982, 4);

"Potatoes" (Churchill 1982, 5); "Soup" (Churchill 1982, 5); "Sad" (Churchill 1982, 7); "Marlene" (Churchill 1982, 13); "Ten" (Churchill 1982, 18); "Balls!" (Churchill 1982, 19); "Cake" (Churchill 1982, 20); "Bastard" (Churchill 1982, 23). These single words are little by little interspersed with unfinished utterances: "Can we have some more bread?" (Churchill 1982, 5); "Walking is good" (Churchill 1982, 12); "Keep you warm" (Churchill 1982, 14); "Big cock" (Churchill 1982, 14); "In a field, yah" (Churchill 1982, 17); "Big one, small one" (Churchill 1982, 19). Finally -and quite surprisingly-, she delivers a completely articulated monologue calling for rebellion, that closes the Act (and which will be analysed in detail in the next section of this chapter). However, after the monologue she resorts once more to using an unfinished phrase: "Coal bucket, good" (Churchill 1982, 29). Gret's utterances, then, can be seen as underlining and exemplifying what is being said by all the other characters in Act One: Namely, the ordeals that all the women have gone through in different periods, their total submission to the men in their lives, be they fathers, husbands or Emperors, and their reaching a revolutionary position against the males as part of the dream-like quality of the act. The faked catharsis of the Act takes place with Gret's speech, which can be seen as a call for a rising against patriarchy. However, Gret's words prove somewhat ineffective, since the fact that she goes from being almost unable to make a coherent speech to delivering the descriptive monologue she utters about rebellion comes out as something highly unlikely. This is probably why she resorts to

an unfinished utterance at the end of the Act, signalling thus the unreality of the scene as a whole.

The fact that Dull Gret is doubled with Angie in Acts Two and Three of the play is also relevant, as has already been seen. In this way, the fact that Gret resorts back to her 'simple', rather basic behaviour at the close of Act One, establishes links between the two characters and points forward to the rather bleak ending of the play. Indeed, Act One has been a dream by Marlene, no catharsis takes place, no rebellion is summoned. What we are left with is the very patriarchal ethics that will underlie the play. Taking this point further, it could also be said that, from what we can see in the play, the working class, as represented by these two characters, will never be able to pose any threat to capitalist society unless it creates its own political discourse. This will be the case of Joyce, which we will see in detail in Act Two and, especially, in Act Three. However, neither Dull Gret nor Angie will accomplish anything, since they lack the necessary awareness that would grant them the possibility of overcoming the drawbacks of their class and reach other standards of thinking and living.

Angie is also determined by class and this is something that shows in her linguistic discourse. Being uneducated, quite a simple girl and somewhat retarded, she totally lacks an acceptable command of the English language, and this is yet another element that will prevent her from accessing society and any kind of higher position in the class hierarchy. Her inability to make correct sentences appears when talking about

Joyce, Marlene's sister: "Wish she was dead" (Churchill 1982, 33). Other instances of her faulty construction of sentences are the following: "It's X, innit" (Churchill 1982, 33), or "She don't like you" (Churchill 1982, 34). She is clearly an uneducated working-class girl who lacks the sufficient command of the language necessary to allow her access to a higher-class status. When she flees from her hometown to live with Marlene in London and Marlene introduces Angie to Mrs Kidd, quite a revealing exchange takes place:

MRS KIDD. I just wanted a chat, an informal chat. It's not something I can simply - I'm sorry if I'm interrupting your work. I know office work isn't like housework / which is all interruptions.

MARLENE. No no, this is my niece. Angie. Mrs Kidd.

MRS KIDD. Very pleased to meet you.

ANGIE. Very well thank you. (Churchill 1982, 57)

Angie shows here in a transparent way how she is unable to interact with anybody else in society. To Mrs Kidd's very middle-class formulaic greeting she retorts with a completely inadequate answer, which makes the exchange deeply strange and which underlines Angie's impossibility of being in the office, surprisingly the only place she longs to be in: "It's where I most want to be in the world" (Churchill 1982, 60).

Another aspect that needs commenting in relation to language and dialogue is the use of a specific layout made by the playwright. This should be approached in the light of Aston and Savona's account of dialogue in "radical" dramatic texts. According to them:

[W]e should ... expect to find a disruption of the traditional functions characteristic of dramatic speech, i.e. the means of establishing character, space and action, and to look for registers of disruption in the linguistic sign-system. (Aston and Savona 1991, 65)

This is certainly what Churchill does in the play, establishing three other possibilities apart from the most common one in dramatic texts, "a speech usually follow[ing] the one immediately before it" (Churchill 1982, i). The first possibility is used "when one character starts speaking before the other has finished" and "the point of interruption is marked / " (Churchill 1982, i). An example of this would be as follows:

ISABELLA. This is the Emperor of Japan? / I once met the Emperor of Morocco.

NIJO. In fact he was the ex-Emperor. (Churchill 1982, 2)

In this case, the cue to Nijo will be the word 'Japan', and both characters will be saying their lines at the same time after the word is uttered.

The second possibility in the layout takes place when "a character sometimes continues speaking right through another's speech" (Churchill 1982, i). An example can be found in the following exchange:

ISABELLA. When I was forty I thought my life was over. / Oh I

NIJO. I didn't say I felt it for twenty years. Not every minute.

ISABELLA. was pitiful. I was sent on a cruise for my health and I felt even worse. Pains in my bones, pins and needles ... (Churchill 1982,7)

Here, the cue to Nijo will be the word 'over'. After that, the dialogue of both characters will overlap.

The third and final possibility in this radical devising of layout consists of the fact that "sometimes a speech follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it, and continuity is marked \*" (Churchill 1982, i). The example for this one is as follows:



GRISELDA. I'd seen him riding by, we all had. And he'd seen me in the fields with the sheep\*.

ISABELLA. I would have been well suited to minding sheep.

NIJO. And Mr Nugent riding by.

ISABELLA. Of course not, Nijo, I mean a healthy life in the open air.

JOAN. \*He just rode up while you were minding the sheep and asked you to marry him? (Churchill 1982, 20-1)

In this case, 'with the sheep' is the cue to both Isabella and Joan's speeches. Nijo's cue will be 'minding sheep', and Isabella's new cue will be 'riding by'.

What all these different and innovative linguistic strategies bring forward is, therefore, a willingness on the dramatist's side to align herself with a very specific tradition of radical theatre that exploits the different types of disruption mentioned before. One aspect of this disruption has to do with the "I-You exchange" and with the notion of the I:

The stability of the I-You exchange which fixes identity in discourse is ... fragmented in Churchill's restaurant scene where a babble of 'I's point not to the individual but to a collective female 'I', the object of patriarchal oppression. (Aston and Savona 1991, 70)

On top of that, Aston and Savona argue that:

In *Top Girls*, the use of overlap is a sign of the female voice. Brecht's splintering of the ego is further problematised in Churchill's text by the female entry into the symbolic order of language. As a logocentric or phallogocentric sign-system (as identified in Derridean or Lacanian terms), language places the female subject in a marginalised relation to its patriarchal order. (Aston and Savona 1991, 70)

By destabilising the linguistic exchange and therefore unfixing identity, but at the same time giving predominance to a "female voice", Churchill seems to be stressing in a radical way "the destabilisation and displacement of the female subject in relation to language" (Aston and Savona 1991, 70), and

consequently in relation to occupying a position in a patriarchally-defined society. In relation to this, the different linguistic strategies above-mentioned also underline one of the main concerns of the play, namely the fact that all the women in Act One speak over each other's lines and thus they do not listen to one another at all. According to Michelene Wandor:

The dovetailing of the dialogue suggests a sharing of experiences, and the interruptions give a sense of bubbling excitement, but also suggests (depending on the nature of the production) the ways in which the women can chatter on and on without necessarily listening to one another. (Wandor 1987, 123)

This reinforces the gloomy fact that they will not be able to learn from each other's experiences in life, and therefore no hopeful alternative can be envisaged. On a similar level, the same thing happens in Act Three, when Marlene and Joyce, the two sisters, confront each other. As we will see later on, most of the confrontation is based on the same technique, which makes it almost impossible for the two sisters to listen to each other and therefore to reach some kind of understanding at the end. This is why the end of the play is left open, and this is the reason why Joyce and Marlene eventually fail to communicate with one another, since they only seem to be concerned about making their own discourses explicit and available to themselves.

Act One of *Top Girls* takes place in a London restaurant, "a public space out of time" (Wandor 1987, 122), and gathers Marlene with the five women from literature, history and art. They are going to hold a celebratory meeting, the reason being

Marlene's recent promotion to Managing Director in the Employment Agency she works in. Through the act, the women talk about themselves, the submission to the men in their lives, the sons they have borne and their lovers, constantly interrupting each other and speaking through one another's speeches. As they get more and more intoxicated, they start releasing their anger for all the atrocities they have had to suffer from the men in their lives in such a way that the act culminates in a climax-like catharsis, that, nevertheless, is left unresolved because it is a faked one and leads nowhere.

When the act begins we are introduced to Marlene, whom we see in command from the very beginning: "I'd like a bottle of Frascati straight away if you've got one really cold" (Churchill 1982, 1). In this case, she is ordering drinks, but the way she addresses the waitress hints at the fact that she knows exactly what she wants and how to ask for it. She is accompanied by the silent waitress, who all through the act will make sure that everything is promptly being taken care of.

It soon becomes clear that Marlene is celebrating something at the restaurant. She is congratulated by Isabella, to whom she retorts: "Well, it's a step. It makes for a party. I haven't time for a holiday" (Churchill 1982, 1). This sparse information sheds some light on the idea of celebration, but it is not until later in the act that we are allowed to share the information:

MARLENE. Magnificent all of you. We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think, Griselda isn't even here yet, and I want to drink a toast to you all.  
ISABELLA. To yourself surely, / we're here to celebrate your success.

NIJO. Yes, Marlene.  
JOAN. Yes, what is it exactly, Marlene?  
MARLENE. Well it's not Pope but it is managing director.\*  
JOAN. And you find work for people.  
MARLENE. Yes, an employment agency.  
NIJO. \*Over all the women you work with. And the men.  
ISABELLA. And very well deserved too. I'm sure it's just  
the beginning of something extraordinary.  
MARLENE. Well it's worth a party.  
ISABELLA. To Marlene.\*  
MARLENE. And all of us.  
JOAN. \*Marlene.  
NIJO. Marlene.  
GRET. Marlene.  
MARLENE. We've all come a long way. To our courage and  
the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary  
achievements.

*They laugh and drink a toast.* (Churchill 1982, 12-3)

The reason for the dinner in a posh restaurant is therefore Marlene's recent promotion to managing director at the agency she works in, the "Top Girls" employment agency. From Joan's perspective, Marlene's job is regarded as having altruistic connotations and therefore as something positive, since she will give people jobs. Her promotion will also allow her to rule over the people she works with, irrespective of their gender and of the fact that Marlene does not wear trousers at the workplace: "I don't wear trousers in the office. / I could but I don't" (Churchill 1982, 8). This is why Marlene is so ravishing and willing to celebrate with all those "clever girls" (Churchill 1982, 4) from the past. At first, she seems rather humble about her achievement, but soon she gives in, as can be seen in the words she utters in her toast. Thus, she eventually submits to making a reference to the women's braveness to steer their own lives, and to their accomplishments. Even though it is true that these women are really courageous indeed and that they have actually achieved

quite a number of things in their lives, there is a paradox that can be found in Marlene's words, the paradox being that, as Michelene Wandor has put it, these women "have not all changed their own lives" (Wandor 1987, 123), since they have conformed at all times to male standards of behaviour. One of the messages that the playwright seems to be putting forward through the play is that, in fact, they have had to pay extremely high prices to be in the position they are in, but that nothing has really changed in their lives nor in women's lives in general.

The enthusiastic atmosphere reached with the toast progressively wears itself out as the act develops, to reach a culmination at the close of the act. Way before the end, though, Marlene seems to acknowledge the reality she and the other women have gone through, and she verbalises it: "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?" (Churchill 1982, 18). These words are uttered well into Act One, and after some of the women's ordeals in life have been exposed. However, Marlene herself continues being some kind of mystery to the reader/audience. The only information we know about her so far is the fact that she has just been promoted and that she experiences anger sometimes: "Don't you get angry? I get angry" (Churchill 1982, 5). There is also one last element to take into consideration at this stage when dealing with the character of Marlene, the fact that she leaves the room when Patient Griselda tells the story of how she was deprived of her children. First, Marlene gets angry at Walter, Griselda's husband, taking her two children off her as a test of her love:

GRISELDA. Walter found it hard to believe I loved him. He couldn't believe I would always obey him. He had to prove it.

MARLENE. I don't think Walter likes women.

GRISELDA. I'm sure he loved me, Marlene, all the time.

MARLENE. He just had a funny way / of showing it.  
(Churchill 1982, 22)

By questioning the nature of the love Walter showed Griselda, Marlene is also disclosing the misogyny and hatred inherent in power relations between the sexes. The fact that Marlene is able to verbalise it hints at her capability of analysing how these relationships work. It is when Griselda explains in more detail how she had to give up her daughter in order to be slaughtered that Marlene seems to reach her limit:

MARLENE. But you let him take her? You didn't struggle?

GRISELDA. I asked him to give her back so I could kiss her. And I asked him to bury her where no animals could dig her up. / It

ISABELLA. Oh my dear.

GRISELDA. was Walter's child to do what he liked with.\*

MARLENE. Walter was bonkers.

GRET. Bastard.

ISABELLA. \*But surely, murder.

GRISELDA. I had promised.

MARLENE. I can't stand this. I'm going for a pee.

MARLENE goes out. (Churchill 1982, 22-3)

The fact that Marlene leaves the room in order not to hear the story will certainly prove symptomatic of her own ordeal in life, as we shall see in more detail in Acts II and III. Besides, the fact that the act ends with her being totally intoxicated further points in this direction.

The very first guest to arrive at the restaurant is Isabella Bird, the Victorian traveller, and the account she gives Marlene of her sister Hennie, who stayed in Scotland instead of joining her in Hawaii, immediately establishes links with the relationship between Marlene and her own sister Joyce,

who also stayed in their East-Anglian village instead of moving to London to start a new life. Isabella and Marlene's exchange at the beginning of the play mirrors in a very relevant way the exchange between Marlene and Joyce at the very end, creating a circularity of female experience and seeming to tell the reader/spectator about the futility of such an experience in a world dominated by men. We can see this in the case of Isabella and Hennie:

ISABELLA. I sent for my sister Hennie to come and join me. I said, Hennie we'll live here forever and help the natives. You can buy two sirloins of beef for what a pound of chops costs in Edinburgh. And Hennie wrote back, the dear, that yes, she would come to Hawaii if I wished, but I said she had far better stay where she was. Hennie was suited to life in Tobermory.

MARLENE. Poor Hennie.

ISABELLA. Do you have a sister?

MARLENE. Yes in fact.

ISABELLA. Hennie was happy. She was good. I did miss its face, my own pet. But I couldn't stay in Scotland. I loathed the constant murk. (Churchill 1982, 1-2)

Then, in the case of Marlene and Joyce:

MARLENE. You could have left.

JOYCE. Who says I wanted to leave?

MARLENE. Stop getting at me then, you're really boring.

JOYCE. How could I have left?

MARLENE. Did you want to?

JOYCE. I said how, / how could I?

MARLENE. If you'd wanted to you'd have done it.

JOYCE. Christ. (Churchill 1982, 76)

The relationship between the sisters seems to be quite similar, bearing in mind that both Isabella and Marlene decided to leave their hometown and travel around. Isabella went around the world. Marlene, our contemporary, went first to London, then to the USA, and finally she returned to London. Hennie and Joyce seem to have had different behaviours, in the sense that, even though both had stayed back home and adjusted to life

there, Joyce seems to have developed a clearer sense of class, as we will see when dealing with Acts Two and Three. Another aspect worth mentioning is that Isabella and Hennie Bird seem to come from a much higher social status than Marlene and Joyce, who are definitely East-Anglian working class. The implication here seems to be that women belonging to the middle or upper-middle classes could have somewhat more command over their own lives than working-class women, even though there always seems to be one party paying a higher toll for somebody else's achievements.

Isabella Bird, though an intrepid traveller, was totally submitted to her father, a clergyman, who on the other hand provided her with a higher degree of education than the one she was supposed to have:

ISABELLA. I tried to be a clergyman's daughter. Needlework, music, charitable schemes. I had a tumour removed from my spine and spent a great deal of time on the sofa. I studied the metaphysical poets and hymnology./ I thought I enjoyed intellectual pursuits.

NIJO. Ah, you like poetry. I come of a line of eight generations of poets. Father had a poem / in the anthology.

ISABELLA. My father taught me Latin although I was a girl./ But

MARLENE. They didn't have Latin at my school.

ISABELLA. really I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses./ Better than reading books,

NIJO. Oh but I'm sure you're very clever.

ISABELLA. eh Gret? A rough life in the open air.  
(Churchill 1982, 3-4)

Isabella was given the possibility of choosing by her very class origin, and this was something she took advantage of. She was even taught Latin, her father being a member of the church. However, she decided to reject all this and become the adventurer she was to be remembered as. In this exchange,



another element that comes up is the fact that Marlene did not learn Latin -probably as a consequence of her belonging to different class and educational systems, thus signalling another difference between the two that can account for the different paths they followed in life.

Nevertheless, Isabella had to pay a price for not conforming to the stereotypical behaviour she was expected to follow. Thus, when she became older, she experienced a breakdown, which is interesting to consider in connection to her tendency to be ill:

ISABELLA. When I was forty I thought my life was over./ Oh I

NIJO. I didn't say I felt it for twenty years. Not every minute.

ISABELLA. was pitiful. I was sent on a cruise for my health and I felt even worse. Pains in my bones, pins and needles in my hands, swelling behind the ears, and -oh, stupidity. I shook all over, indefinable terror. And Australia seemed to me a hideous country, the acacias stank like drains./ I had a

NIJO. You were homesick.

ISABELLA. photograph for Hennie but I told her I wouldn't send it, my hair had fallen out and my clothes were crooked, I looked completely insane and suicidal. (Churchill 1982, 7)

Something quite remarkable that springs from these lines is the fact that there does not seem to be a life for women above the age of forty. This experience is mirrored in the play in the character of Lady Nijo, as we shall see later on. Another relevant point here that shall also be explored in further detail is the reference to Isabella's 'crooked' clothes. In this respect, a little later, and as a consequence of the therapeutic effect of the travelling on her, she makes a reference to the "Sandwich Isles", where "I woke up every morning happy, knowing there would be nothing to annoy me. No

nervousness. No dressing" (Churchill 1982, 8). The social and cultural constraints inherent in age and dressing are therefore exposed at this point of the play.

Isabella was actually paying the price for not conforming to the society she was living in. This is what created her "indefinable terror", which can also be linked to Joan's "terrorem" and to Angie's uncanny "[f]rightening", that closes Act Three of the play. The best way to find a solution to this was finally submitting to the rules of society through the institution of marriage. However, before that, she had a remarkable experience with a man who fell in love with her because she "could make scones and also lasso cattle" (Churchill 1982, 9). She actually tried to make up for her improper behaviour, but it did not really work:

ISABELLA. The loves of my life were Hennie, my own pet, and my dear husband the doctor, who nursed Hennie in her last illness. I knew it would be terrible when Hennie died but I didn't know how terrible. I felt half of myself had gone. How could I go on my travels without that sweet soul waiting at home for my letters? It was Doctor Bishop's devotion to her in her last illness that made me decide to marry him. He and Hennie had the same sweet character. I had not.

NIJO. I thought his majesty had sweet character because when he found out about Ariake he was so kind. But really it was because he no longer cared for me. One night he even sent me out to a man who had been pursuing me./ He lay awake on the other side of the screens and listened.

ISABELLA. I did wish marriage had seemed more of a step. I tried very hard to cope with the ordinary drudgery of life. I was ill again with carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration. I ordered a tricycle, that was my idea of adventure then. And John himself fell ill, with erysipelas and anaemia. I began to love him with my whole heart but it was too late. He was a skeleton with transparent white hands. I wheeled him on various seafronts in a bathchair. And he faded and left me. There was nothing in my life. The doctors said I had gout / and my heart was much affected. (Churchill 1982, 11-2)

Here Isabella is pointing to the power relation she

established with her sister Hennie, according to which she would be the one travelling while the other would stay at home waiting for her to come back and providing her with a point of reference in her wanderings. Thus, maybe as a consequence of her sister's death and the subsequent disappearance of the role played by Hennie, she felt the urge to conform to society through the institution of marriage. The fact that her husband died and she was left with a void may underline the ordeal that many women totally dependent on men have been through when, after the decease of their loved ones, they find themselves unable to face life.

Another important aspect in relation to the character of Isabella Bird is that she recounts the experiences she has had from a very particular Western perspective. This can be related to Edward Said's theorisation of the East. According to him, and approaching Orientalism from the Foucauldian notion of discourse:

Without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (Said 1978, 3)

This is what Isabella is doing in the play. In fact, her account of the East is totally shaped by the West itself, and in this way she definitely seems to be "managing" and "producing" the East. Besides, she seems to be exerting the same power over the East as the male society is exerting over her. In this way, and apart from establishing an interesting parallelism, the play is showing us how male society also

"manages" and "produces" the female, the representation then of the "Other", of the East. Her words are clear in conveying this imperialist view:

ISABELLA. \*Such superstition! I was nearly murdered in China by a howling mob. They thought the barbarians ate babies and put them under railway sleepers to make the tracks steady, and ground up their eyes to make the lenses of cameras./ So

MARLENE. And you had a camera!

ISABELLA. they were shouting, 'child-eater, child-eater.' Some people tried to sell girl babies to Europeans for cameras or stew!

*Laughter* (Churchill 1982, 15)

Her account of the selling of girl babies is, to say the least, frivolous and superficial. The fact that the women laugh at such an atrocity also implies that they are reproducing the parameters of power exertion and that they are not actually learning much from the experience of being together and sharing their life stories. Later on, Isabella adds:

ISABELLA. Whenever I came back to England I felt I had so much to atone for. Hennie and John were so good. I did no good in my life. I spent years in self-gratification. So I hurled myself into committees, I nursed the people of Tobermory in the epidemic of influenza, I lectured the Young Women's Christian Association on Thrift. I talked and talked explaining how the East was corrupt and vicious. My travels must do good to someone beside myself. I wore myself out with good causes. (Churchill 1982, 18)

This is the price Isabella had to pay for daring to live a different kind of life. And this entails as well the demonisation of what she most loved in the world, alien countries, distant lands. She had to render them "Other" and make England the centre in order to redeem herself from her improper behaviour.

However, Isabella can also be seen, and probably most importantly so, in terms of the dissidence she seems to embody

as a character. Dissidence in terms of class and dissidence from a traditionally feminine behaviour. In fact, she states many times throughout the act her refusal to behave according to her class standards, once she realises about the impossibility of its ever happening:

ISABELLA. I can never be like Hennie. I was always so busy in England, a kind of business I detested. The very presence of people exhausted my emotional reserves. I could not be like Hennie however I tried. I tried and was as ill as could be. The doctor suggested a steel net to support my head, the weight of my own head was too much for my diseased spine. / It is dangerous to put oneself in depressing circumstances. Why should I do it?

JOAN. Don't cry.

...

ISABELLA. How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady.

...

ISABELLA. Why should I? Why should I? (Churchill 1982, 25-7)

This is Isabella's point. Her questioning in the collective final catharsis of the necessity of following society's standards and rigidly fixed gender positions thus becomes illuminating. Furthermore, and this time borrowing the Latin from Pope Joan (yet another hint at her upper-class education), she also laments the grievings women have suffered throughout history: "Oh miserables!" (Churchill 1982, 27), before delivering her final speech, which closes the act in a definitely dissident tone, hence its power:

ISABELLA. I thought I would have a last jaunt up the west river in China. Why not? But the doctors were so very grave. I just went to Morocco. The sea was so wild I had to be landed by ship's crane in a coal bucket. / My horse was a terror to me a

GRET. Coal bucket, good.

JOAN. nos in luce timemus  
something  
terrorem.  
ISABELLA. powerful black charger.

NIJO *is laughing and crying.*

JOAN *gets up and is sick in a corner.*

MARLENE *is drinking ISABELLA's brandy.*

So off I went to visit the Berber sheikhs in full blue trousers and great brass spurs. I was the only European woman ever to have seen the Emperor of Morocco. I was seventy years old. What lengths to go to for a last chance of joy. I knew my return of vigour was only temporary, but how marvellous while it lasted. (Churchill 1982, 28-9)

The very fact of continuing with her travels is the best act of dissidence she can choose. Besides, the fact that she visits the Emperor of Morocco (whom she mentioned at the opening of the play, thus emphasising the circularity of the Act) wearing trousers is also significant, in terms of the appropriation of a piece of clothing which has traditionally been considered as masculine. Bearing in mind how, earlier in the act, Isabella makes clear that she "always travelled as a lady" (Churchill 1982, 8), she clearly becomes more of a transgressor at the end of the act, and the fact that the act closes on her seems to add to this feeling of dissidence from the dominant order.

The second guest to arrive at the dinner party is Lady Nijo. Upon her entrance, she makes a direct reference to the probable challenge embodied in the reunion. The fact that a group of women get together, drink and celebrate is quite far from what she was accustomed to in her native land. As she puts it herself: "It was always the men who used to get so drunk. I'd be one of the maidens, passing the sake" (Churchill 1982,

2). From Nijo's perspective, then, the fact that the women in Act One are occupying a subject position that does not naturally correspond to them is clear from the beginning.

Lady Nijo introduces, then, a central aspect of her life that will also become a central issue in the play. She recounts how she became a concubine at a very young age, due to the Emperor of Japan's wishes:

NIJO. Well I was only fourteen and I knew he meant something but I didn't know what. He sent me an eight-layered gown and I sent it back. So when the time came I did nothing but cry. My thin gowns were badly ripped. But even that morning when he left / -he'd a green robe with a scarlet lining and

MARLENE. Are you saying he raped you?

NIJO. very heavily embroidered trousers, I already felt different about him. It made me uneasy. No, of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby. I soon found I was sad if he stayed away. It was depressing day after day not knowing when he would come. I never enjoyed taking other women to him. (Churchill 1982, 2-3)

Nijo's words embody the interiorising of the male discourse according to which women are negated a subject position in the patriarchal Symbolic Order and are relegated to being an object, totally submitted to the male subject. Such an interiorising comes once Nijo is able to decode the symbolic value of clothing. She refuses the 'eight-layered gown' the Emperor sends her, that represents her entry into the Symbolic Order, and instead she tries to keep her own clothes. However, this proves unsuccessful, as he rips her 'thin gowns', too fragile to protect her from the strength of a man who doubles her in age. The fact that the Emperor himself is dressed in very elaborate clothes that help to signify his power is also significant. In fact, his 'heavily embroidered trousers' might

add to his position as a ruler, whereas the fact that he is wearing a robe 'with a scarlet lining' may be a hint at Nijo's deflowering and hence at his power over her. What we have in the play is, then, "the feminine ... [being] verbally and visually signed on and through the body" (Aston 1997a, 39). This is probably the most important issue of the play and can be exemplified through all the characters that appear in it, but most crucially with the case of the women in Act One and of Angie in Acts II and III. According to Elin Diamond:

The five 'top girls' eating and drinking together in an expensive London restaurant have entered Western representation, but at a cost. Each points to the elaborate historical text that covers her body -Nijo in geisha silks, Joan in regal papal robes- but their fragmented speeches, the effect of the words of one being spoken through and over words of another, refer to need, violence, loss, and pain, to a body unable to signify within those texts. (Diamond 1988c, 196)

Lady Nijo assumes the importance of dressing as part of her acceptance to be written upon, thus hoping to be given a passport that will grant her survival in the patriarchal system of representation that has taken possession of her. This is why she becomes extremely concerned all through the act with the different 'historical text[s]' that will signify her. As an example:

NIJO. Don't you like getting dressed? I adored my clothes.  
/ When I was chosen to give sake to His Majesty's brother,  
MARLENE. You had prettier colours than Isabella.  
NIJO. the Emperor Kameyana, on his formal visit, I wore  
raw silk pleated trousers and a seven-layered gown in  
shades of red, and two outer garments, / yellow lined with  
green and a light  
MARLENE. Yes, all that silk must have been very ...

*The WAITRESS starts to clear the first course.*

JOAN. I dressed as a boy when I left home.\*  
NIJO. green jacket. Lady Betto had a five-layered gown in



shades of green and purple. (Churchill 1982, 8)

Once she has interiorised the implications involved in dressing, she tries to adjust to it with all her might, as we can see in her proudly veiled account of the hierarchical distinction between the numbers of layers of the different gowns. However, once she becomes useless to the system, personified here in the figure of the Emperor of Japan, she will automatically lose her position and therefore her right to wear fancy clothes:

NIJO. There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor's favour. The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. / But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk. (Churchill 1982, 12)

The right to wear distinguished clothes mirrors, then, the hierarchical system present in the Symbolic Order. A sub-group appears, however, including the Empress and Niho. Both women can be said to be oppressed by the systems of representation. However, the Empress, being in a higher position than Niho, chooses to exert all the oppression she can on her, perpetuating in this way the workings of the system. The expensive clothes, a commodity in themselves, therefore come to mirror another commodity: The women's bodies. Once the bodies have been written upon, they become useless. The bodies then become 'unable to signify'. Furthermore, and according to Elaine Aston, this metaphorical use of clothes "make[s] 'visible' an historical/patriarchal text which is, however, a sight/site of disruption in terms of the 'spoken' pain and suffering" (Aston 1995, 47). This disruptive characteristic is

what the play is repeatedly going to emphasise.

Lady Nijo's body becomes 'unable to signify' once she loses the Emperor's favour. The only way out, then, is to enter holy orders, always following her father's advice. As she puts it: "Oh, my father was a very religious man. Just before he died he said to me, 'Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders'" (Churchill 1982, 3). The idea, then, is to be subjected to any kind of male power, and the triad Father-King-God appears once again as embodying the rule over women. Once the Emperor has rejected Nijo, she has no other option in the patriarchal economy but to become a nun. At this point, having been thrown out of the power structure, she shares Isabella Bird's feelings of loss when she was forty. The difference in the case of Nijo is that she chooses dissidence the moment she is expelled from the core of the Symbolic Order. She joins a religious order and thus continues wearing the imprint of masculine oppression, but instead of living as a recluse in a convent she chooses to become a wandering nun and walks through Japan for the next twenty years. She chooses then a marginalised position within the established order.

Nijo's deed has a precedent earlier on in her story, though, which is related to the treatment women receive from men. As she says:

NIJO. I'll tell you something that made me angry. I was eighteen, at the Full Moon Ceremony. They make a special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks, and then they beat their women across the loins so they'll have sons and not daughters. So the Emperor beat us all / very hard as usual -that's not it,  
MARLENE. What a sod.

NIJO. Marlene, that's normal, what made us angry, he told his attendants they could beat us too. Well they had a

wonderful time. / So Lady Genki and I made a plan, and the ladies all hid

*The WAITRESS has entered with coffees.*

MARLENE. I'd like another brandy please. Better make it six.

NIJO. in his rooms, and Lady Mashimizu stood guard with a stick at the door, and when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. 'We couldn't even dream of stepping on your Majesty's shadow.' And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick. (Churchill 1982, 26-7)

This rebellion against the established power structure that inflicts corporal punishment on its female subjects also hints at other rebellions that will take place through the act. In this sense, dissidence gives way to more radical action on the part of the women subjects who choose to become subjects of their own story. Even though this seems to be a result of the Emperor's homosocial behaviour, that makes him establish some complicity with his male social inferiors (in the same way as Clive established a homosocial link with his servant Joshua in *Cloud Nine*), rather than the result of the ladies' consciousness in the field of sexual politics, the fact that they beat up the Emperor is nevertheless a significant step. Besides, this is probably why Lady Niho joins in in the final catharsis at the end of the act, experiencing a relief that shows in her final mixing of laughs and tears. Exhilaration and pain.

The next character to arrive at the dinner party is Dull Gret. As we have seen before, she has been depicted as leading a female rebellion against the devils in a painting by Brueghel. It is also interesting to remark that she "[has been]

taken as the archetype of proletarian rebellion by Brecht" (Innes 1992, 466). In fact, Churchill takes on the Brechtian archetype and uses her as a symbol of the proletariat and of its struggle against oppression. A husky and taciturn woman, she says very little all through the act until the very end, when she takes on the lead and delivers a powerful monologue which is nothing else but a call for rebellion against the power structures. Through this character we can also see examples of dissidence, such as her reaction when hearing Nijo leaving the court and setting out wandering:

NIJO. Out of favour but I didn't die. I left on foot, nobody saw me go. For the next twenty years I walked through Japan.

GRET. Walking is good. (Churchill 1982, 12)

By emphasising the act of walking in itself Gret is actually stressing the importance of Nijo's deed, that is, leaving the palace and starting a new life by herself, without depending on the Emperor. Thus, she is pointing to new ways of living, alternatives to the established order.

Another example of Gret's capacity for subversion is related to her conception of sexuality. We learn through the act that she bore ten children, which gives the reader/audience the idea of the sexual oppression she must have suffered. However, when talking to Joan about the latter's lover in the Vatican, she makes quite a joyful use of sex:

JOAN. In the end I did take a lover again.\*

ISABELLA. In the Vatican?

GRET. \*Keep you warm.

NIJO. \*Ah, lover.

MARLENE. \*Good for you.

JOAN. He was one of my chamberlains. There are such a lot of servants when you're a Pope. The food's very good. And I realised I did know the truth. Because whatever the Pope

says, that's true.

NIJO. What was he like, the chamberlain?\*

GRET. Big cock.

ISABELLA. Oh Gret. (Churchill 1982, 14)

Through her reaction, Gret is emphasising the festive element implicit in sexuality, rather than the moral reprobation that we can feel in Isabella's words and that probably responds to a more Victorian attitude, mirroring the conception of woman as the "angel in the house". With this festive use of sex, Gret is undermining the traditional conception of sexuality as a male realm totally forbidden to the female.

Bearing in mind the progression in Dull Gret's articulation of words, it is interesting at this point to analyse her monologue at the end of Act One. Interpreting it as a distinct call for rebellion, for "collective action", and also in terms of the returning from Lacan's Symbolic Order to the Imaginary, Gret starts speaking immediately after Pope Joan "subsides" (Churchill 1982, 27), after having delivered her speech in Latin. These are her words:

GRET. We come into hell through a big mouth. Hell's black and red./ It's like the village where I come from. There's a river and

MARLENE. (to JOAN). Shut up, pet.

ISABELLA. Listen, she's been to hell.

GRET. a bridge and houses. There's places on fire like when the soldiers come. There's a big devil sat on a roof with a big hole in his arse and he's scooping stuff out of it with a big ladle and it's falling down on us, and it's money, so a lot of the women stop and get some. But most of us is fighting the devils. There's lots of little devils, our size, and we get them down all right and give them a beating. There's lots of funny creatures round your feet, you don't like to look, like rats and lizards, and nasty things, a bum with a face, and fish with legs, and faces on things that don't have faces on. But they don't hurt, you just keep going. Well we'd had worse, you see, we'd had the Spanish. We'd all had family killed. My big

son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword. I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. I come out my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, 'Come on, we're going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out.' And they all come out just as they was / from baking or washing in their

NIJO. All the ladies come.

GRET. aprons, and we push down the street and the ground opens up and we go through a big mouth into a street just like ours but in hell. I've got a sword in my hand from somewhere and I fill a basket with gold cups they drink out of down there. You just keep running on and fighting / you didn't stop for nothing. Oh we give them devils such a beating.

NIJO. Take that, take that. (Churchill 1982, 27-8)

Gret's first description of hell could very well be applied to the village Marlene and her sister Joyce come from. In this sense, an immediate parallel can be established in terms of class between the three characters, and especially between Gret and Joyce. In fact, in the same way as Gret leads a revolt against oppression, Joyce also tries to rebel in her own way against the power structures, as we are going to see in Act Three. On the other hand, the description could also be applied to London itself -that will symbolise in this way a hellish place, and, by extension, to the capitalist system.

Gret establishes in a graphic way the connection between money and excrement, and notes how some of the women get distracted at the sight of money and abandon the fight. However, most of them continue with it and defeat the devils. This is a clear metaphor for the situation of the contemporary women in the play. As has been said before, Joyce can be compared with Gret, whereas Marlene would stand for one of the women who get distracted by the attraction of money and stop fighting.

To go back to the previous point about the longing for an Imaginary Order that has disappeared, and to relate this to the consideration of the importance of clothing as an instance of male writing over a female body, we might quote Elaine Aston. Applying French feminist theory to the play, and specifically Hélène Cixous's notion of the necessity of 'woman to write herself' (Cixous 1980 [1975]), instead of being written upon, Aston argues:

For 'woman to write herself' she needs to be re-located, un-made in the pre-Oedipal space of the Lacanian Imaginary, i.e. the pre-symbolic ... It requires a bursting, a violent breaking up of the symbolic order/language which has denied women their 'voice', their identity. (Aston 1995, 46-7)

According to Jacques Lacan, the access to the Symbolic Order, a consequence of the mirror stage, comes together with the acquisition of language and the surrender to the Law of the Father. Since language is given in and by a system dominated by men, women's access to it is going to be clearly mediated. According to this, women's 'voice', their 'identity', will be totally artificial, a construct defined by patriarchy. This is precisely what Gret purports to destroy in her powerful speech, in which she equals the Symbolic Order to hell. A hell where all the devils are male.

After Dull Gret, the next guest to arrive at the party is Pope Joan. Being a Pope (actually a *Popess*), and therefore the highest representative of a completely misogynist institution, she paradoxically embodies the impossibility for women to achieve a position of responsibility in a man's world, and the price to be paid for the disruption of the established order.

Joan, who defines herself as a "heresy" (Churchill 1982, 6), first dressed as a boy for intellectual purposes, since this was the only possibility for her to access education:

JOAN. I dressed as a boy when I left home.\*  
NIJO. green jacket. Lady Betto had a five-layered gown in shades of green and purple.  
ISABELLA. \*You dressed as a boy?  
MARLENE. Of course, / for safety.  
JOAN. It was easy, I was only twelve. Also women weren't / allowed in the library. We wanted to study in Athens. (Churchill 1982, 8)

The prohibition for women to enter the library in Pope Joan's IXth century is also reminiscent of the experience undergone by the narratorial persona in Virginia Woolf's XXth century essay *A Room of One's Own*:

[H]ere I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction. (Woolf 1945 [1928], 9)

Whereas Woolf's persona is denied access to the library because of her sex, Joan was ingenious enough to deceive the people of her age into believing that she was a man. Her intelligence also grants her the position of Pope. However, there is a price to be paid for such a deed, and it turns out to be extremely high, both physically and psychologically. Thus, when her biological sex is discovered, she is exemplarily punished. The fact that she is discovered precisely because of her femaleness, when she gives birth to a child in the middle of a procession, is also significant. Besides, this fact immediately establishes links with Marlene and her relation to



motherhood, as we will see in Acts Two and Three. Joan's account of her childbearing is powerful:

JOAN. I didn't know of course that it was near the time. It was Rogation Day, there was always a procession. I was on the horse dressed in my robes and a cross was carried in front of me, and all the cardinals were following, and all the clergy of Rome, and a huge crowd of people./ We set off from

MARLENE. Total Pope.

JOAN. St Peter's to go to St John's. I had felt a slight pain earlier, I thought it was something I'd eaten, and then it came back, and came back more often. I thought when this is over I'll go to bed. There were still long gaps when I felt perfectly all right and I didn't want to attract attention to myself and spoil the ceremony. Then I suddenly realised what it must be. I had to last out till I could get home and hide. Then something changed, my breath started to catch, I couldn't plan things properly any more. We were in a little street that goes between St Clement's and the Colosseum, and I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. Great waves of pressure were going through my body, I heard sounds like a cow lowing, they came out of my mouth. Far away I heard people screaming, 'The Pope is ill, the Pope is dying.' And the baby just slid out onto the road.\* (Churchill 1982, 16-7)

Thus, Joan could get hold of power for a small portion of time in her life. It lasted until her femininity got on the way. To a certain extent, it can be said that her act is another act of dissidence, in a similar way as Isabella, Lady Nijo or Gret's are too. However, she is severely punished by it, as she tells the group and so interrupts the laughter her story has provoked:

JOAN. One of the cardinals said, 'The Antichrist!' and fell over in a faint.

*They all laugh.*

MARLENE. So what did they do? They weren't best pleased.

JOAN. They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.

*They stop laughing.*

MARLENE. Joan, how horrible. (Churchill 1982, 17)

Joan is also the character who, at the end of the scene, delivers a speech in Latin. Joan acquired the language because, as we have seen, she dressed up as a boy to get an access to education. This is relevant because several of the women in the play have had to adopt male behaviour in order to carry on with their lives and -as Louise says in Act Two- "pass as a man at work" (Churchill 1982, 52) or elsewhere. This impersonation of male behaviour is related to the psychological price these women have had to pay in the play, and the case of Joan exemplifies it very well. In fact, Joan got accustomed to being a boy, even though she was not one, and this made her reject her biological sex. As she puts it herself:

NIJO. Well you were a woman.

JOAN. Exactly and I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope. (Churchill 1982, 15)

In this case, she is negating her sex because it was something that prevented her from accessing a position of power. Besides, impersonating a man will have lethal consequences. Maybe the worst of all will be the loss of touch with herself, the total lack of knowledge of her own body and being. Joan makes this point clear when she says to Nijo: "I wasn't used to having a woman's body" (Churchill 1982, 16), which underlines the ignorance she feels in relation to her own body. She reinforces the idea later on, when commenting on Griselda's ordeal: "I didn't live a woman's life. I don't understand it" (Churchill 1982, 24).

Joan's speech in Latin acquires a definite relevance, since it also precipitates the catharsis:

JOAN. Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,

e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;  
non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,  
sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.  
Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri  
per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.  
Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere  
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,/  
despicere unde queas alios passimque videre  
errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae,

...

certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,  
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore  
ad summas emergere opes retumque potiri.  
O miseras / hominum mentis, o pectora caeca!\*

...

qualibus in tenebris vitae quantisque periclis  
degitur hoc aevi quodcumquest!/ nonne videre  
nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui  
corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur

...

Something something something mortisque timores  
tum vacuum pectus- damn.  
Quod si ridicula-  
something something on and on and on and something  
splendorem purpureai

...

nos in luce timemus  
something  
terrorem. (Churchill 1982, 27-9)

Approaching the source of Joan's speech will shed some light on its meaning and, thus, on the meaning of the play as a whole. Her words come from Lucretius, and specifically from his work *De Rerum Natura*, Book II, Lines 1-18, 45-47, 52, 55-59. The translation of the main part of the speech reads as follows:

It's pleasing, when over a swollen sea winds are stirring up the waters, to watch from the shore another's peril: not because his troubles are a cause of delight or joy, but because it's pleasing to recognise what troubles you are free from yourself. It's just as pleasing to witness

battle being waged across a plain, when you're out of danger yourself. But nothing is more delightful than to occupy the calm of an ivory tower built on the teachings of white men; from here you can look down on others as they wander about seeking some path through life, as they strive to be clever, to out-do each other in reputation, battling night and day to get to the top of the pile with their power and wealth. What miserable minds men have! How blind their hearts are! To waste their brief span of life in darkness, in peril! Don't they see all nature needs is for life to be lived without physical pain, while the mind, freed from cares, enjoys a sense of delight? (Lucretius in Naismith 1991 [1982], 91)

These Latin words are relevant in several respects. They are specifically praising a male-based position, the 'ivory tower built on the teachings of white men'. Nevertheless, as they are uttered by Joan, a woman impersonating a man, their effect seems to be to highlight once again the superior position of men and the way the struggle for equality seems to be leading women to a dead end. This is reinforced by the fact that, towards the end, Joan's speech becomes more dispersed as she starts mixing Latin with English. The repetition of the words 'something' and 'on' hints at her cursing an established order of things that does not seem to change. The way she finishes, though, leaves no room for doubt. The distinct 'terrorem' that closes the speech may be taken to question once again what has previously been said. Joan's words also seem to be addressed to the reader/spectator, since s/he can be automatically given a "safe" position in bourgeois theatre, similar to being in the 'ivory tower' mentioned by Lucretius. However, the effect would still be the same, since we would be shown the pathetic struggle that leads only to despair and misery. In fact, what Joan might be advocating here is the destruction of masculine power, the destruction of the phallus,

symbolised in the tower itself.

Joan's explosion at the end of Act One can be related to Hélène Cixous's call for the annihilation of the Symbolic Order and, consequently, of language:

*Voice-cry.* Agony - the 'spoken' word exploded, blown to bits by suffering and anger, demolishing discourse: this is how she has always been heard before, ever since the time when masculine society began to push her offstage, expulsing her, plundering her. Ever since Medea, ever since Electra. (Cixous and Clément 1987 [1975], 94)

She actually demolishes 'discourse' through her speech in Latin, blows it to pieces precisely from the inside, by using it. Taking the whole play into consideration, it might also be said that even the way in which Caryl Churchill plays with the layout of the dialogue points to this idea of the demolition of patriarchal language. This is also a reaction on the part of Churchill and Joan to being 'offstage' from the beginning of time, as Elaine Aston puts it: "Modern women's theatre is characterized by a resistance to being pushed 'offstage' and is replete with explosions, 'demolishings' of discourse" (Aston 1995, 47). This idea takes us back to Virginia Woolf:

Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind. (Woolf 1945 [1928], 76)

Thus, Marlene's celebration party ends on a gloomy note, emphasising the historical inequality between the sexes and not showing any hints of the situation changing for the best. However, and as has been mentioned above, there is a clear element of subversion that appears at the very end. Joan, after having exposed her negative to forgive and forget -"I can't

forgive anything" (Churchill 1982, 25), and after having uttered her discourse, "*gets up and is sick in a corner*" (Churchill 1982, 29). Her being sick can be taken to summarise the nausea experienced by women all through history and can point out at ways of taking action, in the same way as Dull Gret's call for rebellion at the end of the act can be taken as a possible call for subversion. The fact that the other characters in the act also move in this direction supports this point.

The final guest to arrive at the restaurant is Patient Griselda. She is quite late for an unknown reason, and she arrives just after Joan has recounted her frightening story. Griselda's appearance is like a long coda to the Act, and also a way of showing that it is always possible for things to get worse. Marlene introduces her and her story as being "a fairy-story" (Churchill 1982, 20), but very soon the reader/audience finds out that it is actually quite the opposite. A peasant girl, at the age of fifteen she got married to a Marquis, and bore him a son and a daughter. Griselda shows at all times a very submissive attitude in relation to her husband, an attitude that she finds normal in a woman. She amplifies this with a class analysis:

GRISELDA. But of course a wife must obey her husband. / And of course I must obey the Marquis.\*

ISABELLA. I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn't seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn't have wanted to go abroad while I was married.

MARLENE. \*Then why bother to mention it at all? He'd got a thing about it, that's why.

GRISELDA. I'd rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village.

MARLENE. Yes, that's a point. (Churchill 1982, 21)

According to Griselda, from a position of gender submission, it is always preferable to be economically subjected to a man belonging to a superior social class than one's own. At this point, Marlene seems to agree with her, which is also illuminating. Later on, we will find out that one of the reasons why Marlene left her hometown was in order not to be subjected to any of the village men. However, both Marlene and Griselda will pay a high price for their actions. In the case of Griselda, her acceptance of subjection to the Marquis will turn out with her being temporarily deprived of her two children -whom she considers dead- and thrown out of the palace. She accepts everything her husband does to her with the utmost resignation.

Griselda's submission to patriarchal standards is also exemplified in the text through the issue of dressing. As we commented before, the presence or absence of clothes is used as an instrument and as a metaphor of patriarchal power. Thus, when Griselda gets married to her husband the Marquis, "He had ladies with him who undressed me and they had a white silk dress and jewels for my hair" (Churchill 1982, 22). Conversely, once she is dispossessed of everything, she decides to leave with nothing:

GRISELDA. He sent me away. He said the people wanted him to marry someone else who'd give him an heir and he'd got special permission from the Pope. So I said I'd go home to my father. I came with nothing / so I went with nothing. I NIJO. Better to leave if your master doesn't want you.  
GRISELDA. took off my clothes. He let me keep a slip so he wouldn't be shamed. And I walked home barefoot. My father came out in tears. Everyone was crying except me. (Churchill 1982, 24)

Thus, when Griselda falls out of favour with patriarchy,

she leaves almost naked. Nakedness will then be parallel to a blank page, ready to be written upon by the males and their pen[is]es.

Marlene's reaction to Griselda's story is also relevant. From the very beginning she shows a very hostile attitude towards Walter, and, when Griselda tells the women how she was deprived of her children, Marlene feels unable to continue listening to the story and leaves the room. Her physical impossibility to listen to what Griselda is telling her is also significant, since we will learn in Act Three that Marlene was also deprived of her own daughter by capitalism and patriarchy, even though at no point does she realise it.

It is not until the very end that Griselda seems to take on some kind of dissidence, in the same way as the other women have previously done. When the final catharsis takes place and all the women are reacting against the oppression inflicted upon them, she utters the following words: "I do think - I do wonder - it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to" (Churchill 1982, 27). In this way, she finally seems to participate in the rebellion, she joins the other women in the disruption of patriarchy. Her constant forgiving attitude gives way to doubt, to the wonder mentioned by herself. This is the more radical positioning she allows herself to reach. Bearing in mind her "patience" and the fact that she has been justifying her husband Walter all through the act, her final words are questioning enough.

In this way, Act One reaches its conclusion. After having witnessed the -on the whole- horrid life experiences of the



five women from the past -the experiences of the present-day women will be dealt with in Acts Two and Three, and after having heard their stories about dead lovers and unhappy childbearings, the act closes on the final catharsis mentioned before. The women's stories, then, become the referent we need to understand and evaluate Marlene's position later on in the play. As Christopher Innes has said:

For Marlene, who sees herself as their modern equivalent, these figures justify the competition for power in male terms. Their status supports her position. However, their real-life stories symbolize the exploitation of women through the ages, providing the perspective for evaluating the contemporary model of success in Marlene. (Innes 1992, 465)

In connection with the previous idea linking the end of the act to a possible undermining of the Symbolic Order, Aston's words also come to mind: "The final moments of the dinner scene might be described as marking the desire to exit from the symbolic" (Aston 1995, 47). She expands on this point:

The dinner scene, as a whole, centres on a model of collective oppression in which the individual narratives of female objectification offered by the women from their different fictional, historical, 'real' planes constitute a radical critique of the Symbolic Order, its structures and ideologies. (Aston 1995, 47)

What we have here, then, is a clear connection to the play previously discussed in this work, *Cloud Nine*, which also set to undermine patriarchal order. This turns out to be, in this way, a common characteristic in Churchill's work. The case of *Top Girls*, though, is more pessimistic, also according to the times in which it was written, in the sense that the play shows that such a disruption turns out not to be possible, as we are going to see in Acts Two and Three.

Acts II and III are related to the present, as a clear contrast to Act I and the women from the past. This probably obeys Churchill's intention to trace a continuity of oppression both over and between women through time. Act II takes place mainly in the office, in the Employment Agency where Marlene works, even though there is a scene that develops in the back yard of Joyce's home in East Anglia. The act is also devoted - and quite fundamentally so- to the character of Angie. Finally, Act III takes place in Joyce's kitchen at the same East-Anglian household and it evolves around Marlene and Joyce's eventual violent confrontation and around Angie's hallucinated witnessing of the scene.

In Act II there are three job interviews that are conducted by Marlene and her two work colleagues, Nell and Win, and that are interspersed with other scenes. Each interview underlines a different aspect of the field of women working, but the three of them share important aspects. The play is going to show at this point how Marlene and her new subordinates at work belong to a different sphere from the "disempowered interviewees" (Aston 1997a, 42) who pathetically try to change their positions in life. Marlene is in charge of the first interview. She talks to Jeanine, a young girl who wants to have "prospects" (Churchill 1982, 30) in her career, together with a successful marriage and children. Marlene immediately warns her of the dangers of such an ambition:

MARLENE. So you won't tell them you're getting married?

JEANINE. Had I better not?

MARLENE. It would probably help.

JEANINE. I'm not wearing a ring. We thought we wouldn't spend on a ring.

MARLENE. Saves taking it off.

JEANINE. I wouldn't take it off. (Churchill 1982, 31)

Marlene's attitude is significant. In the same way as she mentioned in Act One that she does not wear trousers in the office, she tries to make Jeanine hide any hints in the workplace of her leading a married life. The fact that Jeanine asserts her refusal to hide her status as an engaged woman automatically discards her from entering a possible interview for a competitive job. Besides, her working record is not very distinguished either, her marks at school do not really help and, most importantly, she lacks the ambition to prepare herself and plan her career in advance:

JEANINE. I'd like a job where I was here in London and with him and everything but now and then - I expect it's silly. Are there jobs like that?

MARLENE. There's personal assistant to a top executive in a multinational. If that's the idea you need to be planning ahead. Is that where you want to be in ten years?

JEANINE. I might not be alive in ten years.

MARLENE. Yes but you will be. You'll have children.

JEANINE. I can't think about ten years.

MARLENE. You haven't got the speeds anyway. (Churchill 1982, 32)

The word 'speeds' here can be applied to Jeanine's ability at typing, but also to her attitude to life. She clearly lacks the ambition that would allow her to reach a different position in society. However, at some point she seems to be willing to change and she relates her capacity for change to the way she dresses:

MARLENE. People often do think advertising. I have got a few vacancies but I think they're looking for something glossier.

JEANINE. You mean how I dress? / I can dress different. I

MARLENE. I mean experience.

JEANINE. dress like this on purpose for where I am now. (Churchill 1982, 31)

This reference to dressing makes this issue quite a recurrent one in the play. Jeanine agrees to make some changes in her attire in order to improve her working position, and this shows how she has interiorised such a cultural construct, in the same way as the women from the past had also interiorised it in Act One. However, Marlene foresees that she does not have enough strength and, consequently, places Jeanine's application for a similar position to the one she already has.

The second interview is conducted by Win, one of Marlene's colleagues. Previous to the interview, though, we witness her tough attitude in relation to life and work. Thus, she discusses clients with her colleague Nell and puts down some of them for various reasons, until they agree on a lady who, according to Win, is a "Tough bird like us" (Churchill 1982, 48). Win's ruthless attitude in relation to work contrasts with what turns out to be her poor private life. When Nell arrives in the office after the weekend, she tells her about her married lover:

WIN. I spent the whole weekend at his place in Sussex.  
NELL. She fancies his rose garden.  
WIN. I had to lie down in the back of the car so the neighbours wouldn't see me go in.  
NELL. You're kidding.  
WIN. It was funny.  
NELL. Fuck that for a joke.  
WIN. It was funny. (Churchill 1982, 49)

Win's acceptance of such humiliating treatment on the part of her male lover might show how, after all, she is not free from the constraints society imposes on women, however powerful she is in her job. In fact, she tries to justify her behaviour

by saying that she is not interested in a regular relationship and by mentioning going to Australia as a way to escape from the drudgery of London life. However, as we learn later on, this seems to be a constant in her life. As she puts it, "I lived with a fella and supported him for four years, he couldn't get work" (Churchill 1982, 65). This relationship was later followed by a marriage "in a moment of weakness and he's inside now, he's been inside four years" (Churchill 1982, 65). Win's relationship with men seems to be somewhat difficult, and each involves some degree of humiliation. After travelling for a while in the United States and in Mexico, she ended up having mental problems: "I came home, went bonkers for a bit, thought I was five different people, got over that all right, the psychiatrist said I was perfectly sane and highly intelligent" (Churchill 1982, 65).

Win is in charge of interviewing Louise, a forty-six-year-old single woman who has been working at the same place for twenty-one years and who, after devoting her life to her job, wants to quit. As she puts it: "I've spent twenty years in middle management. I've seen young men who I trained go on, in my own company or elsewhere, to higher things" (Churchill 1982, 52). The character of Louise exemplifies the number of women who occupy positions of responsibility, but who do not reach higher management. Louise is also significant because of her attitude towards women, whom she regards as her enemies, a phenomenon she is not aware of and that contributes to her isolation:

LOUISE. There was one [woman], she was my assistant, it

was the only time I took on a young woman assistant, I always had my doubts. I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work. But I did take on this young woman, her qualifications were excellent, and she did well, she got a department of her own, and left the company for a competitor where she's now on the board and good luck to her. She has a different style, she's a new kind of attractive well-dressed - I don't mean I don't dress properly. But there is a kind of woman who is thirty now who grew up in a different climate. They are not so careful. They take themselves for granted. I have had to justify my existence every minute, and I have done so, I have proved - well. (Churchill 1982, 52)

What Louise cannot stand is the fact that another woman achieves what she has not been able to achieve. Besides, her making yet another reference to the issue of dressing, and even to a metaphorical cross-dressing, is worth mentioning. In fact, her 'pass[ing] as a man at work' can be understood in this sense. Thus, not only are women forced to adopt a strict male code of conduct in society, but also this travesty of masculine behaviour will inevitably lead them to annihilate the very basis of their being.

This seems to be one of the powerful messages that comes from the play, how patriarchy purports to travesty women, to isolate them, to make women enemies among themselves and, thus, to prevent any kind of female collectivity from being created. Since a collective action would pose a threat to the power of the males, the best solution seems to be parody, alienation and isolation. A clear example of this is the fact that none of the professional women -Marlene, Win and Nell- seem to have any women friends -in fact, in Win's interview she takes good care of reminding Louise of not getting too intimate: "You shouldn't talk too much at an interview" (Churchill 1982, 53). Also

bearing in mind how miserable their relationships with men are, the conclusion would be that these women are actually disempowered by the very structure they purport to defend.

The last interview in Act II is conducted by Nell, who seems to be more ruthless than Win and probably closer to Marlene's position. She is determined to succeed in her career and this is clear from the way she talks about it, which shows the assimilation of a male attitude and of a masculine language. When discussing Marlene's winning of the managerial position over their colleague Howard with Win, her words are significant:

NELL. Howard thinks because he's a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard and that's that.

WIN. Poor little bugger. (Churchill 1982, 46)

In this case, both Nell and Win show their acquisition of a male behaviour that goes together with a specific use of language. The references to 'balls' and to 'little bugger' point in this direction, as the way Nell, later on, usually refers to competitive women also does, with the words "pretty bastards" (Churchill 1982, 50). The difference between Nell and Win lies in their different attitudes towards men. In this sense, the former more actively avoids any kind of commitment:

NELL. Derek asked me to marry him again.

WIN. He doesn't know when he's beaten.

NELL. I told him I'm not going to play house, not even in Ascot.

WIN. Mind you, you could play house.

NELL. If I chose to play house I would play house ace.

WIN. You could marry him and go on working.

NELL. I could go on working and not marry him. (Churchill 1982, 48)

Nell's attitude here also anticipates Marlene's siding

with the power structures in Act Three. And the two of them seem to share a preference for a working life that excludes marriage commitments. Besides, her career being Nell's top priority, she does not rejoice over the fact that Marlene becomes the new manager because, as she states, "I don't like coming second" (Churchill 1982, 50).

The fact that Nell interviews the young woman Shona is also relevant, since Shona epitomises some of the qualities Nell has fought to adopt all through her life. In fact, Nell feels that Shona could very well be a 'tough bird' like Marlene, Win and herself through Shona's responses to her questions. Thus, we learn that she wants some "management status" (Churchill 1982, 60), that she does not take "people's feelings" (Churchill 1982, 61) into consideration, and that, like Nell, she is not "very nice" (Churchill 1982, 61). That is why Nell asks her whether she would like to work at the office: "I'm not in a position to offer, there's nothing officially going just now, but we're always on the lookout. There's not that many of us. We could keep in touch" (Churchill 1982, 62). Nell's proposal can also be understood as an attempt to create a group of women that share some characteristics, a group of powerful women at the top. However, Shona's refusal makes her suspicious and she asks her to elaborate on her life. It is as a consequence of this and the subsequent narrative delivered by Shona that Nell realises the falsity of the story:

SHONA. My present job at present. I have a car. I have a Porsche. I go up the M1 a lot. Burn up the M1 a lot. Straight up the M1 in the fast lane to where the clients are, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, I do a lot in Yorkshire. I'm selling electric things. Like dishwashers, washing



machines, stainless steel tubs are a feature and the reliability of the programme. After sales service, we offer a very good after sales service, spare parts, plenty of spare parts. And fridges, I sell a lot of fridges specially in the summer. People want to buy fridges in the summer because of the heat melting the butter and you get fed up standing the milk in a basin of cold water with a cloth over, stands to reason people don't want to do that in this day and age. So I sell a lot of them. Big ones with big freezers. Big freezers. And I stay in hotels at night when I'm away from home. On my expense account. I stay in various hotels. They know me, the ones I go to. I check in, have a bath, have a shower. Then I go down to the bar, have a gin and tonic, have a chat. Then I go into the dining room and have dinner. I usually have fillet steak and mushrooms, I like mushrooms. I like smoked salmon very much. I like having a salad on the side. Green salad. I don't like tomatoes. (Churchill 1982, 63)

This speech clearly shows that Shona has made up all the information she has given about herself. First of all, because of the linguistic hesitation she demonstrates throughout it. In this sense, her clumsy use of male language demonstrates how the Symbolic Order negates her a distinct voice, how it forces her to travesty herself. The falsity of the story is gradually perceived by Nell as a consequence of the rather luxurious, imaginative and basically unreal account of the life of a representative on the road Shona provides her with. Furthermore, the example of the milk seems to be more related to her own experience in life than to an actual sales situation. Thus, it can be said that Shona has invented a narrative by following male standards, but her actual ignorance of such standards in practice is what, finally, has given her away. Shona's main problem here -apart from the gender one- is related to the class she belongs to: the working class. The fact that Shona is an Irish name also hints at this point. She therefore stands for the craving of a section of working-class

women to attain their place in the capitalist sun; she also stands for the fantasy of a capitalist narrative -an impossible deed if one does not have access to the tools necessary to create it; but ultimately -and most importantly so- she stands for the extreme difficulty of overcoming class constraints.

It is also in Acts II and III that we are offered more insightful information about Marlene, the main character of the play. This new information will further disclose her as a ruthless "top girl" and will shed light on the whole play in a rather clarifying way. Marlene has achieved power and a high position thanks to her ruthlessness and ambition. However, it is not until Act III, the very last one of the play, that we learn her story. Coming from the working class, she has sacrificed her original family and social background in an effort to succeed in the world. On the other hand, her sister Joyce has remained in the background she was born into, and maintains a radically different attitude towards life to Marlene. Joyce is much more attached to her roots as a working-class woman, as well as to her duties towards her family. One of the characteristics that defines Caryl Churchill's quality as a playwright is that nothing in her plays is basically good or bad. Avoiding any sort of manichaeism then, she forces the reader/audience to face the conflict as it is. In fact, in the case of *Top Girls*, "the play takes no moral or political attitude towards [Marlene], any more than it does towards Joyce" (Wandor 1986 [1981], 173). Thus, we sometimes feel on Marlene's side, as a woman who has actually achieved something in a man's world, but, at the same time, we tend to feel more

solidarity with Joyce, who bears the even tougher part of living in her working-class context and surviving with all the burden Marlene has left behind. However, we never fully identify with any of them, and this is also possible as a consequence of Churchill's Brechtian heritage. Escaping from any sort of identification with the characters, we analyse the situation and their relationship as a microcosm of the world.

As we have previously hinted, *Top Girls* is basically a play about capitalism and sexism: About capitalism in the sense that it analyses labour and social relations constituted by a capitalist economy, about sexism in that these relations are seen from a female point of view, which explores how female identity is put down by the politics of patriarchy. *Top Girls* is also a socialist-feminist play. It can be defined as socialist in that it takes a clear position against any sort of capitalist ideology, and it can be defined as feminist because it presents us with a parallel between socio-economic oppression and gender oppression. In fact, as we have seen, Churchill herself is a firm believer in the "inseparability of feminism and socialism" (Kritzer 1991, 149). Talking about a visit she paid to America, the cradle of capitalist ideology, she says:

I had been to America ... and had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I'd ever met here [Britain], where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. (Churchill in Kritzer 1991, 139)

This double attitude is also found in the play in the

relationship between the two sisters, which is shown in Act III. In fact, Marlene has been to the States as part of a learning process to achieve success in the world. Marlene has learnt the American way. Once back in Britain, she is just applying the basis of what she has learnt to the new environment. And she makes it. Joyce, on the contrary, shares the opposite ideology. Having stayed at home taking care of her mother, of Marlene's daughter and cleaning houses for a living, she is the antithesis of her sister. The different ideologies embodied by the two sisters have been addressed to by Lisa Merrill, who points to the existence of a dichotomy between "a socialist feminist orientation and one which claims to be feminist without a class consciousness" (Merrill 1988, 85). The former position would be Joyce's, whereas the latter would be Marlene's.

At this point, something should be said about the existence of three different types of feminism that emerged during the 1970s, as has been put forward by Michelene Wandor: Radical, bourgeois (also known as emancipationism) and socialist. (Later on, as we have seen in chapter one, these three types have been re-named as "cultural", "liberal" and "materialist" [Austin 1990, Case 1988, Dolan 1988]). According to Wandor, radical or cultural feminism:

[S]prings from the direct, gut response of all women to the day-to-day irritations and resentments which women feel and experience. Radical feminism articulates these responses, analyses and politicises the details of oppression. It challenges very directly the notion that men are biologically superior to women, and it does so by claiming that what women do and think and feel is socially valuable and important. Radical feminist theory argues that the oppression of women predates capitalism, and that

therefore all subsequent forms of social injustice stem from the basic sexual antagonism between men and women ... [R]adical feminism simply inverts the model of sexist values, and produces a reverse moral system, in which - instead of men on top and women below - women are on top and men are below. (Wandor 1986 [1981], 132-3)

Bourgeois or liberal feminism, on the other hand, "has only become widespread and visible ... in the 1980s" (Wandor 1986 [1981], 134), and:

[It] simply seeks a larger share of social power for a small number of women -the 'women at the top' syndrome. It often takes the apparently liberal line of 'men and women are different, but can be equal', but in practice this usually means that the real basis of power relations between the sexes (personal and political) is concealed. Bourgeois feminism accepts the world as it is, and sees the main challenge for women as simply a matter of 'equalling up' with men; in other words, what men already do is seen as the norm ... [I]t places total stress on individual effort, which produces the token woman surrounded by men, and served by other women; this means that bourgeois feminism has no interest in any idea of solidarity or sisterhood -the reverse, since such an idea is bound to conflict with the notion of individual self-advancement. And because bourgeois feminism accepts the status quo (with a bit more power for women) it also -like radical feminism- has no interest in a class analysis, and certainly no interest whatsoever in socialism or the labour movement. (Wandor 1986 [1981], 134-5)

Finally, socialist or materialist feminism:

[A]ims to analyse and understand the way in which power relations based on class interact with power relations based on gender -again, at both the individual and the social level. Socialist feminism recognises that there are times and issues over which solidarity between women can cut across class or cultural barriers, but it also recognises the importance of struggles based on class, which necessarily involve men, and that women can have important differences among themselves, based on class difference. Socialist feminism ... proposes changes both in the position of women as women, and in the power relations of the very basis of society itself -its industrial production, and its political relations. Thus while radical and bourgeois feminism can account for certain kinds of reform change for women, only socialist feminism can offer an analysis which provides for genuine, revolutionary change ... Men are challenged by socialist feminism on the basis of their class power, and their gender power -as male in a society which values the male

higher than the female. (Wandor 1986 [1981], 136-7)

Following this classification, Marlene can be defined as a bourgeois or liberal feminist, whereas Joyce would be a socialist or materialist feminist. Marlene will represent the "bourgeois feminist dynamic, coming through loud and clear and confidently" (Wandor 1986 [1981], 173). Indeed, she has fought her way up in the social hierarchy very hard and is not going to give it up. She feels no solidarity towards Joyce or Angie, and her unconditional siding with a conservative politics leads her to ignore the proletariat. Joyce, on the other hand, will clearly represent the socialist or materialist perspective, since she definitely seems to have quite a thorough understanding of the power relations that rule capitalist society. The sad paradox of our point is that, as usual, Joyce and the class she represents will not make it. Joyce, having stayed at home and having kept her roots, is doomed to cleaning houses. Angie, Marlene's unrecognised daughter, is also doomed to the same destiny (or even worse, for she lacks the class consciousness that bolsters Joyce's strength). As Marlene says -in quite a lucid but also terrifying way- about her, when being asked about Angie's professional prospects: "Packer in Tesco more like" (Churchill 1982, 66).

Marlene, then, is the only one who has made it and who will definitely make it in the future, achieving even more ruthless heights. In Act III, she defines herself with these words: "I'm not clever, just pushy" (Churchill 1982, 72), which relates her to the idea of 'individual self-advancement' intrinsic to the definition of bourgeois feminism. She was

brought up with her sister in a bleak village in the south-east part of England. At seventeen, she became pregnant and as a consequence Angie was born. Determined not to stay at home and lead the sort of life she was expected to lead, she left. When her sister scolds her for having done so, she replies: "Of course I couldn't get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed?" (Churchill 1982, 79). These lines show clearly that Marlene is a clever woman. Besides, from quite an early age she could foresee the future that awaited her and desperately moved away, as she says when referring to life with her parents: "I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, / never let him, make my own way, out" (Churchill 1982, 85). Analysing the figure of her mother, she uses these words:

MARLENE. Fucking awful life she's had.

JOYCE. Don't tell me.

MARLENE. Fucking waste. (Churchill 1982, 78).

Marlene has a strong awareness of her personal situation, and she transforms this awareness into a political one. However, and using Michelene Wandor's terms, she inclines towards a bourgeois lifestyle instead of using her class awareness for a socialist struggle. Thus, not only is she utterly discontented with her situation in life, but she will also negate her origins by leaving and not really planning to go back. As Joseph Marohl states:

Marlene's bourgeois style of feminism is proved in the course of the play to be culturally conditioned, for her success does not really challenge patriarchal authority but appropriates it, conforming, as it does, to the existing hierarchy. (Marohl 1987, 382)

This is what comes clear through Marlene and Joyce's open confrontation in Act III. They are arguing about their prospects for the future:

MARLENE. So on on into the sunset. I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

JOYCE. Who for?

MARLENE. For me. / I think I'm going up up up.

JOYCE. Oh for you. Yes, I'm sure they will.

MARLENE. And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there. This country

JOYCE. You voted for them, did you?

MARLENE. needs to stop whining. / Monetarism is not stupid.

JOYCE. Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

MARLENE. It takes time, determination. No more slop. / And

JOYCE. Well I think they're filthy bastards.

MARLENE. who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote. (Churchill 1982, 83-4)

Marlene's development as a person makes her embrace capitalism, and so she confesses to Joyce that she votes for the Conservative Party. Living in a hostile capitalist world makes her negate collectivism. She does not want to be part of any movement aimed at social reform. As she negates her class and origin, she also refuses to establish any sort of alliance with other women. Therefore, Marlene's attitude reflects, in Amelia Kritzer's words, a "commitment to the ethic of competition integral to the masculine model of success" (Kritzer 1991, 145). Marlene puts forward this ideology very clearly in a seminal set of speeches. After having stated her belief in "the individual" (Churchill 1982, 84) and her disbelief in the notion of class, she proceeds to attack the working class:

MARLENE. I hate the working class / which is what you're



going

JOYCE. Yes you do.

MARLENE. to go on about now, it doesn't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid. / I don't like the way they talk. I don't

JOYCE. Come on, now we're getting it.

MARLENE. like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits / and brothers and sisters -

...

MARLENE. and I will not be pulled down to their level by a flying picket and I won't be sent to Siberia / or a loony bin

JOYCE. No, you'll be on a yacht, you'll be head of Coca-Cola and you wait, the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs -

MARLENE. just because I'm original. And I support Reagan even if he is a lousy movie star because the reds are swarming up his map and I want to be free in a free world - (Churchill 1982, 85-6)

All through these speeches, Marlene stands for a bourgeois style of feminism and, therefore, she also represents capitalism. She becomes one and the same with the capitalist state. She epitomises Margaret Thatcher, the first English woman Prime Minister ever; she epitomises Ronald Reagan; she also epitomises Edith Cresson, the first French woman Prime Minister ever. By openly denying any sense of collectivity, however radical it may sound, implied in the use of the words 'brothers and sisters', she is setting up the standards for what is going to be the ferocious struggle for power in a 'free' world. The sad paradox of all this is that Marlene has had to fight against her own origins in order to rise above them. She had to fight against her dead father, whom she utterly despised. She has had to fight against her mother, whom she had not seen for a long period of time, and also against her own sister, who, at the end of the play, openly declares her her enemy. However, the most terrible thing is having to

fight against her own daughter, and she will have to in order to get ahead in the world. For there is no place for Angie in the society Marlene dreams of building, and she will have to be sacrificed. Marlene dreams of a 'free world', but she does not realise that she will end up being a prisoner of her own ideas, of the monstrous society she is helping to build. Her conversation with Nell and Win about Angie in II, iii, which, chronologically, is the real end of the play, is deeply significant:

MARLENE. Is she asleep?

WIN. She wants to work here.

MARLENE. Packer in Tesco more like.

WIN. She's a nice kid. Isn't she?

MARLENE. She's a bit thick. She's a bit funny.

WIN. She thinks you're wonderful.

MARLENE. She's not going to make it. (Churchill 1982,66)

Therefore, it is not altogether strange that Angie, at the end of Act III, defines unambiguously a nightmare -or maybe a vision- she has just had to Marlene, who "*sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink*" (Churchill 1982, 87), after her hard confrontation with Joyce:

ANGIE *comes in.*

ANGIE. Mum?

MARLENE. Angie? What's the matter?

ANGIE. Mum?

MARLENE. No, she's gone to bed. It's Aunty Marlene.

ANGIE. Frightening.

MARLENE. Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well you're awake now, aren't you pet?

ANGIE. Frightening. (Churchill 1982, 87)

In a way, she is foreseeing her own future. Angie has no possibility whatsoever of making any sort of advancement in her life in this society. Being quite limited in her own way, she wants to take after her aunt, whom she in fact suspects of

being her real mother, as she tells her friend Kit in Act II: "I think I'm my aunt's child. I think my mother's really my aunt" (Churchill 1982, 41). She feels miserable living with Joyce, who literally forces her to go to school and do her domestic chores. Her hostility towards her real aunt is shown in Angie's first striking line in the play, addressed to Kit and referring to Joyce: "Wish she was dead" (Churchill 1982, 33). Later on, and still talking to Kit, she insists: "I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch" (Churchill 1982, 36). We soon find out that she wants to escape to London to see her aunt Marlene, fascinated by her lifestyle, sick of the life she leads with Joyce: "If I don't get away from here I'm going to die" (Churchill 1982, 36).

When she eventually leaves home and turns up at Marlene's office, she finds her real mother quite insensitive about her, even after committing the *faux pas* of not recognising her:

ANGIE. Hello.

MARLENE. Have you an appointment?

ANGIE. It's me. I've come.

MARLENE. What? It's not Angie?

ANGIE. It was hard to find this place. I got lost.

MARLENE. How did you get past the receptionist? The girl on the desk, didn't she try to stop you?

ANGIE. What desk?

MARLENE. Never mind. (Churchill 1982, 53)

Nevertheless, she recalls Marlene's last visit to her and her supposed mother, which took place the year before, as being "the best day of my whole life" (Churchill 1982, 56). Besides, after witnessing the row between Marlene, who has just been given the management position in the office, and Mrs. Kidd, the utterly submissive wife of the defeated candidate for the position, Angie's admiration reaches an even higher peak. Mrs.

Kidd is the prototype of the wife who has done everything for her husband. As she says herself: "I put him first every inch of the way" (Churchill 1982, 58). She is also ready to do whatever is necessary to defend him, since, in the last instance, her own salvation depends on this. She has come into the office to persuade Marlene to give the new position up for her husband's sake and, in front of Marlene's refusal, finds no better way of replying than resorting to a traditionally masculine use of language that she has clearly interiorised:

MRS KIDD: It's not that easy, a man of Howard's age. You don't care. I thought he was going too far but he's right. You're one of these ballbreakers / that's what you are. You'll end up

MARLENE. I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

MRS KIDD. miserable and lonely. You're not natural.

MARLENE. Could you please piss off? (Churchill 1982, 59)

However, Marlene knows how to defend herself and she replies in a rude way, but without the sexist connotations implied in Mrs. Kidd's unkind words. Her words impress Angie, and she openly declares her intentions to Marlene, talking about the office in the following terms: "It's where I most want to be in the world" (Churchill 1982, 60). We have already seen Marlene's skepticism about Angie's prospects in life. Angie's pathetic ambitions are best reflected in the words she utters during Marlene's visit to Joyce and her in the last act of the play. Reading from a postcard Marlene sent from the Grand Canyon on one of her trips to America (in accordance with the sheer grandness of Marlene's way of life), and that she keeps as a treasure, she tries to live the States and all they represent through Marlene's typical postcard-words, which at the same time emphasise her conscious escaping from her own

roots: "'Driving across the states for a new job in L.A. It's a long way but the car goes very fast. It's very hot. Wish you were here. Love from Aunty Marlene'" (Churchill 1982, 75). Marlene underlines the existence of a successful career that takes her 'fast' on her car around another continent that epitomises success and opportunities. She emphasises the fact that it is far away from home and that the weather is 'hot', probably the opposite to Joyce and Marlene's cold and wet place of origin in East Anglia. Marlene is constantly underlining the difference, what makes her life different from what it used to be in her humble origins. After reading the postcard, Angie makes a plea to Marlene:

ANGIE. I want to go to America. Will you take me?

JOYCE. She's not going to America, she's been to America, stupid.

ANGIE. She might go again, stupid. It's not something you do once. People who go keep going all the time, back and forth on jets. They go on Concorde and Laker and get jet lag. Will you take me?

MARLENE. I'm not planning a trip.

ANGIE. Will you let me know?

JOYCE. Angie, / you're getting silly.

ANGIE. I want to be American. (Churchill 1982, 75)

Angie desperately wants to embrace a totally alien system of life that nowadays dictates and rules over the rest of the world. She wants her "auntie" Marlene to take her because Marlene represents that new way of life she wants to be a part of. To Joyce's irritability, she broods on the attractiveness of the unknown, the velocity, the fast life that takes the form of different types of airplanes. Her own ignorance makes her mix jets and Concordes with Lakers, linking all of them with the even more foreign sensation of 'jet lag'. To Marlene's elusiveness, she concludes with a desperate affirmation of her

desire to become something totally out of her grasp. The reality is that neither will she go to America nor work in Marlene's office. She will most probably end up working as a run-of-the-mill employee in a supermarket -as Marlene predicts, or even like her aunt Joyce, cleaning houses. However, whereas Joyce has got a clear political ideology, Angie will only be a passive product of capitalist society. A cog in the machine. She will not question anything of importance. In this sense, the last word uttered by her in the play, "Frightening" (Churchill 1982, 87), will acquire particularly disheartening connotations, so much so as it will mirror both Isabella Bird's mentioning of an "indefinable terror" (Churchill 1982, 7) and Pope Joan's last word at the close of Act One, before she is sick: "Terrorem" (Churchill 1989, 29). By making them utter the same or a synonymous word in different languages at different historical moments in the play, Churchill, in a pessimistic way, is emphasising the eternal nature and inevitability of male oppression and of repressive power structures through the centuries. Her conclusion to the play is the more grim because of this. In the case of "'dull'" (Aston 1997a, 41) Angie, her thickness will prevent her from trying any kind of subversion in the first place, and the situation will become all the more nonsensical and tragic because of her willingness to be a part of what is totally negated to her. This is particularly clear through the semiotic use of a dress Marlene gives to Angie in Act III and that she wears sadistically in the confrontation scene with her "mother" in Act II. The dress, that suited her when she was given it, has now become *"an old best dress,*

*slightly small for her*" (Churchill 1982, 44). The fact that Angie clings desperately to Marlene's present, even though it does not fit anymore, emphasises her utter marginalisation from Marlene's world and from what it represents, and also works as a perfect example of the Brechtian *gestus*, as has been seen in chapter three. Finally, the fact that the scene takes place in the most immediate dramatic present also reinforces this idea. As Aston states:

The dress signifies the 'misfit' or gap between Angie's desire to be like the (well-dressed), career woman Marlene, and Marlene's dismissal of her own daughter's career aspirations. (Aston 1997a, 41)

Angie, "the key site of intrasexual oppression" (Aston 1997a, 41) in the play, tries to use the dress as a way of annihilating her "mother" Joyce. And she tells Kit: "I put on this dress to kill my mother" (Churchill 1982, 44). What she is actually trying to do is to neutralise Joyce's power through the creation for herself of a Marlene-like image. However, she also "*picks up a brick*" (Churchill 1982, 44), as if she also realised about the symbolic aspect of the ritual and the necessity of undertaking real action, which she does not do in the end. The use of the dress also exemplifies a fact dealt with in the case of the women from the past: How the capitalist system *dresses* Angie to signify her total subjection to the power structures as a member of the two most dispossessed classes -women and the working class, at the same time as it underlines the total impossibility of escaping from them.

There is one last aspect worth mentioning in relation to vulnerable Angie, which is her link with a mythical element in

relation to the female body: Menstruation. When Kit and her are hiding in a "shelter" in Joyce's "back yard" (Churchill 1982, 33), the following exchange takes place:

ANGIE. You're scared of blood.

KIT *puts her hand under her dress, brings it out with blood on her finger.*

KIT. There, see, I got my own blood, so.

ANGIE *takes KIT's hand and licks her finger.*

ANGIE. Now I'm a cannibal. I might turn into a vampire now.

KIT. That picture wasn't nailed up right.

ANGIE. You'll have to do that when I get mine. (Churchill 1982, 36)

The fact that Angie tastes the menstrual blood of her friend and asks her to do the same when she gets her period might be read as the creation of a clear link between women. The origin of the link is deeply subversive, since it plays with the overcoming of a disturbing worldwide taboo: The atavistic taboo of menstruation. In this case, it could also be said that even though Angie is cursed from her very social origins, she might redeem herself through the subversive use of "the curse" for her own purposes. Unfortunately, and as has previously been put forward, she lacks the class consciousness to carry out such a deed. Nevertheless, the reference to menstruation is striking, and reminiscent of Kate Millett:

The event of menstruation ... is a largely clandestine affair, and the psycho-social effect of the stigma attached must have great effect on the female ego. There is a large anthropological literature on menstrual taboo; the practice of isolating offenders in huts at the edge of the village occurs throughout the primitive world ... There is considerable evidence that such discomfort as women suffer during their period is often likely to be psychosomatic, rather than physiological, cultural rather than biological, in origin ... Patriarchal circumstances



and beliefs seem to have the effect of poisoning the female's own sense of physical self until it often truly becomes the burden it is said to be. (Millett 1990 [1969], 47)

Taking possession of "the curse", incorporating the 'burden', making the 'period' a weapon instead of a 'stigma' might be part of another way of action that seems to be hinted at in the play. This links Angie to the world present in Act One, to the fight against the Symbolic Order. Perhaps tasting Kit's menstrual blood is a first step in the deconstruction of the power structures, and also a way of looking for possibilities for getting rid of the fear experienced at the end of the last act of the play.

Joyce, on the other hand, represents the point of view of materialist feminism. Contrary to her sister Marlene, she stayed at home and went through an unhappy marriage. She makes a living out of cleaning the houses of people she abhors. She has also taken care of her parents. All this has made her acquire a political consciousness, but, on the other hand, has turned her into a somewhat bitter person. Besides, her relationship with Angie has become unbearable and she does not seem to know what to do about it. We find an example of this in II,ii, when Angie and Kit are hidden in the garden and Joyce loses her temper in quite a spectacular way:

JOYCE. You there Angie? Kit? You there Kitty? Want a cup of tea? I've got some chocolate biscuits. Come on now I'll put the kettle on. Want a choccy biccy, Angie?

*They all listen and wait.*

Fucking rotten little cunt. You can stay there and die. I'll lock the back door. (Churchill 1982, 37)

Later, talking to Kit about school immediately before

Angie's attempt at murder, she utters one of the most lucid speeches about Angie's future:

I didn't like it. And look at me. If your face fits at school it's going to fit other places too. It wouldn't make no difference to Angie. She's not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get. I'd be sorry for anyone in charge of her. She'd better get married. I don't know who'd have her, mind. She's one of those girls might never leave home. (Churchill 1982, 42-3)

Angie has left school in the same way as, it can be inferred, Joyce left it herself. This is yet another reason for Joyce's present situation, and here Joyce shows her deep concern about her niece. However, she is proved wrong in her appreciation of Angie, since she will actually leave home to seek shelter in Marlene's London world.

It is not until Act III, the end of the play, which turns out to be the chronological beginning, that the two sisters meet as a consequence of a faked phonecall made by Angie in Joyce's name, inviting Marlene to spend Sunday with them in East Anglia. In this meeting, Joyce clearly adopts the position of the working-class representative and a materialist feminist position -even though she is not aware of it herself- in front of Marlene's ruthless capitalist attitude. Beginning by telling her sister about her unwillingness to see her, the act soon acquires speed as the quarrel unfolds. Thus, we discover that Joyce is not so happy about having stayed at home all these years, and probably her hostility towards her sister is a consequence of this fact. She starts attacking Marlene and defending her own position:

MARLENE. I did wonder why you wanted to see me.

JOYCE. I didn't want to see you.

MARLENE. Yes, I know. Shall I go?

JOYCE. I don't mind seeing you.  
MARLENE. Great, I feel really welcome.  
JOYCE. You can come and see Angie any time you like, I'm not stopping you. / You know where we are. You're the  
MARLENE. Ta ever so.  
JOYCE. one went away, not me. I'm right here where I was. And will be a few years yet I shouldn't wonder.  
MARLENE. All right. All right. (Churchill 1982, 69-70)

Then, she questions Marlene about her apparent lack of feelings towards her family, for not having visited them in years. Her main remarks concentrate on the fact that she has not visited her mother for a long time:

MARLENE. Why can't I visit my own family / without all this?\*

JOYCE. Aah.  
\*Just don't go on about Mum's life when you haven't been to see her for how many years. / I go and see her every week.\*

MARLENE. It's up to me.  
\*Then don't go and see her every week.

JOYCE. Somebody has to.  
MARLENE. No they don't. / Why do they? (Churchill 1982, 78-9)

Answering Marlene's remark about the absurdity of paying compulsory visits to her mother, she makes her final attack, that is going to disclose a powerful piece of information: "I don't know how you could leave your own child" (Churchill 1982, 79). This leads the two sisters to a still bigger confrontation during which we discover that Angie is really Marlene's daughter, the product of a pregnancy when Marlene was seventeen. The play acquires even more dramatic heights here, for we can relate Act Three to Act One, to all the struggle and misery of the "top girls" of the title. We become aware, then, of Marlene's ambitious personality, of what she has had to give up in order to achieve success in the world. Thus, not only has she had to forget her family and her origins, but also her own

daughter, who acts as a reminiscence of the young working-class girl she used to be.

Towards the end of the Act, Joyce makes a concession and acknowledges the misery of her life: "I can see why you'd want to leave. It's a dump here" (Churchill 1982, 82). Later, she utters what is probably her most genuinely feminist line. When talking about the necessity of having men around, she says: "Who needs them?" (Churchill 1982, 83). Then, they reach the most important stage in their discussion. When Marlene starts praising Margaret Thatcher and her politics, Joyce's materialist feminism explodes and she delivers what is going to be one of the fundamental speeches in the play: "What good's first woman if it's her? I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures" (Churchill 1982, 84). With these words, Churchill seems to be questioning the women's advances which have been praised so highly from a bourgeois feminist position, the fact that women achieve high positions without showing any social concern. This speech also leads Joyce to make a lucid analysis of their parents' lives, parallel to the one Marlene has done, but of course from a different perspective:

JOYCE. You say Mother had a wasted life.

MARLENE. Yes I do. Married to that bastard.

JOYCE. What sort of life did he have? / Working in the fields like

MARLENE. Violent life?

JOYCE. an animal. / Why wouldn't he want a drink?

MARLENE. Come off it.

JOYCE. You want a drink. He couldn't afford whisky.

MARLENE. I don't want to talk about him.

JOYCE. You started, I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.

MARLENE. She was hungry because he drank the money. / He used to hit her.

JOYCE. It's not all down to him. / Their lives were rubbish. They  
MARLENE. She didn't hit him.  
JOYCE. were treated like rubbish. He's dead and she'll die soon and what sort of life / did they have?  
MARLENE. I saw him one night. I came down.  
JOYCE. Do you think I didn't? / They didn't get to America and  
MARLENE. I still have dreams.  
JOYCE. drive across it in a fast car. / Bad nights, they had bad days. (Churchill 1982, 84-5)

This is a very important sequence because Joyce puts her mother and her father on the same side. Her socialist view of society also becomes a materialist feminist one that takes into account 'struggles based on class'. This is why she tries to understand the way her father behaved in relation to her mother, stating that both were doomed to bear the oppression exerted by the power structures. This is what makes her avoid having a feeling of hatred towards her father. Marlene, on the other hand, lacks Joyce's capacity for analysis and puts all the blame on her father's behaviour. Following Joseph Marohl's dichotomy, instead of finding a traditional "female/male" opposition, in this play we find a more to the point dichotomy between the notions of the "oppressor" and the "oppressed" (Marohl 1987, 387). Thus, in their family, Marlene can be said to represent the figure of the oppressor, while Joyce, Joyce and Marlene's parents and Angie would stand for the oppressed. However, on close inspection, Marlene herself also appears to be clearly oppressed by the very system whose existence she is defending, and what symbolises this oppression would be the sacrifice of her own daughter.

The importance of a political approach to the play becomes, therefore, essential, since the fact that Marlene

shifts from being the oppressed to the role of oppressor acquires in this way a deeper insight. This situation, together with her own awareness of the repressive structures of society, leads Joyce to face Marlene: "I'm ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself, you've got on, nothing's changed for most people / has it?" (Churchill 1982, 85). We arrive, then, at the final confrontation between the two sisters, and while Marlene is delivering her indictment of the working class, Joyce fights back:

JOYCE. I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring / Mercedes it was.

MARLENE. Oh very mature -

JOYCE. I hate the cows I work for / and their dirty dishes with blanquette of fucking veau.

MARLENE. and I will not be pulled down to their level by a flying picket and I won't be sent to Siberia / or a loony bin

JOYCE. No, you'll be on a yacht, you'll be head of Coca-Cola and you wait, the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs - (Churchill 1982, 85-6)

In this way, the two sisters reach too utterly irreconcilable positions. Joyce stands for a total siding with the working-class ordeal and, led by her deep anger, justifies violent actions, however petty they may be. Her actions, her scratching of luxury cars, can also be seen as her own small contribution to the disruption of the Symbolic Order. Marlene, on the other hand, has sided with an ideological position that defends the opposite view. Thinking only of leaving her origins behind, she does not hesitate in following a political movement that is totally unconcerned about the dispossessed, with the ironic paradox that she remains one of them.

Having reached the peak of their argument, Joyce's final

point is to question Marlene about her own daughter in the same words she has used to attack the working class:

MARLENE. I don't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.

JOYCE. And if they haven't?

MARLENE. If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?

JOYCE. What about Angie?

MARLENE. What about Angie?

JOYCE. She's stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?

MARLENE. You run her down too much. She'll be all right.

JOYCE. I don't expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. Because nothing's changed and it won't with them in.

MARLENE. Them, them. / Us and them?

JOYCE. And you're one of them. (Churchill 1982, 86)

Here Joyce goes back to Marohl's dichotomy. Using the words "us" and "them" she verbalises the existence of two opposite sides, and she defines her own position. Here Joyce has started to develop a new political attitude. As a materialist feminist, she has understood that she has nothing in common with her sister, and the fact that both are female does not really mean anything. From this moment on, having probably burned all the bridges between her sister and herself, she will regard her life with a sort of lucidity about her own misery. Joyce's position is, nevertheless, honest. Marlene's, on the contrary, is not. Whereas Marlene's political analysis might be seen as correct, she fails to apply the same analysis to her personal life, and this failure renders her position worthless.

As I have shown through the comparison of the two sisters' lifestyles, Marlene's attitude lacks ethical qualities, whereas Joyce lacks the power to change the exploitative structure she

is chained to. Thus, the play leaves the reader/audience in a deeply pessimistic state, for it does not really foresee any sort of way out. We see how the advance of women in our society covers a number of terrible situations, crimes and offences. The longed-for disruption of the Symbolic Order, that closed Act One on such a hopeful note, proves ultimately not to be possible. However, Caryl Churchill has also told the reader/audience not to be ingenuous enough to make it a male against female case. Quite on the contrary. Marlene is as lethal an enemy to Joyce as Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher are. As Janet Brown points out, the play can be seen as a "critique of the individual woman who achieves equality in the work world without regard for her sisters (literal or figurative), and even at their expense" (Brown 1988, 124). In fact, Marlene is once again a very good example of this lack of concern.

I would like to conclude with a reference to the title of this chapter. As *The New York Times* theatre critic put it: "Even in England, one assumes, not every woman must be either an iron maiden or a downtrodden serf" (Rich 1982, 49). Certainly not, I would say. However, this somewhat simple classification exemplifies in a very clear way how contemporary societies are structured. In this way, there will always be people who oppress and people who are oppressed, unless some kind of deconstructive action is undertaken. Besides, everybody can embody some characteristics from each position, to a certain extent. Thus, Marlene, Margaret Thatcher and Edith Cresson, as an example, are the sort of women that could be



described as 'iron maidens', belonging to a right-wing type of feminism, a feminism that justifies the reproduction of roles inherited from a capitalist, patriarchal ideology. On the other hand, Joyce, Angie, and Joyce and Marlene's parents, amongst others, could with no doubt be described as 'downtrodden serfs', as the ones who will always 'bear the brunt' of the other group's oppression. However, by being the members of the first group invariably Coca-Cola executives, Prime Ministers or Managing Directors of important companies, and by following the sort of politics they embrace, the prospects for the future of the rest of humanity (both women and men) are quite grim. The only possibility of hope would be the presence of a materialist-feminist woman in one of those positions. However, I cannot help but see a contradiction in Churchill's reasoning here, for a woman must really enter the capitalist mechanism in order to achieve 1% of what Marlene, Mrs Thatcher or Mrs Cresson have achieved. In other words, a materialist-feminist would never have access there. Indeed, the future might appear "frightening" for all of us, both men and women, whether we are 'iron maidens' or 'downtrodden serfs'.

## CHAPTER VI.

### CRUNCHING ONE'S OWN PRICK: *BLUE HEART* AND THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINIST CANNIBALISM OF THE PATRIARCHAL MALE SUBJECT

This chapter will approach Caryl Churchill's play *Blue Heart* (1997) as an example of a new direction in the playwright's career. Thus, it will show her concern with finding new ways of expression -as can also be seen in her fusing of drama, dance and music in her latest experiments<sup>1</sup>- that here translate into adopting an aesthetic and formal discourse based on some of the so-called tenets of Expressionism and of the Theatre of the Absurd. Together with the heritage of these theatrical traditions that have inevitably informed her career, we can also identify the presence of a definite anxiety at "the loss of identity and culture in the artifice of the postmodern Western world" (Aston 1997, 88). Hence, postmodernism also comes into the picture. However, from a gender-biased perspective, I will also argue that Churchill's use of this postmodern anxiety will especially affect maleness. This point will be made clear through a combined use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, poststructuralism and French feminist theory, which together will give way to poststructuralist feminism.

First, postmodernism. As critics Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach put it in their rendering of Lyotard's theories:

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Churchill started experimenting with other artistic fields as early as 1984, when she contributed to a performance art production at London's ICA, *Midday Sun*. Subsequently, she worked with choreographer Ian Spink in *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) and in *Fugue* (1988); with Spink and Orlando Gough in *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1991); and again with Spink and Gough (plus Second Stride) in *Hotel* (1997).

[The postmodern condition is characterised by] the collapse of categories themselves, an implosion that has been attributed to the media-saturated powers of capitalistic production and consumption. (Reinelt & Roach 1992, 1)

They also state that: "Postmodernity has been described as a culture of 'hyper-representation' in which objects lose their authenticity and become indefinitely reproducible and representable as commodities" (Reinelt & Roach 1992, 1). It is precisely through this "hyper-representation", through this repetition, that what we understand as 'the real' is lost; it literally and metaphorically loses its meaning and thus we lose it (or it loses us). As Linda Hutcheon states:

The postmodern appears to coincide with a general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not *reflect* society so much as *grand* meaning and value within a particular society. (Hutcheon 1989, 8)

In other words, "the simulacrum gloats over the body of the deceased referent" (Hutcheon 1989, 11).

In *Blue Heart*, language is subjected to one such 'hyper-representation', to one such repetition, and therefore the result is the utter loss of its capacity to generate meaning. This brings with it an emphasis on the unreality of reality as it stands and on the realisation -despite humanity's desperate efforts to hold onto it- of the fragile nature of a theoretically coherent entity that gives a definite meaning to people's lives.

It is, however, on pondering on the ontology of reality that we can find a relevant connection between postmodernism and a tradition that turns out to be seminal in relation to Caryl

Churchill: The Theatre of the Absurd. As Eugène Ionesco expressed in his expanding of Antonin Artaud's thought:

As our knowledge becomes separated from life, our culture no longer contains ourselves (or only an insignificant part of ourselves), for it forms a 'social' context into which we are not integrated. So the problem becomes that of bringing our life back into contact with our culture, making it a living culture once again. To achieve this, we shall first have to kill 'the respect for what is written down in black and white' ... to break up our language so that it can be put together again in order to re-establish contact with 'the absolute', or, as I should prefer to say, 'with multiple reality'; it is imperative to 'push human beings again towards seeing themselves as they really are'. (Ionesco 1958, 131)

It is therefore between the postmodern "loss of the real", mentioned earlier, and the Absurdist "multiple reality" that we can locate Churchill's latest play. The connection can also be made at the level of language, and the use Churchill makes of it, the way in which she breaks it up and does not put it together again will be tackled later on in the chapter.

Having established the connection between postmodernism and the Theatre of the Absurd tradition, and after mentioning how this can be transposed to *Blue Heart*, it is relevant to note that director Max Stafford-Clark has also established a link between Caryl Churchill and the Theatre of the Absurd, especially with writers such as Eugène Ionesco. As he puts it<sup>2</sup>:

Caryl Churchill is the same generation as Edward Bond, and Ionesco was the writer who was being done when they were all at university. Her plays, her early plays, *Moving Clocks Go Slow* and some of her one-act plays do have a very discernible influence by Ionesco, and I think that this play returns to

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<sup>2</sup> These words belong to an interview with Max Stafford-Clark at Out of Joint headquarters in London on 8 January 1999. The complete text of the interview can be found in an appendix at the end of this study.

that a bit, I mean if you think of *The Bald Primadonna* and a suburban English household, it's a bit like that. (Stafford-Clark in Monforte 1999).

Indeed, there are a number of similarities between *Blue Heart* and *La cantatrice chauve*, beginning with the one established by Stafford-Clark, the setting. In Ionesco's play, an English couple waits at home for the arrival of another couple for dinner -in fact, it turns out that the invited couple is late and that the hosts have already had dinner by the beginning of the play. The host and hostess are also aided by a dutiful maid, and they receive the unexpected visit from the Head of the local firemen ("*Le Capitaine des Pompiers*" (Ionesco 1999 [1954], 9). The setting then is utterly English, as can be seen through the extra-dialogic stage direction that opens the dramatic text:

*Intérieur bourgeois anglais, avec des fauteuils anglais. Soirée anglaise. M.Smith, Anglais, dans son fauteuil et ses pantoufles anglais, fume sa pipe anglaise et lit un journal anglais, près d'un feu anglais. Il a des lunettes anglaises, une petite moustache grise, anglaise. A côté de lui, dans un autre fauteuil anglais, Mme.Smith, Anglaise, raccommode des chaussettes anglaises. Un long moment de silence anglais. La pendule anglaise frappe dix-sept coups anglais. (Ionesco 1999 [1954], 11)*

Ionesco's banter on the quintessential qualities of an English household are further exploited by Caryl Churchill in *Blue Heart*. Thus, Churchill makes use of a very similar setting, this "suburban English household" Stafford-Clark mentioned, that, in this case, is inhabited by an English couple who are waiting for the arrival of their daughter from abroad. The character of the maid is here substituted by the husband's sister. Besides, there is also the couple's son. Similarly to the case of *La cantatrice*

*chauve*, the characters are subject to a number of totally unexpected visits that will -or, in an Ionesco-like way, will not- have an effect on their lives.

Before continuing, and having established a clear link between the play which is the object of study and the Theatre of the Absurd tradition, some theoretical approach to the latter is needed. Martin Esslin, in his deeply influential study on the Theatre of the Absurd, defined it as follows:

[The Theatre of the Absurd] search[es] for a way in which [people] can, with dignity, confront a universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless - absurd. (Esslin 1980 [1961], 399)

Once he has tackled the basic elements of this type of theatre, he also makes an inevitable connection to form, to investigate how content and aesthetics are put together:

[T]he Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. ... [It also] goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. (1980 [1961], 24)

Through the "abandonment of ... discursive thought", Esslin also emphasises as a major characteristic of this type of theatre its "radical devaluation of language" (1980 [1961], 26), which he relates to its use of "verbal nonsense" (1980 [1961], 328), and to its "deflation of language" (1980 [1961], 337). What he might also mean by "abandonment of rational devices" can be linked to what he termed as "a deliberate rejection of motivation" (1980 [1961],

376). Finally, all this can be related to the absence of a plot "in the conventional sense" (Esslin 1980 [1961], 404) in the Theatre of the Absurd, and with its substitution by "a pattern of poetic images" (Esslin 1980 [1961], 403). It is through these means that it can eventually be said that "[a] yawning gulf has opened between language and reality" (Esslin 1980 [1961], 409).

The characteristics above-mentioned can be found in *Blue Heart*, and my analysis of the play will try to prove this. However, I would like at this point to establish another link, this time with the consideration the subject has received in literary criticism, and with the shift from a Cartesian reading of the subject that has been inherited from the Enlightenment and the subsequent questioning of the existence of such a subject by poststructuralist literary theory.

In fact, Esslin's words about facing an absurd universe become strikingly close to the poststructuralist notion of the disappearance of the Humanist subject, understood as a coherent essence that gives meaning to our lives. As Chris Weedon puts it:

The distinguishing feature of humanist discourses is their assumption that each individual woman or man possesses a unique essence of human nature. Precisely what constitutes this essence varies between humanist discourses, but in classic liberal humanism, which is still the dominant variety, it is rational consciousness. Rationality is shared by all individuals and is the basis of the liberal political demands for equality of opportunity and the right to self-determination. (1997 [1987], 80)

It is precisely this "unique essence", this "rational consciousness", that poststructuralism is going to question from the outset. And this questioning acquires illuminating undertones

in the light of what Chris Weedon defines as a feminist poststructuralism:

Feminist poststructuralism ... is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. Through a concept of *discourse*, which is seen as a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it. It is a theory which decentres the rational, self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness, as socially produced in language, as a site of struggle and potential change. Language is not transparent as in humanist discourse, it is not expressive and does not label a 'real' world. Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation in language and language is not an abstract system, but is always socially and historically located in discourses. Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist. (Weedon 1997 [1987], 40-1)

It is this emphasis on discursivity and the use it makes of language that are also going to be explored in this chapter, especially in connection with the historical specificity of such discourses and with their relation to power.

Bearing in mind the claim that in the Theatre of the Absurd tradition we find the depiction of "a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose - an absurd universe" (Esslin 1980 [1961], 414) and having seen how this can be related to a certain postmodern anguish and to the poststructuralist deconstruction of the Humanist subject, let us proceed to an analysis of the play proper. *Blue Heart* consists of



two short plays put together: The first one is called *Heart's Desire* and the second one *Blue Kettle*. As can be seen from the outset, Churchill's absurd/postmodern/poststructuralist blend shows up in the very title, which apparently makes up a coherent expression that can be related to a certain gloom traditionally attributed to Expressionist and Absurdist ideological contents, and that in our context can even express a nihilist attitude in relation to the fin-de-siècle, which is, moreover, the end of a millennium and the beginning of a new one. The rational entity of the title, the idea that it makes sense in itself, is also found in the title of the first part of the play, *Heart's Desire*. The title of the second part of the play, however, introduces disconcerting undertones. Thus, *Blue Kettle*, even though making sense linguistically and semantically, brings about an element of uncertainty, of disruption, precisely through the use of the word "kettle", that does not tie in semantically with "heart" or "desire", though it actually matches "blue", but, as we will see during the course of the play, there is no connection whatsoever between the two. What the word "kettle" relates to -and quite significantly I would say- is to a definite domestic realm, the kitchen in any Western house -specifically a British one, thus marking the connection with the depiction of a family universe which, as it turns out, is the set Churchill has chosen to stage the annihilation of the certainties and false domestic bliss that have characterised traditional portraits of the nuclear family in bourgeois theatre through the destruction of the male subject.

*Heart's Desire* portrays three characters waiting for another one. Apart from the influence of Ionesco that I mentioned above, we also have to talk here of an evident debt to Samuel Beckett and his *Waiting for Godot*. Alice and Brian, a married couple, and Maisie, Brian's sister, are waiting for the arrival home of the couple's daughter, Susy, from Australia. She "takes her time" in turning up and their wait will become a demonstration of the futility of human existence and of the strains inherent to the institution of the family. Here Churchill will make use of a structure that owes much to the Theatre of the Absurd tradition, and, in terms of content, she is going to develop a sharp critique of the nuclear family, the very basis of society in the Western world. However, the apparent divorce between form and content does not deprive the play of any of its sharpness. Quite on the contrary, the surreal, strange elements that constitute it tie in perfectly well with the ideological content it tries to convey. We are not that far from the "disintegrating world" Esslin made reference to earlier on.

At this point, the structural workings of *Heart's Desire* should be approached. In fact, the play evolves around the dialogue between Brian, Alice and Maisie while waiting for Susy to arrive. What the reader/spectator is made to question, though, is the notion of reality and of a traditional cause-and-effect pattern. Thus, the characters's dialogue will be constantly interrupted by events that will come from either the exterior of the house or from the characters themselves. After each

interruption has led the characters to a different situation, the original dialogue will be resumed, but each time it will be at a completely different moment in the linguistic discourse. Finally, at the end of the play the complete dialogue will be delivered without interruptions -only with a last one that will mark the dénouement.

Each time an interruption takes place, then, we have had a longer piece of dialogue being delivered. The reader/audience is then allowed, little by little, to find out more about the situation in itself, before finally witnessing the complete exchange without interruptions. However, what these series of interruptions will do to the play is identify the Brechtian heritage by introducing elements belonging to the unreal and the uncanny, which will make the identificatory process between reader/spectator and character/performer utterly impossible. As we have already seen, these interruptions will also place the play within the Absurd tradition.

As a common characteristic of many plays influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd tradition, *Heart's Desire* also has a circular structure. It begins and ends with the act of waiting for the (lost) daughter. However, it becomes immediately clear that this waiting is more active on the part of the women than on the part of the man, as it can be seen both through the 'Haupttext' and the 'Nebentext':

ALICE and MAISIE. ALICE *setting knives and forks on table*,  
MAISIE *fidgets about the room*. BRIAN *enters putting on a red sweater*.

BRIAN. She's taking her time.  
ALICE. Not really. (Churchill 1997, 5)

Even though it could be argued that Alice and Maisie's wait is more active for the sole reason that they are fulfilling their traditional role as women in the domestic sphere, that they are just acting 'female', the fact that they set themselves tasks that keep them busy and allow them not to be totally expectant should be noted. This is not the case of Brian, who chooses not to be actively involved in the preparations and therefore cannot find ways to ease out his anxiety at his daughter's coming back home. Having said that, however, and in the light of what has been said previously, the play keeps a surprise in store: Suddenly the action stops and is resumed again:

*They all stop, BRIAN goes out. Others reset to beginning and do exactly what they did before as BRIAN enters putting on a tweed jacket.*

BRIAN. She's taking her time.  
ALICE. Not really. (Churchill 1997, 5)

As we can see, the only change at this point is in the item of clothing Brian chooses to wear to greet Susy: The red sweater has given way to a tweed jacket. At this point, the action will again be stopped and resumed again, only that this time Brian is going to wear an "old cardigan" (Churchill 1997, 5) that later on in the play will be substituted by a "cardigan" (Churchill 1997, 10,33), to eventually give way again to the "old cardigan" (Churchill 1997, 36) at the very close of the play. This element of repetition can, on the one hand, be regarded as yet another

heritage of the tradition of the Absurd and, on the other hand, it can also be considered as an example of the defamiliarisation techniques leading to the creation of an Alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* or A-effect) Churchill uses as a clear debt to Bertolt Brecht. The changing of the clothing, thus, can also be used to emphasise this very alienation, even though it can also signify Brian's anxiety at meeting Susy, an anxiety that shows through his constant changing. At this point, the issue of clothing the body acquires particular relevance, especially bearing in mind the feminist reading of the play I purport to undertake and in the light of the subsequent events that will mark Brian's development in the play.

Brian does in fact change clothes through the continuous re-openings of the play -a total of eight times, plus one uttering only the first part of the sentence. As I said before, this could also be interpreted as showing his nervousness at his daughter coming back home and as a consequence of his desire to please her physically. The movement from the "red sweater" (Churchill 1997, 5) to the "tweed jacket" (Churchill 1997, 5), and from this to the "old cardigan" (Churchill 1997, 5) that, in turn, will give way to an ordinary "cardigan" later on in the play, to eventually go back to the "old cardigan", can be interpreted as emphasising his looking for a way to please his daughter and, at the same time, as an example of the repression of his feelings towards her. In the light of this last idea, the use of red introduces a clear element of sensuality, of the flesh, which ties in with my reading of the

father/daughter relationship as incestuous. The change into a tweed jacket shows how Brian restrains himself to adopt a more grey, formal outfit that might better befit the situation. Finally, the adoption of the cardigan further signals his surrendering to the codes of dressing that better befit the domestic sphere of the home. Traditionally being a homely garment, the cardigan shows Brian submitting to the unwritten rules of domestic patriarchy.

Churchill's experimentation with language, her "alienation of the linguistic sign-system" (Aston 1999, 9), ties in with what Martin Esslin defined as "[t]he Theatre of the Absurd's preoccupation with language, its attempt to penetrate to a deeper layer of the mind, closer to the subconscious matrix of thought" (1980 [1961], 354). But in fact, such an experimentation, her use of dialogue and repetition in the play also bring about Ruby Cohn's words on the quality of language in the Theatre of the Absurd. The relevance of her words to *Blue Heart* is shown very clearly in the light of the poststructuralist approach I am using:

Although Martin Esslin points to subordination of dialogue as a quality of the absurd ... it is so only by comparison with the discursive causality of the realistic play. In the most concentrated drama of the absurd, however, linguistic structures are symbolic -negation, interrogation, and above all repetition. Preceding poststructural criticism that reduces the world to language, the drama of the absurd stages language as paradigm. (Cohn 1990, 8)

It is the "de-emphasis on plot and ... fragmentation of dialogue that would become the lingua franca of the absurdists" (Cohn 1990, 5) that Churchill seems to be greatly at ease with.

Her showing of the symbolism of language, her making language a "paradigm" and her subsequent deconstruction of it also appear in *Heart's Desire* through the adoption of a number of techniques that seem to be trying this very experimentation. Thus, at some point in the play the characters are made to repeat the dialogue in a much quicker way, as can be seen in the stage direction marking it: "*This time do the repeat at double speed, all movements accurate though fast*" (Churchill 1997, 11). This is interrupted later on by another stage direction: "*Resume normal speed*" (Churchill 1997, 13) after which a new piece of information will be delivered to the reader/spectator. At another, later moment in the play, the characters are also made to repeat their dialogue, but this time "*as fast as possible. Precision matters, intelligibility doesn't*" (Churchill 1997, 29), which will also be altered later on: "*Doorbell rings. Return to normal speed*" (Churchill 1997, 31). Churchill's poststructuralist play with language relies, then, on the fixing of body language and movement, in other words, on the foregrounding of kinesics and proxemics at the expense of the verbal utterances. Thus, she is emphasising the very deconstruction of language, she is making it strange and therefore disrupting it.

Churchill's deconstruction of language becomes relevant in the light of a poststructuralist reading of the play. If, according to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the acquisition of language in the child comes together with the entrance into the Symbolic Order and with the acceptance of the Law of the Father,

the importance of language becomes paramount:

For poststructuralist theory the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness is *language*. Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. Subjectivity is produced in a whole range of discursive practices -economic, social and political- the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power. Language ... constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific. Moreover, for poststructuralism, subjectivity is neither unified nor fixed ... [but] a site of disunity and conflict, central to the process of political change. (Weedon 1997 [1987], 21)

Thus, Churchill also makes a paradigm of language in order to exemplify the construction -or rather, deconstruction- of subjectivity. The play with language will inevitably carry with it an awareness of the possibilities of disruption of the social order mentioned by Weedon, a social order that is characterised by following the main tenets of patriarchy. Therefore, a subversion of the rules of language as they exist in society will also bring about a questioning of the rules of the social order in which language exists, as well as a dismantling of the construction of the subject. In the light of a poststructuralist feminist reading this offers subversive possibilities of dissidence, since it opens the way to a questioning of the Symbolic Order of things and shows the possibility of a return to the Imaginary through this dismantling of the *logos*.

A further example of the playwright's deconstruction of language and her underlining of such a deconstruction through a



total divorce between language and movement is the fact that, as part of the interruptions that beset the action of the play, the characters are quite suddenly made to say only part of their lines. This happens twice in the play. The first time, only the beginning of their utterances is delivered:

*Reset to top. As far as possible keep the movements that go with the part lines.*

BRIAN. She's taking  
ALICE. Not  
BRIAN. We should have  
ALICE. We should not  
BRIAN. She'll be  
ALICE. She's a woman  
BRIAN. How can you speak  
ALICE. She's a (Churchill 1997, 17-8)

As we can see, even though language falters, the kinesics and proxemics are kept safe and sound. The second time this happens in the play, though, the divorce between language and movement is made even more evident by the fact that language is kept to its very minimum expression and this time only the very end of the linguistic expression is used:

*Reset to top. This time it is only last words that are said, mark gestures and positions at those points as far as possible.*

BRIAN. time.  
ALICE. really.  
BRIAN. the plane.  
ALICE. not.  
BRIAN. exhausted.  
ALICE. thirtyfive.  
BRIAN. your daughter.  
ALICE. thirtyfive. (Churchill 1997, 24-5)

The fact that, as was said before, Churchill's play with language was already hinted at by Ionesco is quite striking. In *La*

*cantatrice chauve* we find a very similar deconstruction to the one used in *Blue Heart*:

M.SMITH: Hm.  
*Silence.*  
Mme.SMITH: Hm, hm.  
*Silence.*  
Mme.MARTIN: Hm, hm, hm.  
*Silence.*  
M.MARTIN: Hm, hm, hm, hm.  
*Silence.*  
Mme.MARTIN: Oh, décidément.  
*Silence.*  
M.MARTIN: Nous sommes tous enrhumés.  
*Silence.*  
M.SMITH: Pourtant il ne fait pas froid.  
*Silence.*  
Mme.SMITH: Il n'y a pas de courant d'air.  
*Silence.*  
M.MARTIN: Oh non, heureusement.  
*Silence.*  
M.SMITH: Ah, la la la la.  
*Silence.* (Ionesco 1999 [1954], 33-5)

Churchill's deconstruction of language, then, adopts very definite forms in *Blue Heart*, and especially in the second play that shapes it, *Blue Kettle*. However, and probably as a means to pave the way, it hints its way up in *Heart's Desire*. The clearest disruptions of language that can be found in *Heart's Desire*, take place at two unconnected moments during the play. The first one comes when the tensions between the old couple break loose with the imminent arrival of their daughter:

*Reset to just after 'wants to do.'*

BRIAN. You make yourself a doormat to that girl, you always did, she won't be grateful for lunch she'll be on a diet.

ALICE. Are you pleased she's coming back?

BRIAN. What's the matter with you now?

ALICE. You don't sleem peased - you don't pleem seased -

*Reset to after 'coming back.'*

BRIAN. What's the matter with you now?

ALICE. You don't seem pleased, you seem cross.

MAISIE. The tube's very quick, she'll be here in no time I'm sure. (Churchill 1997, 14).

Alice's words at this point are crucial, since she is facing her husband and his feelings towards their daughter. However, Churchill chooses to make them totally unintelligible by playing with them at a phonetic and at a phonological level. Thus, "seem pleased" becomes "sleem peased" or "pleem seased" before being uttered as a meaningful expression. The use of the verb "to seem" at this point also becomes somewhat illuminating, in the sense that the playwright may be emphasising the constant dichotomy between reality and imagination that characterises the play and, by extension, human life. The verb "to please", on the other hand, can also be related to the theatrical situation in itself, since traditionally plays are devised to "please" their audiences, and this is something Churchill also seems to be challenging.

The second linguistic disruption in the first part of the play takes place towards the end, when the confrontation between the old couple is reaching its heights:

*Set back to after 'worse than when they've gone'  
Continue at speed.*

MAISIE. though of course when they've gone you think why didn't I make better use of them when they were still there, you can't do right in those situations.

BRIAN. It's not that you don't have a sense of occasion. You know exactly what an occasion is and you deliberately set out to ruin it. I've thought for forty years you were a stupid woman, now I know you're simply nasty.

*Doorbell rings. Return to normal speed.*

MAISIE. That'll be her.

ALICE. Do you want to go?

*Brian goes off. A ten foot tall bird enters.*

*Reset to after 'situations'.*

BRIAN. It's not occasion occasion deliberately ruin it forty years stupid nasty. (Churchill 1997, 31-2)

Brian's words at this point are marked by total syntactic nonsense. This syntactic disruption takes place nevertheless after having uttered his lines at top speed, and also after the irruption of the huge bird. Brian's incoherent speech may underline at this point the inability of (a patriarchal) language to make sense of the world we live in (constructed by patriarchy), the inability of language to express the self anymore, a self that, on the other hand, is problematised from a poststructuralist perspective. According to Judith Butler:

[T]here may not be a subject who stands "before" the law, awaiting representation in or by the law. Perhaps the subject, as well as the invocation of a temporal "before", is constituted by the law as the fictive foundation of its own claim to legitimacy. The prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject before the law might be understood as the contemporary trace of the state of nature hypothesis, that foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structures of classical liberalism. The performative invocation of a nonhistorical "before" becomes the foundational premise that guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed and, thereby, constitute the legitimacy of the social contract. (Butler 1990, 2-3)

And Chris Weedon clarifies the idea:

[I]n poststructuralist theory, the reasoning subject is not a unified, sovereign, rational consciousness, but discursively produced and subject to process. Moreover, subjectivity encompasses unconscious as well as conscious dimensions and is not abstract but embodied in bodies that are both socially and culturally produced and gendered. The subject of the Western philosophical tradition has been a 'disembodied'

abstract individual governed by conscious rational thought.  
(Weedon 1997 [1987], 173)

Brian, who here acts as this "disembodied" being, starts showing some of the faultlines that appear in his constitution as a traditional subject. We will see later on how his disembodiment is actually taken to its extreme consequences in the play.

Continuing with the analysis of *Heart's Desire*, what clearly emerges from the characters' wait is the tensions that exist between them. These tensions can be immediately seen in the first whole exchange between the couple:

BRIAN. She's taking her time.  
ALICE. Not really.  
BRIAN. We should have met the plane.  
ALICE. We should not.  
BRIAN. She'll be exhausted.  
ALICE. She's a woman of thirtyfive.  
BRIAN. How can you speak of your daughter?  
ALICE. She's a woman of thirtyfive.  
BRIAN. You're so right of course.  
ALICE. She can travel round the world, she can travel the last few miles.  
BRIAN. It's so delightful for you always being so right.  
(Churchill 1997, 6)

This exchange summarises the attitude of both characters in relation to their daughter. Whereas Brian shows a clear anxiety and preoccupation at what he still considers his baby daughter not arriving from the airport, Alice adopts a more sensible attitude, treating Susy as a grown-up who knows how to find her way around. Thus, she is busy preparing a special lunch for her, rather than worrying about her not turning up from the airport. This irritates her husband even more, so he resorts to the adoption of an aggressive behaviour towards her. This will lead to a showing of

the deterioration in the relationship between the old couple, who have spent years together but who do not love each other anymore. This degeneration shows itself in an ambiguous way in one of the interruptions that take place all through the play:

BRIAN. It's so delightful for you always being so right.

ALICE. That's it.

BRIAN. It's what?

ALICE. I'm leaving.

BRIAN. Oh ha ha we're all supposed to be frantic and beg you to stay and say very sorry.

ALICE. I wouldn't bother.

BRIAN. I'm not going to bother don't worry.

*Exit* ALICE.

MAISIE. Alice?

BRIAN *and* MAISIE *wait*.

BRIAN. She'll just have a cry.

ALICE *enters in coat with bag*.

ALICE. Tell her I'm sorry and I'll phone later to tell her where I am.

*Exit* ALICE.

BRIAN. Was that the front door? Alice? Alice.

MAISIE. I don't think you - (Churchill 1997, 6-7)

This unreal episode can be interpreted as a way to show the reader/audience how the situation can be transformed in a matter of seconds and also how the distinction between reality and imagination becomes blurred, as a consequence of the play with language Churchill has undertaken. In fact, the action starts once again after Maisie's words, so the event is immediately questioned. However, the question appears as to the ontological essence of the exchange that has taken place. Does it happen? Will

it ever happen? Has it already/ever happened?

There are two more instances of the utter crisis of the relationship between Alice and Brian. At some later point in the play, he says: "You're the thing makes me cross, drive me insane with your wittering" (Churchill 1997, 35), again as an hostile reaction to Alice's treatment of Susy as an adult. It is, however, the repetition of the following remark in their last exchange in the play that is the most illuminating example of the absolute deterioration of their relationship:

BRIAN. It's not that you don't have a sense of occasion. You know exactly what an occasion is and you deliberately set out to ruin it. I've thought for forty years you were a stupid woman, now I know you're simply nasty. (Churchill 1997, 36)

The fact that what was supposed to be a joyful occasion, a daughter's returning home, turns out to be an excuse to show the souring of human relations within the institution of marriage is relevant. This enables us to say then that *Blue Heart* can be read as quite a powerful attack on the institution of the nuclear family understood as the very basis of Western society. An attack that seems to be carried out by the playwright in many of her plays (certainly in the three plays that are being approached in this work). Brian's statement about his feelings for his wife expresses the Lacanian psychoanalytic and poststructuralist feminist reading of language as being basically a male creation with the critique of the institution upon which society is founded.

The different attitude that the old couple have towards their

daughter Susy shows itself at several points in the play. Thus, while Alice mentions at some point that Susy "didn't want to be met" (Churchill 1997, 8), that "She doesn't want fuss" (Churchill 1997, 8), Brian also retorts that:

BRIAN. She'll never come home from Australia again.

ALICE. What do you mean? of course she'll come again.

BRIAN. In the event she goes back of course she'll come again but she'll never come back for the first time again. (Churchill 1997, 11)

It is this "first time" that Brian seems to be desperately trying to (re)capture, as if trying to regain the past. The fact that Alice seems to be in a different, more independent position than himself irritates him deeply and makes him turn her into a scapegoat for his anger and bitterness. It is, thus, through the exchanges between Alice and Brian, that the fact that the latter holds more than a paternal kind of love towards his daughter gradually comes to light. The fact that his beloved daughter has fled from him to the remotest part of the world has made him angry and resentful. In this sense, the parallelism that can be established between the country Susy has chosen to settle in, Australia, and her being a woman, is worth considering. The fact that Australia holds the status of an old colony for homeland Britain strikingly mirrors the fact that what Brian seems to be trying to do is to (re)colonise Susy, her body and mind.

Alice seems to be aware of Brian's attempts to (re)colonise Susy, and she intercedes in her favour:

ALICE. All I'm saying is be nice to her.

BRIAN. Be nice to her?

ALICE. Yes I'm just saying be nice to her.



BRIAN. When am I not nice to her? am I not a good father is that what you're going to say? do you want to say that? say it.

ALICE. I'm just -

BRIAN. Say it say it.

ALICE. Just be nice to her that's all.

BRIAN. Nice.

ALICE. Fine, you're going to be nice that's all I'm saying. (Churchill 1997, 35)

When Brian feels his fatherhood in danger, he reacts with extreme hostility. Alice seems to be protecting her daughter from his overwhelming presence and he resents that very much. She can wait for Susy at home but she is also preparing a "special lunch" (Churchill 1997, 34) for her. The fact that Alice seems capable of establishing more adult links with their daughter makes him see his own inability to create a different kind of relationship with Susy. And Alice is the one who naturally becomes the object of his loathing:

BRIAN. I should leave you. I'm the one should have gone to Australia.

ALICE. Go back with her I should.

BRIAN. Maybe I'll do that.

ALICE. Though mind you she wouldn't stay in Australia in that case would she? She'd have to move on to New Zealand. Or Hawaii, I think she'd move to Tonga probably. (Churchill 1997, 35)

Alice's retorts to Brian's attack are illuminating in that they show her awareness of the situation and convey Churchill's critique on the nuclear family. When both members of the family unit are considering the possibility of leaving Britain to go to Australia, they are also stating the lack of communication between them. Moreover, the fact that Alice understands Susy's situation places her in a more favourable position than the one in which her

husband finds himself. Alice has always known about Brian's feelings for Susy and has always refused to acknowledge their existence. By showing this, Churchill is making a statement about the potential for corruption within the institution of the family.

As Chris Weedon puts it:

In conservative discourse the family is the natural basic unit of the social order, meeting individual emotional, sexual and practical needs, and it is primarily responsible for the reproduction and socialization of children. Power relations in the family, in which men usually have more power than women and women more power than children, are seen as part of a God-given natural order which guarantees the sexual division of labour within the family. The naturalness of women's responsibility for domestic labour and childcare is balanced by the naturalness of men's involvement in the worlds of work and politics. Both partners are equal in worth but different. The organization of society in family units guarantees the reproduction of social values and skills in differential class and gender terms. (Weedon 1997 [1987], 38)

In fact, Alice and Brian's household is a very good example of what a nuclear family is. Having borne two children, a boy and a girl, they are the best example of the workings of Western capitalist societies. However, as we have seen, not everything shines under its aura. Thus, the failed "socialization" of their daughter Susy has brought about a deep crisis in the power relations between the couple formed by Alice and Brian. Similarly, the failure of the transmission of the values of patriarchy to their daughter implies that the reproduction of the patriarchal/capitalist "social values" in gender terms has also failed. The consequence of this is yet another re-arrangement in the relationship between the married couple and a continuous putting down of the wife. Brian, the patriarch, will never admit

to the slightest flaw in his constitution as subject.

Alice and Brian's utter failure in endowing their children with the necessary tools for a successful integration in patriarchal/capitalist society, with the rudiments of socialization and with the indispensable background to perpetuate society's social values from their specific class perspective and according to each one's own gender shows itself once again in the case of Susy's younger brother. Lewis, Brian and Alice's drunkard son, reveals it in his three different entrances that will break the so-called family harmony. The three entrances will be marked by a stage direction stating the fact that he is drunk. The first time he appears, he is looking for his sister:

*Enter Lewis, drunk.*

LEWIS. Where is she?

BRIAN. You're not coming in here in that condition.

LEWIS. Where's my big sister? I want to give her a kiss.

BRIAN. You'll see her when you're sober.

ALICE. Now it's all right, Brian. Susy isn't here yet, Lewis.

LEWIS. You've probably got her hidden under the table. Dad knows where she is, don't you Dad? Daddy always knows where Susy is. Hello Aunty Maisie, want a drink? Let's go to the pub, Maisie, and get away from this load of - (Churchill 1997, 11)

The fact that Lewis is so graphic about Susy's whereabouts shows that something in the dynamics of the family has not been working for a very long time. From his words we can deduce that Alice always tried to protect Susy from her husband's attention. Apart from this, the fact that Lewis himself seems to be constantly drunk emphasises the unhealthy atmosphere that has determined the lives of the inhabitants of the house, and hence

the critique of the nuclear family as the basis of a theoretically healthy society is once again conveyed.

The second time Lewis appears is also illuminating as to Brian's attitude to his son:

*Enter Lewis, drunk.*

LEWIS. I'm unhappy. What are you going to do about it?

ALICE. You know you have to help yourself, Lewis.

LEWIS. But it never stops.

BRIAN. Lewis, I wish you'd died at birth. If I'd known what you'd grow up like I'd have killed either you or myself the day you were born.

LEWIS. You see this is where I get it from. Is it any wonder?  
(Churchill 1997, 16)

Brian's rage at his son's state is also an example of his own inability to cope with what he himself has created. It seems very clear that the situation in the family is what has made Lewis a drunkard, and the fact that he shows this to his father makes Brian furious. Lewis becomes an unnecessary mirror that reflects the misery in their own lives.

Lewis's third and last appearance in the play is also illuminating as a possible way to go forward:

*Lewis comes in, drunk.*

LEWIS. It's time we had it out. It's time we spoke the truth.

MAISIE. Lewis, you're always speaking the truth and where does it get you?

LEWIS. I want my life to begin.

ALICE. Lewis, there is one little rule in this house and what is it? it is that you don't come into this room when you've been drinking. Do we stop you drinking? no because we can't stop you drinking. Do we throw you out in the street? no because for some reason we are too tenderhearted and that is probably wrong of us. But there is one little rule and if you keep breaking it -

BRIAN. Out. Out.

LEWIS. No more. No more. No more.

BRIAN. Out. (Churchill 1997, 24)

The main confrontation in this exchange is once again the one between father and son. Lewis is putting forward the necessity of talking openly and thus of getting rid of taboos. That's why he uses the word "out". However, and paradoxically, Brian makes an appropriation of this very word and ends up using it for his own benefit. This is also why he wins in the confrontation, as we can see in his uttering of the final "Out" that will signify the opposite his son intended it to be: the silencing of the problem instead of its being talked over. Thus, in spite of Lewis's plea for some kind of mercy, Brian shows his very ruthless behaviour. Lewis, the youngest and the weakest of his children, unable either to face Brian or to escape from him as Susy did, seems to be at a total loss as to what to do with his life. Lewis' weakness is also significant bearing in mind his position as family heir. The fact that he has become a drunkard and that there are no immediate prospects of change make the future for the family patriarchy uncertain and dubious, and this can be seen as contributing to Brian's uneasiness and discomfort. Lewis, as the representative of patriarchy and of the type of male subject that is supposed to endorse it, does not seem to exist.

Brian's ruthlessness, on the other hand, is nevertheless contraposed to his striking urge to eat himself. This is one of a series of events that will besiege Alice, Maisie and Brian's wait, as we have said before, and that will make them experience strange and uncanny situations. Such an urge must also be read in the light of the disappearance of the male subject in *Blue Heart*.

Thus, when confronted with the fact that the devotion he feels towards his daughter is perhaps too erotically intense, Brian turns to appetite. His ambiguous hunger is not voiced, however, until after Maisie has made four references to the act of waiting: "It's all this waiting" (Churchill 1997, 13,15,16), and "I do think waiting is one of the hardest things" (Churchill 1997, 21). It is then that he expresses his state: "I'm terribly hungry" (Churchill 1997, 21), and elaborates:

BRIAN. I'm telling you. I have this terrible urge to eat myself.

ALICE. To bite your skin?

BRIAN. Yes to bite but to eat - never mind.

ALICE. No it's all right, you can tell us.

BRIAN. Starting with my fingernails like this -

MAISIE. Yes you always have bitten your fingernails.

BRIAN. But the whole finger, if I hold it with my other hand it won't happen but what I want to do is chew up my finger, I want my whole hand in my mouth. Don't despise me.

ALICE. Of course not, dear. I'm sure plenty of people -

BRIAN. My whole arm, swallow it right up to the shoulder, then the other arm gobble gobble up to the shoulder, and big bite left big bite right that's both the shoulders in.

MAISIE. Is this something you've always wanted to do or -?

BRIAN. And the shoulders bring the rest of my body, eat my heart, eat my lungs, down my ribs I go, munch my belly, crunch my prick, and oh my whole body's in my mouth now so there's just my legs sticking out, I've eaten it all up.

ALICE. Have you thought of seeing someone about -

BRIAN. Then snap snap up my legs to the knees the calves the ankles just the feet sticking out of my mouth now gallop gallop I've swallowed my feet, there's only my head and my big mouth wants it, my big mouth turns round and ahh there goes my head into my mouth I've swallowed my head I've swallowed my whole self up I'm all mouth can my mouth swallow my mouth yes my mouth's taking a big bite ahh. (Churchill 1997, 21-2)

Brian's powerful image of his mouth devouring his own body - apart from a direct reference to Samuel Beckett's *Not I*- gives us a number of clues for a poststructuralist feminist reading of the

play. Most important amongst his words is the fact that Brian eats up the most evident sign of his maleness, his penis, and that he does so by crunching it. His erasing of the body -a body that all through the play he has been covering with clothes: Sweater, jacket, cardigan- can be directly contrasted to another action, the writing or signing on/through the body characteristic of a section of feminist thought. In fact, Brian's *disembodiment*, his urge to annihilate himself, can be related to the poststructuralist feminist reading of the play I am undertaking as a depiction of contemporary male anxiety with regard to existence in relation to a more seemingly coherent female world. In fact, the crunching of his own penis signals his anxiety to erase any traces of maleness in the world, and this ties in with the action of the play. In fact, in the universe of *Heart's Desire* there coexist two distinct spheres. On the one hand, the male one -Brian and his son Lewis, characterised, as we have seen, by neurosis and despair. On the other hand, the female one -Alice, Maisie and Susy, that seems to create a core against that very neurosis and despair, as we can see in Susy's escape from the patriarchal domain and, especially, in the relationship between Alice and Maisie, as an example of resistance *from within*. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, we could link this with a possible call Churchill might be making in the play, namely the questioning and dismantling of male subject positions as validated by the basis of Western society: The nuclear family. By making, once again, a demolishing critique of the family as an

institution, the playwright seems to be asking for a radical reconsideration of the structures upon which society is based.

Brian's cannibalistic urge to devour can then be linked to the poststructuralist feminist disappearance of the (male) subject, in *Heart's Desire*, in particular, and in *Blue Heart* in general. As was mentioned above, all references to the male in *Heart's Desire* are characterised by negativity and despair. As has already been seen, Brian appears from the beginning of the play as possessed by a deep anxiety created by his daughter's return home from Australia. The observation he makes about Susy's supposed belatedness, "She's taking her time" (Churchill 1997, 5), apart from revealing anxiety, is going to become a motif in the play and will be repeated many times during this first section of *Blue Heart*. The remark also plunges us immediately into a male malaise that Churchill is going to further explore in this play. In fact, Brian is going to be made to say this line ten times. Out of these times, he is going to be replied to by his wife Alice a total of nine times. As we have seen before, to Brian's uneasiness, Churchill contrasts Alice's calmness when, to her husband's nervousness, she retorts with a cool "Not really" (Churchill 1997, 5). However, the final time Brian utters the line, at the very close of the play, no reply is forthcoming from Alice, so the play closes by emphasising male postmodern anxiety, with no comforting female words to alleviate the neurosis. Waiting for Susy, for the daughter that fled from him to the remotest part of earth she could possibly find; waiting for death; perhaps waiting for



another definition of maleness that might suit him better than the ones traditionally offered by the Establishment; after having metaphorically devoured himself and especially the "precious" sign of his maleness, Brian -in what can be considered yet another wink at the genius of Samuel Beckett- is left with nothing but the unending waiting itself.

There are other strange phenomena that beset the three characters' wait, all of them being marked by a high degree of absurdity. Some of them do not require language, such as the sudden irruption of "*A horde of small children rush[ing] in, round the room and out again*" (Churchill 1997, 15), or of "*Two GUNMEN burst[ing] in and kill[ing] them all, then leav[ing]*" (Churchill 1997, 17), or even of "*A ten foot tall bird enter[ing]*" (Churchill 1997, 32). Before and after each of these irruptions, the characters go about their tasks and deliver their lines as if nothing strange and out of the ordinary has happened. These elements -apart from signalling an indebtedness to the figure of Bertolt Brecht- can definitely be inscribed in the Theatre of the Absurd tradition and here they work to underline the strangeness, the uncanny element within the institution of the nuclear family.

Other moments in the play that add to this defamiliarising process are expressed through the sudden reference to a body found in the family garden; to an extra-marital affair Alice seems to have had; to the strange presence of a Foucauldian "*man in uniform*" (Churchill 1997, 29) ordering Brian and the others to show him some identification papers and thus emphasising the

absurdity of defining an identity that seems nevertheless to be crumbling away, and the presence of a "young Australian woman" (Churchill 1997, 27) who introduces yet another element into the play: Susy's sexuality. The exchange is as follows:

BRIAN *returns followed by a young Australian woman.*

ALICE. Oh.

BRIAN. This is a friend, you said a friend of Susy's, I don't quite ...

ALICE. Hello do come in. How lovely. Did you travel together?

YW: It's great to be here. Susy's told me so much about you. She said to be sure to look you up.

BRIAN. And she's just behind you is she?

ALICE. Did you travel in separately from the airport? Did you come on the tube?

YW: I came on a bus.

ALICE. That's a good way.

YW: But what's this about Susy? Susy's not here.

MAISIE. She hasn't arrived yet.

YW: Susy's coming too? that's amazing. She saw me off on the plane.

BRIAN. Of course Susy's coming.

MAISIE. Do you know Susy very well? is she an old friend?

YW: I live with Susy. Hasn't she told you about me? I thought she wrote to tell you to expect me.

ALICE. I'm terribly sorry, I don't think ...

MAISIE. Is Susy not coming home?

YW. I thought that was something she didn't want to do but of course I could be wrong. She said she was coming? (Churchill 1997, 27-8)

The fact that Susy has become a lesbian appears at this ambiguous point in the play<sup>3</sup>. Now we are offered more information about her. She left England, escaping from the affections of her father, and settled in Australia, where now she lives with another woman. Embracing another sexual option, lesbianism, is also a way

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<sup>3</sup> I am taking the reading of Susy as a lesbian from the London production of the play, which was directed by Max Stafford-Clark and which opened in the autumn of 1997. I had the chance of attending rehearsals of *Blue Heart* in January 1999, before a re-run of the play in London, and before an international touring in Brussels, Paris and New York City. Further information appears in the interview with Stafford-Clark in an appendix at the

of contesting the advances of her father. The fact remains though that this -together with the fact that Susy is not coming home after all- is a clear blow to the family, to the apparently happy family awaiting for the long-desired reunion. Something seems not to be working properly in Alice and Brian's household then. To the bitterness and unhappiness that characterise the life of the couple, must be added the son's drunkenness and the daughter's unorthodox -by Brian's and patriarchy's standards- sexual identity.

At this point I would like to ruminate over one of the central aspects of the play that has not been thoroughly dealt with yet: The act of waiting. In *Heart's Desire*, this is constantly voiced through the character of Maisie. In fact, Maisie's first reference to the act comes immediately after the first part of the dialogue between Alice, Brian and herself has been repeated "*at double speed, all movements accurate though fast*" (Churchill 1997, 11), which emphasises the meaning of the action of waiting through the sheer contrast with the lines uttered at double speed. After Brian establishes the impossibility of things ever happening for the first time again, she utters the following words: "It's all this waiting" (Churchill 1997, 13). Later on, she elaborates on this:

MAISIE. I do think waiting is one of the hardest things. Waiting for arrivals and also waiting to say goodbye, that's even worse when you're waiting on a station platform or a quayside or the airport or just at home the day someone's going waiting for the time when they go I think that's far

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end of this study.

worse than when they've gone though of course when they've gone you think why didn't I make better use of them when they were still there, you can't do right in those situations. (Churchill 1997, 23)

Maisie's reflection on the act of waiting becomes, then, a metaphor for the meaning of people's lives. Waiting being a hard act in itself, there does not seem to be any way to soothe it, to make it smoother. Humanity, according to this, is left with the sheer action in itself, with the experiencing of its harshness and with a constant feeling of frustration.

However, at the same time that this seems to be one of the ideological stances of the play, there is also an intended effect of deconstruction of the waiting process. Thus, towards the end of the play, the doorbell rings several times and the characters rush to answer it. First, Maisie is the one to open the door; after her, Brian goes three times; finally, Alice opens three more times. On one of these occasions, however, -and quite inexplicably so- they choose not to open it:

*Doorbell rings.*

MAISIE. That'll be her.  
ALICE. Do you want to go?

*Silence. They don't answer the door and they wait in silence a longer time than you think you can get away with.*  
(Churchill 1997, 32)

The characters' refusal to open the door underlines the alienation effect that pervades the play precisely through the deconstruction of one of its central elements: The act of waiting, that also stands as a metaphor for the fate of the human condition. We can establish yet another parallelism with Eugène

Ionesco and his *La cantatrice chauve* in the following stage direction from the text: "*La pendule sonne cinq fois. Un long temps*" (Ionesco 1999 [1954], 17), that blends the epistemology of the Theatre of the Absurd with a Brechtian influence revealed in the subversion of language and time. To go back to Churchill, Alice, Brian and Maisie's refusal to open the door is here reinforced by the fact that, in a play that theorises about the function of language in society by making a highly sophisticated use of it, there is a sudden and deliberate recourse to silence. This deconstruction of the act of waiting and of the use of language is relevant in the sense that it might signal a possible rebellion towards the meaning of life as delivered to the human condition by an external force.

The act of waiting in *Heart's Desire* can also be clearly linked with death. In this sense, the play's pervasive concern with death is shown at several points. When Alice, Brian and Maisie are waiting for the couple's daughter to show up from Australia, death appears unexpectedly in the form of a tube crash:

BRIAN. She says that but it wouldn't be if she didn't know she was being met and there we just were or there I was -

*Phone rings.*

Hello? speaking. Ah. Right. Yes. Thank you.

MAISIE. What?

BRIAN. There's been an accident.

ALICE. The plane?

BRIAN. The tube. Didn't I say we should have met her?

ALICE. Is she -?

*Set back to top as before.* (Churchill 1997, 8)

This first presence of death in the play, though, is

immediately regularised by the interruption of the extra-dialogic stage direction summoning the action back to the very beginning. However, death appears again shortly afterwards, when Alice and Brian are interrupted in the middle of their ordinary discussion by two gunmen, who "*burst in and kill them all, then leave*" (Churchill 1997, 17). Once again, the uncanny, the unexpected, takes hold of reality and introduces an ominous element of danger and threat that is nevertheless reversed by the characters coming back to life and repeating the scene in yet a different way, as is signalled by the stage direction "*Reset to top*" (Churchill 1997, 17). Esslin's earlier reference to a "disjointed" world applies here.

The third open reference to death in the play occurs towards the ending and it is once again voiced by Maisie. One of the times Alice has gone to open the door to welcome elusive Susy, Maisie asks Brian:

Do you ever wake up in the night and be frightened of dying? I'm not at all bothered in the daytime. We've all got to do it after all. Think what a lot of people have done it already. Even the young will have to, even the ones who haven't been born yet will have to, it's not a problem theoretically is it, it's the condition of life. I'm not afraid of an afterlife well maybe a little, I'd rather there wasn't one wouldn't you, imagine finding you were dead that would be frightening but of course maybe it wouldn't we don't know, but really I think we just stop, I think either we're alive or we know nothing so death never really happens to us, but still sometimes in the night there's a chill in my blood and I think what is it what am I frightened of and then I think oh death that's what it is again and I -

*Reset to after 'that'll be her'.* (Churchill 1997, 32-3)

Maisie acknowledges the presence of death in everyday life,

the constant lurking that causes some human beings such anguish. However, at the same time, she appears to be asking for some kind of confirmation or sharing of the feeling, as a possible way to stop the loneliness with regard to the human condition in the presence of death. Her ruminations about death come, nevertheless, to an abrupt end -yet again- that is signalled by the stage direction summoning the characters to further action. The 'Nebentext' puts an end once more to metaphysical discussion.

I would like to finish the discussion on *Heart's Desire* by making reference to Susy's dream-like entrances as opposed to Lewis' entrances. This could also be seen as a link with the act of waiting and its relation to death. Once it is established that Susy never actually arrives -as the circular structure of the play makes clear, it can be claimed that she arrives in an unreal way three times. The first time is clearly dream-like and responds to the characters' desires:

*Doorbell rings.*

MAISIE goes off. ALICE and BRIAN embrace. Cries of welcome off.

*Enter SUSY with MAISIE behind her.*

SUSY. Mummy. Daddy. How wonderful to be home. (Churchill 1997, 26-7)

This is a totally idealised version of a coming home. The old couple, who have been flaying each other all through the play, are led to kiss at the imminent arrival of the transcontinental daughter who, in turn, is delighted with her return to the family home, the core of society.

The second time Susy arrives (or, indeed, does not arrive), the situation changes. For one thing, Alice is the one who welcomes her, once Brian has opted to remain seated. When they enter, the following exchange takes place: "SUSY. Here I am. / BRIAN. You are my heart's desire" (Churchill 1997, 33). This exchange is significant because it shows, unambiguously, Brian's feelings towards his daughter. It is also significant because it gives way to the whole uninterrupted dialogue of the sequence. However, the dream element is going to be further emphasised in the very last exchange in the play, at Susy's final (non-) arrival:

*Doorbell rings.*

MAISIE. That'll be her.  
ALICE. Do you want to go?

BRIAN *doesn't move*. ALICE *goes out*. *Cries of welcome off*.  
ALICE *and SUSY enter*.

SUSY. Here I am.  
BRIAN. Here you are.  
ALICE. Yes here she is.  
SUSY. Hello aunty.  
BRIAN. You are my heart's -

*Reset to top*. BRIAN *enters putting on old cardigan*.

BRIAN. She's taking her time. (Churchill 1997, 36)

This is the end of the play. By the fact that Churchill interrupts the action once again and makes the dialogue re-start, we can infer that the situation is not real, and, hence, that Susy does not arrive at all. Furthermore, what is also relevant here is the fact that Brian's words are interrupted when he is about to voice his feelings towards his daughter. In this sense, one of the



play's possible themes, the incestuous love a father feels for his daughter, is also made a metaphor for the corruption of patriarchy as the reader/audience is made to experience it. The fact that Brian refers to Susy as his "heart's desire" also adds to the comparison, in the sense that the heart can be considered to be the most vital part of the human body in the same way as the family has traditionally been defined as the most vital part of capitalist society. What seems to be elusive, though, is the notion of "desire". Desire and sexuality seem to be, then, feasible ways through which the many faultlines that characterise the main power structures of Western society may be exposed and thoroughly disrupted.

Churchill's postmodern play with language in *Blue Heart* is also seen in the second of the plays of which it is composed, *Blue Kettle*. In fact, the playwright seems to be investigating the ways in which the deconstruction of language parallels the disruption of the Symbolic Order, to use the terminology of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. As has been seen in other chapters, according to Lacan, the moment the child goes through the "Mirror Stage" signals the point of his/her acquisition of language, the acceptance of the Law of the Father and thus the entry into the Symbolic Order.

Read from a poststructuralist feminist perspective, *Blue Heart* problematises the patriarchal definition of identity and looks for new ways of defining it. If we bear in mind Lacan's claim -via Aston- that "subjectivity is constructed through the

linguistic sign-system of language" (1997a, 36), and having seen how language acquisition goes hand in hand with the acceptance of the Law of the Father, we can easily conclude that one of the things that Churchill is doing in the play is effacing the male subject and disrupting patriarchy by purposely undermining language. Quoting Aston again:

Feminism and psychoanalysis in a post-Lacanian context has been principally concerned with exposing how the arbitrarily imposed Symbolic (phallic) Order in which all subjects as members of a communicating social order are required to participate, privileges the male at the expense of the female. (1997a, 36)

Churchill actively purports to disestablish a number of assumptions in her play. Namely, the arbitrariness in the construction of the Symbolic Order and the neutralisation of women that it undertakes. However, there is another element that further complicates the ideological content of *Blue Heart*. If, as has been stated above, language is needed in order to become a subject, in *Blue Kettle*, Caryl Churchill also seems to exemplify in a clear way the disestablishment of such a subject via the previous deconstruction of the linguistic sign-system upon which any construction of subjectivity - male or female- is based.

Churchill's poststructuralist engagement, then, her problematising of a traditional definition of the subject, principally takes form in *Heart's Desire* in the self-devouring of the patriarchal male subject, revolving around the specific taking in of the attribute that "best" defines maleness, i.e. the penis. This is not surprising, bearing in mind Churchill's political

development as a dramatist and her position against established power structures. However, the second play in *Blue Heart*, *Blue Kettle*, will take this questioning of the subject further on and will eventually make it into something more global, irrespective of gender and sexuality.

The main character in *Blue Kettle*, Derek, swindles old women by making them believe he is their illegitimate son. It is relevant to point out here, in the light of what has been put forward until now, that Derek is actually searching for a mother. In fact, the search for the father is non-existent, the father is absent and his lack of presence is not endowed with any signification whatsoever. The search for the absent mother, though, is also questioned in the play, since Derek is undertaking a fake search. He does actually have a mother, who seems to be senile, in a geriatric ward, and cons the older women in order to take their money from them. The pervasive presence of the mother in the two plays that make up *Blue Heart*, then, can be contrasted to the absence or disappearance of the father. To the father's virtual self-effacement in *Heart's Desire*, Churchill adds his total disappearance in *Blue Kettle*. In fact, as we will see, at some point in the play Derek actually comes across him through a conversation with Miss Clarence, one of the old women he swindles, but he never searches for him. Another male character in the play, Mr Vane, is too much of a secondary figure, who does nothing but emphasise the absence. Finally, the consideration of the main character, Derek, as a possible representative of the role of the

father -as we will see- is later problematised by his elusive behaviour throughout the play and by the dénouement.

Probably the most relevant aspect of *Blue Kettle* is the progressive deconstruction of language it undertakes and that is parallel to the structural deconstruction found in *Heart's Desire*. The two instances of the play with language recorded in the first part of *Blue Heart* are taken, in the second, to an extreme. However, the subversion is structured in a progressive way. Thus, little by little, the words "blue" and "kettle" are interspersed in the characters' lines to achieve an effect of utter unintelligibility. Such unintelligibility will turn into a complete disestablishment of the codes that govern language to such an extent that, by the end of the piece, we will witness its disappearance.

Such play with language can be related to postmodernism and poststructuralism. In the case of postmodernism, it brings to mind Lyotard's emphasis on:

[T]he deconstructive *jouissance* in postmodernism, a restlessness and energy that are manifest, for instance, in language games conceived as part of a "general agonistics" in culture. (Edwards 1998, 80)

In the case of poststructuralism, the play with language expresses the fundamental tenets of the movement and, more specifically, alludes to Jacques Derrida's questioning of Ferdinand de Saussure's "fixing of meaning in the ... sign through the arbitrary coming together of the signifiers and signifieds to form *positive* terms" (Weedon 1997 [1987], 24). Such a critique is

also aimed at "the location of social meaning in fixed signs" (Weedon 1997 [1987], 25). In fact, in his critique of Saussure, Derrida comes across the concept of *différance*, that seems to fit particularly well with Churchill's play with language in *Blue Heart*. According to Chris Weedon:

Derrida questions Saussure's *logocentrism* in which signs have an already fixed meaning recognized by the self-consciousness of the rational speaking subject. Derrida moves from the Saussurean focus on speech to a concern with writing and textuality and replaces the fixed signifieds of Saussure's chains of signs with a concept of *différance* in which meaning is produced via the dual strategies of difference and deferral. For Derrida there can be no fixed signifieds (concepts), and signifiers (sound or written images), which have identity only in their difference from one another, are subject to an endless process of deferral. The effect of representation, in which meaning is apparently fixed, is but a temporary retrospective fixing. Signifiers are always located in a discursive context and the temporary fixing of meaning in a specific reading of a signifier depends on this discursive context. (Weedon 1997 [1987], 25)

And this can be complemented with Derrida's own words:

Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse -provided we can agree on this word- that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida 1978 [1967], 110)

Thus, contrary to the subject product of structuralism, the poststructuralist subject is characterised by a sheer uncertainty and subjection to a number of discourses -the Foucauldian *discursive fields*. Churchill's play allows the reader/spectator to

apply Derrida's theories to emphasise the temporality of the "fixing of the meaning" through the use of a constant deferral of the signifiers and an underlining of the impossibility of existence of the signifieds. Here is an example from the text:

MRS PLANT. You blue he lost kettle when he left home?  
MRS OLIVER. Kettle I blue I'm not kettle myself clear. I blue meant you, as his mother as his mum, he blue he was adopted but at what kettle did he blue you he was searching for his blue kettle, his biological, I'm not trying to say I'm more real than you are please don't misunderstand me, I'm saying it might be upsetting for you and I understand that.  
(Churchill 1997, 66)

These words also bring to mind Una Chaudhuri's rumination about the existence of language as the register of non-communication:

[A]ll language ... is twisted, distorted, attenuated, sometimes even obliterated altogether. Words are still used, but almost never as they are meant to be used, to express meaning ... words are used more often to cover meaning than to express it. (Chaudhuri 1995, 151)

The possibility of infinite play that is offered by the unfixing of meaning could be related to Roland Barthes' -yet again- notion of *jouissance*, to John Barth's concept of *replenishment* and to Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of *affirmation*. This last concept is defined by Derrida himself:

[T]he Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. (Derrida 1978 [1967], 292)

It is symptomatic, in this sense, that *Blue Kettle* opens with the first woman Derek swindles, Mrs Plant, uttering the following words: "I can't speak" (Churchill 1997, 39). She cannot speak because of the effect Derek's words have had on her, since he has

revealed himself to be her illegitimate son, but her words can also be interpreted as a humorous premonition of what is going to happen at the very end of the play, when the following exchange will take place:

MRS PLANT. T t have a mother?

DEREK. K.

MRS PLANT. B happened b k?

DEREK. Tle died ket I ket a child.

MRS PLANT. Bl bl ket b b b excuse?

DEREK. Ket b like. Or not.

MRS PLANT. K k no relation. K name k John k k? K k k Tommy k k John. K k k dead k k k believe a word. K k Derek.

DEREK. B.

MRS PLANT. Tle hate k later k, k bl bl bl bl shocked.

DEREK. K, t see bl.

MRS PLANT. T b k k k k l?

DEREK. B.K. (Churchill 1997, 68-9)

Mrs Plant will, in fact, find herself to be totally unable to speak at the end of the play. Her final realisation about Derek's fake identity comes together with a progressive abandonment of language, to eventually close with the enigmatic monogram "B.K.", that stands for "Blue Kettle" but that could also stand for something else. The circularity of the exchanges, that open and close the play, also mirrors the circularity that we previously found in *Heart's Desire* and thus creates two circles that conform the central play as a larger, more perfect one.

One of the fundamental aspects that appear in this rendering of the play is, once again, a sharp criticism on the institution of the family as the basis of modern societies, and how this parallels the construction of subjectivity. In fact, what the play shows is how arbitrary family life is, how artificial it can be from the outset. The construction of subjectivity is directly

related to this notion of the family as an arbitrary construct. Thus, one of the aspects underlined by the play is how subjectivity is also arbitrarily constructed, and this is, indeed, a poststructuralist idea. We can see this in the first exchange between Derek and Mrs Plant:

MRS PLANT. Do you live on your own?

DEREK. I've got a girlfriend.

MRS PLANT. That's nice. What's her name?

DEREK. Enid.

MRS PLANT. That's nice, it's an oldfashioned name.

DEREK. She's called after her grandmother.

MRS PLANT. Do you hate me?

DEREK. No, I think you're wonderful.

MRS PLANT. I had a name for you. I called you Tom. But when I gave you up I said you hadn't got a name, I thought who you went to would like to give you their own name, I thought that was fair.

DEREK. Tom's nice.

MRS PLANT. Do you like it?

DEREK. Yes I do. (Churchill 1997, 40-1)

After reinforcing the family ties through the adoption of names from generation to generation, a game is established between Derek and Mrs Plant. This becomes, then, an uncertain aspect of the play. On the one hand, it is as if Mrs Plant has finally come across her long lost son. On the other hand, though, it is as if she might be aware of the falsity of Derek's identity, but, nevertheless, she has decided to continue with the game. The extent to which she is aware of it remains a moot point, but at this stage in the play she is exemplifying how subjectivities are constructed in society. Thus, she is constructing Derek as Tom, even though she is not sure whether Tom is his real name. The end of the play may suggest that she is unaware of Derek's strategy, but, at this point, her willingness to establish artificial



identities is recorded, and therefore it underlines the artificiality of any identity within society.

The critique of the nuclear family and of a patriarchal definition of identity also comes through the second encounter Derek organises, this time with a Mrs Oliver. In the exchange, more emphasis is given to the establishing of family ties, to the idea of heredity:

MRS OLIVER. I brought some photographs. I don't know if you want to see them.

DEREK. I'd love to.

MRS OLIVER. This is my sister Eileen. And here she is again with her husband Bob and the twins. That's thirty years ago. This is my parents. He was a good looking man. This is me and Brian and the girls when they were little and this is Mary grown up and her husband Phil and their two which is Billy and Megan, now you may not agree but I think where the family likeness is in Billy you see which is your nephew. Do you see what I mean?

DEREK. Yes I do.

MRS OLIVER. Round the eyes.

DEREK. The eyes yes and -

MRS OLIVER. Something about the shape of the head I think.

DEREK. You're right, yes.

MRS OLIVER. And where that comes from is my father and *his* father though I don't have a picture with me of him, he was a cabinet maker in Yorkshire. This is my other daughter you see, Jenny, and hers, which is Kevin, Mat and Susy. Now what you'll want to see, I do have this one picture of your father, it's not very clear but it's better than nothing. He was better looking than that. The sun was in his eyes.  
(Churchill 1997, 41-2)

The emphasis on the "family likeness", the establishing of links between the different members of the family to create a core against outside aggressions and to construct a sense of identity and therefore subjectivity, the necessity of resemblance is directly contrasted here to the fact that we, as readers/audience of the play, and through the device of dramatic irony, are aware

that Derek is deceiving the woman. This underlines the very arbitrariness inherent to the institution of the family, especially through Derek's apparent detachment from it. In the contrast between Mrs Oliver and Derek we see the representation of such a construction. There is another element that is relevant in this exchange, and it is the allusion to Derek's father. This is the first time the figure of the father is made reference to in the play, and it hints at its further treatment. Thus, what Derek sees is a "not very clear" picture. The image of Derek's supposed father is blurred, and besides "[t]he sun was in his eyes", so we can infer that he could not see the camera, and, consequently, any identificatory process -as in the mirror stage- is prevented from happening.

Mrs Oliver's fear at the sudden discovery of a section of her past she had rejected gives way to a negation of what she had previously defended in such a passionate way:

MRS OLIVER. We don't necessarily have anything in common.

DEREK. Of course not.

MRS OLIVER. Do you believe in heredity?

DEREK. A bit.

MRS OLIVER. But then there's how you're brought up. There's family jokes.

DEREK. Exactly.

MRS OLIVER. I mean I look at you and you could be anyone.

DEREK. Of course. (Churchill 1997, 43-4)

This reference to the bringing up of the subject, to a specific upbringing that is particular to each family, can also be taken as a way of emphasising the arbitrariness of the construction of the subject and a way to see how such a construction is dependent on particular conditioning. This brings to mind Jill Dolan's words:

According to poststructuralism, subjectivity is never monolithic or fixed, but decentered, and constantly thrown into process by the very competing discourses through which identity might be claimed. (Dolan 1993, 87)

I would also like to establish a link between the "competing discourses" Dolan makes reference to and a very similar concept propounded by Michel Foucault, that of *discursive field*, which structures the different aspects of society:

Discursive fields consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes. They offer the individual a range of modes of subjectivity. (Weedon 1997 [1987], 35)

Through the exchange between Derek and the older women, and as we have seen in the example given between him and Mrs Oliver, the family is established as one such discursive field. Meaning is arbitrarily given through heredity or specific forms of upbringing. Thus, the reference to "family jokes" is relevant, because it shows one possible way of achieving meaning. Through the adoption of one or several of these discursive fields the individual may make sense of him/herself in a range of social situations and social positions. In the first encounter between Derek and Mrs Plant, the common link is once more the discursive field of the family:

DEREK. Have I got your nose?  
MRS PLANT. You might have your father's mouth. I can't quite see his mouth but now I see yours ...  
DEREK. My mouth?  
MRS PLANT. Your grandmother's eyes were that colour. Yes, he had a smile. (Churchill 1997, 39)

Derek is 40. He has a girlfriend, Enid, who is ten years younger than he is. Theoretically, Derek is a suitable age to

become a father, but in fact he is looking for a mother. This is another example of the denial of fatherhood that pervades the play. However, there is a moment when he incidentally comes across his "father". When in conversation with another of the older women, Miss Clarence, he suddenly asks her about him:

DEREK. Do you mind if I ask who my father was?

MISS CLARENCE. I'll tell you exactly who he was who he is, his name's Peter Kettle, he's a journalist, you possibly know, he was a postgraduate student. You do blue exactly like him. I can give you his phone kettle. We've stayed friends surprisingly. (Churchill 1997, 54)

Later on, when talking to his girlfriend Enid, Derek's "father" appears again, and this time his role in the play is clarified:

ENID. I don't know what's going to happen to me.

DEREK. Don't leave me, will you?

ENID. I've no idea.

DEREK. You could go and see my dad the kettle.

ENID. I don't want to.

DEREK. Will we just leave him dangling?

ENID. Some time if the worst comes to the blue we'll have him up our sleeve.

DEREK. We'll have him to blackmail for a rainy day.

ENID. He might not be the blackmail type.

DEREK. No. Well. (Churchill 1997, 62-3)

Thus, the only interest involved in recognising the father figure turns out to be the hypothetical financial possibilities he could offer. I also think that the fact that the father is actually left "dangling" at the end of the play adds to my poststructuralist feminist reading of the play as a representation of the loss of the father and consequently of the male subject. We have already seen how the male subject is thoroughly disrupted in *Heart's Desire*; what Churchill seems to be doing in *Blue Kettle* is to intensify the disruption through the underlining of the absence of

the male in the play, thus *Blue Heart* could be interpreted as a representation of the loss and absence of the patriarchal subject.

Derek's intentions with the different women he searches for are, to begin with, to strip them away from part of their money. This is what he tells his girlfriend Enid:

ENID. So how many mothers have you got now?

DEREK. Five.

ENID. What are you going to do with them?

DEREK. I see them.

ENID. And then what?

DEREK. We'll see what.

ENID. And you think there's money in it.

DEREK. Of course I blue there's money in it.

ENID. What money?

DEREK. We'll see what money. (Churchill 1997, 46-7)

Derek turns out to have four "mothers" plus a real one. In Derek's rapport to Enid, significantly, a linguistic disruption takes place. This disruption is amplified when the actual encounter between Derek and his real mother takes place, when he visits her in a geriatric ward:

DEREK. I'm hoping to be making a lot of money.

MOTHER. That's lovely.

DEREK. I'm finding all these blue kettle and kettle to be their long lost son.

...

My kettle is to trick these blue kettle out of their money. My girlfriend doesn't like it and she might blue me. I'm not sure I blue enough to stop kettle it. Her name's Enid like Enid Blyton. I've told you that before a blue kettle. (Churchill 1997, 59-60)

The fact that Derek's biological mother turns out to be senile and looked after in a geriatric ward is worthy of note. To the disappearance of the figure of the father in the play -as we have seen before in the light of poststructuralist feminism- we

must add the very precarious position in which the figure of the mother is found. Thus, of all the "mothers", we have seen the strong concern of two of them, Mrs Plant and Mrs Oliver, in questions of heredity and also in connection with the relevance of memory and the past. The discussion that takes place between another couple, Mr and Mrs Vane, yet again in connection with memory, is also of some relevance. After Derek has made himself known to Mrs Vane, she insists on having him and Enid to dinner at her place, hiding their identity from her husband. The conversation evolves around the importance of memory and husband and wife appear to be at odds about the function memory plays in a life:

MR VANE. I remember the names of every boy in my kettle in every kettle I was at kettle. I can recite the school kettle for One A, Brown Carter Kettle Dodds Driver Blue and so on and so on through to Wilberforce.

ENID. I blue that's a kettle impressive feat.

MR VANE. Impressive but alas useless.

ENID. But what's useful? what's a kettle memory?

DEREK. Twice two.

ENID. No, kettle of your life, what's useful about them?

DEREK. If you didn't have any you wouldn't know who you were would you.

ENID. Kettle that's blue I'm so confused.

MR VANE. I wouldn't know who the boys in my blue were but I'd know who I was all right.

MRS VANE. My memories are definitely what I am. (Churchill 1997, 55-6)

Whereas Mr Vane -and quite significantly so- seems to reject his memory, to spell out its uselessness in a slightly contradictory way, Mrs Vane defends it and acknowledges how she is constituted by it. However, the play seems to bring into the picture the arbitrariness also implicit in the use of memory. By the fact that

Derek is an impostor, Mrs Vane's past, her memories, are made to be seen as something artificial, unreal.

Radically contrasted to Mrs Vane, Miss Clarence, another of the women Derek swindles, totally negates the importance of memory and the past in people's lives. Besides, out of the five mothers of Derek we come across in the play, this is the only one who seems to reject the basic tenets of motherhood. Miss Clarence, as can be inferred by her title, is an unmarried university lecturer who talks openly to Derek about her lack of interest in keeping him. She also seems to have lost any trace of his presence in her life:

MISS CLARENCE. ... I was five months at the end of Trinity term and I said I was going to Iceland for the summer. Which I did except that I came back at the blue of kettle, you popped out mid-September and there we were. I was back at high table right as blue to start the Michaelmas term. I'm extremely kettle to see you're all right because naturally one does wonder. But I didn't like babies, I really didn't.

...

DEREK. Blue didn't you keep me? blue do you think it feels? blue could you do that? You weren't a child.

MISS CLARENCE. I don't remember blue. Is that kettle? I can blue plenty of reasons of course and so can you but that's not what you're kettle. I know what I did but I can't remember anything I blue or felt. I remember riding a kettle in Iceland and looking at a blue spring.

DEREK. Do you remember me?

MISS CLARENCE. Yes I have blue a blue mental kettle of you with a lot of black hair.

DEREK. And what were you feeling?

MISS CLARENCE. As I've already blue you I seem to have lost my memory of anything I felt.

DEREK. Or kettle you didn't feel anything.

MISS CLARENCE. That remains a blue kettle. (Churchill 1997, 54-5)

The importance of memory and the past are therefore

questioned by this woman, who seems to have fought at some point in her life against the demands of motherhood which patriarchy imposes on women. At the same time, the price to be paid is the disappearance of the individual's access to memory and the past as a way of constituting the present. However, what the play also shows -as we have seen through Mrs Vane- is that both elements can also be misleading and can be used against the interests of the individual.

Before concluding, I would like to go back to the end of the play, to the final conversation between Derek and Mrs Plant. On the one hand, the exchange reminds us of another play by Churchill, *Hot Fudge*, in which we find two characters who hide their identities from one another, to eventually disclose them at the end of the play. The mutual recognition of otherness is somewhat present in *Blue Kettle* as well in that Derek discloses himself as somebody who turned out to meet Mrs Plant's biological son. However, this mutual recognition is here further problematised by the fact that Derek chooses to keep lying to Mrs Plant when she asks him about his real mother:

MRS PLANT. T t have a mother?

DEREK. K.

MRS PLANT. B happened b k?

DEREK. Tle died ket I ket a child. (Churchill 1997, 68)

Apart from the fact that Derek's disconcerting attitude never seems to stop (since we could further wonder about the way in which he managed to get in touch with all the different women and therefore question whether he really ever met Mrs Plant's son),



the fact that at the end he keeps hiding his real identity from her may also be interpreted as the last step in the process traced through Derek towards the disestablishment of language and therefore of subjectivity. By the end of the play, the destabilising of the linguistic sign-system has reached its highest point. Therefore, if following Althusserian Marxism and feminist poststructuralism, we reach the conclusion that "it is language which enables us to think, speak and give meaning to the world around us, [and that] [m]eaning and consciousness do not exist outside language" (Weedon 1997 [1987], 32), it becomes relatively easy to agree on the fact that any possibility of reconstituting discourse, and therefore any possibility of reconstituting subjectivity is negated at the end of the play. In this sense, we can also wonder with Blau: "[W]hat does the seeing amount to -what does it *mean*?- if we can't quite count on an identity, an *I* that goes with the *me*, an autonomous self or ego, as the stable subject of sight" (Blau 1990, 279). The answer to the question remains unanswered.

To conclude on the poststructuralist feminist note that has been pervasive through this chapter, it could be said that Churchill, in *Blue Heart*, seems to be making a stance towards the disruption of the Symbolic Order through the utter turning upside down of language. This longing to return to the Imaginary Order appears once again in the reading of her plays. It was already present in *Cloud Nine*, and it appeared as well in *Top Girls*. The Imaginary -like the Kristevan Semiotic- is once more regarded as a

kind of alternative to patriarchal reality. In the case of the play under discussion, such disruption takes place at the level of language and it succeeds in conveying a powerful critique of phallogentrism and of logocentrism. In this sense, such a critique springs from a rejection of patriarchal binarisms. As we have seen, in *Heart's Desire* phallogentrism is disrupted through the effacing of the figure of the father and the pathetic portrayal of the character of the son -that can also be interpreted as yet another consequence of patriarchy, the putting down of men who do not conform. In *Blue Kettle* we witness the disruption of logocentrism through the Derridean play with *différance*. This way, the conjunction of phallogentrism with logocentrism, that also, according to Derrida, gives way to *phallogocentrism*, will be problematised in *Blue Heart*. To conceptualise it a little more:

Patriarchy is the practice, phallogocentrism the theory; both coincide, however, in producing an economy, material as well as libidinal, where the law is upheld by a phallic symbol that operates by constructing differences and organising them hierarchically. (Braidotti 1991, 213)

It is this phallic symbol that is thoroughly neutralised in *Blue Heart*, through despair and disappearance in *Heart's Desire* and by means of absence and loss in *Blue Kettle*. It is as if Churchill were trying to move beyond the lethal binarisms, differences and hierarchies constructed by patriarchy, as if she were contesting phallogocentrism as the only way to move forward and start changing a bleak reality at the end of the second millennium.

## CONCLUSIONS

The title of this study, *Gender, Politics, Subjectivity: Reading Caryl Churchill* determined, from the outset, what the approach adopted was going to be. Thus, as was also established in the introduction, I started off from the assumption that this was going to be a theoretically-informed approach. In this case, I have drawn on the theories resulting from the developments that have taken place in the last twenty years in the field of literary theory, paying special attention to the development of gender studies and feminisms. Thus, here I have used French feminist theory and poststructuralist feminist theory. On the other hand, I have also made use of other fields not openly related to feminism, but that can very easily be used as a link, such as film theory and cultural materialism. Since I am dealing with theatre, I did not want to leave out a fundamental aspect of it: The fact that it is conceived for performance. This is why I have used semiotics as part of my approach to the dramatic text.

Having established the theoretical approach, and, as I stated in my introduction, the main conclusion to this work is that a gendered and politics-oriented approach to theatre, such as we find in the work of Churchill, would serve to subvert the patriarchal and conservative assumptions implicit in traditional theatre. We could also argue that to such subversion taking place at the level of the literary creation, another dimension of subversion could be added, one that could have a more direct

social impact.

Chapter I has dealt with the relationship between feminism and theatre bearing in mind a fundamental issue that always emerges in relation to theatre and cinema: Spectatorship. Since theatre has an inherent duality, in the sense that it consists of a written text but it is also devised to be seen on a stage, the role of the audience is important in the configuration of meaning. The problem is that this audience has traditionally been considered as male, and so women have always been excluded from the complicity created between stage and audience space. In this sense, I have used feminist film theory and psychoanalysis to analyse the mechanisms inherent to the production of meaning in the cinema and the theatre. These analyses have evolved around the concept of the "gaze", which takes for granted that the audience is intrinsically male and that, by watching a performance or a film, the mechanisms of identification are directed towards the male members of the audience, thus objectifying women. Having stated that, I have analysed different ways of subverting the male gaze from the perspective of feminisms (Austin 1990, Belsey 1982, Fetterley 1978).

The chapter has also given some consideration to the different types of feminisms that have emerged since the late 1960s in the Anglo-American world, with a particular emphasis on materialist feminism, since this branch of feminism has been further developed in the analysis of the plays in chapters IV and

V. I have taken into account the fact that I happen to be a male academic writing on feminist issues, and so I have offered some consideration as to this issue. The final section of the chapter has analysed in more detail the workings of traditional drama, showing how it closely follows the patriarchal ideology of society and how such an ideology can be reflected at the level of structure. I have also shown how the player/role relationship is similar to gender division in society and likewise helps to perpetuate the existence of patriarchal subjectivity. Finally, I have proved how the theories of Bertolt Brecht can be very useful for a feminist theatrical practice, paying special attention to the *Verfremdungseffekt* or A-effect, the "not ...but", his concept of historicisation, and the *gestus*.

Chapter II has analysed the political and socio-economic situation of England from 1979 to our times. A special emphasis has been given to the figure of Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister for eleven years, and to the impact of eighteen years of Conservative government on English society at large. Bearing in mind the achievement of reaching such a position in British history -as has been seen, Margaret Thatcher was the first woman ever to lead the Conservative Party, the question that appears is to what an extent this could be considered a feminist victory. If we analyse the politics established after her victory, together with the way in which she undertook the duties inherent to the post, we will easily conclude that both were clearly male.

After this consideration, the chapter has described the difficult situation in the late 1970s in the United Kingdom as a way to understand the change in politics of the following decade. The emphasis is on how Mrs Thatcher systematically dismantled the Keynesian idea of welfare-capitalism, popular in the country since the end of the Second World War, and followed instead the trail of a more radical Capitalism. This she accomplished through a thorough deconstruction of the pillars upon which the Welfare State had been built, such as "social security, medical services, housing, and education" (Marwick 1990 [1982], 353). What Thatcher propounded instead of welfare capitalism was a more radical form of capitalism known as the "Enterprise Economy", a system based on a strict monetarist policy and on the praise of individual initiative, in contrast to the notion of collective action. This emphasis on the individual goes hand in hand with a reinforcement of moral values that, according to Mrs Thatcher, should follow the examples of Victorian times or of the Britain of the 1950s. Thatcher's government brought about a high increase of unemployment, inflation, and an economic recession, that was shortly followed by a de-industrialisation of the country, with the closing down of many factories, and by the progressive loss of power of the trade unions, through the passing of a number of Acts. Apart from the fact that the country was being progressively de-industrialised, many remaining public national industries were privatised. This was followed by the shift from a postindustrial

society to an IT one (Information Technology). As to social elements, we should bear in mind the existence of urban riots in many deprived neighbourhoods scattered throughout the country in cities such as London, Liverpool or Birmingham, which also led to an increase of attacks on the part of neo-fascist groups on those who had different racial characteristics or sexual orientation. It has also been said that, even though social division in the country increased enormously, in the eighties the British economy was very stable. Mrs Thatcher was followed in power by John Major, who never reached the level of popularity of his predecessor, and who was defeated in the election of 1997 being replaced by Tony Blair. Blair's victory put an end to eighteen years of uninterrupted Conservative government and introduced "New Labour" into Britain.

Chapter III has introduced Caryl Churchill as a woman playwright and has also situated her in the context of what is generally known as the birth of contemporary British drama, with the opening in England of plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, or Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley*. Such plays paved the way for a different type of theatre, one which would escape from middle and upper class conventionalities and which would depict working-class situations previously unseen. It was in the wake of this type of theatre and especially because of the effects of the development of the feminist and gay movements that some women started writing,

Caryl Churchill being one of them. However, after a seemingly optimistic moment in the 1970s and in the early 1980s, when more new writing was produced, there was another decline that has reached our times.

Once the context has been established, Churchill's career as a playwright has been analysed in detail, dividing it into five different stages. The first stage, that could be labelled as a formative stage, corresponded to her writing plays while at Oxford university and her writing radio plays at home in the first years of her marriage, when she decided to stay at home and bring up her children. The second stage was characterised by her configuration as a playwright, with stage plays being professionally produced. The third stage was her working with professional companies, such as Joint Stock or Monstrous Regiment, which would introduce her into a different -more community-based- way of working in the theatre. The fourth stage was determined by her actual consolidation as a successful playwright, with her plays even being transferred, in many cases, to the United States. Finally, the fifth stage showed her moving away from the traditional use of language and her experimenting with other forms of artistic expression, such as dance, movement or music.

Another interesting issue that has been seen in chapter III is the influence German playwright Bertolt Brecht has had on Churchill. The techniques analysed have been the recourse to historicisation, the use of an epic structure, the use of cross-



casting at several levels, and the use of the social gest or *gestus*.

Chapter IV has offered a detailed analysis of *Cloud Nine*, the first of Churchill's plays to be analysed here. As has been seen, this play can be considered a watershed in her career since it was her first success in professional theatre. The play is also important in that it is an example of the collaboration of the playwright with one of the leading professional companies of the time, Joint Stock. *Cloud Nine* is representative of the times when it was written (late 1970s) in that the starting point for the production was sexual politics. This is undoubtedly related to the strength that the feminist and lesbian and gay movements achieved at the time, and this vigour permeates the whole play. Following Jean Genet, the play establishes a parallelism between colonial oppression and sexual oppression, through the situation of the action in two different temporal and physical spaces: Colonial Africa and the London of the late seventies. Colonial oppression is exemplified through the British presence in Africa and in Northern Ireland and in the exertion of power they effect from a clear position of rulers. Sexual oppression is exemplified at several moments in the play, especially in relation to the situation of women in relation to men, or in relation to gays and lesbians. The play also analyses the position of racial "others" and the working class and looks actively for strategies of dissidence to the established order. In Act One, the

reader/audience is introduced to an archetypal British family in an African colony in the XIXth century, but in Act Two this is totally contrasted to a radically different setting (a century later in London) with the particularity that some of the characters from the previous Act appear again without showing the traces of time and living in a much less constrained way than in Africa. The ideological content of the play is reinforced at both the formal and ideological levels by the adoption of some of the techniques propounded by Bertolt Brecht, basically following the A-effect, such as cross-gender casts -a male actor playing the role of a woman, or viceversa; cross-race casts -a white actor playing the role of a black character, to emphasise that the character follows the values of white society; cross-generation casts; the use of songs; chronological disruptions -one hundred years elapsing between Acts One and Two, but the characters only age twenty-five years; and a challenge to the structure of dramatic texts following the traditional legacy of Aristotle. Through an analysis of how these techniques work, the content of the play has been interpreted from a gender perspective. Thus, the notion of gender as a construct that can be performed is shown through making male actors play female roles, and viceversa. This performative characteristic of gender is a powerful way to subvert the very basis of gender relations in patriarchal societies, and it is, thus, disruptive. Together with this reading, and also by applying French feminist theory, the play can be interpreted as an

exemplification of the disruption of the Symbolic Order exerted at the level of gender and sexuality. In order to attain this disruption, a clear emphasis is given -apart from the question of gender- to the subversive and pervasive presence of female genitalia in the play, a presence that seems to contain in itself the strength to overcome patriarchal power. *Cloud Nine* also demolishes the nuclear family as the very basis of patriarchal society through the portrayal of the couple Clive and Betty and their two sons, who end up subverting the morality implicit in the family, especially through recourse to incest.

Chapter V has been devoted to the analysis of *Top Girls*, Churchill's most prestigious enterprise so far, according to a significant number of critics. In contrast to the previous play, *Top Girls* was a direct product of Margaret Thatcher's leadership of the Conservative Party and of the belief by a sector of feminism in the positive value of women succeeding in a capitalist, patriarchal order of things. Churchill presents us with the story of two sisters from a working-class background who have evolved differently in life as representative of capitalism and socialism. In doing so, she is establishing a parallelism between politics and feminism, and showing that a feminism that follows the socio-political and economic structures created by patriarchy does nothing but perpetuate the very same systems of oppression. The subversive conclusion is that women should look for an alternative to male power structures, but at the same time

the play acknowledges the strong limitations. This is a more overtly political play than the previous one, which can also be read from a French feminist perspective in that a clear reference to the disruption of the Symbolic Order can be found through a call for collective political action against patriarchal oppression, whether this be exerted by men or by women. And this is a crucial point, bearing in mind Mrs Thatcher's performance in the Britain of her time. The fact that Marlene, the sister who succeeds in business, strictly follows on the radical capitalist tracks of Mrs Thatcher and is more than eager to pay whatever price in order to achieve her ambitions, be it a betrayal of her working-class origins or of her own daughter, shows the ruthlessness of the game. Indeed, her longing to succeed in the world is so intense that she escapes from her place of birth as soon as she has the chance to do so. However, she will have to leave her daughter with her sister Joyce in order to go ahead in the world. As for Joyce, she stays in the village and endures a working-class existence that will provide her with a solid political consciousness. Joyce will at all times work as a contrast to her sister Marlene, in that she will be a constant mirror to her. However, the play will also show in a pessimistic way the inability to fight against capitalism, and the conclusion to be drawn from it is quite bleak. Women will only achieve high positions in society if they adopt the ideology of the main power structures, of the 'oppressors' mentioned by Joseph Marohl. Once

they succeed, and thanks to the above-mentioned interiorisation, they will just exert the same power that was previously exerted over them. In this case, belonging to a historically oppressed gender will not change things substantially unless there is a political awareness of the situation. The play is, therefore, highly representative of a conception of theatre as a social and political weapon, and this can also be seen in the extensive use it makes of the techniques devised by Bertolt Brecht, such as chronological disruption, the doubling or trebling of roles, the combination of reality and illusion, or the incredibly sophisticated use of language and dialogue. The main conclusion is how the exertion of oppressive power takes place irrespective of gender and class factors.

This play can also be approached from the perspective of French feminist criticism in the sense that there are some clues that point towards an active disruption of the Symbolic Order and a return to the Imaginary. In this sense, the fact that the disruption should come from the working class becomes clear. Churchill, however, shows how the people who manage to escape from their class origins simply interiorise the main tenets of the new class they embrace. This is what happens to Marlene in the play. The other working-class character, Joyce, is doomed to remain in her class and, even though she is in possession of a clear awareness, will lack the tools to effect any changes in society. Finally, the patriarchal aim will be to prevent any kind of female

collectivity from being created.

Chapter VI has offered an analysis of *Blue Heart*, one of Churchill's latest works. The play has been shown to offer a complete deconstruction of language as a poststructuralist feminist response to the way patriarchal society is structured. Following French feminist theory once more and the way this has read the work of Jacques Lacan, language is taken as one of the fundamental devices to interiorise the status quo, the binary mechanisms upon which patriarchy exerts its power and constructs a specifically male subject. The play subverts this construction and, in a similar way to the two previous ones, sets to disrupt the foundations of the current power structures through the dismantling of their very basis: Language. Through a total negation of the power of language to act as an instrument of communication, and in a move that links Churchill to Theatre of the Absurd playwrights such as Ionesco or Beckett as well as to postmodern anxiety, the outcome of the play is the desolate portrayal of a fin-de-siècle society that, in the family sphere, seems to be characterised by a negation of the figure of the father and a longing to recover the mother figure, even though, at the very end, this longing is also deconstructed. The total disappearance of language at the end of the play can also be understood as the need for feminism to look for other areas of expression, areas not based on the patriarchal *logos*. This, together with the disappearance of the father, the representative

of *phallogocentrism*, will take us to the resulting linguistic element, *phallogocentrism*. Propounded by Jacques Derrida, this concept summarises the main areas of male domain in society and establishes them as a paradigm to be followed in order to become a subject. In *Heart's Desire*, the first part of *Blue Heart*, the dismantling of patriarchy, which is paralleled by a structural deconstruction, acquires a deeper significance in that the patriarch in the play, Brian, dreams of eating up the sign of his own maleness, his penis. Besides, the total disruption of language that takes place fundamentally in *Blue Kettle*, the second part of the play, signifies the end of the power of the *logos* to establish identities. The utter disruption of these two areas by a poststructuralist feminist problematising of the traditional subject sheds more light on the matter and shows a possible way forward, a way that will look for an alternative definition of identity, one that will mirror Derrida's concept of *différance*.

The disruption of language in the play is mirrored in the deconstruction it effects of one of the pillars of capitalist society: The nuclear family, represented by the unit composed of Brian, Alice, Lewis and Susy. By showing the decadence associated to what, theoretically, is an ideal family by making it strange and uncanny, Churchill makes her message even more powerful. The two exponents of patriarchy, Brian and his son Lewis, are totally defeated by the high expectations patriarchy imposes on them. Brian, the father, is subjected to the passion he feels for his

own daughter, whereas Lewis, the son, cannot live up to the standards of what is expected of him, to which Brian's feelings for his daughter do not contribute. Conversely, the two women, mother and daughter, seem to be able to endure the harshness of existence through an altogether different attitude to life, one that allows them to establish a different kind of relationships towards other people and also amongst themselves.

To conclude, and drawing again on French feminist theory, a thread can be established in the three plays that have been analysed in this study, all of them produced in the last twenty years in Britain: An investigation into different possibilities of disrupting the Symbolic Order and to recover part of the Imaginary. This recovery entails a distinction between reality and imagination becoming blurred. This is the case of the three plays that have been analysed. In *Cloud Nine*, the disruption takes place at the level of gender and sexual politics, by showing the performativity of gender and by analysing how women are oppressed in patriarchal society as a consequence of their biological sex. As has been seen, this play also shows a more revolutionary moment in history, and is pervaded by a clear optimism, characteristic of the mood of the times. In *Top Girls* there is a conceptualisation, an attack on the apparatus of capitalism, an analysis of how capitalist ideology works together with patriarchy and an exploration of ways of dismantling it. This is a more openly political play and, at the same time, it shows us the first hints



of a gloom that is to appear in a clearer way later on in time. In *Blue Heart*, the disruption takes place at the level of the word/language. Through the total deconstruction that is effected in the linguistic sign-system, Churchill seems to be adopting a more nihilistic attitude without losing her ability to keep fighting the apparent solidity of male subject positions. However, the play openly shows the doom and gloom that characterises the fin-de-siècle/millennium.

The three plays analysed share the presence of recurrent themes that I would also like to mention as a closure to the conclusions. The most important one is the active engagement with an exploration and a disintegration of patriarchy, that is effected through a total dismantling of the institution of the nuclear family, understood as the very basis of patriarchal society. Another basic element that appears in the plays analysed is the issue of colonisation, a colonisation that takes place at several levels, such as race, gender, or sexuality. Finally, the capitalist system is also attacked in the three plays, since it allows the establishing of power relations that necessarily entail dominance and subservience, thus creating a fatal circle. This is what Ms Churchill seems to be exploring at present, in the light of the theories I have used to read the three plays analysed in this work.

Playwright Caryl Churchill also seems to have taken to directing plays nowadays, and her last experiments with movement,

music and dance may make us wonder about her next artistic endeavours. However, be that as it may, it seems doubtless that she will keep contributing to the development of a certain British drama, a drama that has always been active in posing difficult questions precisely because it foregrounds the faultlines in society and plunges into them with subversive intent.

## APPENDIX.

### DIS-JOINTING TRADITIONAL THEATRE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MAX STAFFORD-CLARK

Max Stafford-Clark has decisively contributed to the development of a new English playwrighting and to a clearly innovative type of contemporary theatre in the United Kingdom. Having learned the basics of his profession at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, he left it to create his own company, *The Traverse Workshop*. After that, he founded the now mythical *Joint Stock Theatre Group* (1974) together with William Gaskill and David Hare, which in turn he left to become artistic director at the prestigious Royal Court Theatre (1979-93). As of 1993, Stafford-Clark is the director of *Out of Joint*, a touring theatre company.

This interview was carried out at the *Out of Joint* headquarters, in London, on 8 January 1999, after a rehearsal of *Blue Heart*.

ENRIC MONFORTE: You are working on a re-run of *Blue Heart*, one of Caryl Churchill's latest plays. Where are you going on tour?

**MAX STAFFORD-CLARK:** It's going to the States and it's going to tour a little bit more in this country. The problem of doing new work for an English touring company is that we're funded to tour England. Touring abroad is seen as an additional benefit when the play is accessible, successful, or when there's an international interest in it. Initially *Shopping and Fucking*, by Mark Ravenhill, played in a very small theatre because the writer was totally unknown. The play sounded provocative but nobody knew anything about it. Once you're committed to that run and you've contracted the actors for that length of time you don't have a permanent company, so you're tied to that finite length of engagement. If it's successful then you have to do it again, prepare a longer tour in perhaps bigger theatres and to re-engage the actors. In this

occasion, *Blue Heart* has been asked to go to BAM, Brooklyn Academy of Music, in New York, and because we're going to do that we'll be able to tour a little more in this country, and it's also going to Paris and Brussels, where it has not been.

EM: Why the change from a consolidated position as artistic director in the Royal Court to creating a touring company, *Out of Joint*?

**MS-C:** I was in the Royal Court for 14 years, which is longer than most artistic directors in this country stay in a theatre, and my contract was anyway coming to an end. I think the option when I left the Royal Court was either to go into bigger theatres, into the heartland of the establishment -like the *RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company)* or the National Theatre, or to start my own company. I think, like Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, or Simon McBurney, that if you really want to do your best work as a director, you have to start your own company. Certainly, the best work I've done has always been with an ensemble. However, it was actually much harder to start *Out of Joint* than it was to start *Joint Stock Theatre Group*, the company I ran before I went to the Court, in the 1970s. The funding situation was so much worse, and the Arts Council were not very optimistic, they said that it would be three years at least before they would guarantee funding. And indeed it was longer than that, it was actually four years before we got regular funding. But, in a way, it's much easier focusing on what you're passionate about doing, as opposed to running a building and having

the additional problems of salary increases and producing problems. Besides, starting a new company, and touring, is very different, I enjoy that very much. I enjoy touring in England because you see the country. You get a much more vivid understanding when you go to Leeds and Newcastle and to small towns than you do simply by sitting in London.

EM: I read in an interview that the political dimension in the theatre is extremely important for you. I think this is very clear bearing in mind your career, but what would this political dimension be like nowadays?

**MS-C:** Well, it's a very good question, and indeed a younger generation of writers and directors who've come up don't necessarily have a particular political commitment. I suppose in the eighteen years when Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister, there was a broad sense of purpose shared by a lot of directors and writers. We were all against Mrs Thatcher. Then she went and now we have the socialist government we've wanted and campaigned for all these years. Then, inevitably, the theatre becomes critical of Tony Blair's socialist government. I think there is a great tradition of social comment in English theatre; occasionally that's stifled when the theatre is censored, or when theatres become too big. Theatre censorship was introduced in this country in 1728, and from then to 1960 is a theatrical desert. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries what happened is that the theatres became too big, too dependent on box-office success, and no critical stance could be

afforded. You have to please the public. But if the theatre sets out simply to please it trivialises itself. That's Broadway theatre, or West End theatre. I think pleasing the public is fine, but you mustn't have it as your super-objective. For example, a play like *Shopping and Fucking* sets out to provoke, but incidentally pleases the public and becomes a huge West End hit. I suppose the privilege of theatre in this country is that it's been a medium for social comment. In the nineteenth century the great English novelists like Dickens criticised Victorian capitalism, whereas today Dickens might well have chosen to be a playwright.

EM: In connection to this social concern, do you think feminist theatre still exists nowadays, or maybe it has become an anachronism?

**MS-C:** It's a good question. Well, at the Royal Court in the eighties the percentage of plays that were written by women went up from 8% to 38%, but it never reached 50%, and probably now in the nineties it's gone down again to 25%. So maybe a special pleading for women writers is a good thing. Feminist theatre does exist, but obviously it's changed, and I suppose there've been plays, not by Caryl Churchill particularly but by Timberlake Wertenbaker -*The Break of Day*- and by April de Angelis -*The Positive Hour*- that are really about the failure of feminism. One can see that the twentieth century has had a number of religions: Christianity, Marxism, Socialism, Feminism, all of which it has managed to discard or see through, in one way or another, and probably

feminism is one of those. In the broader sense, in the large view it's changed things, but probably it's failed its true believers in the way that socialism has.

EM: I would like to change into how you approach the staging of a play now. Are you still keen on the workshop techniques that you used with *Joint Stock*? Do you still do workshops?

**MS-C:** Yes, but not in every case. Obviously, the difference between *Blue Heart* and a play like *Serious Money*, also by Caryl Churchill, is enormous. I think that in the original production we cut ten lines of *Blue Heart*. The script is essentially the same in performance as it was on the first day of rehearsal. There had been no changes at all, whereas in the case of *Serious Money*, which was a workshop play researched with the actors, the text was changed before rehearsal started, changed during rehearsal, very late on the running order of the scenes was changed, a lot of songs dropped and new scenes were written. So, the difference in Caryl Churchill's head between a workshop play and a play she's written herself like *Blue Heart* and *Top Girls* is enormous. So yes; I still do plays like that. But *Blue Heart* isn't one.

EM: And the ones you mentioned before, like *Shopping and Fucking*?

**MS-C:** *Shopping and Fucking* went through a lot of changes in rehearsal. And we did do a workshop of that, but not from the start. It was a play that I read and I was immediately attracted to and committed to it, then it went through some changes. But I have done a workshop recently with a writer called Rebecca Prichard, and

that's a play that will be written from scratch. After the workshop.

EM: You have declared to follow both the Stanislavski and the Brechtian methods. However, very often you place the emphasis on the political dimension of the work -which is closer to a Brechtian approach to theatre. How do you actually manage to find a balance between the two?

**MS-C:** We were doing a bit of Stanislavski this afternoon. We ran a scene, it was not very good and we went back to what the intentions were behind the actions. I went to University but I didn't study theatre, I studied English. My acquisition of skills has been pragmatic. You learn to do it from the actors really, whose pleasure or irritation and lack of pleasure tell you very often whether you are going in the right direction or not. So I didn't study Stanislavski until I had already evolved my own way of working, which was Stanislavskiish, which I had been led to by the actors, asking them questions like "What's your intention, what do you want to do in this scene?", and so on. I don't see both schools as being at cross purposes really. I think that if you work in a Stanislavski way, then a bad actor will always say "Oh, I don't think my character would do this". Then you have to use Brecht and say "What's the writer's purpose in the scene?; the writer's purpose is to show that it is you doing this, so you have to find that way of making your character behave". I don't think there's a confusion between the two. Nowadays, there is an A-level, a Theatre



Studies paper in England, and students always say "Were you influenced by Brecht or were you influenced by Stanislavski?", and you say "Well, it's not that simple, it's not like either one or the other". Both are now in the blood stream, both of them are great writers on theatre whose methods have been assimilated and who are like two separate streams that have converged and now flow together as one river. So it's not either/or really.

EM: I would like to move on now to your relationship with Caryl Churchill. You have directed six of her plays: *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, *Serious Money*, *Icecream* and *Blue Heart*. Why this recurrence in working with a specific playwright?

MS-C: I think that if you find a partnership with an actor or with a writer, then that's very valuable to stay with that. And I think that we were both working at the Royal Court and we were much of the same age. She's a little older than me, but I saw her work and liked it, and she saw my work and must have liked it. Then, working together you do challenge each other. It's a bit like a marriage, but like a marriage that's full of infidelity. I go off and work with other writers, she has gone off and worked with other directors, but on the whole you come back to each other because you do complement each other. I think Caryl Churchill has the most astute theatrical intelligence of anybody I've ever worked with. She's excellent at being able to say "Oh, that line can be cut", or "Why don't you...?", so she's always a challenge to work with and

that=s very stimulating.

EM: Have you got any preference about these six plays?

**MS-C:** Well, *Top Girls* is a play that has absolutely become a modern classic in this country. Indeed, the National Theatre have just polled different people about the top one hundred plays of the century, and *Time Out*, the magazine, is now thirty years old and polled the top thirty theatrical experiences in the last thirty years. *Top Girls* had the highest place for a living writer in both those polls. It certainly is a great play that hits a particular political moment, the advent of Thatcherism, and questions whether or not women should do exactly the same things as men, whether that=s really a liberation from feminism. *Serious Money* was great fun to do, and started from a standpoint of ignorance. Neither of us knew anything about The City and the money world, the financial market, and it was enormously enjoyable to explore that and accumulate a body of knowledge with the actors.

EM: How did you approach *Top Girls*? How did you start working?

**MS-C:** I remember very clearly how I started. The first scene. It's very hard to find a kind of social context for it because it takes place in a restaurant and the characters come from mythology, history, painting, or whatever. We all -the actors, Caryl Churchill and I- had to think through it, about the social behaviour, about how each character would behave towards each other. What would Dull Gret do? How would she react to a Pope? And the dialogue, with all those separate speeches, and the intercutting and the overlapping,

which was refined in rehearsal. But what Dull Gret, who says very little until the end, thinks of Lady Nijo is an area that every production can speculate about a bit, you have to find out the social behaviour. So that was the starting point, I think.

EM: What do you recall was the reaction to the play when it first opened in England?

**MS-C:** Well, it always takes time for a new play to accumulate a reputation. Caryl Churchill was not at that point a particularly well-known or famous writer. She had I think one other play done at the Court, *Cloud Nine*, which had been a big hit. So, there was interest, but the first run at the Court was not a huge hit, even though by the end of the run it was playing to very full houses. Then it went to New York, where it was billed as a London hit, and then it became a New York hit. When it came back to London, we said "It's a New York hit". A kind of transatlantic trick that was pulled in the eighties.

EM: So New York was partly responsible for the London success.

**MS-C:** Yes, but the same thing happened with, say, *Our Country's Good*, by Timberlake Wertenbaker, which didn't go to America but went to Australia. The fact that the play was being widely acclaimed abroad and that there was some feedback in the English press about that generated more interest. I mean, we're unable to do what they do in Russia, which is keep a play in repertoire for seven years. If you were able to do that, then the play's reputation would stabilise, and reach a point when people want to

see it.

EM: Would having a permanent company be your goal with *Out of Joint*?

**MS-C:** Yes, although there are always different demands. If you respond to new work, the demands of each play are very different. One might have young black kids in their early twenties, and one like *Blue Heart* might demand people in their eighties. The casting requirements are very different. Besides, permanent companies aren't easy either to establish or to maintain.

EM: Going back to what you mentioned before, bearing in mind the changes in Government in the UK, and some disappointment that many people have experienced, from Conservative to New Labour, don't you think that the dichotomy between Marlene and Joyce that you find in *Top Girls* -what Joseph Marohl has termed "us" vs. "them"<sup>1</sup> - has actually broadened?

**MS-C:** Yes, I think it has. I think any play is a specific product of its time, and inevitably, when you revive a play, some of the immediate political sense has gone. Recently, I've read *The Beggar's Opera*, by John Gay. When it was originally performed in the eighteenth century it was seen as an absolutely devastating satire and criticism of Walpole, who was the Prime Minister and who was identified with Macheath. People who saw the play saw this criminal as being the Prime Minister, everybody knew that was what

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<sup>1</sup> See Marohl, Joseph. 1987: "De-realised Women: Performance and Identity in *Top Girls*". *Modern Drama* 30: 376-88.

they were going to see, and the force of the production was such that he had to come anonymously himself to see it. Of course that's absolutely not present when you do that play now, but it's still a very fine play, still satirising corruption. So, something that Caryl Churchill is talking about in *Top Girls*, the danger of the government which makes rich people richer and poor people poorer, is still a lesson, but we don't have that government now, so you're quite right that the perspective has changed a bit.

EM: I would like to move now to the changes, the differences between a theatre production and a TV production, bearing in mind the fact that *Top Girls* was broadcast by the BBC in 1991. Are you happy in general with TV adaptations of plays? Because this is something you have a great tradition of in England.

**MS-C:** It's always a bit of a problem. I enjoyed doing it even though I didn't have a great deal of experience in TV. I've only ever done two plays on television, and one of them was *Top Girls*. There was no pressure to broaden the text out, or to cast anybody else, or to do those things that Hollywood insists on, so it was very much a television representation of the stage version. The actors were the same. And indeed I revived the play and we shot it for television. Then, we had another week's rehearsal and then toured the play in the theatre.

EM: There is something quite interesting in the TV version, you introduce a change in the structure. You start the play with the office interview between Marlene and Jeanine, instead of the actual

restaurant scene. Why did you decide on this change?

**MS-C:** It did seem that, if you are playing to a broader and therefore necessarily less theatrically sophisticated audience, putting people into the world of Marlene straight away would be helpful in identifying her in the dinner scene, so that viewers had already seen her at work and knew who she was a bit. In the television there's no necessity to have the little Jeanine scene at the beginning of Act II, because what you use the Jeanine scene for in the theatre is also to prepare the next scene. In the theatre, after the restaurant scene, a curtain would be drawn and we would have Jeanine and Marlene's scene. When the interview scene is over, the curtain would be drawn back and now it's the back garden with the two girls already there. On television you don't need to do that, and therefore plunging into the world of Marlene to begin with seemed both practically a good option and a good practical step to introduce her to us.

**EM:** In the same way, at the beginning of the television version there is a temporal marker, "1980". Is this because you wanted the audience to know more, to understand what was going on?

**MS-C:** Yes, I suppose that becomes clear in the final scene, when we learn that it is set the year before. We wanted it like that. Particularly since it was then 1991 and because there's nothing in the Jeanine scene and nothing in the dinner party scene that would say what year it was so it was good to locate it, stick a label on it.

EM: And also in relation to the TV version, at the end of the dinner scene, when all the angry women are shouting, the waitress seems to join in, in the final catharsis. I found this funny because some critics have mentioned that what the women in the rest of the scene do is basically to exert the same pressure, the same kind of oppression over the waitress as it was exerted upon themselves. But then it was a bit shocking to have the waitress join in at the end.

**MS-C:** I think both points are there, by definition. I mean she has no lines, it's a non-speaking part. If you go to the *RSC* (*Royal Shakespeare Company*) you see lots of actresses with non-speaking parts, but it's highly unusual, in a modern play, to have a character who doesn't speak. The role of the waitress in *Top Girls* is used as a demonstration of impotence, but actually by the end she has a good time with the other women and is able to forget her place. So I think that to say "Oh, she's there because she's a symbol of the oppression women are doing to her, the same as they..." is probably true, but it's a bit heavy-handed as an analysis because, after all, many of the actresses who would have been in the play would have worked as waitresses when they were drama students. It's a perfectly honourable profession, to be a waitress you don't have to be oppressed. (Laughs)

EM: I've always considered it a bit far-fetched myself. I would like now to ask you a question about *Blue Heart*. To what extent can we trace Beckett's influence in the play? I am thinking about the

recurrence of the theme of waiting in *Heart=s Desire*, when Brian and Alice are waiting for their daughter Susy to come back from Australia.

**MS-C:** I once asked Edward Bond "Were you influenced by Beckett?", and he said "No". The next day he came and said "I apologise, I was a bit rude. Ionesco, all of us were influenced by Ionesco". Caryl Churchill is the same generation as Edward Bond, and Ionesco was the writer who was being done when they were all at university. Her plays, her early plays, *Moving Clocks Go Slow* and some of her one-act plays do have a very discernible influence by Ionesco, and I think that this play returns to that a bit, I mean if you think of *The Bald Primadonna* and a suburban English household, it's a bit like that.

EM: What are your future projects?

**MS-C:** Well, *Out of Joint*, as I explained right at the beginning, holds work in repertoire for much longer than we did at the Royal Court, so we're engaged quite a lot of the year in re-mounting, re-producing plays we've already done, like *Blue Heart*. But at the end of this run of *Blue Heart* everything will be over, we have to do something new, so we will be doing two new plays in the Edinburgh festival in August 1999. One is a new play by Mark Ravenhill, which is partly about how the politics have been taken out of politics. It's called *Some Explicit Polaroids*, and it's about how everybody is now happy in this land where there is no conflict. The other play is by a completely unknown writer and it's rather like a Royal



Court work-play like *The Kitchen*, by Arnold Wesker. It is based around a group of people working together, only that the work is burglary, they're all thieves. The man who wrote it is a first-time playwright. He's indeed just done three years in prison for burglary, and while he was in prison he did a writing course. The play is a very vivid observation of male behaviour. It's very accurate, very funny, very brutal. I have great hopes for it, so those are the two immediate projects I have.

EM: What's the playwright's name?

**MS-C:** His name is Simon Bennett, and the play is called *Drummers*. And a "drummer" is someone who knocks on the door of a house to see whether it's empty. The burglar knocks on the door, and if there's no reply then they know that person's out during the day, so probably the next day they come back and burgle the house.

*Drummers* and *Some Explicit Polaroids* were performed at the New Ambassadors Theatre, London, in the autumn of 1999.

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