

# **CARYL CHURCHILL:REPRESENTATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS AND PROVISIONAL TRUTHS**

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**I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains  
as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a  
degree at any tertiary educational institution.**

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**Iris Joy Lavell**

## **Dedication**

This Thesis is dedicated to my parents: to my mother Betty who, in the Depression, despite having gained a scholarship to a private girls' school, had to leave school on the day she turned fourteen and not come home until she had a job, and to my father Ernest, who, although he had to cut short his own education, always encouraged ours. It is dedicated to long discussions around the family dinner table, the encouragement to speak freely and an appreciation of ideas for their own sake.

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MacCaskill's theatre school Chimera (later Kaff) introduced me to the theatrical addiction and to a love of Churchill's plays, particularly: *Vinegar Tom*, *Fen*, *Top Girls*, and *The Judge's Wife*.

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## Abstract

*JUDGE: Go away Barbara. I've had enough. Should we all be kind? You are lukewarm and will be vomited. There are two camps, Barbara, mine and theirs. Either you are with, or you are against.*<sup>1</sup>

Although English playwright Caryl Churchill wrote the three scripts examined in this thesis more than thirty years ago, each captures our contemporary zeitgeist in sometimes surprising ways. These works explore the shifting politics of power, revealing binary and essentialist representations that not only continue but have been strengthened on all sides in recent years, suggesting their central importance in defining and controlling culture.

This thesis examines how Churchill subverts conventional forms of representation and probes the ways in which she herself has been represented by critics and scholars at various periods of her writing career. It is my contention that these processes operate in tandem, performing an ongoing dialogue. Because of the dynamic nature of this dialogue, the aim here is not so much to provide an increasingly unified or finite understanding of the artistic milieu from which a play emerges, as it is to recognize the level of complexity underlying the mutable and political process of its interpretation.

I have undertaken a detailed exploration of three lesser-known short scripts from 1972, a 'watershed' year for Churchill, culminating in the relative success of *Owners*, her first major stage play. While many of her earlier works have been deserving of further exploration, a number of them have been largely overlooked in the broader environment of her subsequent contribution to

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<sup>1</sup> From "The Judge's Wife" in *Churchill: Shorts* 159.

contemporary theatre. The particular scripts that I explore in the course of this thesis are: *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*; *Schreber's Nervous Illness* and *The Judge's Wife*, an unperformed stage play, a radio play and a television play respectively. These works are worthy of exploration because of their experiments with the politics of subjectivity as it impacts on race, gender and social class, and notions of 'legitimacy' that shift with a person's changing circumstances. Each of these plays implicitly demonstrates the importance of subjectivity in relation to representational power as it places characters who have traditionally been silenced at the centre of the action.

I have titled my thesis *Caryl Churchill: Representational Negotiations and Provisional Truths*. In invoking this title I pre-empt the engagement of a subjective, strategic essentialist approach, both in critiquing this period of Churchill's work and in declaring the assumptions of the arguments contained in the pages that follow.

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## Introduction

Caryl Churchill is a notable British playwright who was born in 1938. She has been writing plays since she was a student at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University where she graduated in 1960 with the Richard Hillary Memorial Prize and a B.A. in English Language and Literature. During her student days she wrote *Downstairs*, *You've No Need to be Frightened*, *Having a Wonderful Time*, and *Easy Death*, and on 27 November 1962 the BBC transmitted *The Ants*, her first professional radio production (Fitzsimmons 7).<sup>1</sup> She has continued writing for radio, television and live production until the present day, and her most recent production, at the time of writing this thesis, is *A Number*, produced in 2002.

The study that follows has been broadly positioned under the rubric of representation as a political process. This orientation reflects a concern both with the ways in which Churchill has used particular representational strategies in her writing, and with how she and her work have been variously portrayed by reviewers, scholars and other members of the artistic community. While this approach is not intended to demonstrate a direct relationship between how Churchill has been represented and how her work has subsequently developed, it does endeavour to provide a space in which the political nature of the interaction between the artistic environment and the art itself is considered. As a participant in this process, my own position regarding strategies of representation and their relationship to Churchill's

oeuvre are relevant and will be introduced at this point, to be developed further in Chapter One.

My position has emerged, and continues to emerge (as I assume positions do for most people) from reading, interpreting, integrating, transforming, and otherwise distorting new information to fit within or to change previously held belief systems. In the process I have become acutely, painfully, aware of the constantly (re)generating character of understanding, and the fallacy of the assumption that it is possible to find a stable position, let alone an end, or a definitive answer to what essentially began as a series of unformed questions.<sup>2</sup> My decision to leave the questions surrounding Churchill and her work negotiable for as long as possible was a deliberate attempt to discover, rather than to construct, something new. This became for me a dangerous, albeit stimulating approach, and ultimately led to the conclusion that perhaps I was discovering more about my own processes than I was about Churchill. A quotation from Diane Elam, which I happened upon in the course of browsing through books in the 'Feminism' section of our university library, seemed to sum up my endeavour and my state of mind generally.<sup>3</sup> It also helped to explain why I hadn't been able to finish my PhD in the three years initially nominated. Elam was describing the picture on the *Quaker Oats* box which shows a picture of a man holding a *Quaker Oats* box, with a picture of a man holding a *Quaker Oats* box and so on, ad infinitum.

She writes:

Representation can never come to an end, since greater accuracy and detail only allows us to see ever more Quaker Oats boxes. This is rather odd, since we are accustomed to think of accuracy and detail as helping us to grasp an image fully, rather than forcing us to recognize the impossibility of grasping it. (27-28)

I had probably skipped over Elam's statement earlier in my study – it seemed familiar – but reading it four years into my project shocked me into the realisation that if I continued as I had been, I might never complete my thesis.

The problem posed here is one that is perhaps at the centre of the debate on representation: that the representational act is endlessly capable of generating the perception of an object even (preferably?) in its absence, hence “the impossibility of grasping it” (Elam 28).

In the quotation that follows, Clare Colebrook has pointed to another aspect of this impossibility, in relation to a reified concept of identity as unified and consistent. The question raised (yet again) by her observation in this era of relativism<sup>4</sup> or post-relativism is how far this argument might be extended to include social and even scientific constructs in general. Of particular importance to this discussion are those questions that relate to understandings of the gendered and racialised body. Colebrook describes this constantly shifting ground in relation to identity and self-representation as follows:

To represent oneself is to submit to a trans-individual system of language, signification or representation. But any such representational scheme can never be fully disowned, rendered autonomous, collective, inhuman or fully dispersed beyond all subjectivity. Rather, the act of representation institutes autonomy, or places a self in a point of view. Autonomy ought not to be defined in terms of a being that is then expressed. Rather, the procedure of autonomy is a recognition that there is no foundational being other than its continual institution through a representation that dislocates itself from a prior presence (63-64).

Following Colebrook's thoughts with regard to the construct of identity, can we extend this idea beyond intellectual comprehension to *a*

*frame of mind* that views our own identities and everything processed through individual perception as continually instituted “through a representation that dislocates itself from a prior presence”? I believe that it is one thing to argue the idea, but it is a very different thing to consciously and consistently operate as if it were so.

How does one cultivate this frame of mind? One way is to become vigilant in acknowledging the processes that underlie representation, and this is explored in some detail in Chapter One of this thesis. In the context of educational institutions, the critical study of our individual assumptions, tenets and theories, and those of others in our various disciplines, provides at least some of the necessary training to create a critical mind-set. However, the inclusion of such meta-analysis is often circumscribed by the dominant paradigms that define our areas of study, and perhaps we tend to fare better as students and in our professions if we take these, and the representational systems that define them, on trust.

In a space more accessible to broader communities than that of the educational institution, innovative playwrights such as Churchill, who experiment with conventional modes of representation, have an important role to play, partly because they have the ability to define their own paradigms within the performance space. This enables the implementation of novel representational modes by providing an environment where an internal logic can operate within the performance. Nevertheless, experimentation with modes of conventional representation is, of itself, a provocative act that can threaten prevailing systems of belief and is, therefore, a potentially risky approach in terms of public reception. Counter-attacks can be mounted in the

form of reviews that deliberately distort the interpretation of a performance, or diminish it through negative comments directed at the playwright's identity, originality or skill.

A playwright's credibility and influence is diminished if s/he is seen as imitative of others, and in Chapters Two and Three this issue is explored in relation to Churchill's oeuvre through an interrogation of the playwright's public identity and the canon. In Chapter Two I creatively explore the 'continual institution' of Churchill's identity in the public arena, then examine her ambiguous position in relation to the canon in Chapter Three. Chapter Two is presented in the form of a pseudo discussion group and imagines the process by which representational strategies have been variously employed to produce the playwright's publicly perceived identity. It suggests that this process is less chronological than cumulative, and that the playwright's production is influenced by factors that often have less to do with the artistic merit of the work itself, than with the various motivations of the professional community that surrounds it.

Chapter Three discusses canonisation to the extent that it informs the reception and interpretation of Churchill's work. A range of stylistic strategies, themes and sensibilities often attributed to later external influences were already present in the three works examined in this study.<sup>5</sup> This has implications for adjusting prevalent constructions of Churchill's identity, particularly where, in my view, her own influence on the writing of her contemporaries may have been understated, whilst their influence on hers has perhaps been unduly emphasised. In this chapter I note that Churchill's more recent plays are frequently compared with and/or seen to be derivative of a



wide range of (works by) canonised male playwrights. However, while these comparisons may be intended to be flattering, the influence tends not to be seen as travelling in the opposite direction, and this prompts a questioning both of the underlying thinking that motivates such comparisons, and of their ultimate effect on perceptions of her contribution to the canon. Her argued inclusion in the canon finds her variously marginalised by those who feel that her acceptance might indicate that her work is less than transgressive, and by those who have tokenized her position as a female playwright or as *the* representative of feminism within the canon.

From another perspective, individual works within a playwright's collection can, of course, acquire canonical status, and this is relevant both when investigating those that might be considered worthy of further examination, and in measuring a playwright's status within the artistic establishment. Within Churchill's oeuvre some plays determined to be worthy of study have been included in University curricula and others have been dealt with more briefly (if at all) as products of the apprenticeship that preceded her entrée into serious playwrighting.<sup>6</sup> However, treasures can be found in Churchill's early 'shorts', plays that remain largely unexplored yet which are, I believe, critically important both in contextualising her achievements, and in their own right.

### **Churchill's Strategies of Subversion**

In the pages that follow I reclaim some of the works written by Churchill prior to her recognition as an important contemporary playwright and describe how, in these earlier works, she has already begun to subvert and re-frame strategies of representation employed to maintain dominant interests

in her society. Churchill contests the language of repression through a complex interrogation of speech, portrayals of the body, and the politics of subjectivity. She writes with a great deal of humour, by confronting and altering dominant binary associations, and frequently by adopting a stance which employs strategic essentialist assumptions from which to launch her political agenda.

Some discussion of the constructs of essentialism and binary representation is useful to contextualise the arguments presented in this thesis. These concepts comprise much of the territory that Churchill engages to confront the structural inequity of representational modes conventionally employed by dominant social institutions. While I address these constructs in the context of Churchill's earlier writing as the thesis progresses, it may be helpful to introduce these concepts at this point as they relate to my understanding of Churchill's undertaking.

Broadly speaking, I take the position that essentialist categorisation and its associated use of binary conceptualisation functions in the social context to confer an advantage on the speaking subject over the object of categorisation. This is particularly relevant when the object of categorisation is another person. Essentialism has been critiqued for its dangerous tendency to discriminate and distort through a truncation of information, and its inclination to classify and therefore confine disparate aspects of experience to a single entity. The implications of this are significant – in controlling the system of classification which defines the essential properties of something or someone, one is able to influence perception and thus activity relating to that thing, person or group of people. Garth Hallett has described essentialism as

“pathological” and as “a prominent feature of Western thought” and, “for the most part a regrettable one” (3). He defines essence in the following terms:

Essences in the traditional sense are core properties or clusters of properties present, necessarily, in all and only those things which bear the common name. Knowledge is one thing; language is one thing; beauty, meaning, humanity, life, law, justice – each is a single invariant reality, present in most varied instances, or in a separate realm of forms. (2)

Essence confers an aura of inviolability on concepts such as knowledge, language, beauty, humanity, life, law and justice, and these concepts then function to consolidate the power bases advantaged by their essentialist and binary definitions. Critics of essentialism might suggest new ways of communicating; however, as Diana Fuss has pointed out in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, constructionism employs essentialist strategies even as it challenges its assumptions. In truth it may not be possible to communicate in a way that avoids some degree of essentialist thinking. This reminds us of Elam’s *Quaker Oats* box analogy: each time we break down an essence we simply create different essences and an even more complicated world of definition. This may result in a severe diminishment of communicative clarity and influence, which is often the opposite of its intention.

An alternative approach to destabilising entrenched essentialist categorisation may be to use essentialist notions in untypical ways with conscious intent, and on the understanding that such notions are always provisional and can be ‘strategically’ applied and strategically altered. In this understanding I have accepted Fuss’s awareness of the impossibility of avoiding essentialism and used the term ‘strategic essentialism’ to designate the deliberate adoption of a polarised perspective which avoids a more even-

handed approach in favour of promoting theatricality, political emphasis and satire. It is defended as a useful theatrical device to effectively combat unchallenged assumptions, providing argumentative power and clarity of purpose. Fuss draws on Gayatri Spivak's reading of subaltern studies noting that Spivak has not dismissed their essentialism out of hand. Fuss writes:

... when put into practice by the dispossessed themselves, essentialism can be powerfully displacing and disruptive. This, to me, signals an exciting new way to rethink the problem of essentialism; it represents an approach which evaluates the motivations *behind* the deployment of essentialism rather than prematurely dismissing it as an unfortunate vestige of patriarchy (itself an essentialist category) (31-32).

Churchill's use of essentialism may at times sacrifice complexity of character development in favour of caricatures, but in so doing, she is employing a technique that throws light on the strings that guide the puppet of stereotypical characterisation, the type of characterisation that passes more seamlessly for naturalism. Her revelation promotes consciousness of the more commonly employed essentialist assumptions that are too often accepted without question.

Similarly, the conscious manipulation of binary representation provides the necessary ground for engaging those embedded structures that maintain social inequity. In discussing the influence of the binary, I align myself with Elizabeth Grosz's comments on the problem with dichotomous thinking. Grosz argues that:

The problem with dichotomous thought is not the dominance of the pair (some sort of inherent problem with number two); rather, it is the *one* which makes it problematic, the fact that the one can allow itself no independent, autonomous other (*Volatile Bodies* 211).<sup>7</sup>

In Grosz's argument, there are aspects of the *one* that are denied and designated as characteristic of the Other. Grosz identifies the Cartesian

mind/body dichotomy as a significant point of focus in which “the body is coded in terms that are themselves traditionally devalued” (*Volatile Bodies* 3).

By listing some of the comparisons invoked by dualism, she demonstrates how an association with the body impacts on the most significant aspects of assumptions about human relationships:

The mind/body relation is frequently correlated with the distinctions between reason and passion, sense and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance, mechanism and vitalism, transcendence and immanence, temporality and spatiality, psychology and physiology, form and matter, and so on (*Volatile Bodies* 3).

In terms of the relationship between those who control institutions of power in a society and those who do not, Grosz identifies a representational alignment between the (male) subject and the mind, and the (female) Other and the body. She suggests that this conceptualisation underpins a (Western) philosophy which excludes women through an implicit coding that associates them with the body and thus with irrationality. Importantly in the context of Churchill’s writing, the same binary underpins the power relationships in European countries and colonies between ‘white’ and ‘black,’ and in the class system between the ‘upper classes’ and the ‘working classes.’ Because the mind/body dichotomy is central to the execution of power, perhaps it is at the site of the body that binaric conception might best be disrupted.

As for essentialist thinking, which itself operates through a binary process, Churchill subverts this by appropriating the binary and manipulating it to create, paradoxically, a multiple view. While the simple act of calling attention to a binary assumption will merely reinstate the existing power relationship (such as in female playwright, doctor, barrister and so on), a challenge might be made at the level of the corporeal associations linked to

binary pairs. By providing a tear in the fabric of habitual conceptualisation, Churchill demonstrates that it is possible to provide a moment of liminality or cognitive dissonance in which the spectator simultaneously perceives the novel binary relationship presented and its contradiction of the habitual binary concept. Thus in *The Judge's Wife*, one of the plays presented in this thesis, the Judge is presented as simultaneously powerful (the stereotypical binaric relationship), and as a helpless and somewhat pathetic or vulnerable figure being helped out of the bath by his wife.

Examples from Churchill's earlier scripts will be discussed further as the thesis progresses. In particular, her reinterpretation of the binary and of essentialist description as effective forms of satirical confrontation will be examined in the detailed analysis of the plays in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

### **The Plays**

Three examples of Churchill's writing are drawn from 1972 and critiqued in Chapters Four through Six. I have chosen this specific year because I see it as a turning point in her career just prior to the critical, if ambivalent, recognition of *Owners*, her first full-length stage play.<sup>8</sup> Following the production of *Owners* she was to move from writing predominantly for radio to live performance, a shift that has influenced the way in which she continued to develop her dramatic form, and the way in which critics have perceived her significance as a playwright worthy of note.<sup>9</sup> This period also precedes her association with Joint Stock Theatre Group and Monstrous Regiment, which have been cited as major influences on the development of both her writing style and her politics.<sup>10</sup> For this reason alone, a review of her earlier plays can be instructive.

Chapter Four examines *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (*Hospital*), a play which has not yet been professionally staged and which is based on the Algerian struggle for independence from French occupation in the nineteen fifties.<sup>11</sup> The script demonstrates Churchill's thoughts on some of the major questions that would be interrogated by feminist and postcolonial scholars at least a decade later, and which continue to be of concern. These include those questions relating to power differentials and the various relationships between colonial men, colonial women, colonised men and colonised women. In addition it posits the unsatisfactory options for action available to the person that Albert Memmi has termed "the colonizer who refuses," a person who, in this instance, is realised in the form of a young woman brought into the hospital for psychiatric attention.<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of Churchill's subsequent writing career, I point to a possible relationship between this play and the canonical *Cloud Nine*, in which similar themes are explored in the context of English colonialism and an English feminist awareness of the late nineteen seventies. Perhaps more significantly in the current world political climate, in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, Churchill examines the role of representation in justifying and making sense of state, institutional and revolutionary violence, and the personal and political consequences for those who perpetrate violence.

Chapter Five critiques *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, a radio play that has also been performed as a one-man show in live performance. Through analysis of this text I investigate the place of this play in relation to Churchill's dramatic approach and style. Its inclusion provides the added opportunity to review some of Churchill's writing techniques in response to

the challenges of radio, to examine the relationship between power and subjectivity, and to speculate on the relative significance of her expertise in this particular medium on her writing for live performance.

Both *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* and *Schreber's Nervous Illness* draw on the lives of historical figures and are set in a psychiatric institution; however, in Schreber's case it is in Germany in the late nineteenth century. Daniel Paul Schreber was a High Court Judge from an influential, nineteenth-century German family who wrote his memoirs while he was incarcerated in mental asylums. In mid-life, Schreber had a 'nervous breakdown' which Sigmund Freud later cited, following examination of the memoirs, to develop a theory of paranoia.<sup>13</sup> Churchill identifies Schreber's illness as schizophrenia.<sup>14</sup>

The play uses a translation of Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* as its source material and organizes those aspects of Schreber's story that must have appealed to the playwright as enlightening in relation to contemporary issues of the time. It deals with the representation of 'madness,' both as a vehicle for the physical and psychological imposition of power, and as a social metaphor. In this context Churchill engages with the concept of gender performance, with the idea of 'becoming woman' which is a key preoccupation of the central character, and with Schreber's shifting claim to subjectivity as his social status diminishes and his compensatory relationship with his gods increases. I concentrate on examining those issues explored by Churchill relating to the social significance and uses of mental illness, to the place of a Christian God in a modern psyche and, given the public prominence of feminism at the time, to the significance of being or 'becoming' a woman.



The final script examined in Chapter Six is *The Judge's Wife*, a television play. In my analysis I discuss the implicit irony in the title and challenge some aspects of previous critical interpretations on the basis of what I believe to be a misplaced emphasis on the Judge's story and subjectivity over that of Caroline, his wife. As with the other two plays, *The Judge's Wife* engages with one of the central social institutions of power and its function in maintaining privilege for an elite minority. At the same time, it juxtaposes class relationships, private and public spheres of influence, and gender politics in relation to the English legal system. As a television play it again provides some insight into the range of techniques that Churchill had been developing prior to her recognition as a 'serious' playwright for the theatre, and it acknowledges the unique set of skills that she would bring to bear on her subsequent career.

A detailed analysis of these three plays is important for understanding the way in which the playwright's contribution has been portrayed because of the place these plays occupy in the chronological sequence of her developing art form. I suggest that there has been an underestimation of Churchill's particular form of originality at the point where her plays began to be recognised, attributable, at least in part, to her gender. The filtering of perception through gender is a complex relationship which relates to the most deeply embedded structures within our society. These structures are so entrenched that they are often difficult to see. Because of this, even women and men of good intent can sometimes fall into the trap of reinforcing inequity in relation to those women who enjoy a modicum of success within the existing social structure.

## **Producing the Playwright to Conform to the Interpretation**

One of the questions raised in this thesis concerns the place that Churchill occupies in the politically-charged environment of contemporary performance practice, a place that is actively negotiated by critics and scholars via a process of interpretation and counter-interpretation. This process continuously conflates and reproduces both the work and the playwright's public identity, and to some extent influences the ongoing reception of her work. Throughout, the relentless identification of Churchill as a female playwright, and popularly as a feminist playwright, has been central to her representation and the continued production of her identity. Her position as a writer worthy of note has consistently been subject to the male/female binary and its hidden assumptions and thus firmly situated in relation to the normative male subject position. Her professional association with predominantly male directors, directors who are now well-established, has further defined this relationship and the way it might be perceived and portrayed within a contemporary feminist context.<sup>15</sup> While this relationship does not necessarily set up an oppositional or competitive dynamic, it is important for the ways in which the gender politics of her work are construed and for the reception that her works receive. The use of established male directors could be perceived by some to influence the expression of such politics in the play's production, and by others to account for the success of her scripts in performance.<sup>16</sup> Again the perception of unilateral influence is an issue, together with the undervaluing of Churchill's contribution to the careers of her contemporaries.<sup>17</sup> By raising questions such as these it is hoped

to contribute to the debate with regard to the socio-artistic environment negotiated not only by Churchill but also by other female playwrights.

The establishment of rules which define excellence in artistic practice, and its opposite, are necessarily subject to scrutiny by those who have not been well-served by such rules in the past. In the tradition of Western Theatre, critics and reviewers are influential in the establishment of specific rules for engaging with texts and performances. These simultaneously provide a framework for assigning relative value to the works, suggesting both legitimacy and authority, if not objectivity. However, while the establishment of rules provides an illusion of standardisation, it is important to remain aware that standards are highly subject to interpretation and to the consolidation of dominant group interests. I use the phrase “remain aware” because once awareness is raised (as it has been for more than thirty years in feminist, postcolonial and other political studies), the predominant challenge in a so-called post-feminist and post-postcolonial era is to continue to promote that critical faculty in the broader community. We should continue not to be ‘blinded’ simply by claims to authority, no matter how well-earned, because that authority may be circumscribed by paradigms which implicitly favour particular groups over others. The proscribing of particular conventions to define excellence presupposes a unitary point of view, and while standards are required to justify the critic’s role, in my opinion the default position tends more towards applauding the well-executed ‘conventional’ than the ‘risky/innovative.’ This may occur even where the critic seeks something new: novelty is more acceptable when it can be incorporated within an existing conceptual framework.

For example, in Susan Sontag's introduction to *A Barthes Reader*, "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes," she describes Barthes' position on some 'rules of thumb' for the critic, emphasising the importance of unfamiliarity to the exercise of good taste:

Though work of every form and worth qualifies for citizenship in the great democracy of "texts," the critic will tend to avoid the texts that everyone knows. ... For it is, finally, the exercise of taste which identifies meanings that are familiar; a judgement of taste which discriminates against such meanings as too familiar; an ideology of taste which makes of the familiar something vulgar and facile. (xi)

'Taste' however is ideologically, culturally and historically influenced, and determination of the familiar or the overly familiar may be an artifact of perception in which the unfamiliar is converted into the familiar through a process of selective discrimination. This claim is based on a dominant paradigm psychological theory, namely Kelly's Personal Construct Theory, which suggests that the unfamiliar, or data which does not concur with an individual's existing personal constructs, is either converted, rejected as nonsensical, or not perceived at all.<sup>18</sup> While the overly familiar might be seen as 'vulgar and facile,' the overly *unfamiliar* risks being similarly scorned until it achieves sufficient formal recognition, interpretation, or familiarity to be reconsidered.

I am not suggesting that such conservative reactions are invariably confined to reviews directed at works by adventurous female playwrights. However, dislike of unfamiliar material from an unfamiliar authority source may, in part, explain some of the early equivocal responses to Churchill's work.<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, male playwrights who were later to form part of the canon of European theatre were not immune to reactionary comment, and the

work of Antonin Artaud, Harold Pinter, or even John Osborne might, for example, be cited to illustrate this point.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, an early period in which the artist challenges established practices might be seen as a necessary credential for those who mature into the new canon, or a process through which the artist necessarily travels from margin to centre. In addition, on the broader level of artistic paradigm, critical judgements need to be socially and geographically contextualised. For instance, according to Janelle Reinelt, Bertolt Brecht's work, while embraced in postwar England as innovative, was apparently received in East Germany as an example of Communist establishmentarianism.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, it might be helpful to determine where Churchill's work is situated in relation to the highly subjective standards of both journalistic reviewers and scholars. From a feminist perspective it is important to establish the ways in which her situation differs from that of the canonized male playwrights, and to understand how the perception of her work has changed over the years.

When viewed from the position of the canon, the significance of innovative works by female playwrights has tended to be interpreted differently from those of their more privileged male counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Churchill's originality of form in *Owners*, for instance, was initially seen by some as poor grasp of her craft<sup>23</sup> whereas, subsequently experimentation in theatrical form was represented as an important aspect of her approach to her work.<sup>24</sup> The perceptual change has accompanied the ongoing development, acceptance and growing popularity of her work, as well as that of other highly experimental practitioners in the nineteen fifties, sixties and seventies.<sup>25</sup> This

in turn has arguably contributed to a re-thinking of broader expectations with regard to contemporary theatrical conventions.

To return for a moment to Barthes' ideas, in determining the tastefulness of a work, it is not incidental that the critic simultaneously provides an indication of the effectiveness of the work's creator. In doing so, s/he participates in the writer's ongoing production as a playwright who is, or is not, worthy of recognition. This process can also function in the opposite direction: in recognizing and indicating the degree to which a playwright is esteemed, the underlying worth of the work is suggested.<sup>26</sup> Where such interpretive strategies are examined in the light of contemporary theories applying to matters of race and gender, there are obvious concerns about their use, particularly with regard to who speaks about whom, issues that are taken up again in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis.

### **Approach**

The present study emphasizes texts rather than performance. Because this investigation examines the ways in which Churchill and her work are represented, as well as her own employment of representational techniques, I have treated her play scripts, journalistic reviews of productions, and scholarly texts addressing her contribution as the primary source material. I have done this for reasons of clarity. At the point of a play's production there are multiple, sometimes competing influences. Discussion of the performance as an uncomplicated illustration of the playwright's product, as frequently occurs in reviews, fuses and confuses authorial with directorial, technical and actor input. This conflation of influence or responsibility, and the unpredictable movement and distinction of accolades or otherwise between

playwright, director and cast, is worth noting from the perspective of the playwright's construction and is explored in Chapters Two and Three. The subjective attribution of influence and competence has typically been unevenly constructed along gender, race and class lines. While this construction is not always expressed crudely or in predictable ways, especially as communities have become more conscious of discrimination issues, some attention to the relative attribution of praise and blame between playwright, director and cast can sometimes be instructive.

When concentrating on the ways in which interpretations of the work are invoked to represent a playwright's ability, and thus to some extent a future capacity to have her work produced, the use of the performance is thus problematic when employed in isolation to gauge the effectiveness of the writing. Where a performance is successful, it might as easily be attributed to the skill of director and actors as it is to that of the writer, or conversely where it fails, to the failings of the writer (director, or cast). These attributions may provide as much information about the reviewer's affiliations as the skill of the various participants. Because Churchill occupies a minority position, that of a commercially and artistically successful female playwright in a still male-dominated field, I am interested in the ways that she negotiates her ability to be 'heard' within this context. Partly for these reasons, consideration of the pre-production script itself is a critical component of the ongoing production and counter-production of meaning which contextualises my analysis of Churchill's work.

## **Synopsis**

In writing this thesis I am inevitably complicit in the ongoing process of representation, and in the production of Churchill's identity as a playwright, and of her work. This is ultimately a political process because my representations aim to influence the reader to view Churchill in particular ways. My stance is sympathetic to feminist and post-colonial inquiry, particularly in terms of rendering the political agenda that is embedded in the structure and use of language visible. Underlying my concern is the premise that the hegemonic structure of language and other forms of representation coerce those who are marginalised or excluded from the dominant culture, into participating in their own subjugation.<sup>27</sup> This commonly dubbed 'internalised sexism' or 'internalised racism' suggests that the repetitive association of negative, or positive, characteristics with people from a particular class, race or gender, can be incorporated by the individual in the construction of his or her own identity.<sup>28</sup>

Churchill's contribution to confronting this process is, in my view, significant. She demonstrates how it is possible to bring to awareness those aspects of representation that are consistently and strategically de-emphasised by the dominant cultures in Western societies. She does this by employing an approach that juxtaposes gendered and racialised subjectivities and attributes in unconventional ways in her characters, effectively resulting in a kind of subversive humour employed within a socialist/feminist consciousness.<sup>29</sup> This strategy functions to alter the conventional understanding of the nature of social reality and ultimately, perhaps, contributes to altering the social reality itself. While a large claim, this may occur as it would for other writers,



through obliquely and directly influencing other writers and members of the artistic community in addition to her audiences.

The texts investigated here provide some important insights regarding ways in which the representational strategies developed to advantage a dominant sector of society might be appropriated to serve a marginalised group. The composition of the characteristics of minorities and majorities in this case is broadly framed within a ‘Western’ perception, but the strategies employed in Churchill’s writing might also be applicable to other inequitable systems.

To summarise, I have divided the body of the thesis into six chapters. Chapter One provides a statement of my tenets and reviews literature that has shaped my understanding of representation and Churchill’s endeavour. It provides a premise from which I discuss how, in these early texts, Churchill identifies and subverts representational strategies structurally employed to repress the rights of particular groups. Chapter Two creatively investigates the nature of Churchill’s representation while Chapter Three examines her uneasy position in relation to the Western theatrical canon and its implications for the interpretation of her work. Chapters Four through to Six provide detailed analyses of three plays immediately preceding the emerging recognition of her as a playwright worthy of note with the production of *Owners*. I end by suggesting a more widespread review of her earlier work. By highlighting representational strategies employed by Churchill, further understanding of effective strategies of debate within an increasingly controlled contemporary context might be gleaned.

### **Postscript**

Throughout the process of investigating these plays I had initially been amazed at the sometimes uncanny relevance of Churchill's early social commentary to contemporary world politics. I should not have been. The politics of power that interested her at the beginning of the nineteen seventies appear not to have changed significantly, although the attacks on the USA and their aftermath seem to have again brought them into sharp focus. The most striking element of recent world events, from the Western perspective, has been a return to simplistic binary representation in television, radio and newspaper reportage reminiscent of the nineteen fifties. At times during my candidature the thesis has threatened to become something of a quixotic response to what I perceived as a dangerous reactionary trend, on all sides, against a multifarious approach to understanding human relations which had gradually been developing over the latter part of the twentieth century. In the three plays examined here, Churchill poses questions relevant to this particular dilemma through her incisive interrogation of human potentiality within the limitations and ultimate consequences of reactionary politics. One possibility offered is a descent, or ascent, into 'madness,' and an associated severing of a viable future. Reviews of *A Number*, Churchill's most recent play at this time of writing, suggest that these are concerns that continue to occupy the playwright and offer opportunities for future examination of this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts of a review by Martin Shuttleworth of *The Listener* (6 December, 1962), and the Introduction to *New English Dramatists* by Irving Wardle conveniently found in Linda Fitzsimmons (13-14), suggest the play was well received.

<sup>2</sup> I felt that the formation of a very specific question could risk pre-empting a preconceived answer.

<sup>3</sup> It has occurred to me that the need for a 'feminism' section is indicative of the journey still ahead of us before all works in the library are able to integrate ideals of multiple voices and perspectives.

<sup>4</sup> Epistemological relativism is simply used here as defined in Runes, Dagobert. *Dictionary of Philosophy* "the theory that all human knowledge is relative to the knowing mind and to the conditions of the body and sense organs." (269)

<sup>5</sup> For example in *Drama Today: A Critical Guide to British Drama*, Michelene Wandor points to the influence of discussions and ways of working practiced by Monstrous Regiment, a feminist theatre company where she produced *Vinegar Tom* and with Joint Stock Theatre Group with whom *Cloud 9* was produced. Wandor writes: "Caryl Churchill had had a number of plays broadcast on radio, and after the production of *Owners* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972, became more and more influenced by the kinds of discussions and ways of working practised by Monstrous Regiment and Joint Stock. Her successful working relationship with director Max Stafford-Clark has given her a commanding position, with the kind of access to production at the Royal Court that enabled her to develop steadily as a stylist" (51). While these undoubtedly had an important impact on Churchill's work, writing for radio for over a decade prior to the emergence of these groups may have been even more important in enabling her to develop her own unique style. Frances Gray acknowledges the importance of the work in radio on Churchill's development in her entry on the playwright in the *International Dictionary of Theatre 2 – Playwrights* (194). In so doing, Gray retrieves Churchill's ownership of her own unique gifts which seem so often diminished in attributing the originality of her works to other, later sources.

<sup>6</sup> See Susan Bennett's discussion on *Cloud 9* in Rabillard (30).

<sup>7</sup> Throughout I have used a format suggested by the fifth edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (218).

<sup>8</sup> The first London production of *Owners* was in the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 6 December 1972. In *File on Churchill*, Linda Fitzsimmons provides excerpts from the initial reactions to the play by those who criticise it for what they perceive as flaws in form judged against the classical standard (19-23).

<sup>9</sup> That her stage plays have been more frequently reviewed and therefore recognised than her radio plays is evident from a brief perusal of Linda Fitzsimmons's *File on Churchill*.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Michelene Wandor's comments in endnote 5 (above). In an interview with Churchill, Jackie Kay comments that there has been a change in Churchill's practice from writing on her own before the seventies to subsequently writing a lot of her plays after a "workshop" period. Churchill responds, "The word workshop gets overused rather – it now gets applied to anything that people get together to do. My experience of workshops has been quite specific with the theatre group Joint Stock..." (41).

<sup>11</sup> An earlier version of Chapter Four appears in *Modern Drama*, Spring 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Memmi 85.

<sup>13</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Case Histories*.

<sup>14</sup> See author's note to the play in *Churchill: Shorts* 58.

<sup>15</sup> Although directors such as Max Stafford-Clark were not as 'established' when Churchill began working with them in Joint Stock Theatre Group, they are by now arguably part of their own directorial canon. This affects not only how their work might be perceived, but also the degree to which Churchill's contribution might be credited.

<sup>16</sup> Again, as Wandor suggests in endnote 5 (above), and as implied by Sheila Rabillard in her critique of Churchill's embrace by the theatrical establishment, which will be discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>17</sup> See Roberts, Philip. *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* for mention of Churchill's contribution to the economic viability of the Royal Court Theatre (182, 202), and of her support of Max Stafford-Clark (198, 199).

<sup>18</sup> See George Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*.

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<sup>19</sup> See reviews of Churchill's plays from the first half of the Nineteen seventies in Linda Fitzsimmons' *File on Churchill* for examples of negative reactions to her use of novel form and content.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Director Geoffrey Blakemore, in an interview with Margaret Throsby transmitted on 29 July 2002, commented that new work such as the plays by Pinter and John Osborne were initially very difficult for audiences and critics to accept, and could have easily been overlooked.

<sup>21</sup> In *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*, Janelle Reinelt observes that: "East Germany turned Brecht into an official classic and used him as an establishment example against the experimental work of new, young theater workers." She cites Klaus Volker, who wrote in 1987: "While Brecht has been reduced to pure entertainment in the West, his theatre has become a party organ in the East" (Reinelt, 5).

<sup>22</sup> For example, Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, when introducing an excerpt on Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, in their book *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* write, "Those adjectives applied to playwrights – 'polemical', 'gay', 'black', 'woman' – are part of a critic's arsenal, deployed as weapons of repression, which seek to belittle plays that are often about so much more than the issues, attitudes or events that have engendered them. And none more so than a play written by a black woman who died of cancer in 1965 at the age of thirty-four: Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965)" (193).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, John Elsom where he claims, "But the play fails for want of the most elementary dramatic disciplines: namely unity of action and unity of tone – those much despised classical standards" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 19).

<sup>24</sup> Janelle Reinelt in *After Brecht* links this experimentation to Brechtian dramaturgy (81-107), however I argue in Chapter One that this influence is just one of many possible.

<sup>25</sup> Examples are Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and Luigi Pirandello. Churchill does not fit seamlessly within this type of grouping, however, because she presents a female perspective offered with a level of confidence and authority that was rare at that time.

<sup>26</sup> Barthes distinguishes between authors and writers in essentially political terms. He argues that authors identify themselves with language and are subject to what he calls the 'sacralization' by the literary establishment that "permits society – or Society – to distance the work's content when it risks becoming an embarrassment, to convert it to pure spectacle... ." (qtd. in Sontag, 188), whereas for the writer "language is restored to the nature of an instrument of communication, a vehicle of 'thought'" (qtd. in Sontag, 188).

<sup>27</sup> The word hegemony is used here as encompassing the domination of one group over another, as the word has come to be commonly conceived. The precis to an article by Rares Piloiu titled "Hegemony: Methods and Hypotheses, A Historical-Comparative Perspective" found on [www.reconstruction.ws/022/hegemony.htm](http://www.reconstruction.ws/022/hegemony.htm) suggests that "Rather than critically working through our vocabulary, we instead employ these keywords in our studies of transitory interests, only to further obscure our vocabulary, and our intellectual heritage." p. 3. While this approach is appealing, it might also be conceived as resulting in the discouragement of the use of powerful terms by all but those who specialise in specific areas of scholarly endeavour. This is particularly relevant given that the term has enjoyed extensive use in feminist writings over recent years. It is, however, acknowledged that it was appropriated from one which originally incorporated the Marxist ideal of "domination of the social sphere by the working class, which was supposed to reach a 'hegemonic' position at the end of a given historical cycle" (3).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Dawkins theory of Memes, in *The Selfish Gene* as the social equivalent of genetic evolution lends some support to this contention.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the instance where Françoise destroys her party dress and goes to the toilet over it in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (Churchill: *Shorts*, 137)

## **Chapter One**

### **Exposing the Means of Production**

I introduced this thesis by saying that it was situated under the heading of representation as a political process. This choice of positioning is driven by my understanding of an important aspect of Churchill's project, and that is her particular curiosity and experimentation with the mechanics and strategies of representation in performance, and especially with the construction of language.<sup>1</sup> While experimentation and manipulation of language could be convincingly argued as intrinsic to all writing for performance, a review of Churchill's contribution from her early plays through to the most recent suggests an unwillingness to become settled with any particular style or use of language. It is this conspicuous variability of style that is perhaps most consistent in her approach and which makes her work difficult to definitively categorise. Like a latter-day manifestation of Proteus, or perhaps to invoke one of her own theatrical apparitions, the Skriker, Churchill is a shape shifter, sometimes prophetic, channelling at times through her plays a "death portent ancient and damaged,"<sup>2</sup> as she attempts to find new ways of entering our consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Her most impressive ability is that of avoiding solutions.

Offering solutions might traditionally have been seen as a sign of strength and willingness to commit to a particular position, and its avoidance as indicative of poor structure or idealistic naivety. It is unlikely, however, that Churchill is, or was naive, or that she has a problem with the capacity to structure her work to conform to the idea of a well-made narrative and its solution-focussed dénouement. Her stylistic choices are deliberate and her determination to

continue raising questions requires considerable commitment. More importantly for a playwright, definitively answering questions risks destroying embryonic possibilities of future production interpretations linked to changing social conditions.

Churchill's idealistic determination, expressed early in her career and still practised, to raise and then resist answering questions is, in my view, both a mark of expansive writing and an act of generosity and courage. It is suggestive of a willingness to relinquish authority, without relinquishing the prerogative, and perhaps the responsibility, to influence. As audience members or readers, we are seduced into thinking about the questions she has posed, and as active participants we each have a stake in the process. As a result, the experience of the play is encouraged to travel much further than the production or the first and subsequent readings.

I have gained the sense, through reading across the range of her works, that to some extent Churchill experiments with language for its own sake, playfully, or to use a more serious scientific analogy, as *pure* research. This is not to suggest that this approach is without direction, but rather that it appears to be openly directed at discovering what it is that drives language and other forms of human behaviour, and how these behaviours in turn influence our perception. While strikingly apparent in later works such as *The Skriker*, *Mad Forest*, *Blue Heart* (*Blue Kettle* and *Heart's Desire*) and *Far Away*, her enjoyment of language is evident in each of the earlier plays addressed in detail here. Its gaps, inconsistencies and ability to influence our construction of reality is displayed not

only in the ‘madness’ of characters such as Judge Schreber, and Françoise in *Hospital*, but perhaps more tellingly in the often comical inconsistencies of the putatively rational characters who surround them. The incisiveness that Churchill displays in getting to the heart of the language and the meaning generated by bodies, sound, structure and social context, is frequently harnessed in her plays as an interrogation of personal and political power.

To begin this chapter, in the interests of transparency and ‘setting the scene’ for the arguments that follow, I share my own position with regard to ideas of representation and why I consider them important in the broader political context of Churchill’s work. My understanding is framed by a belief in the potential application, within broader social settings, of strategies identified and developed by the playwright.

### **The Argument for Exposure**

In the present day, when ‘political spin’ is so prevalent in journalistic rhetoric that it has become a cliché, it could be argued that the mechanisms underlying the production of meaning need no further exposure in the general consciousness. However, while the public is given to understand that the language of politicians and media personalities can be, and probably is manipulated for professional and economic gain on a regular basis, this emphasis detracts attention away from a deeper concern. There is a tendency, that is not universal but sufficiently widespread to be of concern, to see a separation between the language of large ‘P’ Politics and its media portrayals, and the representations performed by the social institutions and mores that circumscribe

our personal lives.<sup>4</sup> These comprise legal, medical, scientific and educational institutions as well as the multiple hidden assumptions that determine social and personal relationships. The English language has structured these two spheres in binary opposition. Despite the catch cry of Second Wave Feminism that the personal is political, underlined by a belief that the personal and the public are more intricately intertwined than we are encouraged to presume, the illusion of separateness and its implications are remarkably resilient.<sup>5</sup>

The complex interaction between these areas has been of particular interest to Churchill in the plays discussed here,<sup>6</sup> and the premises upon which they operate simultaneously impact upon the themes that permeate her writing and upon her ambiguous reception as a successful female playwright. That formal social institutions and a society's dominant systems of belief affect the way in which meaning is construed, constructed and conveyed so that existing power relationships are maintained, and the ways in which this dynamic might impact on Churchill's plays, underpins my argument.

My argument rests on the premise that representation is seldom, if ever, motivationally neutral since its function is to construct reality in a way that is meaningful to people and, as such, it necessarily provides subjective information about how to interpret a human area of interest. In addition, in seeking to communicate, one seeks to influence. The inference that might be drawn is that the conscious decision to recognise representation as a powerful strategy in shaping experienced reality empowers one to choose the manner in which it is employed. Depending upon one's affiliations it is possible to choose to work



within existing linguistic and semiotic structures, to subvert them, or to strategically adopt a combination or alternation of both approaches. I suggest that Churchill tends towards the latter.

In performance, awareness of the malleability of representational modes is important in understanding the playwright's crafting of the play, its execution in production and, as discussed in the Introduction, its critical interpretation.

Without overstating the importance of a critical review, I believe that critics do influence people in their decision to attend productions, and the ensuing success or otherwise of a performance can be partly influenced by audience sizes and the ambience created in the live theatrical experience. Critics are therefore an important element in the writer's career, in promoting or discouraging the emerging playwright, and in the process of canon-making. More importantly perhaps, the review remains once the performance has disappeared and forms an important source of evidence for future analyses of the script. The writer, director and actors negotiate their approaches within this context and are influenced in their interpretations both by their own biases and to the extent that they are able to have their visions realised in the final production.

### **Gender Politics**

Whether or not such visions avoid an obvious engagement with the politics of gender, I adopt the viewpoint that social relationships operate against a background of gender identification, and that the periodic foregrounding of this factor is necessary to prevent the erosion of rights to an equitable participation in public life.<sup>7</sup> In Churchill's case, the politics of gender are visible because she is a

woman, one who began writing plays just prior to the advent of second wave feminism, and because she has since been regularly identified as a feminist playwright.<sup>8</sup> Not only did she begin writing when the idea of a female playwright was seen by some as an oxymoron, but the fact that she was poised to become a successful female playwright completed the conditions necessary for such a descriptor to be confidently employed.

Early reviews of her work were often patronising. *Owners* attracted somewhat reactionary comments from John Elsom, a theatre critic from *The Listener*, on its “fail[ure] for want of the most elementary dramatic disciplines: namely unity of action and unity of tone – those much despised classical standards” (Fitzsimmons 19) and from Michael Billington who wrote that “Miss Churchill’s weakness is that she throws everything into the kitchen sink” and that “(S)he also manipulates character to prove her social points: you don’t really believe in the property tycoon’s lust for her tenant, in her bookish butcher-husband who is a caricature of male chauvinist piggery or in the suicidal tendencies of her industrious legman” (Fitzsimmons 20). Some reviewers expressed more positive sentiments about *Owners* while still adhering to a conservative view of theatrical form. Robert Brustein, writing in *The Observer*, commented that while “its several plot strands are insufficiently integrated ... it brings a genuine human voice into a theatre which has lately been suffering not a little from stridency and polemicism.” He further remarked, “I am among those who will watch Miss Churchill’s future progress with a keen sense of anticipation” (Fitzsimmons 21).

Times have changed though, and most reviewers now describe Churchill in more glowing terms. Benedict Nightingale claims her as the most “original and skilful dramatist currently at work,” (“First Night Reviews” n. pag.) and Philip Fisher, when introducing his review of the same play, *A Number*, writes:

Caryl Churchill is always a surprising playwright. It is safe to say that her new plays will always be unpredictable as she enjoys experimenting with both form and ideas and never repeats herself. She also has an incredibly sharp mind and a willingness to explore uncomfortable subjects from new angles (n. pag.)

The historical confinement of female achievement to anomaly or token might now be read as a strategy that has been frequently employed to neutralise the troublesome implications of female competitors in an already competitive industry. This form of discrimination occurred even at a time when that industry was challenging other markers of political conservatism, a point underlined by Michelene Wandor’s *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* in invoking and subverting the idea of John Osborne’s ‘angry young man’ in *Look Back in Anger*.<sup>9</sup> In earlier historical periods, the strategy of implying that the exception proves the rule may have been sufficiently reassuring or discouraging, depending upon one’s position, to ensure that women did not begin to take an equal place in public life. However, in 1972, after a ten year professional writing career in radio when Churchill emerged with *Owners*, the prevailing climate of militant second wave feminism contextualised the reception of any public expression by women, especially that which placed women centre-stage. *Owners* challenged conventional gender roles and the institutions of marriage and ownership in what could be interpreted as a highly confrontational

manner given the prevailing conservative values and feminist debates of that time.<sup>10</sup> It was inevitable in this context that the play's subject matter would suggest a polarised affiliation and attract predictable reaction from the critical establishment, a response which suggested that they identified Churchill with feminism. Subsequent plays such as *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls* and *Fen* reinforced this position, at least in terms of popular perception.

However, the feminist mantle was, and is, something of a mixed blessing for women, especially for those attempting to forge their way in the public arena. In positive terms it provided a framework which supplied a degree of protection or support for them to speak out and to initiate challenges on some of the artistic male strongholds that resisted them as individuals. Unfortunately it simultaneously became an essentialist descriptor in itself that distorted and reduced the complexity of their grievances in a way that created a new set of problems. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Churchill has herself been reluctant to accept the descriptor unreservedly, not because she is disinterested in the rights of women, but because categorisation is predisposed to incidental and deliberate distortion.<sup>11</sup> The establishment of a range of groups arguing from different theoretical perspectives and the use of the plural form 'feminisms' has not entirely addressed the essentialist problem, and may even be argued to have diluted the political effectiveness of a unified front. How one represents oneself is complex where the 'rules' keep changing and the struggle to equalise status relationships is at stake.

Commenting in an interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, Churchill said that when she began writing plays in 1958, she didn't really know of any other women playwrights (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 90). Her credibility needed to be earned, not only as an individual playwright but, whether she liked it or not, as a member of an identifiable group which had not made its presence felt before in the area of play writing. Canonical female novelists had already emerged, but although women had proved that they could write novels, this did not mean that they would necessarily be deemed able to write plays which were designated action-based, with action promoted as a male domain.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, writing tended to be taken seriously only where the protagonist, and more importantly, subjectivity, were masculine, a condition that has underwritten a dominant assumption of male perspective in all areas of public life, even those which predominantly affect female experience.<sup>13</sup> The presumption of a legitimate subjectivity unevenly distributed along gender/sexuality and race/nationality/class lines appears to have limited the range of plays and writers that might be considered as potentially canonical. The ultimate consequence for those who fall outside the parameters of such subjectivity has been limited access to the economic, social and political advantages of such acceptance.

The manipulation of subjectivity is a critical point to consider in interpreting Churchill's play writing. Because the exclusive claim to the subject position is a key strategy through which representational power is maintained, it is a key point of contestation. Subjectivity is more than 'point of view,' a seemingly innocuous term traditionally used in writing, and one which implicitly

underestimates the value of the subject position as a marker of relative power. The shift made by Churchill from the neutral employment of point of view to the politically visible act of giving voice to those who had been previously ignored or silenced is central to an understanding of her effectiveness in challenging conventional binary and essentialist notions. The disruption of the idea that any two human characteristics are necessarily linked, by establishing and then breaking down such stereotypes, is often accomplished in her scripts by placing commonly objectified persons as characters in the subject position. Simplicity gives way to a more complex and layered vision of some of the more maligned members of society such as the stereotypical submissive, middle-aged, career housewife in *The Judge's Wife*, or the incontinent, cross-dressing, schizophrenic judge in *Schreber's Nervous Illness*. Clare Colebrook has pointed out that both stereotypes themselves, and challenges to them, are dependent upon the idea of a stable subjectivity (62). Attacks on stereotypes again rely on essentialist and binary assumptions, and reinforce them. Churchill seems to have been cognisant of this in the plays discussed here. One strategy that she adopts is the deliberate establishment of a stereotypical and apparently stable character, such as that of the Judge's wife, as a precursor to ultimately deconstructing and showing the projected identity to be performative rather than permanent.

Experimentation with form is another approach that Churchill has continued to employ over time. She points out that early in her career, her idea of what a play could be was derived from a male perspective.<sup>14</sup> The realistic form has been argued to encourage a perspective that reinforced the status quo because

realism transferred the established social structure, complete with its embedded structural inequities, to the performance space, as the unexamined background against which the performance took place.<sup>15</sup> As a result, various feminist theorists identified the structural confines of realism as an area to be challenged, and Churchill's writing style qualified her for being presented as one who had accepted this challenge.

Her professional beginnings in radio play writing were important in influencing her away from the strictest forms of theatrical realism and encouraged her unique approaches to writing performance scripts. Churchill's plays have become increasingly distanced from the realistic form as she has progressed in her writing career, and this has been accompanied by a gradual departure from political statement that can be overtly identified as feminist in content. Nevertheless, because the form deconstructs those embedded assumptions that reinforce a particular view of the world dominated by a conservative power base, these plays continue to work towards a shift in perspective that provides the space for disenfranchised groups, including women, to be heard and seen.

### **Negotiation of Identity**

I have mentioned above that Churchill has exhibited a degree of ambivalence towards wholeheartedly accepting the feminist mantle. Self-identification as a feminist, in a popularist sense of the word, is often deliberately construed as a confrontational act, and a closed, defensive response by those in positions of influence does not necessarily assist a feminist agenda. At the same time, other more militant women might denigrate the *avoidance* of such

identification. Self-labelling of any sort might be seen as a liability for a playwright for this reason, and also because it pre-empts a mental set in relation to viewing any new works in a particular and possibly restrictive way. An alternative may be to utilise feminism (as an essentialist category) as a temporary and permeable framework so that one is not constrained within overly rigid construct boundaries that prevent movement between a strategic participation in established institutions and overt feminist debate. There is necessarily a performative element to this calculated movement that might be elucidated by some of Judith Butler's observations with regard to gender identification per se.

Butler's essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" suggests the possibility of treating gender "as a corporeal style, an 'act' which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' itself carries the double meaning of 'dramatic' and 'non-referential'" (7). This way of thinking suggests a considerable degree of freedom in inventing a public, gendered identity for oneself. Gender is a term which has often been sabotaged by being used in popular parlance as interchangeable with one's 'sex,' perhaps partly in reaction to a distinction that has been developed to counter natural determinism. However, it is an important term because it designates a performative act, and an awareness of this is potentially empowering for those disadvantaged by essentialist categorisation legitimised by references to anatomical depiction.<sup>16</sup>

The performance of gender and the construction of human identity in broader terms are themes explored in each of the three plays I examine. As early



as 1966 Churchill exposed gender construction, the politics of sexual activity and preference, and the use of psychotherapy as an agent of social control in the radio play *Lovesick*. Gender performance continued as an area of interest for her in *Cloud Nine*, where a system of cross-casting brings the active creation of gender and other aspects of identity into focus both in terms of the play's content and its overall structure. In *Owners*, *Top Girls*, *The Skriker*, *A Mouthful of Birds* and to some extent in *Far Away*, she experiments with the variance of female identity from the benign and passive stereotype to one which acknowledges the potential for violence and the incorporation of active characteristics of self-invention. These characteristics confront a binary pole that we are conditioned to associate with male identity, except in specific instances which are presented as aberrant such as in magic and witchcraft, a fear explored in *Vinegar Tom* and obliquely in *The Skriker*.

The plays from *Lovesick* to *Far Away* span a period of time in excess of thirty years so it is reasonable to assume that gender identity has formed a central concern for Churchill. This concern preceded her association with theatre companies and feminist influences that have typically been seen as initiating her interest in this area.<sup>17</sup>

As Churchill interrogates gender issues in her writing, there is an inevitable linking of her own identity both with this and other areas explored. Her perceived identity informs the reception of her plays, and the ways in which she represents herself is a possible factor in determining how her plays are interpreted. Churchill has taken the opportunity to interact in the production of

her own identity and to express her views through a limited number of interviews over the years.<sup>18</sup> However, despite being careful to qualify her comments, in the interview process a significant degree of control over the direction that the interview will take and its ultimate contextualisation often remains with the interviewer and the publication in which its written version ultimately appears. Churchill's own written comment may be a less adulterated form of self-representation because she maintains control over the process both in terms of the original context and in choosing what to discuss, so that her views are potentially less subject to distortion.<sup>19</sup> Churchill has held relatively few interviews in recent years, and for this reason the same words tend to be quoted frequently. I posit in Chapter Two that Churchill's early comments tend to be conflated with those made more recently, illustrating the highly negotiable nature of communication and its appropriation in the public sphere.

A more accurate reflection of her underlying thinking might be gleaned indirectly from the way in which she has functioned over time within the artistic community. This includes her activities as a Council member for the Royal Court Theatre, in relation to those who produce and direct her plays, and in her author's notes or comments on the plays themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The tactical use of identity applies to writing where identification of the writer is considered to be sufficiently important for it to be entrenched in the convention of publication etiquette.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it is difficult for an author to 'disappear' if we conceive of language as coded in such a way that it is gendered and contains assumptions with regard to race and class that are either implicitly

supported or more visibly confronted.<sup>22</sup> Content and process of a (body of) work signal the author's affiliations, as the critic's perception of the author's identity and group affiliations simultaneously facilitates and stifles a particular interpretation of the work. The process inevitably works in terms of the binary, the acknowledged subject and its discarded Other.

### **Representation: Process Rather than Product**

The early identification of Churchill as feminist playwright suggests a particular orientation to interpreting her work, an orientation that she has rendered more problematic in recent years as her plays have become increasingly difficult to place in ideological categories. Her most recent play, *A Number*, while it engages an important contemporary debate, has no female protagonist, for example. Resisting categorisation could be seen as having enabled Churchill to actively participate in the process of her own representation through the ideological unpredictability of her work. The tension between the external impetus to delimit interpretation through categorisation and the desire to maintain fluidity in the ongoing negotiation of meaning is tactically important to a feminist agenda insofar as resisting categorisation disrupts the tyranny of binary conceptualisation.

Churchill maintains a fluidity of representation through deconstruction and reconstruction of conventional forms and conventions of language and corporeal representations that render visible its constructed character. This enables her to resist entrenchment of structural inequity in the language legitimised by closed definition because the approach permits an engagement in

the ongoing creation and unsettling of language and allows challenges to hegemonic definition. She effectively holds open the liminal space where possibilities and questions become more important than solutions.

Churchill's playful engagement with representational media is particularly marked in plays such as *The Skriker* and *Blue Kettle*, where her experiments with language challenge the presumption of a connection between the word and its object. In *Blue Kettle*, she begins to replace expected words with the words 'blue' and 'kettle' and this replacement continues and increases as the play progresses. The device is a clear challenge to the convention of language as a truthful form of representation as the link between the replacement and the common character who uses it is established. *The Skriker* uses a form of stream-of-consciousness writing which catches the fleeting associations thrown up by particular words before they slip back into the unconscious mind. Both of these plays, in different ways, 'call the name' of the process that language regularly uses and conceals.

This process brings to consciousness and application disparate associations that continuously shift interpretation, perception of reality, and ultimately the broader social reality itself. Notwithstanding, partly because the focus tends to be directed away from the process of representation to its object, entrenched strategies of representation are seldom questioned and are therefore highly resistant to change. The mere act of focussing on representation as process thus becomes subversive because it highlights the assumptions that underlie the system of signification itself.

Before discussing the implications of rendering representation visible through this process of 'meta-observation,' I will take a moment here, to summarise the way in which the concept of representation is used in this thesis. By describing representation as process rather than product, my intention is to move away from the idea of fixed definition, and towards that of representation as a phenomenon, which is demonstrated in terms of its specific expression. In this instance I am concentrating on the way in which representation is both demonstrated and provisionally defined through its application. I have used the concept of representation in this way because I would argue that its abstraction, and concomitant fixed definition, leads us back to the problematic idea of representation as a neutral and stable measure, against which a range of human interactions might be objectively evaluated.

My argument is that a unitary concept of representation itself is neither politically neutral nor stable, and to use it as such here, would be to move away from the practice of employing strategic or multiple essentialisms, which is the modus operandi of this thesis. Different applications of various representational constructs might be required for different purposes. Thus the idea of the binary, of the Other, of the impact of subjectivity, and of the place of the body, all of which are discussed in the course of this chapter, might be invoked separately, or in combination, as representational strategies employed to argue a particular perspective. The alternative, which is to remove it from its source and abstract it into a single definition, distorts an understanding of its political nature, and places it in a position that, I would argue, continues to support dominant representational

paradigms. In addition it artificially freezes, and thus alters, what is argued here as a highly mutable process. This understanding of the mercurial nature of representation may be helpful in conceptualising its ability to move in and out of visibility, which is discussed next.

### **The Argument for Exposure**

Representational effectiveness is most persuasive when its mechanisms remain hidden and unless the representational act becomes an object of observation in itself, there is customarily a deflection of focus from the means of discussion to its object, which detracts attention away from the representational strategies in use. I would further suggest that there is a tendency to focus on the mode of communication only at those points where it is rendered inert or breaks down so that the more visible the mechanisms of representation, the more inept the communication is perceived to be. In common usage, failure of language has typically been seen less as a problem of the representational system than of the speaker or writer's ability to communicate. This is particularly evident when those who have traditionally been silenced in public spheres attempt to communicate their own interests.<sup>23</sup>

However, in more recent years, in academic institutions at least, the multi-disciplinary approach to formal education, and to information sharing in general, has contributed to a growing awareness of those areas where language fails or needs to be revised. As paradigms from one discipline intersect with those from another, disjunctions become apparent, useful concepts and associated

terminologies are appropriated, others are discarded, and new meanings are generated. Nowhere is this more apparent perhaps, than in the trans-disciplinary approach taken by those who attempt to make sense of the points of intersection and departure between the theories relevant to the humanities, particularly those broadly positioned under philosophy, literature and performance. As a result of influences of feminist and postcolonialist theories in contemporary 'Western' universities, these areas have been re-evaluated and redefined in recent years in an attempt to reconcile the inevitable inconsistencies and to emphasise the possibilities of common ground. While an emphasis on common ground is a commendable objective from the point of view of improving communication and co-operation, there may also be some benefit in focussing on the inconsistencies themselves as a potentially rich source of information with regard to representational process.

In recent years there have been arguments made for actively retaining disjunction and inconsistency, or for exposing the 'seams' as a way of recognising the provisional nature of representation, and as a form of protest, subversion and political contest.<sup>24</sup> A reassessment of the excesses or unincorporated elements of representation, which might also be portrayed as its defining negative spaces, provides the potential to rediscover a valuable resource, particularly for disenfranchised groups, and is informed by the work of Julia Kristeva.<sup>25</sup> Kristeva has pointed out the ways in which the excesses or residue of a sign system are both politically informative and a place from which political

action might be launched. I will return to a discussion of Kristeva's point later in this chapter.

Theatre is an excellent medium for exploring the riches of excess and disjunction, especially at the fringes where costs are low and risks can be taken, but the disadvantage is that relatively few people are exposed to this type of theatre. Problems arise when such performances attempt to move into the broader economic success attracted by more conventional performances. Efforts to confront implicit assumptions that a seamless performance is an indicator of excellence often draw negative comment and intimations from reviewers who may (at times) read these disjunctions as indicators of skill deficit, flawed argument or inept narrative and theatrical form. This has been particularly so in performance where skilled playwrights have not yet established a legitimising reputation amongst mainstream newspaper reviewers, and where they may be seen as threatening in terms of their ability to challenge the status quo.<sup>26</sup> For playwrights not yet established, therefore, from a practical point of view, to take a disjunctive approach beyond communities educated in theatrical experimentation (such as student bodies) has historically been to risk a form of representational suicide, particularly in the context of the newspaper review.

Despite the risks, the arts are in a unique position to experiment with existing representational systems because they have tacit permission, and a certain expectation, to do so. As a result, there have been ongoing incremental contributions to perceptual changes in mainstream audiences through cautious borrowings by mainstream film and television from more innovative film,



theatre/live performance, music and dance.<sup>27</sup> However, many of the methods employed to confront the common view may inadvertently reinforce structural inequities (for example political theatre which employs the uncritical adoption of realism and its implicit social assumptions). Alternatively, the performance may be so novel as to resist general comprehension, and thus either be rejected both by producers and audiences as nonsensical, or categorised as an endeavour separate from the serious business of public life. Grosz makes this point in discussing the writings of Irigaray when she suggests that a distinction is made between textual practices such as poetry and ‘serious’ discourse:

Textual practices like poetry, which aim to explore and play with the undecidability of language, are socially tolerable when they remain sharply divided from other modes of (true, scientific, serious) discourse. When poetry is separated from either prose on the one hand, and non-fiction or theory on the other, the self-image of phallogentric knowledge is preserved (*Sexual Subversions* 130).

The corollary of this is that where the separation between poetry and prose, or the imaginative script and political comment is blurred, what Grosz refers to as “the self-image of phallogentric knowledge” is threatened. Perhaps this explains the critics’ emotional responses to many of the plays written by Churchill in the seventies. In a number of these texts, the use of poetic language is embodied, contextually embedded, and employed as political comment to lampoon scientific and social paradigms which have been used to justify political and personal repression and atrocities.<sup>28</sup>

In *Schreber’s Nervous Illness*, the title character’s poetic rhetoric confronts and, at times directly refutes an understanding of his thought processes by his doctor. The juxtaposition of Schreber’s poetic language against his

psychiatrist's scientific language demonstrates the reductionism necessary to enable science to contain and make sense of the apparently abnormal. The alternative, in Irigaray's terms, may constitute a threat to "the self-image of phallogocentric knowledge." The play raises doubts, not only about the efficacy of accepted medical understanding of this historical period, but also about the role of the medical/psychiatric profession in maintaining power relationships across time.

### **Attribution of Churchill's Influences**

In performance, more than in other contexts perhaps, the way in which reality is created and manipulated through representation can be observed. This is particularly apparent since the advent of Brecht's influence on performance, and it is pertinent to note that Churchill has been described as a playwright who has absorbed Brechtian techniques into her work.<sup>29</sup> However, as for any playwright, it is a difficult task to separate Brecht's effect on Churchill from that of others (such as Beckett, whose plays she listened to on the radio)<sup>30</sup> or from the Shakespearean and Greek theatrical traditions. This is particularly relevant as Churchill has described Brecht's influence more as a significant part of the background in which she and other post-Brechtian playwrights write, rather than a style which she consciously adopts in her plays.<sup>31</sup>

Brecht himself is typically seen as singular in his innovation; however his technique emerged from a long tradition. In *Theatre as a Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, Aston and Savona describe Brecht's stage

practice itself as part of “an anti-illusionist aesthetic posited upon the foregrounding of the means of representation in order to maintain a critical distance between the spectator and performance” (92). This, they remind us, “reflects to a very considerable extent a return to the convention-based modes of presentation of the Greek, medieval and Elizabethan theatres” (92). Brecht’s practice is part of a larger aesthetic which Aston and Savona point out also incorporates that of Meyerhold in Russia and Piscator in Germany. All of this is important when contextualising the claimed degree of influence on Churchill by Brecht, and also in considering possible reasons for the differences in the way these two writers are represented.

Nevertheless, the anti-naturalistic aesthetic has been increasingly adopted by Churchill throughout her writing career and is important in terms of the ability it affords to reveal the mechanisms of representation to an audience. By being reminded to observe technique whilst incorporating content, the spectator may be encouraged to shift perception from the idea that representation is a reflection of reality, to the understanding that social reality, at least, is the product of representations that are manipulated. One way that this is done is through the body.

### **Representation of the Body**

When representation is invoked within the context of performance studies, the immanent materiality of the body, the intonation of the voice, spatial relationships and the environmental context, interact with language to create a

complex play of influences in which the production of meaning takes place. In the chapters that follow I have incorporated comment on these various elements at points where they are most important to an understanding of Churchill's technique. A preliminary discussion regarding the significance of the body to representational theory is useful in comprehending the extent of Churchill's project and in addressing the assumptions that invest her identification as a female playwright. The implications of embodiment as a tangible rationale for the imposition of power are relevant when applied to those who either do not have control of the means of representation, or who are frustrated in their attempts to gain access to its public face in an equitable way.

Elaine Scarry argues that the exercise of power on the body becomes more apparent in times when there is a crisis of belief within the State, and the same might be observed in relation to the individual (14). The materialisation of power exercised on the body can be extreme, as detailed in her book, or it can be sufficiently subtle to avoid conscious identification. Scarry has discussed how the body becomes the site upon which representation in the guise of state power is manifested and legitimised, in particular by the association between the interrogation process and physical torture. While its perpetrators depict torture as the means by which information is extracted, she submits that in the majority of torture cases the information is already known.<sup>32</sup> The interrogation process is thus the rationale used for inflicting pain on the body in order to make power concrete.<sup>33</sup> The process is one that applies to domestic violence in the same way

that it does to the torture room, a link that Churchill explores in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, and this is discussed further in Chapter Four.

The implications of Scarry's observation of the essential relationship between the expression of power, its imposition on the body and the escalation of activity in times of a crisis of belief, are profound. They suggest a tangible way of identifying the time, place and means through which such a crisis might be confronted and transformed within the performative context. The body thus becomes an indicator and the potential agent by which destructive power is identified and countered through alternative representations. In *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, a torture victim, Patient B, is present to bear silent witness to his treatment, and his broken body, which is juxtaposed with the dialogue of the other patients, confronts the meaning conferred on the torture process by the state. He wears the results of the torture on his body, in his actions, in his vain attempt to take his own life and through his language which has been reduced to a repeated cry of "no." Scarry points out that the torture process reduces our worlds back to our bodies, whereas speech expands them beyond the borders of our bodies.<sup>34</sup> The reduction of speech discourages an adequate retelling of the horrors of pain for which language has developed no adequate vocabulary in any case. However, in performance the body can emotively express its otherwise unintelligible cries, and the physical presence of the body itself, which is the site of contention, is provided as evidence of its own history under a level of scrutiny only achievable in a performative context.

War, torture and domestic violence are extreme manifestations of the imposition of power on the body and it is the embodiment of relative power and vulnerability that grounds their abstraction and renders their existence indisputable. However, in times and places of relative peace, the practice of using the body to substantiate the idea ranges from laws and mores which dictate minimum standards of dress connected to ideas of social status, gender and religion, to restrictions on breastfeeding in public and the embodied expression of modesty.

### **Investing the Body with Meaning**

In *Unmaking Mimesis*, Elin Diamond suggests that “(Churchill’s) texts have become increasingly attentive to the ideological nature of the seeable” (85).

Diamond argues that,

Churchill does not sketch out performance scenarios; she works within egocentric, logocentric representation but she stretches and reconfigures its conventions. In what I consider to be Churchill’s feminist project – her version of semiotic realism – there is no ecstatic ‘writing the body’ but rather a foregrounding of the apparatus that makes the writing impossible (85).

Diamond’s statement draws attention to the difficulties presented by the body as a representational apparatus, and Churchill’s response to these difficulties. The body is of itself present and real, and can be invested with meaning and used to invest meaning with the import of authenticity. It is the most visible form through and upon which meaning can be drawn, but it is already heavily interpreted, and its various and extreme manifestations have been progressively incorporated into dominant representational paradigms and coded.

In Churchill's play writing, the body alternately shifts emphasis between that of an instrument through which ideas are filtered and transformed, to the embodiment of the idea itself. In the plays discussed here, I outline a number of instances where Churchill manipulates the fact of the body to confront conventional perceptions.

This is not a simple manipulation because the ways in which the body are read is complex, and it arrives in the performance space with a plethora of socially contextualised interpretations that are often difficult to dislodge. The presence of nakedness or clothing in performance is complicated, for example, and confounded by gender identification and the male gaze.<sup>35</sup> Women and men are seen differently; old women and men are viewed differently from those who are young; people with overt disabilities are viewed differently than those who are considered to have the ideal body; and race is a significant factor. These views are filtered through the layers of signification applied to them through media presentations, religious ideology and political manipulation and posturing. To provide just one simplified example, Western women have been increasingly represented as sexually overt, powerful and promiscuous over the second half of the twentieth century, and this has multiple readings, social responses and political uses that may consolidate and/or confront existing stereotypes. In recent years, the veiled Islamic woman, once a romantic and mysterious sexualised image in the Western imagination, has been produced in Western media as the image of female oppression. However, with regard to both secular Western women and 'fundamentalist' Islamic women, previous conceptions inform

subsequent readings although these same signs are, of course, likely to be read quite differently in the various communities that relate them to their own belief systems and agendas. This particular example is relevant to a changing interpretation of *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* because the contrasts that are drawn between the French colonisers and the resisting Algerian nationals have altered resonance(s) in the contemporary world climate. This point will be discussed further in the chapter dealing with this play.

An examination of these complex issues is useful in understanding the development of Churchill's technique and in highlighting the areas of corporeal representation that appear to be most deeply entrenched. A number of postcolonial, post-modern, and feminist theorists of various persuasions have debated ways in which representation of the body is problematic.<sup>36</sup> The implications of gendered bodies and bodies differentiated by race, cultural practice, age and social class have been argued on a number of levels, from those that interrogate psychotherapeutic approaches espoused by Freud and Lacan, to the phenomenology of embodiment. Other perspectives occupy a broader socio-political plane.

From the ensuing debate, a degree of awareness has emerged with regard to the extent to which embodiment, the meaning that is attached to it, and the power that is exercised through it, pervades our experience. I will discuss a small number of the points emerging from this debate as they pertain to Churchill and her early work in the remainder of this chapter and later in the context of the specific plays interrogated in this thesis.



## Negative Spaces

Churchill typically exposes those aspects of personal and socio-political situations that are normally concealed. One way in which she does this is through shifting the focus of attention from the centre to the periphery. She demonstrates how the aspects of embodiment that are most revealing in terms of maintaining the dominant paradigm are to be found in what I will call the negative spaces.

In the visual arts, the negative space constitutes the area that enables the subject to emerge from the background, and a focus on the negative space promotes an altered perspective in viewing the positive space. The surrounding social environment (the negative space) contextualises and defines the subject's parameters, a process that becomes apparent in the consistent use of an assumed, but usually unstated, binary comparison as a way of discriminating between oneself and the rest of the world. Thus concepts of normality are negatively defined by abnormality, concepts of legitimacy are defined by the illegitimate, and concepts of masculinity by femininity. As mentioned earlier, Grosz has argued that the binary works, not by a hierarchical concept of first and second, but by the one, the subject, allowing "no independent, autonomous other" (*Volatile Bodies* 211). Using this analogy, the negative pole of the binary might alternatively be conceived as the surrounding negative space that defines the self-proclaimed centre. But at the same time this surrounding 'space' (the psychiatric patient, the 'madman', that reassures us that we are normal, for example) is reduced to the presence and immutability of an inanimate object, 'fixed' by the

subject's gaze.<sup>37</sup> By way of contrast, the viewing subject that produces the 'madman,' or the woman, or person of colour in order to define (him)self, is protean and subjectively invisible, always placing the focus of attention elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Churchill interferes with this perception by placing the madman/woman/person of colour as mutable viewing subject who refuses to be frozen as an object and turns the gaze back onto the vulnerable centre, destabilising it in the process.<sup>39</sup> Another part of this manoeuvre is Churchill's inclusion of the abject body<sup>40</sup> and her use of unincorporated information that is residual to the sign system, in Julia Kristeva's terms,<sup>41</sup> as it relates to both subject and object, resulting in a potential breaking down of the borders that separate them. Thus the 'ramblings' of a schizophrenic, or of the Skriker in the play of the same name, or the use of the Romanian language for an English audience in *Mad Forest*, have as much legitimacy as 'sensible' language in the conventional understanding.

Kristeva's theory of semanalysis suggests a way in which information might be viewed anew and ultimately this has implications for how different bodies are grouped and viewed. Grosz describes this concept as follows:

Semanalysis is the analysis of the *remainder* or residue left over in sign systems or unincorporated by them, resistant to the unifications they impose. It is the production, not of meaning, but of textual waste ... (*Sexual Subversions* 61).

Textual waste, information or data unincorporated by sign systems, is unintelligible to the broader society because it spoils the conception of a unified and single legitimate view of social reality. The examination of what has been discarded is the nature of Kristeva's contribution to an understanding of

Churchill's endeavour, particularly with regard to the three plays discussed here. In each of these plays the abject body is grounded in materiality and exposed in its animalistic vulnerability, and information which has been traditionally excised from the well-made 'realistic' play is retained and celebrated.

Each of the plays examined here demonstrates Churchill's early understanding of the abject and the distortion of information necessary for society to contain mental illness, or the views of women framing them as excessive, idiosyncratic, organic, and irrelevant to the normal workings of society. She reinstates the voices of the schizophrenics in two of these plays as they name what has hitherto been repressed by their societies, and demonstrates how the expression of such unincorporated information becomes the definition of mental illness.

The bodies of those whose subject position is unincorporated by the society become both a concrete example and a metaphor for the excess that is visible only insofar as it defines the centre. For women, this excess is manifested in terms of its perceived exception to the normative male body in relation to specified external markers considered to be of importance, such as genitalia, body size and reproductive function. Likewise, in Western societies, there is the differentiation between white males and men and women of colour, as well as any number of sub-groups unincorporated by virtue of externally defined characteristics (such as old age) considered to be outside of normative experience.

Churchill consistently reminds us of those who are typically seen as excess to the central functioning of the systems addressed by the plays, in terms of the shadowy figures that inhabit the borders of her texts. There are the fleeting, silent images of a working-class mother crying in the kitchen in *The Judge's Wife*; an Algerian bomber's wife never seen yet periodically invoked by her husband in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*; and references to Schreber's absent wife in *Schreber's Nervous Illness*. In subsequent work (such as *Vinegar Tom*, *Fen*, *Top Girls*, *The Skriker*, and *Far Away*) she often uses the character of a young girl or woman to contest conventional representation of meaning and to expose what might be conceived as the remainder. She instates the young female figure as one with integrity, wisdom and as a 'whistle blower,' and this choice confronts mainstream society's conditioned or learned assumptions about a natural order which was particularly visible at the time of writing. A young girl/woman might be considered the most extreme opposite to the patriarchal power of the colonial society, and it is the claiming of this 'Otherness' that I will now explore further.

To invoke the descriptor 'Other' is to name one part of the residue, because for the relationship to be effective, the binaric comparison remains residual, or an unquestioned assumption. The notion of individuals who are promoted as exceptions to the norm is nevertheless a structural necessity of a representational system that uses difference to define itself. Frantz Fanon's post-colonial writing of the late nineteen fifties appropriated the existentialist conception of the 'Other' to demonstrate structural inequities implicit in

interpretations of race, (*Black Skin*) as de Beauvoir did in relation to gender (*Second Sex* 109). By naming this construct, discussion has been made intelligible where its previous exclusion from the representational system had enabled dialogue to be resisted. The development of concepts and the words that evoke them leads to new incorporations in the representational system. These incorporations have the potential to enable a more equitable system to emerge, a system that facilitates the ability to be heard.

The notion of the 'Other' has again been expressed through Irigaray's insights into Lacan's mirror phase, and this is relevant to an understanding of Churchill's endeavour to enable women to speak from their own subject positions. Irigaray observed that for women, the reflection they see is not their own but themselves as the male's idea of them reflected. Because a woman is allowed representation only within the parameters of his conception of her in relation to him, and not in her own right, her representation is distorted. In *The Judge's Wife*, the play's title suggests this process and pre-empted the response to the title character. The few reviews and discussions of *The Judge's Wife* have tended to concentrate on the Judge's character rather than that of his wife and demonstrate the difficulty in raising the issue of this relationship without erasing its subject. Because the judge's wife is characterised only insofar as she is his wife, the ultimate monologue following his death, in which she attempts to reinvent him, and thus herself, according to her own subject position, fails. This point is important in terms of the problem of female subjectivity that Churchill addresses in her earlier writing, and, in relation to this particular play, will be

discussed further in Chapter Six. The issue is also raised in the other two plays I examine and continues as an ongoing problem that Churchill battles in later plays in which heterosexual politics are explored, such as is the case in *Cloud Nine* and, as Elaine Aston has pointed out, in *Turkish Delight* (Caryl Churchill 18).

The problematic of the unifications that the sign system attempts to impose, which Grosz mentions (above) in describing Kristeva's endeavour, assists an understanding of one of Irigaray's major insights into the representation of female desire. Irigaray attempts to create a new metaphor for lived experience and its expression to enable women to speak from their own subject position. This metaphor moved away from the unitary phallus and its imposition of a single meaning to that of a female experience of sexuality: the "two lips" where experience and desire were multiple and diffuse. Grosz stresses that Irigaray is not invoking a version of anatomical essentialism here, but instead is providing a powerful metaphor, "an image to contest and counter dominant phallic representations" (*Sexual Subversions* 116). The idea of legitimately speaking from multiple positions allows a more open system of representation flexible enough to incorporate a range of alternative interests. As such, it is potentially more inclusive and tolerant than the unitary system traditionally adopted. This concept is helpful in the context of this discussion, because it suggests a possible theoretical framework by which ideas that challenge the system of representation that excludes them can be made intelligible and incorporated as legitimate insights. It applies to theatrical forms that do not proceed in a chronological order, as is emblematic of Churchill's writing, or which present multiple parallel

stories as occurs in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*.<sup>42</sup> As for Kristeva's acknowledgement of the sign-system's residue, the understanding of diffuse and multiple sites of pleasure and understanding allows a divergence from a singular idea of structure, character, identity and truth as legitimate expressions of human experience.

### **The Significance of the Unrepresentable Body**

The grounding of power in the actuality of the body has already been discussed in relation to Scarry's work. However, the authenticity of the viewed body is an illusion because our understanding of what it signifies necessarily filters our perception of the body. Moira Gatens has argued that the human body is in fact *unrepresentable* because bodies are diverse in their morphology and so representations always involve a process of selection (thus, reminding us of Kristeva's work, a process of discarding whatever doesn't fit).<sup>43</sup> Gatens' reasons that anatomical depictions have traditionally been of the male body and that philosophical accounts reflect anatomic representations – woman is woman insofar as she is not-man. If we consider otherness as the negative space that defines the legitimate subject, an argument that has been made in relation to race, what Ruth Frankenberg calls the “unmarked marker” of whiteness (1), we could turn this around to say that man is man insofar as he is not woman. In reality it is not an either/or situation. The subject who holds the power to represent slips between the two positions, invoking an idealised view of masculinity to provide a positive view of man in the world of ideas and, in the social context, on an

individual level, by demonstrating his distance from characteristics designated feminine.

Accepting Gatens' view that the body is unrepresentable, allusions to nature as a strategy to justify social practice also become more transparent. I will turn presently to the basic concerns felt by many feminist writers with viewing gendered bodies as predetermined products of nature and the implications of this for Churchill's work. Before doing so, however, I would contextualise the discussion by mentioning the debate relating to the problematic of essentialist conception, as it is externally imposed and as it is internally co-opted.

### **Gendered Bodies as 'Natural' Categories**

In the Introduction I made mention of the problems of essentialism and possible reasons for adopting a strategic essentialist stance. The 'Sisterhood' approach to Women's Liberation is one such example. In more recent years this approach has been criticised as suggesting a white middle-class view of oppression which does not take into account the specific concerns of women of colour, working-class women, or women in various cultures. The idea of what constitutes feminism appears to be underpinned by assumptions regarding appropriate functioning within or outside existing social systems, and although these have become more inclusive over time, they continue to inform interpretations regarding the relative worth of specific women who reach positions of some power. Margaret Thatcher is seldom called a feminist, for example, because of her extreme conservative rhetoric and political actions when



in power, although she certainly set a precedent for women in Western politics. Churchill had been claimed a feminist writer mid-career; however, Sheila Rabillard has more recently called into question her claim to a subversive position given her acceptance by the theatrical establishment (9). This will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

The assumption of a singular perspective with regard to a legitimate form of feminism creates exclusions of the type that most need to be examined. To illustrate this point, in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Conboy, et al, cite Sojourner Truth's impromptu speech at the Akron women's suffrage convention in 1851 (3). Truth uses her own body to demonstrate the fallacy of the nature argument regarding female frailty and points out the discrepancies between the way she is treated to that of white women, which Conboy et al interpret as "prefigur[ing] the very issues of bodily construction that pervade late twentieth-century feminism" (3). They point out that:

Partly in an attempt to achieve political consensus, feminists have often assumed a universal female body, an assumption that has usually left some women silenced, inhabiting the borderlands. Clearly any definition of the category woman necessarily produces exclusions and leads to divisions among women. (3)

Subsequently they remind us that all women are not equally oppressed and that Truth's speech cautions that any membership in a "cult of true womanhood, reserved for the few, is procured through the exclusion of the many (6).

The conception of male and female bodies as natural categories linked to social function is thousands of years old, legitimised in monotheistic and medical

texts. Emily Martin, in an essay exploring historical and contemporary metaphors used by medical science in relation to women's bodies, observes that the certainty of a direct relationship between the social and natural order was shaken in the seventeenth century by "The new liberal claims of Hobbes and Locke" (18), and the French revolution, however, that "after 1800 the social and biological sciences were brought to the rescue of male superiority" (18).

The nature claim locks the gendered body (and other socially defined categories of bodies) into a fixed representational system that is implicitly portrayed as immutable and sacred. Cate Poynton points out the pragmatic effects of viewing the gendered body as a product of nature in order to maintain the status quo in relation to male power and privilege (3).

At the simplest level this is done by denial of injustice on the basis of 'essential' characteristics of men and women because these are seen as fundamental, natural and self-evident. Denial features prominently and requires confrontation in an uneven battle where one party has the advantage of dominating and financially controlling the public means of representation through all avenues. In addition to the electronic and paper media, this includes the legal, medical, psychiatric, political, religious and artistic establishments. With its accompaniments of ridicule, diminishment and force, and supported through all of these institutions, denial is an effective strategy through which equality is avoided. Poynton describes this as follows:

Much of the response to this comprehensive naming of social injustice with respect to women has been to deny that any injustice is involved, to deny that the issue of gender is in any way problematic: men are men, women are women, and that's that. The basis of such denial of the

problematic nature of gender is usually that male and female are seen as fundamental, natural, self-evident categories (for some they have the even greater force of being regarded as God-given categories), whose naturalness and obviousness depends on seeing the social category of gender as deriving automatically and exclusively from the biological category of sex. (3)

The results of denial and the consequent entrenchment of the nature argument have been highly effective as a means of control. Women are represented as closer to nature than men, and therefore as in need of domination. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* exploits this idea. The association of man as Self/Subject and woman as Other/Object, with the Self imagined as transcendent mind, and the Other trapped in immanence, bodily function and appearance, was observed by de Beauvoir and is discussed by Conboy in the Introduction to *Writing on the Body*:

Men have created a concept of woman's "nature," but in doing so, they project their own ambivalent relationship to external "Nature" onto the female body.

Just as man's civilizing impetus transforms wildlife, land, and vegetation into territories to tame and control, so too does it render woman a form of nature to apprehend, dominate, and defeat. (Qtd. in Conboy 2)

This linking of women with nature is ironically invoked by Churchill in *Schreber's Nervous Illness*. In this play she explores aspects of gender mutability through Judge Schreber's transformation into a woman as he becomes increasingly disempowered, closer to nature, and less 'civilised' in the context of the mental institution in which he is incarcerated.

Just as male and female bodies have not traditionally been viewed as equally subject to natural forces, in Western societies those of white Europeans

have been distinguished, typically in dichotomous terms, from all other 'races' combined, and this alone alerts us to the political nature of such a distinction. Less effectively represented in the wider community is a contemporary scientific perspective, particularly since understanding of genetics has burgeoned, which demonstrates the construct of race to have no intelligible biological basis. Similarly, the sharp distinction between the sexes is based on the ability to ignore the continuum that constitutes sexuality of the human body, to conceive of those born with indeterminate sexual characteristics, or those who seek gender reassignment, for example, as deformed or aberrant. Whether difference is viewed as a valid part of the human continuum or residual to its needs is thus socially determined.

Nevertheless, medical science continues to be periodically invoked to provide a legitimising authority. By assuming the invisible subject position that focuses attention outward towards the object of observation, it has historically distracted attention away from its own socially biased descriptions. Emily Martin demonstrates how, even now, medical science invokes metaphors of menstruation and menopause that are characterised by negative representations which can influence understanding of how the body functions and the medical treatment that it attracts. She also points out that a lack of logical consistency to metaphors which make associations between the functioning of the body and economic productivity, has not been seen as problematic by such scientific bodies because they align with binaric assumptions about gender difference. Logical inconsistency, it seems, is a necessary part of the representational system.

Similarly, although women have been represented as closer to nature than men, paradoxically in colonial settings white women have often been presented as a civilising force for the indigenous population and colonial men who might otherwise inter-marry and be corrupted by the Indigenous population. These are relevant to an understanding of Churchill's undertaking in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* and later in *Cloud Nine*.

### **Self Regulation and (Self)Surveillance**

Internalised surveillance was discussed by Foucault in relation to Bentham's panopticon and its affects on prisoners, and this idea has since been appropriated to illustrate the constant self-surveillance exercised by women which impacts on their ability to act in the public sphere.<sup>44</sup> Sandra Bartky relates this self-surveillance to increasing control over the mind, a frightening prospect in an environment where 'image' is increasingly emphasised as necessary for success:

It is also the reflection in woman's consciousness of the fact that *she* is under surveillance in ways that *he* is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please or to excite. There has been induced in many women, then, in Foucault's words, "a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." Since the standards of female bodily acceptability are impossible fully to realize, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature, a woman may live much of her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency. Hence a tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind. (149)

The role of the playwright in loosening this social straightjacket is to present alternatives for female action and representation, a quest that Churchill

has undertaken throughout the bulk of her writing career. These alternatives for action are socially unacceptable, and sometimes anarchistic. They may include resorting to 'madness' as occurs in the case of Françoise, the young Frenchwoman in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*; to ruthless preoccupation with the desire to own as occurs in *Owners*, or to infanticide in *The Skriker*. Solutions are not offered. However, by portraying women in the full range of both negative and positive experience, an attack is made on the underlying binaric assumptions that differentiate male and female capacity for action.

Again, in *Writing on the Body*, Conboy, et al, outline the practical implications of women's suggested closeness to nature as one possible reason for the moulding of women's 'natures' to exclude such options for violence, ambition and the ability to speak out from their own subject positions:

To make the transition from nature to culture woman must deny the potentially "dangerous" appetites and continuously shape what Foucault call a non-threatening "docile" body. Women are encouraged to internalize and embody all the values of domesticity. (3)

The ultimate objective is to keep women busy and distracted so that they don't interfere in the power:

...To guarantee our man-made place in culture, we are still exhorted to "become" women through increasingly complex regulatory practices of ornamentation such as weight control, skin and hair care, attention to fashion, and, above all, resistance to ageing. But we continue to ask, "What is a woman?" (3)

Churchill explores the effects of outward appearance self-surveillance and surveillance of other women in the work discussed here. In both *The Judge's Wife*

and *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* she addresses the differences between women and the readings given to their outward appearances. In *The Judge's Wife* she distinguishes between the title character who is always well-groomed and 'bland,' her liberal-minded sister whose appearance is unkempt, and the outward trappings of poverty imposed on the body of the working class mother of young Warren, the revolutionary/criminal whom the Judge sentences. In *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* she draws the distinction through the dialogue of a French Colonial woman who discusses the garments worn by Algerian women who she accuses of either concealing weapons under their traditional garments, or trying to deceive by passing for ordinary French women.

### **The Body and Representation**

Throughout her career Churchill has continued to explore ways in which conventional representation of the body can be challenged. More recently, in *A Number*, she has delved into the subject of human cloning which on one level might be described as a detailed interrogation of the nature/nurture debate. She has played with the idea of changing bodies in plays such as *The Skriker*, *Schreber's Nervous Illness* and *Cloud Nine*. She has explored the relationship between power and the ageing body as a subtext in *The Judge's Wife*, and more overtly in *Blue Kettle*. Most famously, she has investigated the mutability of gendered bodies through cross-casting in *Cloud Nine*, and less famously through Schreber's never fully-completed transformation into a woman in *Schreber's Nervous Illness*. She has implicated the female body as meat in *Owners*, and as a

specimen in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, and presented the racialised body in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* and *Cloud Nine*.

Representation as a trope provides a way to understand the construction of social reality and its relationship to Churchill's political endeavour. As such it contains a broad and somewhat undifferentiated field of ideas to be selectively raided in order to provide alternatives to a worldview already skewed in favour of an elite minority. Churchill's agenda, if it can be identified at all in the plays discussed here, is conscious of social inequity and the will to power that excludes the rights of the less powerful to benefit those who are already advantaged. She pursues this agenda through a skilful manipulation of the representational tools at her disposal. Taking a broader view, the way in which she negotiates her way within the socio-political context of the artistic community will either assist or sabotage this enterprise and it is this which will be explored in the following two chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> This is demonstrated by the range of processes that she uses, even tackling a translation of Seneca's *Thyestes* from the Latin to English apparently unfazed by her limited experience in such a project. Churchill states in her "Introduction" to the play "I'd studied Latin at school and with the Loeb (translation) and a dictionary began to pick my way through a few bits that interested me" (*Plays: 3*, 295).

<sup>2</sup> From stage directions to *The Skriker* in *Plays: 3* (243).

According to John Elsom in *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (214) "*The Skriker* (1994) derives its title from a kind of northern goblin."

<sup>4</sup> This, I believe, is the case notwithstanding the rise of 'reality' television shows such as "Big Brother".

<sup>5</sup> Michelene Wandor, referring to the plays in which both men and women appear in the 1980s suggests an increasing marginalisation of women, in which "Above all, the dominant message is that the political is not the personal" (*Look Back* 153).

<sup>6</sup> Again Wandor suggests *Top Girls* as play in which personal and public lives might be seen as intertwined precisely because the play involves an all-female cast "The Story So Far" (*Look Back* 151-154).



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<sup>7</sup> For example, Anne Summers expresses concern for the erosion of women's rights in her recent book, *The End of Equality: Work, Babies and Women's Choices in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia*.

<sup>8</sup> Ruby Cohn in her chapter "Reading and teaching Maria Irene Fornes and Caryl Churchill" from *Anglo-American Interplay in Recent Drama* makes the point that both writers have been "claimed and disclaimed by different feminists. The claimants couple them as women playwrights and the disclaimants recognize that these dramatists have rejected the feminist label".

<sup>9</sup> In commenting on Osborne's play and its already "stock character" very early in her career (1960) Churchill is asking, "All right. Where do we go from here?" (qtd. in Roberts, 78).

<sup>10</sup> Churchill's reasons for making the dominant character a woman were stated in terms of highlighting the distinction between western aggressiveness and eastern passivity: "At that point the landlord became a woman because that made the distinction better than if I'd had an active man and a passive woman" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 21).

<sup>11</sup> See Churchill's comment in reference to this in an interview with Fitzsimmons in 1988. "I've constantly said that I am both a socialist and a feminist. Constantly said it" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 89).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Cate Poynton. Poynton lists binary oppositions associated with gender in English contrasting ideologies of male activ(ity) and action with those of female passivity and speech (18). See also excerpt from Churchill's interview with Linda Fitzsimmons (90). Churchill states, "Women are traditionally expected not to initiate action, and plays are action in a way that words are not. So perhaps that's one reason why comparatively few women have written plays" (Fitzsimmons (90). Janelle Reinelt points out that historicizing gender relations enables a recovery of an alternative narrative of women as active subjects determining the course of human events, because it challenges gendered modes of being (83).

<sup>13</sup> See Emily Martin's essay on "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies Menstruation and Menopause" in Conboy (15-42).

<sup>14</sup> Again Churchill, in an interview with Geraldine Cousin, states: "I probably made men main characters without thinking of it consciously at all, but probably just because main characters tended to be men" (5). See also her comments in Fitzsimmons (90).

<sup>15</sup> For example, in *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Peta Tait has discussed the usefulness of theatre in its power to affect social reality, because "it can condense and restage ideas about the impact of social and political forces on individual lives in ways which educate an audience to think and act differently. Almost like a rehearsal for social change, theatre authenticates the possibility of bringing about change in social reality" (30). She cites Elin Diamond who argues against the use of theatrical realism for the purposes of challenging prevailing ideas about women, because of its reproduction of a social 'reality' in which women are disadvantaged by those very social structures. "Therefore the use of non-realistic forms in feminist theatre derives from, and reinforces, recent feminist theoretical understandings of the implications of form and depictions of social reality" (31).

<sup>16</sup> Moira Gatens disputes this however. She argues that the distinction between 'gender' and 'sex' tracks dualistic conceptions of mind and body, and uses instead the concept of "a sexed 'body image', which takes account of the materiality of the body [which] is introduced in order to think beyond 'degendering' or 'regendering' proposals for social change" (xii).

<sup>17</sup> Michelene Wandor suggests that Churchill was spurred on by more militant younger women at the beginning of the 1970s (*Drama Today* 50-51).

<sup>18</sup> Fitzsimmons provides a list of interviews up to the date of publication of *File on Churchill* (92).

<sup>19</sup> Churchill acknowledges this control over her ability as a writer to have her concepts reproduced, unlike some of her artistic colleagues. Her approach to her work is very often highly collaborative at the stage of production and on many occasions when writing. She describes this collaboration in relation to the production of *The Lives of the Great Poisoners*, and further suggests that: "The writer has an unfair advantage because words can easily be reproduced in a book" (*Plays* 3 viii).

<sup>20</sup> For example, Churchill resigned from the Council for ethical reasons following the Court's decision to take on sponsors due to financial losses (Roberts 208-209).

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<sup>21</sup> This naming, not incidentally, generally provides information with regard to the writer's gender and ethnic origins, hence one motivation for women adopting a male pen name, such as was the case with George Eliot or Henry Handel Richardson.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of an author's 'disappearance' was discussed by Roland Barthes in *Image Music Text* (109-114).

<sup>23</sup> Gatens suggests that women have traditionally been silenced in the public arena by use of vitriolic terms that equate them with animals (24-25).

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Robinson discusses this in *Between Presence and Absence: The Pleasures and Disciplines of a Journey through Performance* (10-11).

<sup>25</sup> Examples from the scientific world also suggest that by understanding the effects of the discriminating mind set knowledge which works through discarding material it doesn't understand or find immediately useful can be extended in less obviously political areas as well. For example, in genetics 'junk' DNA has been found to be important and demonstrates the ways in which a skewed perception of discriminating between what is immediately apparent as useful and discarding the rest can limit the pursuit of knowledge at understanding at all levels. Recent work by neuroscientist R. Douglas Fields and graduate student Beth Stevens demonstrate that glial cells which make up 90 percent of the brain, and "long considered to do little more than provide a healthy environment for neurons" communicate among themselves and appear to regulate the formation of synapses and through this learning and the storing of long-term memories (6).

<sup>26</sup> See reviewer comments on Churchill's early experimental work in Fitzsimmons for examples of this especially in relation to *Owners* (19-21), *Perfect Happiness* (23-24), *Objections to Sex and Violence* (24-26), and *Moving Clocks Go Slow* (26-27).

<sup>27</sup> There is, for example, increasing representation of African American protagonists in all genres of American film and television, and while this can be attributed to an effective history of social activism by representative groups in the US, in the second half of the twentieth century, plays by writers such as Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson were an important part of this history.

<sup>28</sup> In *Far Away* for example, the use of animals as allies or enemies on various sides of the war taps into the absurdity and arbitrary nature of the so-called moral high ground in war. In *This is a Chair*, certain passages are reminiscent of an e. e. cummings style of poetic playfulness with the language that acts on an emotional level before it is processed intellectually.

<sup>29</sup> See Reinelt's analysis in *After Brecht* where Churchill's work is tagged "Socialist Feminism and Brechtian Dramaturgy," for example (81).

<sup>30</sup> In an interview with Geraldine Cousin in *New Theatre Quarterly*, Churchill says, "Television was around at the end of my childhood, but I don't remember it ever being important at all. Radio was, and it was nice because you could do other things at the same time, like drawing. I went on listening to the radio, Beckett plays for example. Until, I suppose, my early twenties radio was really quite important to me" (4).

<sup>31</sup> See Churchill's comments related to the influence of Brecht in Reinelt (86).

<sup>32</sup> She writes: "What masquerades as the motive for torture is a fiction ... The idea that the need for information is the motive for the physical cruelty arises from the tone and form of the questioning rather than from its content: these questions, no matter how contemptuously irrelevant their content, are announced, delivered *as though* they motivated the cruelty, *as if* the answers to them were crucial" (28).

<sup>33</sup> "Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying, but torture also mimes (objectifies in the external environment) this language - destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (20).

<sup>34</sup> Scarry observes that: "...the voice becomes a final source of self-extension; so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body, occupies a space much larger than the body ... Their ceaseless talk articulates their unspoken understanding that only in silence do the edges of the self become coterminous with the edges of the body it will die with" (33).

<sup>35</sup> As suggested by Sue-Ellen Case in *Feminism and Theatre* (120).

<sup>36</sup> These concerns have been long term and persistent, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to undertake a fully comprehensive survey within the scope of this thesis. To provide just a flavour of the extent of discussion, those who have engaged in the debate include William

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Shakespeare (c.1600), Sojourner Truth (1851), Ralph Ellison (1952), Simone de Beauvoir (1953), Frantz Fanon (1967), Luce Irigaray (1977), Kate Poynton (1985), Elaine Scarry (1985), bell hooks (1992), Susan Bordo (1993), Elizabeth Grosz (1994), Moira Gatens (1996), and Peta Tait (2000).

<sup>37</sup> As Frantz Fanon found he was 'fixed' in the white gaze on his first trip to Paris as described in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>38</sup> As discussed in relation to the concept of whiteness by Frankenburg in *Displacing Whiteness*.

<sup>39</sup> In *Feminism and Theatre* Sue-Ellen Case has discussed the importance of returning the gaze in performance. Churchill does it in the context of the narrative.

<sup>40</sup> As in *Schreber's Nervous Illness* where Judge Schreber empties his bowels into a bucket as he plays the piano. The link between classical music, the ultimate symbol of the exulted idea and the unacknowledged materiality of the body is shocking because it undermines the fundamental premises upon which the concept of western civilisation is built.

<sup>41</sup> Grosz provides a relatively detailed exploration of Kristeva's notion of abjection in which she refers to the abject as "the underside of a stable subjective identity, an abyss at the borders of the subject's existence, a hole into which the subject may fall when its identity is put into question, for example in psychosis. The subject needs a certain level of mastery over the abject to keep it in check, at a distance, to distinguish itself from its repressed or unspeakable condition" (*Sexual Subversions* 72).

<sup>42</sup> The problem may be, however, where such incorporation suggests an ultimate reunification. In *Imaginary Bodies* Gatens takes some issue with Irigaray's sexual imaginary because she interprets it as falling into the same trap as Marxist Theory in providing a single utopian vision as the alternative to the current model. Instead, Gatens posits a system of "linked social imaginaries [that] is constantly being transformed and refigured"(ix).

<sup>43</sup> *Imaginary Bodies* vii-viii.

<sup>44</sup> Discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

## Chapter Two

### Fictional Representations of a Rare Animal – The ‘Successful’ Female Playwright

*For years and years I thought of myself as a writer before I thought of myself as a woman, but recently I've found that I would say I was a feminist writer as opposed to other people saying I was. I've found that as I go out more into the world and get into situations which involve women what I feel is quite strongly a feminist position and that inevitably comes into what I write.<sup>1</sup>*

Chapter Two experiments with an idea, and that is the cumulative production of a playwright's identity. It suggests a possible tension between the playwright's attempts at self-representation and her representation by others. The specific process of negotiating representation of self is suggested in Churchill's quotation above, where she claims a feminist position on her own terms and in her own time, rather than one which is externally imposed. This quotation has gone through a number of incarnations. I took it from Elaine Aston's book *Caryl Churchill*, and Aston had taken it from an interview conducted by Geraldine Cousin, which was published in *New Theatre Quarterly* (4).<sup>2</sup> The process by which identity is produced might be measured by the shifts that occur as statements such as Churchill's are heard. In this case it is produced for the first time in the live setting of the unedited interview, itself an already controlled situation, then in the journal article, again in Aston's text on Churchill and now in this thesis.

The nexus between self-representation and its various interpretations is inherent in an economy in which we all have our vested interests, and where the public figure becomes the currency of exchange. Churchill has given fewer interviews as her career has progressed, perhaps preferring to let her work 'speak for itself' and it is from the productions of her scripts that much of her identity has

been gleaned in recent years. Nevertheless, the reference to her early statements, as shown here, and to those of her colleagues and others who have studied her work, combine to create an ever-changing image of the writer.<sup>3</sup> The question that is most interesting to me is not whether these productions of identity are an accurate reflection of a true persona, or even if such a thing is possible, but the purpose that they serve and their overall effect on Churchill's perceived worth as a playwright. What do they tell us about the people who create them, about the nature of the political and artistic enterprise, and about the strategies that it employs?

A prime concern of theatrical reviews, and perhaps of scholarly works, is to influence, and the direction of this influence, to a greater or lesser extent, is subjectively determined by the reviewer according to his or her personal and professional values, along with the standing of their publication. The conflation of a playwright's identity with the play is a potentially useful strategy employed to indicate or construct a writer's credibility and worth, and the form that this takes has implications on a broader level for various interest groups. To be able to claim a person of recognised ability and canonical success for one's own group has ramifications which extend beyond the individual playwright. However, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, this relationship is more complex and less predictable than might be expected. In more general terms it is useful to retain in visibility the highly subjective context in which a play is received, understood, and periodically reinterpreted if the complexity of the playwright's act of communication is to be understood.

I contextualise the chapters that follow with a fictional discussion group, constructed from a collage of quotations relating to Churchill and her oeuvre, as

well as statements made by Churchill herself, structured by my own arrangement and inserted comments and questions. In adopting this approach I am aware that there is a related strategy employed by increasing numbers of television comedy shows which lampoon (in the main) political figures, by contextualising their 'sound bites' with the comedian's own deliberately distorting commentary.<sup>4</sup> In the creation that follows, there is distortion without any (intentional) humour. This is the point of the exercise. The 'trick' of seamless rearrangement of material to create a particular impression avoids the humour that draws attention to the sleight of hand.

While the quotations that follow are drawn from published interviews with Churchill, and from various reviewers and scholars over an extended period of time, they are not presented in a chronological sequence. The aim is to provide a subjective impression of the cumulative effect of statements about Churchill and her produced works. Such impressions are not necessarily formed in a linear fashion, but are constructed from the odd materials of interview excerpts, reviews of productions that may be largely out of the playwright's hands, and varying interpretations regarding the impact of external influences.

Representation is an active process because it always occurs in the present and this is significant given that, as Roland Barthes observed in relation to photographic representation, its object is always in the past.<sup>5</sup> Its object precedes it and is 'pinned down'<sup>6</sup> so that its essential elements can be extracted. In the process it is reconstituted. Representations such as plays and reviews themselves become the objects of subsequent representations, and thus of subsequent reconstitution. In addition, the less stable the object of observation, the greater the gap between being able to test the validity of the representation against its object.

As a result, the more reliance we tend to place on the representation itself. Such is the written review to performance, and this is particularly marked in the case of 'live' performance which occurs in a moment of time never to be exactly repeated, even though the review suggests that it can. The point is again relevant in terms of an identity, which in Colebrook's terms, as discussed in the Introduction, is continually instituted through representation, which dislocates it from a prior presence. The playwright's externally perceived identity is continually reconstituted by others, and this provides the means by which it can be selectively interpreted according to the interests of particular groups.

The insertion of my own voice in the presentation that follows emphasizes the necessarily subjective nature of this study and my own complicity in Churchill's ongoing production. This imagining frames Chapter Three which deals with Churchill's status with regard to the canon, suggesting a context in which both Churchill and her contribution to play writing might have been perceived and represented over the course of her career.

### **Manufacture of a Female Playwright**

*I begin by focussing on Churchill's early writing period in radio, with her need to work between the responsibilities of motherhood, and with the discussion of whether her radio plays should be represented as an apprenticeship period or as a specific artistic phase in their own right. The idea of apprenticeship begs the question as to the legitimacy or seriousness of the work produced by Churchill over the first twelve years. The insertion of discussion regarding the pragmatics of fitting the work around her family responsibilities further reinforces a binary which places the perceived worth of the radio work in some question. In binary terms, the idea of being a serious mother as well as a serious playwright, especially in the nineteen sixties, could be expected to confuse traditional expectations.*

**Iris Lavell:** Who wants to begin?

**Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found:** Churchill, Caryl. 1938 to ...

**Iris Lavell:** She's been writing steadily since 1960. *A Number* opened at the Royal Court in September 2002 ...

**Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found:** British dramatist, who started to write radio plays in the early 1960s about 'bourgeois middle-class life and the destruction of it.'

**Jackie Kay:** But the reason she is regarded by many as one of Britain's finest living playwrights ...(41).

**Encarta:** ...one of the most important contemporary female playwrights in Britain ...

**Jackie Kay:** ... does not simply stem from her eclectic subject matter (41).

**Elaine Aston:** Caryl Churchill has been performing her radical, revisionist view of society for over thirty years in professional theatre and is now acknowledged as one of the foremost, innovative writers for the contemporary stage (*Caryl Churchill* 3).

**Jackie Kay:** She is as bold stylistically as she is thematically. Her plays have the ability to make you think as much as laugh (41).



**Amelia Kritzer:** Radio served as an important training ground for her (*Plays* 15).

**Iris Lavell:** I think that's an important point. Perhaps someone from radio could say something.

**Simon Trussler:** She had a long apprenticeship in radio playwriting during the 'sixties'... (Fitzsimmons 6).

**Iris Lavell:** Apprenticeship? So does this imply that her radio plays were simply a training exercise?

**Geraldine Cousin:** I think that it is important to avoid the suggestion that the radio and early stage plays were simply stepping stones towards the later, more mature, works (*Churchill* 17).

**Frances Gray:** I don't consider radio as a lesser category ...

**Iris Lavell:** Perhaps we could start with Frances Gray, someone with a particular interest in radio.

**Frances Gray:** Caryl Churchill's professional career as a playwright started in her 20s with radio plays (*Dictionary* 194).

**Encarta:** While a homemaker, she wrote a series of radio plays for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the 1960s.

**Eva Figs:** She is a writer with an obvious talent for the medium (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 16).

**Amelia Kritzer:** May I say something?

**Iris Lavell:** Of course.

**Amelia Kritzer:** The length of Churchill's ten-year apprentice phase in radio was undoubtedly affected by the fact that its demands proved compatible with caring for her three children born to Churchill and her husband David Harter between 1963 and 1969 (*Plays* 16).

**Caryl Churchill:** I went on writing short plays for radio partly because I liked radio but also because I began having children ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 85).

**Iris Lavell:** And you were writing *about* children.

**Geraldine Cousin:** Alongside the forces in the radio plays which work towards change, there are further elements which recur in Churchill's later writing. Children are an important aspect ... (*Churchill* 124).

**Iris Lavell:** Children representing the future, or a lost future ... like Angie in *Top Girls*.

**Elaine Aston:** She has described how her preliminary ideas for *Owners* were interrupted by a miscarriage ... (*Caryl Churchill* 24).

**Caryl Churchill:** I wrote it in three days. I'd just come out of hospital after a particularly gruesome late miscarriage. Still quite groggy and my arm ached because they'd given me an injection that didn't work. Into it went for the first time a lot of things that had been building up in me over a long time, political attitudes as well as personal ones (qtd. in Aston, *Caryl Churchill* 24).

**Geraldine Cousin:** The tortuous mother-child relationships appear elsewhere, however, and begin to coalesce into a sense of reciprocal betrayal, guilt, and loss (*Churchill, The Playwright* 10).

**Iris Lavell:** This is a potentially rich area of inquiry. But let's return first to the discussion on her time in radio ...

**Frances Gray:** Yes, these facts are important for an understanding of the unique strengths of her stage output ... (*Dictionary* 194).

**Caryl Churchill:** As a child I was of a generation who grew up with radio...and it was nice because you could do other things at the same time, like drawing. I

went on listening to radio, Beckett plays for example ... (“Common Imagination” 4).

**Frances Gray:** Radio – far easier to break into than the theatre for a young woman in an era so much less egalitarian than it looked ... (*Dictionary* 194).

**Caryl Churchill:** ...Until, I suppose, my early twenties radio was really quite important to me. So it was partly that, and partly having had one radio play done (“Common Imagination” 4).

**Iris Lavell:** Was it easier for women to have radio plays accepted for production than stage plays?

**Frances Gray:** Radio demanded different virtues (*Dictionary* 194).

**Caryl Churchill:** Radio is good because it makes you ... precise (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 85).

**Frances Gray:** It works in short scenes; it has the intimacy of a story-teller’s fireside; it can make ambitious leaps in time and space as long as the mind’s eye of the listener is sufficiently engaged to follow them; and it can play upon that same mind’s eye to create scenes of great imagined visual beauty ... (*Dictionary* 194).

**Caryl Churchill:** ... Then there's the freedom – you can do almost anything in a radio play, whereas you're tied to possibilities of the set and the stage in the theatre (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 85).

**Frances Gray:** The radiophonic virtues may be summed up in a single word: concentration. Churchill has the almost unique gift of concentrating layers of meaning in a simple, economic and striking image (*Dictionary* 194).

### **A Shift in Emphasis**

*Churchill's first professional stage play Owners was produced in 1972. There is a tendency to represent this as the start of Churchill's serious writing career, so that influences in the mid-seventies take on a greater significance in popular representation than the development not only of skills but also a feminist consciousness in the previous decade. Stylistically, there is a shift of representational emphasis on possible influences from radio writing to Brecht, while the social context of the Women's Liberation Movement informs the scattered reactionary critical responses to Owners.*

**Amelia Kritzer:** While writing for radio, Churchill looked beyond it to the challenges of theatre (*Plays* 16).

**Geraldine Cousin:** The first stage play that was done professionally was *Owners*, at the Royal Court in 1972? (Churchill, "Common Imagination" 4).

**Caryl Churchill:** Yes.

**Geraldine Cousin:** Was it a big jump after writing for radio? (Churchill, "Common Imagination" 4).

**Caryl Churchill:** Well, I'd written other stage plays – certainly two, which hadn't been performed while I'd been writing for radio (Churchill, "Common Imagination" 4).

**Iris Lavell:** *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* was one. And although written as a radio play, *Schreber* was also performed as a stage play. But weren't there more? *The Finnsburg Fragment*, *Lee*, *The Marriage of Toby's Idea of Angela and Toby's Idea of Angela's Idea of Toby*, *Comic Strips from the Chinese* ...

**Linda Fitzsimmons:** These plays ... all written between 1961 and 1972, remain unperformed, and are not available for performance (10).

**Iris Lavell:** Why is that?

**Amelia Kritzer:** During the 1960s, she wrote several plays for the stage, but had none produced. One submission, in fact, elicited a rejection later referred to by Churchill as 'one of those encouraging, friendly letters' from the Royal Court, the theatre with which she was eventually to become most closely associated (*Plays* 16).

**Iris Lavell:** Then with *Owners*, her first full-length stage production there were mixed reviews.

**B. A. Young:** I felt only that there were moments when the play sprawled unnecessarily. Miss Churchill writes, as most of today's writers do, in a mosaic of short scenes, rather than longer ones where development can be seen taking place (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 21).

**Caryl Churchill:** I desperately wanted to see if I could make things happen ... Next time I don't think I'd need to have so many scenes because now I've got the confidence to realize that I can make things happen (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 22).

**Michael Billington:** Miss Churchill's weakness ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 20)

**Robert Brustein:** Miss Churchill possesses creative gifts that are almost singular among her contemporaries (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 21):

**Michael Billington:** Miss Churchill's weakness is that ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 20)

**Robert Brustein:** Allow me to finish ... a poetic imagination, an idiosyncratic vision of reality, and a sense of variousness in her characters ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 21)

**Michael Billington:** Miss Churchill's weakness is that she throws everything in bar the kitchen sink: euthanasia, body-snatching, the Protestant work ethic, the use of sex for social revenge (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 20).

**Robert Brustein:** ...even when she clearly dislikes them (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 21).

**Michael Billington:** She also manipulates character to prove her social points ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 20).

**Robert Brustein:** I am among those who will watch Miss Churchill's future progress with a keen sense of anticipation (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 21).

### **Woman, Mother, Wife and Playwright**

*The Writer is represented as the Woman Writer on the crest of Second Wave Feminism. Again she is seen in the heterosexist economy – in relationship to husband and children, as if this is a necessary part of her definition as a (female) playwright.*

**Iris Lavell:** The first production of *Owners* was at the end of 1972. It seems to have taken quite a long time for you to begin writing for the stage on a regular basis. Is that because women tended not to be taken seriously as writers for the stage?

**Caryl Churchill:** I began writing plays in 1958, and I don't think I knew of any other women playwrights then. Luckily I didn't think about it ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 90).

**Iris Lavell:** Why were there so few female playwrights? Why *are* there so few recognised female playwrights?



**Caryl Churchill:** Women are traditionally expected not to initiate action, and plays are action, in a way that words are not ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 90).

**Michael Billington:** I am ... sorry that Ms Churchill's play opts not for a detailed exploration of one area but for a frivolously superficial jog around the whole complex and fascinating territory of sexual relations (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 42).

**Caryl Churchill:** ... So perhaps that's one reason why comparatively few women have written plays (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 90).

**Iris Lavell:** And, for some, husbands and children ...

**Caryl Churchill:** I began having children ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 85).

**Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found:** Her husband was a barrister who came to work for a law centre, and a hatred of social injustice characterized Churchill's first major stage play, *Owners*, produced at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in 1972.

**Iris Lavell:** I must admit I do find it interesting that your husband's occupation rates a mention in the Concise Oxford Companion to Theatre.

**Amelia Kritzer:** Finally, she rewrote two of her most successful radio plays for stage performance (*Plays* 16).

**Michael Coveney:** Miss Churchill's transplanted radio sketch is a woefully anaemic and inconclusive foray into Women's Lib territory that fumbles inconsequentially with 'the role of a woman in a male-dominated society' ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 23).

**Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found:** While not at first a politically committed writer, she came to write for left-wing and feminist companies, such as Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment ...

**Michael Coveney:** ... but fails to deal with any issue in a fundamental, let alone theatrical, manner (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 23).

**Caryl Churchill:** During the seventies there was a context for thinking of myself as a woman writer. Other people were thinking of me in that way and I was becoming more interested in women's issues. I became more aware of myself then as a woman writer ("Common Imagination" 5).

**Sheila Fox:** The impossibility of the 'women's position' – guilty for being both too strong and too weak – is underlined with passion, frustration and, thankfully, ambiguity (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 45).

**Caryl Churchill:** I remember before I wrote *Top Girls* thinking about women barristers – how they were in a minority and had to imitate men to succeed – and I was thinking of them as different from me (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 90).

**Francis King:** Max Stafford-Clark has directed an inchoate play, seemingly written on the principle ‘I don’t know what I think until I get it on to paper’ (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 58).

**Caryl Churchill:** And then I thought, ‘Wait a minute, my whole concept of what plays might be is from plays written by men’ (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 90).

**Geraldine Cousin:** You don’t see a woman writer’s job as being different in our society from a man writer’s? (Churchill, “Common Imagination” 5).

**Caryl Churchill:** I do sometimes. I think I feel quite differently at different times about writing. I’m only just beginning to realize that it is alright to be inconsistent. There are times when I’m aware of things ... and at other times they’re not on my mind (“Common Imagination” 5).

## **On Cloud Nine**

*Cloud Nine, Churchill’s first big popular success is largely seen as a triumph of Max Stafford-Clark and the Joint Stock Theatre Group. Her relationship with her director is emphasised in a way that appears more marked than that of writers such as Pinter, Stoppard, or Hare... The implications for her liminal position in relation to the theatrical canon are informative.*

**Iris Lavell:** While we’re talking about gender roles, we should say something about *Cloud Nine* which Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright describe as Churchill’s first big popular success.

**Susan Bennett:** The production of the play, as Churchill herself describes, was a “watershed” (“Growing Up” 29-30).

**B. A. Young:** *Cloud Nine* ...

**Michlene Wandor:** Its title comes from the way one of the older women who came to talk to the company described orgasm (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 46).

**B.A. Young:** ... is full of good lines and effective little situations; but at the end of it I felt we had seen nothing more than an enjoyable exhibition of the splendid acting of the Joint Stock Theatre Group (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 42).

**Iris Lavell:** So, does this mean you would erase the playwright's contribution, more or less?

**James M. Harding:** Read through the lens of the stage directions, Churchill's play does not deconstruct heterosexual presumptions but, rather, enforces a repressive mode of expression, a passing under duress (260).

**Irving Wardle:** Beyond the laughs, the real dramatic interest lies in the double approach to character as a fixed or fluid thing. The triumph of the play and of Max Stafford-Clark's production, is that this point is inscribed in the casting (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 43).

**James M. Harding:** While the cross-casting of Betty may underscore the social construction of gender, it also refigures Ellen's and Betty's transgressive lesbian moment as a conventional reaffirmation of heterosexuality (261).

**Awam Ampka:** Churchill's deliberate replay of cross-gender and cross-racial casting imposes a sexualized prism through which the referent identity is depicted. By using discordant bodies to represent supposedly immutable identities, the playwright destabilizes absolutist notions of "natural" identities (150).

**Caryl Churchill:** One of the things I wanted very much to do in *Cloud 9* ... was to write a play about sexual politics that would not just be a woman's thing. I felt there were quite a few women's groups doing plays from that point of view. And gay groups ... There was nothing that also involved straight men (qtd. in Amkpa 148).

**Frank Rich:** Working with just the right, delicate balance of rowdiness and sensitivity – as well as with an unusually good cast – Mr. Tune often succeeds in giving a seriously overlong evening the illusion of flight (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 44).

**Iris Lavell:** There seems to have been an associative link created by critics between Churchill's success with plays such as *Cloud 9*, *Top Girls*, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, and *Serious Money*, and the cast and direction. Or its failure in Mr Harding's terms, and Churchill's writing. Maybe I'm reading too much into it ...

**Charles McNulty:** Director Max Stafford-Clark's production, however, goes a long way toward enhancing the playwright's minimalist precision and wit (130).

**Gerard Raymond:** Over the past 20 years, Stafford-Clark has staged six world premiers of the English playwright's work (146).

**Michlene Wandor:** Her successful working relationship with director Max Stafford-Clark has given her a commanding position, with the kind of access to production at the Royal Court that enabled her to develop steadily as a stylist (*Drama Today* 51).

**Iris Lavell:** And what about *Serious Money*? I mean the play of course.

**Caryl Churchill:** Max Stafford-Clark is very good at having ideas – it was his idea to do a play about the City (Kay 41).

**Iris Lavell:** *Blue Heart* was another one that he directed ...

**Matt Wolf:** So it fell to the playwright's longtime director, Max Stafford-Clark, and a game company of actors, two of whom are in their 80s, to make lucid what is encoded on the page ("True Blue" 51).

**Caryl Churchill:** I work very well with Max Stafford-Clark. He is very good at suggesting cuts and revisions, and I ... have a say about the way in which I think the text should be presented on stage (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 88).

**Iris Lavell:** Max Stafford-Clark seems to have been an influential figure in British theatre from the seventies onwards ...

**Philip Roberts:** ... to date the longest-serving Artistic Director of the Company – by which I mean the Royal Court Theatre.<sup>7</sup>

**Iris Lavell:** In 1985 Tony Dunn interviewed him for *New Theatre Quarterly*. He spoke about the Royal Court and playwrights, who happen to be women.

**Max Stafford-Clark:** Now, Although the Court has always had a great social awareness of the work it has done, it's recently developed a more overt political awareness ... (139).

**Tony Dunn:** Would the Court's recent championing of women's writing be part of the same policy? (Stafford-Clark 139).

**Max Stafford-Clark:** I'm not conscious of any positive discrimination in favour of women's work. Simply, the most interesting work at the moment – in the personal as opposed to the epic area – is by women. Feminism has, without doubt, been the most influential and powerful political movement of my time at the Court. It's been an enormous influence on plays that both women and men have written in recent years. But obviously for women it has led to great personal liberation and discovery, and we've reflected that in productions of work by Caryl Churchill, Andrea Dunbar, Sarah Daniels, Louise Page, Lis Bond, and Timberlake Wertenbaker. These are extraordinary and talented writers who happen to be women (139).

**Tony Dunn:** Is it simply then a case of the Court, as always, encouraging new writers? (Stafford-Clark 139).

**Max Stafford-Clark:** Our first job is obviously to encourage and develop new writing, and all the women writers we've mentioned have graduated (or shortly will) from productions in the Theatre Upstairs to the main house (139).

**Iris Lavell:** Could we backtrack for a moment? When you say "talented writers who *happen* to be women," what do you mean?

**Simon Trussler:** Caryl Churchill is now generally recognized as among the leading dramatists of her generation. She also happens to be a woman – and some of the earlier reviews in this volume predictably marginalize her concerns as 'women's lib' issues (Fitzsimmons 6).

**Iris Lavell:** Ruby Cohn, where do you feel Churchill fits in relation to other writers?

**Ruby Cohn:** With *l'écriture féminine* not so much in mind as in background, I compare the drama of American Maria Irene Fornes and British Caryl Churchill, both of whom have been claimed and disclaimed by different feminists. The claimants couple them as women playwrights, and the disclaimants recognize that these dramatists have rejected the feminist label (95).

**Iris Lavell:** Have you rejected the feminist label?



**Caryl Churchill:** I've constantly said that I am both a socialist and a feminist. Constantly said it. If someone says 'a socialist playwright' or 'a feminist playwright' that can suggest to some people something rather narrow which doesn't cover as many things as you might be thinking about ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 89).

**Iris Lavell:** Do you mind being labeled a feminist?

**Caryl Churchill:** I get asked if I mind being called a woman playwright or a feminist playwright, and again it depends entirely on what's going on in the mind of the person who says it (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 89).

**Iris Lavell:** Is writing credibility compromised depending upon how successful one seems to be as a feminist? Or as a militant feminist?

**Michelene Wandor:** For Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems and Nell Dunn (the latter primarily a book writer who turned late to theatre) the real change in their writing careers came at the beginning of the 1970s, spurred by more militant, younger women ... (*Drama Today* 50-51).

**Caryl Churchill:** I think originally I wasn't interested in gender ideas at all.

**Michelene Wandor:** Caryl Churchill had had a number of plays broadcast on radio, and after the production of *Owners* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972, became more and more influenced by the kinds of discussions and ways of

working practised by *Monstrous Regiment* and *Joint Stock* ... (*Drama Today* 50-51).

**Caryl Churchill:** There's a common misapprehension that all of my work is from workshops.

**Susan Bennett:** ... feminist writers such as Caryl Churchill and Franca Rame have had their plays produced by mainstream theatres and the incorporation of their works in academic studies of modern drama affirms that the impact of feminist practice extends beyond constituency interest (*Theatre Audiences* 62).

**Iris Lavell:** So is feminism now being integrated into the mainstream? Has your work now come to be considered standard text, or canonical?

**Sheila Rabillard:** Through the course of the nineties, Churchill's canonical status became incontrovertibly established; witness, for example, William Worthen's inclusion of two of her plays in his widely adopted college-level anthology of modern drama ... (8-9).

**Iris Lavell:** And yet status seems to vary within the canon itself. I've never seen an influential male playwright compared with you and yet you've been compared with Ibsen, Ionesco, Brecht, Beckett and now Pinter, Hare, Stoppard, Ayckbourn ... the list goes on. Why is it so hard for women to reach that status where *their* subjectivity is normalised and where male playwrights are compared to *them*?

**Caryl Churchill:** Most theatres are still controlled by men and people do tend to be able to see promise in people who are like themselves ... (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 90).

**Iris Lavell:** And yet now you are considered by many to be part of the theatrical canon.

**Mark Wing-Davy:** She doesn't have a sense of herself as an author in some canon in English Literature ... (Wolf, "True Blue" 52).

**Matt Wolf:** ... says Wing-Davy who has known the playwright some 25 years ("True Blue" 52).

**Mark Wing-Davy:** It's more egalitarian than that. She is a writer, and that has enabled her to have a sense of self – it's not the most important thing every day of her life (Wolf, "True Blue" 52).

**Sheila Rabillard:** This canonicity in itself introduces a new set of critical questions: about her claim to a subversive, marginal, leftist or feminist position; regarding the pedagogy that has framed her for the academic canon ... (9).

**Iris Lavell:** Does this mean influential people associated with the Royal Court Theatre, or canonical male playwrights such as Beckett and Brecht?

**Caryl Churchill:** I used to listen to Beckett plays on the radio.

**Janelle Reinelt:** Caryl Churchill has used a variety of identifiably Brechtian techniques to construct her socialist feminist dramas (85).

**Iris Lavell:** Did you consciously model your earlier writing on that of Brecht?

**Caryl Churchill:** 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 ... (qtd. in Reinelt 86).<sup>8</sup>

**Iris Lavell:** Sheila Rabillard, you were talking about "her claim to a subversive, marginal, leftist or feminist position." Is it a case of the old strategy of incorporating the margin into the mainstream in order to control it? Which concerns do you feel need to be raised regarding her suggested marginality?

**Sheila Rabillard:** ... concerning the shifts and continuities in reception that have sustained her popularity over a considerable span of years, and in the rather different contexts of British, American, and Canadian theatres and classrooms ... (9).

**Iris Lavell:** Like the periodic revival of *Cloud Nine* in various student theatre companies for example? As Susan Bennett describes ...

**Susan Bennett:** My first reaction to the season announcement was, not surprisingly, heavy-hearted. Again I pondered the canonical status of Churchill's play – not another student production of *Cloud Nine*; is Churchill the only playwright who might represent women's dramatic writing, feminist playwriting and why always *Cloud Nine*? (“Growing Up” 36).

**Sheila Rabillard:** ... and in relation to the variations and valences of performance as certain of her plays are revised, revived, and re-presented on stages or in media very different from their originating productions (9).

**Susan Bennett:** *Cloud Nine* has turned out to be a much richer play than I realized in 1979; of course, we always know more about an age when we have lived through it and beyond it (“Growing Up” 39).

## **Boundaries**

*Deconstruction, pushing the boundaries and allowing others to speak on her behalf.*

**Iris Lavell:** Although she is still commonly associated with *Cloud Nine*, she has had many successful productions since then. To borrow a phrase from Ann Wilson, I think it is true that she ‘continues to test the limits of representation.’ In many of her later plays such as *The Skriker* and *Mad Forest*, language itself has been increasingly deconstructed.

**Ann Wilson:** For four and a half pages of the published text, the Skriker's opening speech continues; its language is shifting linguistic overflow, unregulated by standard conventions of grammar or narrative sequence (174).

**Joylynn Wing:** Like all of Churchill's work, and perhaps more than most, *Mad Forest* sets up a challenging dynamic with the spectator. The scripted language is sometimes sparse, elliptical, enigmatic; at other times dense, overlapping, indecipherable (indeed some of the script, written in Romanian, is untranslated in performance) (129).

**Iris Lavell:** Her more recent plays seem to continue this experimentation with language and with our understanding of the world, for example, the two one-act plays that make up *Blue Heart* and more recently still, *Far Away*, produced at the end of 2000. More recently there has been *A Number*, about clones, which opened in late 2002, directed by Stephen Daldry. The reviews have certainly been kinder than they were when *Owners* was first produced in 1972. It's true, the later plays could be better plays, but how do we know?

**Matt Wolf:** As the 1997 plays (the opening one is called *Heart's Desire*) arrive this month at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in their original Out of Joint production directed by Max Stafford-Clark, perhaps it is time once more to pay tribute to a playwright 60 this year – who in her own quiet way continues to speak volumes about the ways in which theatre boundaries exist to be pushed, stretched, tantalizingly redefined (“True Blue” 51).

**Max Stafford-Clark:** If the work itself is a surprise, it's certainly not out of character. Caryl has always had an interest in theatricality and structure (“True Blue” 52).

**Gerard Raymond:** ‘Caryl Churchill has always had an ability to surprise, not just the critics and the audience, but herself and her collaborators as well’ says director Max Stafford-Clark. ‘She gives challenges to a director that are sometimes alarming.’... According to Stafford-Clark, Churchill described the two one-acts of *Blue Heart* as “antiplays” – each carries the seed of its destruction within it. He speculates that the plays may come from a certain bitterness and anger about the theatre (146-147).

**Matt Wolf:** Mr Daldry said he thought of “Blue Heart” as “a playwright saying, ‘What is the role of theatre?’” He continued, “With ‘Blue Kettle,’ you’ve got a play that could be a good enough play as it is, but there’s a virus in it, and ‘Heart’s Desire’ is a play that doesn’t really have a story.’...“It’s almost like the plays themselves are rebelling against the idea of what a play is,” he said, aware of the paradox that, by breaking down form, Ms. Churchill only invigorates it. “Caryl is very, very bright. There isn’t anyone else that has that degree of joy at formal experimentation” (“Coming Apart” 7).

**Iris Lavell:** Now I feel that I’m getting a real sense of the person behind the plays. Tell me more.

**Max Stafford-Clark:** We were on the train back to London and it was this lovely, sunny September morning; we were having breakfast and reading the reviews – which were good – and she was happy. She said to me, tongue-in-cheek, ‘Well, of course it’s an unsuccessful anti-play. If I’d really wanted it to be

successful, I'd have gone on for another two scenes in *Blue Kettle*. That would have really driven the audience out' (qtd. in Raymond 147).

**Iris Lavell:** And *Far Away* ...

**Sunday Telegraph:** Here as in previous plays, Churchill moves into new territory by inventing speech habits; in this case, a prosaic acceptance of extreme horror coupled with the old language of middle-class values which lingers on like a twinge in a Phantom limb.

## **Reflections**

*Churchill as a mirror reflecting male accomplishment*

**Benedict Nightingale:** Altogether Mr Pinter seems as much a part of the London theatrical scene as oxygen just now ("Feast" n. pag.).

**Iris Lavell:** Mr Pinter? But we've been talking about Caryl Churchill.

**Benedict Nightingale:** Caryl Churchill's 50-minute "Far Away," which moves from the Royal Court to the Albery on Jan. 18, is reminiscent both of his understated yet charged early play and of the ugly political ones he wrote in the 1990s ("Feast").

**Iris Lavell:** And Churchill's contribution to the play?



**Benedict Nightingale:** What is happening? Another ordinary-seeming scene is no more informative ... But then Stephen Daldry, directing his first play since making the film “Billy Elliot,” pulls off a coup. Suddenly, a fashion parade of ragged, chained prisoners appear, wearing exotic spirals, model ships and other outre decorations on their heads. The hat factory is revealed as part of a judicial system that culminates in ritual humiliation and execution (“Feast”).

**Iris Lavell:** And Churchill’s contribution to the play?

**Benedict Nightingale:** Ever since *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* two decades ago, Ms. Churchill has been expanding the theatrical boundaries and now she pushes them into sci-fi realism (“Feast”).

**Iris Lavell:** So, who is she?

**Philip Roberts:** ... a writer who was to become one of the Court’s greatest, Caryl Churchill... (78).

**Iris Lavell:** And, reputedly, increasingly reticent about being interviewed.

**Matt Wolf:** She shuns the spotlight with the same avidity with which she refuses to write for the marketplace (“True Blue” 51).

**Caryl Churchill:** I don’t really like being interviewed very much.<sup>9</sup>

**Matt Wolf:** Ms Churchill, 60, declined to discuss her two recent one-acts, beyond having described them earlier as “just talking plays” (“Coming Apart”).

**Caryl Churchill:** I dislike the feeling of being pinned down as being one thing or another, a feeling that that definition is perhaps limiting what people expect of you ... And another thing: whenever I read them, they’re nearly always misquotes anyway. So that I have given up thinking of them as reflecting anything about me. The amount of stuff that’s down in quotation marks as me having said, that I know I’ve never said at all. So that it’s all pointless really (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 91).

### **End**

Perhaps as Churchill says, it is “all pointless really.” But the concern that she raises in relation to the way in which her words are manipulated is at the centre of this discussion. Improper contextualisation, such as provided in the exercise above, misquoting and inaccuracy are all part of a more covert imperative. In the broadest social terms, a woman who begins to make inroads into a hitherto male-dominated territory will have her gender emphasized, regardless of her own wishes. Churchill’s status as a female playwright – as a playwright who ‘happens to be a woman,’ as a feminist playwright, or even as a covert opponent of feminism – always seems to be at the forefront. This observation prompts me to ask how her consciousness of this might have affected the writing process, but also to what extent it is possible to occupy other than a borderline location given the persistent reminder of her relationship to the normative male position. What role does her consistently imposed marginality

play in reinforcing this position and where does she stand in relation to the changing façade of feminist theory? The expectation that she should be not only a feminist, but also a ‘good’ feminist, threatens a secondary marginalisation from those who might consider themselves as occupying such a position.

For scholars of theatre, reviews are an important component in retrospectively determining how the playwright has developed, and potentially signaling which work is worthy of examination. Reviewers commonly instruct the public on how to think about innovative or difficult work and for this reason they hold a position of power and responsibility in gate keeping for those whose works ultimately do, and do not, become incorporated into the theatrical canon. While the postmodern critical process is now often overtly and unapologetically subjective, the subjectivity is couched as educated opinion measured against an established set of rules. For some time the creation of seemingly transparent rules regarding good and bad literature, theatre, or art in general have provided the suggestion of, if not objectivity, at least fair play. This is where Chapter Three, “Churchill’s Containment Within the Canon,” begins.

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Aston *Caryl Churchill* 18.

<sup>2</sup> Although 1977 might seem quite late for Churchill to claim her own feminist affiliations, it also demonstrates her level of caution in accepting the essentialist descriptor on other people’s terms.

<sup>3</sup> This is a process inherent in canonisation which will be discussed in relation to Churchill in Chapter Three. There is a sense in which a playwright is not fully entered into the canon until his or her body of work is complete, and this is interesting in view of the function of the canon to serve the artistic community rather than the playwright per se, and because the playwright is then in no position to intervene in countering any productions in relation to themselves or their work.

<sup>4</sup> For example in Australia, “The Glass House”, and “CNNNN” both shown on ABC Channel 2, utilise this technique.

<sup>5</sup> *Camera Lucida* (4).

<sup>6</sup> In *Black Faces, White Masks* Fanon invokes the image of a captured insect being pinned down so that it can be observed when describing how he felt as a ‘black’ man when he arrived in what was then a Paris dominated by ‘whites’.

<sup>7</sup> Inside cover of *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*.

<sup>8</sup> From Personal letter from Caryl Churchill, February 23, 1985.

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<sup>9</sup> *File on Churchill* (91).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Caryl Churchill's Containment within the Canon**

After a career spanning forty years, Churchill's oeuvre has become sufficiently attached to university curricula to suggest that she, or a selection of her works, might now be considered as a part of the theatrical canon.<sup>1</sup> But how comfortably she sits within the canon, if at all, is debatable. Her status in this regard is addressed here because it has implications for the way in which her work is recognised and interpreted within the artistic and scholarly communities most interested in her contribution. The idea that Churchill may have gained acceptance in a canon that has been called anachronistic<sup>2</sup> and inequitable threatens to impact on the interpretation of her work and its identification as subversive, particularly as it relates to a feminist perspective. Sheila Rabillard has raised this latter point in the introduction to a collection of essays on Churchill and my reaction to her observations will be discussed in the course of this chapter. (9)

In the previous chapter I explored the idea that a playwright's identity is consciously manufactured, and that this is influenced by the personal and professional interests of others. I took the position that the production of a public identity provides the means by which a degree of control might be exercised over that identity for a broader socio-political agenda. For an artist who enjoys critical acclaim, an important part of public identity relates to where he or she is positioned vis-à-vis the canon. However, the meanings that can be attributed to placing an artist such as Churchill within the canon are not as straightforward as they might at first appear. Her canonical positioning raises questions regarding the

function of her work, the ultimate goals of feminism, and whether widespread critical success and acceptance for a feminist, if Churchill is to be claimed as such, should be construed in terms of ideological success or failure. I am not arguing here that Churchill should *not* be claimed as such, or that she has rejected a feminist ideal, but rather that, in my reading, she prefers to characterise her politics in her own terms rather than according to those of a particular or defined school of thought. She has been cautious in accepting the feminist label because (as mentioned in Chapter Two) it “depends entirely on what’s going on in the mind of the person who says it” (qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 89) and has admitted that she was originally not particularly interested in gender ideas at all. (Fitzsimmons, 89). Nonetheless, her writing has been dispatched with a strong and sophisticated awareness of the problematic way in which women’s sexuality has been viewed from as early as 1965 when *Lovesick* was written, and the politics of women’s equity has continued to feature in her plays from that time.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, she has had no difficulty in describing her views in unmistakably feminist terms.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, others’ expectations, with regard to the responsibilities of what they see as Churchill’s feminist identification, complicate the interpretation and perhaps even influence the nature of the canon’s embrace.

Churchill’s possible inclusion in the canon also, or alternatively perhaps, raises questions about the changing nature of the canon itself, whether the margin is the only justifiable site of resistance and in what, if any circumstances it is deemed legitimate for a(n identified) feminist to move from the margin to the centre.<sup>5</sup> If the concept of a centre continues to make sense in an increasingly

fraught global landscape, then what is the nature of the centre to which she is to move? Finally, how do we know when one has truly become a member of a canon, which itself can be difficult to ‘pin down’? This last concern is reminiscent of a comment made by Ruth Frankenberg in relation to the concept of whiteness, relevant here because both constructs can be argued to operate according to a similar mechanism of binary discrimination. Frankenberg describes the slipperiness of whiteness as a construct that “turns out to be more about the *power* to include and exclude groups and individuals than about the actual practices of those who are to be let in or kept out” (13). In the case of the canon, whether its prime function is about status or excellence, if such a distinction can be made, and the meaning that might be attributed to those “to be let in or kept out,” is a debate that pre-empts this discussion.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, canonical membership is accompanied by a degree of power not only to influence but also to define culture through a central legitimizing institution; a power that has both social and economic currency and which might therefore be suspected as sparingly and conservatively conferred.

Before addressing the broader issues that accompany these concerns in relation to Churchill, it may be helpful to contextualise the discussion that follows with particular aspects of the debate that surrounds the institution of the canon itself.<sup>7</sup> I begin by citing a definition of the canon provided by Griselda Pollock:

The canon signifies what academic institutions establish as the best, the most representative, and the most significant texts – or objects – in literature, art history or music. Repositories of transhistorical aesthetic value, the canons of various cultural practices establish what is unquestionably great, as well as what must be studied as a model by those aspiring to the practice. (3)

Here, while the production of the canon is placed squarely in the province of the academic institution, Pollock elsewhere notes the role of artists and writers in canon formation, a point that will be explored in more detail as this argument progresses (4). Others cite curriculum inclusion and the decisions of university English departments as clearly linked to canonical membership.<sup>8</sup> In addition, reviews as well as books and articles written by theatre practitioners both within and outside formal academic contexts, television programs and any other form of public education that cites a playwright's work, combine to more firmly establish an artist in canonical prominence. The academic institution may provide the seal of approval in terms of a work's standard of excellence; however, scholars are not immune to the opinions of respected journalistic reviewers writing for established newspapers. After all, many of these reviewers have themselves emerged from the academic system, and in some cases (still) teach within it. In addition, in the absence of actually viewing a production firsthand, critical reviews of past productions are an important point of reference to make decisions regarding the efficacy of a (genre of) performance, particularly where dialogue is sparse.<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare's work and that of other entrenched members of the theatrical canon could be, and often is, treated as literature first, and performance second.<sup>10</sup> However this is becoming less feasible with limited text performances that have newly emerged, or older works of similar ilk whose authors have been latterly acknowledged as being of interest to Western universities. Richard



Schechner has cited a range of performative instances that illustrate this point. He writes,

For example, the canon is not solely literary. The debates which began in English Departments are now engaging the visual and performing arts. Aren't the complex musics and oral narrative traditions of Africa, the sophisticated visual and performance techniques of northwest coast Native Americans, the finely articulated performance theories of Sanskrit and Japanese actors, dancers and musicians as relevant today as Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Goethe? (12)

The rich infusion of influences such as these into arts programs in (Western) universities and in popular culture has necessarily destabilised assumptions about the measure of excellence. In addition, overlapping interests between scholars and journalistic reviewers, particularly in relation to performed works, provoke vigorous competition for authoritative supremacy, a point noted by Jo-Ann Wallace. Wallace refers to an article written in 1988 by professor and literary journalist Mark Edmundson in which he “usefully defined the escalating feud between academic critics and journalists as a “struggle for cultural authority”” (122).<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that, suggesting something of a reaction to a latter day trend of putting the performance first, Ronald Tavel, a prolific American playwright and scriptwriter argues that the artistic establishment has failed to nurture the idea of a scripted play as art.<sup>12</sup> Colloquially we might rephrase this as a desire not to ‘throw the baby out with the bath water,’ rather than that of Tavel taking an oppositional stance to Schechner. Nevertheless the point has implications for the influence of both academic and journalistic reviewers for whom, according to Tavel, in the North American context at least, the produced play is given precedence. In the context of Churchill’s oeuvre this

trend has important consequences for the way in which her contribution is represented, an argument raised in Chapter Two.

Tavel maintains that theatre reviewers “have life and death power over plays, and consign them to courtesies or oblivion, deny that as they may” (19). He footnotes an instance in which Edward Albee responded bitterly to the “hatchet job done on his brazen *Man with Three Arms*,” following which “Predictably, Albee would not be favourably, even charitably, reviewed for years to come” (26).<sup>13</sup> Notably Albee *is* considered a canonical American playwright, so the virtual blacklisting of his subsequent works for a period of time did not necessarily disadvantage his longer-term status, suggesting a less than formulaic relationship between the power of the critic and ultimate canonisation.

Economics also play an important role in terms of content that relates directly or indirectly to the complex interests of art as a public activity and personal career path, in the promotion of the plays themselves as financial enterprises, and perhaps ultimately in bringing them to the attention of the canon-makers.<sup>14</sup> While canonisation and public recognition are not identical, they do overlap and a useful by-product of artistic acclaim is its advertising function. Notwithstanding Albee’s negative experience with the critics, the linking of favourable reviews with well-known playwrights is common if not foolproof, and reciprocally assists in reinforcing their status in the canon. As Tavel suggests above, reviews influence the attendance of potential audiences (and thus economic gain) to theatrical productions. Jill Dolan makes a similar point:

Most mainstream critics are powerful enough to influence a production’s success or failure in a given venue, and their response molds and to a

certain extent predetermines the response of potential spectators for the play reviewed. (19)

This is important because of the (ostensibly) different agendas served by academic institutions and newspapers. Newspapers need to ensure that they retain public credibility and therefore are generally loathe to recommend works that might fall too far outside the public tolerance for novelty until, as was the case for Churchill in the second half of her career, the playwright has a reputation tested against public appeal.

While the position of the journalistic reviewer in canon formation is unclear, it might be reasonable to suggest that the reviewer's role in alerting academic establishments to emerging works, and vice versa, indicates if not a symbiotic relationship, at least an intermittently opportunistic one. In Churchill's case, the role of reviewers is critical in tracing earlier responses to her produced plays, particularly in the approximately twenty year period prior to the production of *Cloud 9*. The review is, of course, its own performance and cannot be taken as more than a subjective response to an ephemeral performance on a particular day. Once the performance has ended, the review remains and, in the absence of a published script with author's notes and/or video document, is finally taken as the only enduring evidence of (the) original performance itself.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to Pollock's definition for a moment, the reference to transhistorical aesthetic value is central to the idea of canonical membership. Jonathan Brody Kramnick, in a detailed discussion of the foundations of the English canon writes:

There is an inevitable gap between the writing of a literary work and its ascendancy to high cultural permanence ... literary works require a certain deferral before they become canonical. It is only after the fact that one can be sure that Shakespeare is not part of the sand and dross kicked up by history. (1098)

This is a point of contention upon which the canon is attacked, and surrounding which debate has emerged, particularly in the last twenty years.

Willie van Peer points out (in order to debunk the idea), that the debate surrounding the 'politics' of the canon might be summed up as "[t]he test of time ultimately becomes a test of the success of the ruling classes" (97). Van Peer disputes this by contending that canonical texts often subvert or are simply at odds with the central values of the societies from which they emerge. His vehicle is a comparative analysis of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with the novella equivalent by Arthur Brooke, written in 1562, which provides a much less controversial version of the story for its time, and which has since been largely ignored. While I can empathise with van Peer's concern not to eliminate respect for the vanguard of writers who bravely challenge their society's norms with an admirable degree of literary finesse, I feel he may be oversimplifying the argument with regard to concerns that the anti-canon movement has raised.

Shakespeare may have been less controversial for his time than van Peer suggests; the popularity of his plays with his contemporary audiences suggests that this was the case. More importantly van Peer does not address a basic concern held by the anti-canon with regard to a fundamental social paradigm underpinned by assumptions about gender and other socially proscribed differences. This is a paradigm within which both Brooke and Shakespeare operated, if at different

levels of understanding, accepting its fundamentals if not its specifics as the immutable social background to their writing, and it is this underlying paradigm that continues to be most resistant to change. Indeed Shakespeare's entrenchment as a literary example above and beyond negative exposition may contribute to the continuation of this paradigm.

Contrasting with van Peer's approach, Pollock proposes "that the canon should be understood as both a discursive structure and a structure of masculine narcissism with the exercise of cultural hegemony" (xiv). She examines "the theoretical and political issues involved not in displacing the canon but in 'differencing' the canon, exposing its engagement with the politics of sexual difference while allowing that very problematic to make a difference to how we read art's histories" (xiv). It is this consciousness of 'differencing' that van Peer's analysis lacks, and which is so important to the way in which we view each work of art as subject to a position not entirely transcended by the artist's own experienced identity.

### **Popular Culture Interpretations of Churchill's Place**

Churchill's position in a history of western theatre was illustrated in the BBC documentary series entitled "Changing Stages" shown by the Australian Broadcasting Commission television channel in June 2001.<sup>16</sup> This was a documentary series that implicitly presented itself as a legitimately influential voice through appeals to authority. Firstly, as a BBC production the series is assumed by the general viewing public to have documentary credibility. Secondly, it invoked contemporary authoritative voices in the theatre: established

playwrights such as David Hare, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Alan Ayckbourn were asked to comment on Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett, playwrights who had already been admitted to the inner circles of the canon and had stood the test of time there. They also commented on their own and sometimes each other's work. No female playwrights were asked to comment on the male playwrights, although women occupying other positions within the theatre were interviewed in terms of their observations and personal/working relationships with these theatrical icons. This is significant because of the status differential and the absence of contiguity between any female playwrights and those whom Pollock has described as "legitimizing or enabling predecessors" (4). In *Differencing the Canon* she discusses the influence of artists and writers on the canon:

The canon is not just the product of the academy. It is also created by artists or writers. Canons are formed from the ancestral figures evoked in an artist/writer/composer's work through a process that Harold Bloom, author of the major defence of canonicity, *The Western Canon* (1994), identified as 'the anxiety of influence', and I, in another mode of argument, the avant-garde gambit of 'reference, deference, and difference'. The canon thus not only determines what we read, look at, listen to, see at the art gallery and study in school or university. It is formed retrospectively by what artists themselves select as their legitimizing or enabling predecessors. (4)

As they do so, these writers establish their continuity with tradition. Pollock further observes, from her readings of feminist critiques of the canon, that "canons actively create a patrilineal genealogy of father-son succession and replicate patriarchal mythologies of exclusively masculine creativity" (5).

In the BBC production, of the very few female playwrights acknowledged in the series, Churchill was briefly featured in the penultimate episode, along with two excerpts from the 1979 production of *Cloud 9*. Significantly, she was shown to comment only on her own work, and, even more specifically, only on this production.<sup>17</sup> Hers was the single female example of *the* feminist influence on western theatre in the series. Her inclusion fleetingly suggests an even-handed acknowledgement of ‘an important play’ (sic) that explores gender identity, while simultaneously containing and marginalising it, implicitly constructing its position, and hers, as predominantly of interest to women.<sup>18</sup> By way of contrast, later in the same episode, a satirical, political play by Alan Bennett, *Forty Years On*, set in a residential English boys’ public school, was said to result from ‘imagining’ England.<sup>19</sup> That is, the writer and presenter of the series, Richard Eyre, implicitly constructed the experience of an almost exclusively white, middle-class, male cast as of *general* interest to British politics.

To be fair, the series was a truncated version of a book written as a precursor to the BBC production, and the written version (*Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*) provided a more generous overview of Churchill’s work as well as some brief references to feminist playwrights early in the twentieth century (such as Githa Sowerby and her play *Rutherford and Son*) (92). References to other more recent, female dramatists such as Michelene Wandor and Maria Irene Fornes were absent in both the series and the book. The contributions of Pam Gems, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Louise Page, Sarah Daniels, Clare McIntyre, and Andrea Dunbar are dispensed with in

half a page (318). Lorraine Hansberry is mentioned briefly in the book for her canonical work *A Raisin in the Sun* (193-195).<sup>20</sup>

Written by Eyre and Nicholas Wright, the book, which notably featured Shakespeare along with twentieth century English, Irish and American theatre, was subtitled *A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. Eyre writes with an admirable degree of humility in the book's Foreword, "This is a partial, personal, unscholarly view of the century's theatre written from the perspective of practitioners." He is generous in his acknowledgement of executive producer Andrea Miller's influence in enabling the television series to be made, along with a number of others involved in the production including a small number of women in positions of possible influence (9). Their inclusion in the production process strengthens the impression of an impartial treatment of the topic. The caveat placed on the context of the work, as 'partial, personal and unscholarly' acts as a form of insurance against the kind of criticism offered here because Eyre and Wright do not represent themselves as providing a comprehensive review of 'Western theatre.'

This does not, however, prevent the documentary or the book from operating in the canon's favour. Eyre was approached to undertake the task, presumably, because of his credentials. He has been a significant figure in the British theatrical establishment: the dust jacket to the book tells us that "(he) was the Artistic Director of the Royal National Theatre for ten years between 1988 and 1997. " Similarly, co-author Nicholas Wright "was the first director of the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs and an associate director of the National Theatre from



1984-1998. His writing about the theatre includes *99 Plays, a view of playwriting from Aeschylus to the present day.*” The positions formerly held by these men are located within two key establishments in British theatre, establishments that have been instrumental in providing proved and emerging playwrights with the opportunity to have their work produced in ‘credible’ environments. Through one or both of these two establishments, many ‘members’ of the contemporary theatrical canon, including Churchill, have passed.<sup>21</sup> Wright has had a professional association with Churchill over the years, and directed the original production of *Owners* at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs (Fitzsimmons 20).

While such valuable opportunity nurtures the artists whom it assists, the potential cost of this virtual centralisation of mentoring and subsequent promotion of the endorsed *crème de la crème* in the television series could also be construed as a form of governance. Promotion may be through direct references to the playwrights’ own work or through appeals to their authority and expertise in commenting on those great writers who have gone before. The implication is that the established theatre community has the power to define acceptable parameters of the craft, and in the case of these particular theatres this is underlined by their gate-keeping role in presumably accepting and promoting some plays whilst rejecting others. Discussion of the canon and its mechanisms are important in understanding interpretations of Churchill’s work because her ability to be seen as independent of these influences may be construed as critical to an accurate interpretation of her writing, particularly with regard to the political ideals contained therein.

Churchill has made it clear that she dislikes being categorised (Fitzsimmons 91). Her resolve to resist fixity is in turn resisted, partly because of the desire of others to place worth on her work, or perhaps to diminish its worth, for comparative purposes. Theatre reviewer Charles McNulty alludes to this in a review of *Blue Heart*. He writes, “Critics have accused her all along of capriciously changing direction, but their complaint has less to do with any real break from aesthetic tradition than with their stubborn demand for an artist to produce more of the same” (130). Predictability makes the critic’s job easier. An advantage of determining whether a work, or a playwright’s oeuvre has stood the test of time and whether it is worthy of the canon, is that once complete, and once the playwright is deceased, retired, or safely categorised, it is easier to view the work as a stable entity. The canon operates largely by categorisation and this results in a tendency to circumscribe and thus to some extent, delimit the interpretation of a work in order to hold it up as an example of excellence. Accordingly, Churchill is a particularly difficult artist to confine to this particular institution.

Churchill is above all a playwright who began her writing career with a clear and idealistic vision of the necessarily dynamic nature of her role: “Playwrights don’t give answers, they ask questions. We need to find new questions, which may help us to answer the old ones or make them unimportant, and this means new subjects and new form” (qtd. in Aston 80). She wrote this in 1960 as she was embarking on her writing career, but her endeavour to experiment not only with content but also with form has continued throughout her

lengthy career.<sup>22</sup> Later in her career during the Thatcher years, in her letter of resignation to the Royal Court Theatre Council, she demonstrated an awareness of the specific link between her role as a playwright and the political and economic environment within which she had to operate:

I feel that my plays are saying one thing and the theatre something else. It is a serious problem and not just for me, because if the theatres are making a political statement by their acceptance of this government it's very hard for anyone who doesn't agree with that to work in them with any spirit. ... It's been put to me that under this government the theatre can't survive without embracing sponsorship and all that goes with it but I question what it is that's surviving. I think we and others will look back at this time with astonishment at what we went along with. (Roberts 208-209)<sup>23</sup>

As her resignation from this influential establishment was undertaken for reasons of principle, it would make sense to suggest that she is prepared to take a stand for those values that she considers to be important. This clue to her character and the strength of her political conviction is relevant when considering the discussion that follows.<sup>24</sup>

### **Deconstructing Churchill's Canonical Positioning**

In a review of *Blue Heart*, Matt Wolf has called Churchill a "playwright's playwright" ("True Blue" 51). Wolf's descriptor is problematic in attempting to fully understand her position because it is used as a broad description that fails to identify which specific writers have been influenced by her. In his lack of specificity Wolf is expressing a platitude which seems to have attached itself to Churchill's oeuvre. It is one that may inadvertently mask the discrepancies between her portrayal and that of her male playwriting contemporaries and

predecessors who are frequently implied to have either influenced her work or pre-empted it.

Although Churchill is not universally accorded such accolades as Wolf's, they are nevertheless sufficiently common to suggest that, on face value, she has been accepted into the heart of the theatrical establishment. The idea of her importance to the field has been included in introductions to texts dealing with her works such as Simon Trussler's (General Editor's) Introduction to Fitzsimmons's *File on Churchill* (1989). Trussler writes, "Caryl Churchill is now generally recognized as among the leading dramatists of her generation" (6). Similar sentiments expressed by highly regarded scholars in the field continue to be published in contributions to texts on Churchill and in generic references.<sup>25</sup> For example, in a *Literary Encyclopedia* recently published on the Internet, Elaine Aston writes,

Caryl Churchill is an important figure in British playwriting today; indeed, many critics and theatre scholars would argue that she has played a leading role in shaping our contemporary theatrical landscape, on national and international stages.<sup>26</sup>

However, returning to the idea of Churchill as a "playwright's playwright," contemporary views suggest some disparities between the reception and representation of her work by scholars and critics who write for newspaper columns. Contrary to her work being used as the comparative measure, a function of canonical membership suggested earlier in Pollock's definition, the converse relationship persists. While on one level comparisons with great writers might be

construed as complimentary, they simultaneously locate the recipient of such accolades on the negative side of the binary relationship.

There are numerous examples of reviews and articles that allude either directly or indirectly to the canonical influence of other writers on Churchill's plays. Comparisons are usually couched in positive terms. Bertoldt Brecht has been seen as a major direct influence, with the most comprehensive comparison that I have found being that written by Janelle Reinelt (*After Brecht*) who devotes a chapter to the relationship between Churchill and Brecht (81-107). Reviewers frequently invoke Pinter as an enabling predecessor, along with a range of other canonical male writers. On an internet site "Original Articles" John A. Price, an "occasional contributor" fleetingly compares her with David Mamet before arguing the influence of Pinter citing Ruby Cohn's and Michael Billington's arguments to this effect.<sup>27</sup> Benedict Nightingale, writing in the *New York Times* in his critique of *Far Away*, suggests:

Altogether, Mr Pinter seems as much a part of the London theatrical scene as oxygen just now. Caryl Churchill's 50-minute "Far Away," ... is reminiscent both of his understated yet charged early plays and of the ugly political ones he wrote in the 1990s. ("Feast" n.pag.)

The implication of influence is often oblique, as for example in this passage from Charles McNulty's critique of *Blue Heart* in which Brecht, Ben Jonson, and Eugene Ionesco are invoked:

While the transexual farce of *Cloud 9* may have little in common with the Brechtian epic *Fen* or the Ben Jonson-ian verse comedy *Serious Money*, the underlying social critique is identifiably the same. Not that *Blue Heart*, a bill of related one-acts about elderly parents and their adult children, toes a different party line – just that it seems less provoked by the current Third Way policies of Tony Blair than by the serious metaphysical jests of Eugene Ionesco." (135)

Again, in discussing *The Skriker*, Ben Brantley, writing in the *New York Times*, described the Skriker's monologue as "poised between Joyce and Beckett".<sup>28</sup> Sheridan Morley described *Blue Heart* as "a double-bill heavily indebted to the N.F. Simpson tradition of 1960s experimental eccentricity, the world of *One Way Pendulum* and other long-lost homages to Ionesco."<sup>29</sup> Susan Carlson describes Churchill's exposure of the empire in *Cloud 9* as "Wildean" (313). More obliquely, David Barbour described the set design of *The After-Dinner Joke* as follows: "it looked like the back office of some forgotten Beckett character, a hellish Dickensian view of society strangling on its own red tape" (n.pag.). With regard to her most recent work at the time of writing this thesis, Alan Bird, reviewing *A Number* again suggests a relationship to Pinter's characterisation describing the protagonist Salter as "like a character from a Harold Pinter play" (n. pag.). By way of contrast, Churchill is seldom invoked in critiques of other playwrights' productions.

An exception is a slightly negative review of a David Hare play by Robin Dougherty of the *Miami New Times* titled "Saved by the Actors" in which Dougherty compares Hare to 'his countrywoman Caryl Churchill' (n. pag.). In this case the strategy appears to be used to diminish Hare's status in relation to a play at variance with Dougherty's implied conservative political leanings. This treatment suggests an ongoing marginalisation of Churchill's contribution and once again raises the role of male comparisons with women in male status games more generally, as well as their compounding effect on women's subjection.

Churchill is undoubtedly well respected and admired within many contemporary western academic theatre communities in Britain, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and parts of Europe (Germany in particular). While this is important from the point of view of acceptance of her work as worthy of study and consideration, it does not necessarily translate into broader community acknowledgement. In purely advertising terms, secondary promotion is important in embedding her name in community consciousness. Once other playwrights, their plays and sets begin to be referred to as ‘Churchillesque’ there may be some basis for claiming Churchill not only as a legitimising or enabling predecessor in Pollock’s terms, but perhaps even more importantly, as having been acknowledged as such.

### **Churchill as Too Close to the Establishment**

Churchill has been claimed as part of both the broader (male?) theatrical canon, and as Lizbeth Goodman suggests, the “developing *feminist*” canon.<sup>30</sup> However, the meaning attributable to her status in relation to the former remains uncertain amongst a number of creditable female scholars.<sup>31</sup> In terms of the broader public, or indeed, academic perception, her positioning within the canon appears to be accepted typically without critical interrogation, if an informal review of Internet entries is an accurate reflection.<sup>32</sup>

Churchill’s exposure via the Internet has increased significantly in the past few years, as has the Internet itself. The Internet has facilitated a much more extensive expression of opinions and ideas than was previously possible, along with the continued promotion of her better known works by those interested in theatre at all levels: students and amateur critics, as well as academics and

journalistic reviewers. This exposure, while strengthening the perception of Churchill as a member of, if not *the* canon, (at least, the feminist canon) and as someone whose collection of works is, in itself, often referred to as a canon, confounds rather than strengthens an understanding of her standing. References to her inclusion in a feminist canon reinforce the contention that her presence in university reading lists might be perceived as categorical. As argued earlier in relation to Eyre's BBC documentary, her inclusion may suggest that a 'marginal interest group' (women) has been covered, thus negating the 'face validity' requirement for incorporating any number of other gifted female playwrights. Reading lists still tend to be heavily weighted in favour of the male canon and may include only one or two of a handful of Churchill's better known works even in those lists provided by more progressive teachers.<sup>33</sup> Many do not include her at all.<sup>34</sup> Inclusion might be considered a necessary condition of canonical acceptance, but is it sufficient, or does it in fact support the notion of Churchill's occupation of a liminal position, especially in view of the issues arising from Rabillard's comments, which follow?

Rabillard is generally supportive of Churchill's work, as her editing of a book comprising a contemporary collection of essays on the playwright would attest. However, in the introduction she has cited some essays in the volume and their claim that Churchill and her work now have canonical status, to suggest that perhaps the work is less subversive or transgressive than is typically portrayed.

Rabillard writes:

These readings prompt us to re-evaluate the prevailing emphasis upon the transgressive character of Churchill's work; and imply that an element of



dramatic conservatism may account at least in part for her warm embrace by theatrical and academic institutions. (10)

While she has been careful not to overstate the case for Churchill's "dramatic conservatism," it is important to address some pragmatic concerns here that can accompany canonisation for the female playwright. In doing so, I am responding to considerations raised by Rabillard's point, rather than exclusively to her text *per se*.

The most transparent of these is an understandable feminist suspicion of female success within mainstream institutions, which rests firstly on an assumption that the existing system is conservative rather than progressive, and that the individual is more likely to adapt to, or be used by, the system than vice-versa. It suggests some rather confronting questions. Does success indicate that the woman in question has compromised her own value system in order to court acceptance? Does it imply that she has the 'wrong' values? In Churchill's case, does it suggest an individual whose undoubted enjoyment of commercial artistic success fails to live up to the subversive, socialist politics suggested by her plays, raising an even more fundamental question? If so, does it matter, and if it matters, what does this suggest in terms of the relationship between interpretation of the playwright and interpretation of the play?

I have already suggested that, given her resignation from the Royal Court Theatre Board on the grounds of principle, along with conclusions drawn from a detailed interrogation of the works themselves, Churchill's conservatism is a difficult argument to sustain. In addition I have argued that an increasing

reticence to politically self-categorise on Churchill's part may have been misconstrued as a lack of conviction. Nevertheless, the journalistic tendency to attribute her gifts to the influences of other writers, or to brilliant direction and translation in performance, along with the contention that she may have owed her discovery of feminism to younger, more militant feminists, all conspire to create her as unoriginal.<sup>35</sup>

In pragmatic terms alone I find a reserve in fully supporting Churchill's success to be disquieting. There is a strong argument to be made for promoting change from the margin for a number of reasons, not least of which is the degree of freedom that it offers and the supportive community of like-minded others that it provides. At the same time I would argue that the consolidation of success from a more central position complements rather than confronts the objectives of the margin. Most importantly, if Churchill has been able to enjoy a degree of establishment success, the possibility for offering alternative theatrical form and content to more substantial audiences than the Fringe is able to attract should not be squandered.

The question remains, is dramatic conservatism the reason Churchill seems to have been able to attract academic and theatrical acceptance over a substantial period of time, as Rabillard suggests, or has the perceived acceptance caused a reassessment of the transgressive nature of her work, and something of a backlash? In posing this question, as argued at the outset of this chapter, I wonder whether it is not possible to be transgressive, female *and* (ultimately) accepted within such circles. Rabillard implies that it may not be possible:

This canonicity in itself introduces a new set of critical questions: about her claim to a subversive, marginal, leftist or feminist position; regarding the pedagogy that had framed her for the academic canon; concerning the shifts and continuities in reception that have sustained her popularity over a considerable span of years, and in the rather different contexts of British, American and Canadian theatres and classrooms; and in relation to the variations and valances of performance as certain of her plays are revised, revived, and re-presented on stages or in media very different from their originating productions. (9)

Rabillard's statement "regarding the pedagogy that had framed her for the academic canon" contains an assumption that the pedagogy to which she refers has been somewhat unitary and immutable. There is an inference that Churchill has neither critically engaged with it, nor been an active, independent agent with respect to her artistic development. The descriptor applied to her work, "elements of dramatic conservatism," further assumes that "the pedagogy that framed her for the canon" was itself conservative, and not the same as that of which Rabillard is a part.

I would suggest that the pedagogy that was dominant as Churchill began her writing career, and that which 'warmly embraced' her, might well be somewhat different entities. It now draws its wisdom from a growing number of female academics, as well as from a generation raised in a society that is more educated in relation to women's rights, abilities and potentials than that of previous generations. It is therefore not surprising that there is disparity between views expressed in the early reviews of her work, which tended to diminish her efforts, and those written in more recent years. These later reviews have been influenced by a more enlightened social climate towards women and their perspectives than that which existed prior to Second Wave Feminism. In addition,

earlier ideas of what constituted the ‘well-made play’ have given way to a more liberal perspective, due perhaps in part, remembering Aston’s comments, to Churchill’s influence. Churchill hasn’t compromised her work; however, attitudes have changed. While early criticisms negatively focussed as much on her use of form as on content,<sup>36</sup> a comparison between early works and those written more recently would imply an increasingly provocative approach in both these areas, suggesting that her work has continued to interrogate as her career has progressed.

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The socio-political and academic milieu that frames the pedagogy has changed significantly since 1960, particularly with regard to how women currently represent themselves and are represented in academia. This cannot fail to have had an impact, both on the way in which Churchill and her work is viewed, and on how she continues to raise questions about the positions of women through her writing. While the relationship is neither direct, simple nor easy to discern, this will continue to modify the ways in which her work is represented by others.

Currently it would appear that there are competing pedagogies that are in the process of *reframing* the canon.<sup>38</sup> The nature of the theoretical premises from which Rabillard operates influences an understanding of the political nature of the way in which she has represented Churchill in the excerpt quoted. The word ‘conservatism’ for example, is politically loaded in a negative way when applied to artistic endeavour. A charge of conservatism might be based on a suspicion of political compromise with regard to the theatrical establishment on Churchill’s

part, and perhaps it is this that prompts mild censure. However, the playwright may need to consciously negotiate a place within this political environment in order to speak to an audience that might not otherwise be ready to listen.

It is important in understanding this issue to recognise that the representation of Churchill and “her claim to a subversive, marginal, leftist or feminist position” may shape expectations with regard her work, at least by those familiar with such discussions. Secondly, as flagged at the outset, what Churchill has claimed for herself and that which others have claimed in relation to her work may be quite different. I have already argued that Churchill has been suspicious of categorisation and is especially careful in attempting to avoid limiting and static definitions of the premises from which she operates. She points out in an interview with Linda Fitzsimmons:

If someone says ‘a socialist playwright’ or ‘a feminist playwright’ that can suggest to some people something rather narrow which doesn’t cover as many things as you might be thinking about.” (Fitzsimmons 89)

Even so, her work has continued to be couched in these terms and perhaps it is this kind of representation as an entrée to her work that has accounted for her popularity as a feminist writer over the years.<sup>39</sup> A perception of Churchill’s acceptance within mainstream academic and theatrical institutions by those of us who like to think of ourselves as “subversive, marginal, leftist or feminist” may be now beginning to actively work against her credibility in some quarters. Her movement away from readily categorised, polarised political schools of thought with her later plays risks being interpreted as conservatism rather than as an indication of the increasing level of complexity in our world and how it might

now be dramatically interrogated. A review of the texts of these plays suggests that this is not the case and that in fact her work is, if anything, characterised by change.<sup>40</sup> Again Aston has concluded:

If there is an underlying “shape” to her theatre and an overall “message” then perhaps these lie in Churchill’s shape-shifting skills and interests; her ability to make visible to the spectator actual and potential dangers of an unequal, *manmade*, damaged world, in which women are frequently figured as the most vulnerable and the most at risk.<sup>41</sup>

### **Advocacy**

I now turn briefly to a discussion of the role of advocacy because it is an important aspect of canon-making and it is informative to consider the differences between interpretations applied to the advocacy offered on Churchill’s behalf to that of her male contemporaries. In legal and paralegal contexts, representation by another can strengthen one’s position in the adversarial contest. Advocacy is a particular form of representation intended to protect the interests of the represented party; however, this person’s subject/speaking position may be simultaneously weakened. This is in the understanding that for advocacy a benevolent form of silencing may be taking place, or in more equitable situations, the advocate speaks in place of another’s voluntary silence. In addition, when someone represents another, a covert representation of the advocate inevitably occurs. Both the advocate and the person on whose behalf s/he is advocating benefit, because the more credible the advocate is, the more effective the advocacy.

Max Stafford-Clark has acted as Churchill’s advocate on occasions, or has been placed in this position by interviewers, and as revealed in Chapter Two, their

association is periodically invoked as having benefited her professional standing.<sup>42</sup> In the process of reviewing *Blue Heart*, Gerard Raymond secured an interview with Stafford-Clark regarding the playwright's work. Here, Raymond reports the director's comments: " "It would have taken Ibsen three hours to do the same thing," Stafford-Clark claims" (146). Stafford-Clark is referring to the first of the one-act plays in "Blue Heart" namely "Heart's Desire" in which Raymond describes form and content as building "a complex and disturbing portrait of a damaged family" (146).

The implications of who speaks for whom and whether this results, on the whole, in political and professional gain or otherwise, are complex.<sup>43</sup> In this instance, Stafford-Clark linked Churchill to the canon through a favourable comparison with Ibsen. However, he did so in an artistic context where the abbreviated form of the one-act play has not been traditionally valued in the same way as a 'full-length play' using a classical model based on the Greek Tragedy, or more recently on Shakespearean conventions. When I read the review I speculated on the way in which the reviewer had interpreted and effectively placed a proviso on the director's words. I wondered again at the use of the word "claims," for instance; a word that raises a question mark as to the credibility of Stafford-Clark's statement, and what this was saying about the critic's attitude to the playwright's canonical status.

Matt Wolf interviewed another associate of Churchill's who reported what he saw to be her own attitude to the canon: " "She doesn't have a sense of herself as an author in some canon in English Literature," says Wing-Davey, who has

known the playwright some 25 years. “It’s more egalitarian than that. She is a writer and that has enabled her to have a sense of self – it’s not the most important thing every day of her life” (“True Blue” 52).

In terms of credibility, one who has known the playwright for twenty-five years would be expected to provide a more accurate representation of Churchill than the reviewer, adding weight to his own subsequent production of meaning.<sup>44</sup> And yet again I wondered – at the suggestion of Churchill’s egalitarianism, the ‘sense of self’ that she had apparently gained through her writing and the assessment that the writing was not the most important thing in her life. Has the same been said of Pinter or Ayckbourn, for example? Unnervingly, the descriptors seemed to tap into the usual stereotypes with regard to woman’s work. Does the advocacy in this case diminish the writer’s standing or render it more ‘acceptable’ given her gender, because she is seen as lacking avaricious ambition? Even if the observation proved to be largely benevolent, as it was no doubt intended, the statement as it has been edited and presented in the article, undermines her status in the broader artistic context. This is given the valued aspects of artistic identity based on a conception of desired levels of commitment to the art, placing it above all else, if one is to be considered an artist of canonical standing. In addition, Churchill has mentioned on more than one occasion (1988, 1989) that she steered away from the semi-autobiographical writing that was prevalent for those women who were writing novels, when she began writing plays.<sup>45</sup> So the idea that her writing primarily functions as a way of enabling her



to gain a ‘sense of self’ would seem to run counter to one of her core artistic values.

But if representation-as-advocacy by friends and colleagues is complex, where other forms of representation are employed, such as that undertaken by theatre critics, as outlined above, the position may be even less clear-cut. The interpretation of another’s motivation through an identification (or alienation) process by the representing party can involve a conflict of interest, transference, or even more simply, genuine misunderstanding.

In theatre, the writer’s intention often pragmatically functions as being of less importance than our own reception and conversion, or outright production, of meaning.<sup>46</sup> Our subjective response to a performance is not only a starting point, but arguably the most important criterion for evaluating the success or otherwise of the work.<sup>47</sup> Yet, this paradigm implies that the critic, the audience’s designated representative, experiences a representative subjective response. A quick survey of the demographics of senior newspaper critics in a Western artistic context suggests that *his* (in the main) subjectivity will be influenced by his experience as an educated, middle-class, white man privileged in a patriarchal system and sub-system, and therefore markedly *unrepresentative* of majority experience.<sup>48</sup> Given mainstream journalistic career incentives to conform to a well-established, conservative, dare I say entrenched, world-view; to what extent does the critic’s response embrace this political imperative in evaluating a performance on behalf of a conservative readership?

Producers and directors may also fall into this position. It is useful to periodically remind oneself of the inevitable and sometimes deliberately calculated distortion of interpretation that is introduced with each intervening participant in the process. Critics selectively write as if the playwright has major responsibility for the way in which the performance ultimately emerges. I use the word 'selectively' to suggest that a by-product of crediting or diminishing the playwright-as-artistic-force in any review of his or her work, as it emerges in performance, will occur in the process.

An awareness of this fact by the reviewer is likely to impact on the way in which the writer, director and actors are variously credited for the success or otherwise of the performance. And yet, Matt Wolf, in his review of *Blue Heart*, suggests that Churchill has made her own position clear on this when she says: "Plays are about the whole event that they are" ("True Blue" 51). This implies that she perceives the performance as a Gestalt, which involves and implicates, in terms of ultimate artistic responsibility, all participants in the process. Is this why she resists speaking on behalf of not only herself, but also the play? Other playwrights are not so reticent. Churchill's quote above comes from a segment in which Wolf compares Churchill with contemporaries such as David Hare "who is now penning political threnodies (*Via Dolorosa*) for himself to appear in, and as of April will have had four plays on Broadway in the last 13 months" and Tom Stoppard "a likely Academy Award nominee for his screenplay (with Marc Norman) *Shakespeare in Love*". Wolf goes on to say:

Churchill, by contrast, shuns the spotlight with the same avidity with which she refuses to write for the marketplace. (At a rare Q&A several years back at the National's Cottesloe Theatre, during the London run of her Joycean fairy-tale fantasia, *The Skriker*, Churchill sat away from the microphone, as if willing herself not to be heard.) "I'm not inclined with any of my plays to say, 'This is about that,'" she told me before the play opened at New York's Public Theatre in May 1996. "Plays are about the whole event that they are." So perhaps it's appropriate that Churchill's writing almost always constitutes its own quietly charged event. ("True Blue" 51)

Even so, the playwright who would have the work 'speak for itself', while admirable in terms of artistic ethical sensibility, might in the final analysis, be perceived as either politically naïve or reactionary. Alternatively, might this stance, paradoxically, be viewed as *revolutionary* in an economy of acquisition and consumerism in which collecting interviews could be construed as acquisitive? In the absence of an interview by the playwright herself, the reviewer may resort to contacting her associates, who inevitably introduce their own 'spin' on the interpretive line. In the absence of *anyone* to interview, the reviewer may experience a negative emotional response that colours the interpretation of the work itself.

### **Conclusion**

Churchill's canonisation is, I believe, more complicated than it first appears and is something of a mixed blessing that impedes her reputation in some circles as much as it enhances it in others. The difficulty for the playwright in this regard is that she has very little control over the process. Canon making is in the hands of those who have the power to comment upon and influence the reception of works both in educational settings and in the broader public arena. Her

positioning is made even more complex by the challenges that the canon itself has been facing in the past twenty years in which its relevance has been called into question and its attempts at inclusiveness are necessarily viewed with suspicion given its traditionally narrow and exclusive membership. Yet it persists as an institution that is viewed with affection and which continues to promote the works of those playwrights that are held up as examples of excellence and uniqueness. This would not be a problem if the canon reflected the diversity of community in equitable proportions, and if all members of the canon were treated with equal deference for their different but significant contributions to the art form.

The future may see sufficient change in this area to render the point no longer relevant. One of the canon's problems, and perhaps strengths, is its slowness in responding to new trends, and this inevitably arises from one of its central defining features. Jonathan Brody Kramnick has identified this important defining factor as "reception (securing) value, but only over time" (1099). As a result, our current social awareness may be reflected in the canon in the future once proven by time. For Churchill this means that her own status vis-à-vis the canon is not yet established.

In the next three chapters I will investigate three early, but in my view, significant short plays from 1972. They are significant, not necessarily because of the way in which they are crafted, but because of the clues that they provide in relation to her developing political (feminist) awareness and sensibility. This was at a time prior to the influences of companies such as Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment that are commonly held to have shaped not only her work, but also her

radical politics. In addition, even though written over thirty years ago, each is relevant to contemporary world events and the ongoing struggle for marginal voices to be clearly heard.

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<sup>1</sup> A quick Internet search provides frequent references to Churchill and the canon. Sheila Rabillard has referred to Churchill's canonical membership in *Essays on Caryl Churchill: Contemporary Representations*, and Susan Bennett has referred to her membership of the feminist canon in the same volume.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Kramnick. Kramnick ends his article by writing, "The canon's anachronism in the twentieth century should not, however, obscure its origins in the eighteenth. The dusk of the canon throws light on its making" (1099).

<sup>3</sup> Examples include *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, *The Judge's Wife*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud 9*, *Top Girls*, *The Skriker*, and *Blue Kettle*.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Churchill says: "Playwriting will change not just because more women are doing it but because more women are doing other things as well" (Fitzsimmons 90).

<sup>5</sup> For an analogous situation, see Jean I. Marsden's article on "Mary Pix's *Ibrahim*: The Woman Writer as Commercial Playwright." Marsden argues that success as a playwright for Pix may be the reason she has been overlooked for consideration by feminist scholars for whom marginality appears to be an important consideration. In the same edition, editor Alexander Pettit points out that the irony of this position should not be lost on anyone (118).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed in some respects the canon might be seen as a mechanism by which subversive content is controlled. On the Australian Broadcasting Commission radio program *Australia Talks Back* broadcast on Radio National on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2004, discussions about the need to bring the classics back into schools focussed predominantly on a Eurocentric male canon. One caller expressed his concern that this reactionary trend may lead to the promotion of a particular type of conservative thinking.

<sup>7</sup> See Kramnick's discussion of the origins of the canon which was subject to debate from the outset, and which called for the establishment of a "masculine" canon (1089). Willie van Peer's claim that "For the past decade, discussion concerning the literary canon has been going on in 'political' terms" (i.e. since the mid eighties) precedes an analysis of works in and out of the canon as a vehicle to defend the legitimacy of the canon. In TDR Comment Richard Schechner quotes T. S. Eliot from 1919 in which Eliot points out the effects of introducing new works to the canon: "The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered [...] that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (12).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Valerie Babb and Gay Gibson Cima.

<sup>9</sup> This is also relevant for those productions which scholars may not have had an opportunity to view. Ronald Tavel cites Ruby Cohn as confessing to having seen nothing of Maria Irene Fornes staged (25). In footnote 26 he rather ungraciously suggests that Cohn misconstrues most of the texts that she analyses.

<sup>10</sup> While this is the case within schools and universities, there has been a parallel trend to make his works accessible to a much broader market. In contemporary parlance, Shakespeare is a highly successful example of the economic value of brand recognition. The commercial aspect of maintaining Shakespeare's popularity through the film industry contributes to his ongoing entrenchment in the canon. In an article in *Theatre Survey* titled "Godard and Lear: Trashing the Can(n)on" Susan Bennett discusses Jean-Luc Godard's film version of *King Lear* and the attempted trashing of a nostalgic view of the bard where we "look back at the play(s) to see how much we are like the past and at the same time to see how much less than the past we are (...) it is not only similitude that is claimed but also a corrective and meliorative function that is sought." She concludes, "Public notoriety is by far the more crucial element for big-time show business success, even though such notoriety does not require any genuinely significant artistic

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achievement. The big time only calls for striking and colorful forms of public visibility. Within the contemporary culture industry Shakespeare retains currency because certain aspects of his reputation have perennial interest for provoking journalistic scandal. The transmutation of Shakespeare's value into cash receipts is not a simple matter of putting a quality product on the market" (19).

<sup>11</sup> Also see Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose who cite the battle for the power to define the canon as the power to own and define the culture itself (xix).

<sup>12</sup> The abstract which introduces the article states: "In this article, Tavel argues that the commercial American theatre, endorsed by the American Educational system and theatrical establishment, has never nurtured a vision of the scripted play as art – and has consequently produced no single example of it. The nation's genuine playwrights who saw their tasks as makers of art have, he claims, been neglected throughout American history, and left to wither in the wings" (18).

<sup>13</sup> The play is also titled *The Man Who Had Three Arms*.

<sup>14</sup> Capital is also seen to be an issue of importance in terms of subject matter it seems, especially as the separation between social class and affluence is blurred in the modern western world. It is interesting that Churchill's play, *Serious Money* has also been so successful in economic terms. (Roberts 201-202).

<sup>15</sup> For an interesting discussion on the ephemeral nature of performance and the way in which writing about it fundamentally alters the event itself, see Peggy Phelan's analysis in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan suggests that: "The challenge raised by ontological claims of performance for writing is to re-mark again the performative possibilities of writing itself. The act of writing towards disappearance, rather than the act of writing toward preservation, must remember that the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself" (148).

<sup>16</sup> *Changing Stages*. The specific episode to which I refer, discussing Caryl Churchill was shown in Perth Western Australia on Channel 2 on June 28<sup>th</sup> 2001, 7.30pm.

<sup>17</sup> Her comment was extracted from an interview shown on screen to have taken place in 1988.

<sup>18</sup> The dearth of female playwrights in the series is puzzling given Max Stafford-Clark's comments in an interview with Tony Dunn quoted in Chapter Two in which he states: "Simply, the most interesting work at the moment – in the personal as opposed to the epic area – is by women. Feminism has, without doubt, been the most influential and powerful political movement of my time at the Court" (139). I would argue that the gains made at the time of the interview had been somewhat eroded by the time the documentary went to air.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Bennett said in an interview excerpt on *The Changing Stages* episode that featured Churchill, that the play resulted from his attempt to imagine England as a public school, but also that he just wanted to write an amusing play about a school.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion on the ambiguous attribution of universality/particularity with which acceptance of this work into the canon was accompanied see Robin Bernstein's article on Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

<sup>21</sup> Churchill was associated with the Royal Court Theatre over a number of years in her capacity of playwright and member of the Council, one of a small minority of women in these capacities associated with this establishment. For more detail, see Philip Roberts' account in *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*.

<sup>22</sup> See her interview with Jackie Kay in 1989 where she discusses her love of finding the form that best expresses content (41).

<sup>23</sup> Caryl Churchill in her letter of resignation from the Royal Court Theatre Council.

<sup>24</sup> Although I have attempted to contact Caryl Churchill in the course of writing this thesis, I have been unsuccessful in these attempts.

<sup>25</sup> In *The Royal Court and the Modern Stage* Philip Roberts also calls Churchill "a writer who was to become one of the Court's greatest" (78). As discussed in this chapter, such 'embrace' by the theatrical establishment forms the basis of Sheila Rabillard's question about Churchill's claim to a subversive position.

<sup>26</sup> [www.LitEncyc.com](http://www.LitEncyc.com) <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=878> (1). The article is not dated, but the text mentions the '9/11' attacks, suggesting that it was written after this time.

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<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.womenwritrs.net/editorials/PriceEd1.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Reported by Matt Wolf in "Coming Apart as an Art Form," Start Page 7.

<sup>29</sup> "Save Hall!" *The Spectator*; London; Oct 4, 1997, start page 55-56.

<sup>30</sup> My emphasis. Goodman does however provide the caveat that "... it is not always healthy to legitimize concepts of canonization with nods in that counter-critical direction" (Rabillard 70). The idea of creating alternative canons may be as unsatisfactory as that of simply adding examples of work that has been neglected in the canon in the past. For a discussion of concerns with this latter approach see, for example, Babb and Gibson Cima.

<sup>31</sup> Sheila Rabillard (9), Susan Bennett (35), and Lizbeth Goodman (70), in Rabillard, mention the inclusion of her work in the canon, but each indicates some concern with regard to this.

<sup>32</sup> To obtain an overview in this instance I typed "Caryl Churchill canon" into a Google Search Engine.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Jeffrey D. Mason's reading list for "a general, basic play-reading list that I suggest for students pursuing serious post-baccalaureate study in theatre arts, and more specifically for PhD students who'd like to work with me on the literature portion of the comprehensive exams at the University of Oregon. The list provides an overview and does not go into any depth in any area or playwright." This list is reasonably extensive, including all thirty six of Shakespeare's plays, two of Caryl Churchill's and pre-empted by a caveat with regard to the canon: "... even in the case of, for example, Sophocles or Shakespeare, we should not accept their canonization on face value" (n. pag.).

<sup>34</sup> See Mason's survey of playwrights included in university courses in the United States of America, under the heading "Playwrights traditionally covered in university theatre survey courses".

<sup>35</sup> Michelene Wandor argues: "For Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems and Nell Dunn... the real change in their writing careers came at the beginning of the 1970s, spurred by more militant, younger women. ... Caryl Churchill had had a number of plays broadcast on radio, and after the production of *Owners* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972, became more and more influenced by the kinds of discussions and ways of working practised by *Monstrous Regiment* and *Joint Stock*. Her successful working relationship with director Max Stafford-Clark has given her a commanding position, with the kind of access to production at the Royal Court that enabled her to develop steadily as a stylist" (*Drama Today* 50-51).

<sup>36</sup> See excerpts from Michael Billington's (*The Guardian*) review of *Owners* (Fitzsimmons 20); and B.A. Young's (*Financial Times*) of the same play (Fitzsimmons 20-21). The same reviewers (still working for the same papers) argue along similar lines in their reviews of *Cloud 9*, seven years later.

<sup>37</sup> A comparison between *Owners* produced in 1972, for example, and plays such as *Blue Kettle* which deals with language as a virus, *The Skriker*, and more recently, *Far Away*, show a clear and continuing movement away from conventional form and content.

<sup>38</sup> See for example "Questioning the Canon in a Multicultural Classroom" Valerie Babb and Gay Gibson Cima. The debate surrounding the canon has caused its rethinking and gradual re-framing as its exclusivity has been called into question, as discussed earlier it adjusts to survive.

<sup>39</sup> She is also applauded from a post-colonial perspective. In his book, published in 2004, Awam Amkpa still presents her work in terms of subverting conventional modes of representation in order to expose the legacy of colonialism in *Cloud 9* (144-160).

<sup>40</sup> I refer, for example, to plays such as *Mad Forest*, *The Skriker*, *Blue Heart*, and *Far Away*.

<sup>41</sup> From a proposal for a "Between Nature Paper" titled "A 'Damaged' World and Gender Politics: Caryl Churchill's 'The Skriker'" published at <http://domino.lanccs.ac.uk/csec/bn.NSF/0/3512fb501801359e802569df005d6c80?OpenDocu...>

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter Two of this thesis for examples.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, what would Caryl Churchill think of people speaking on her behalf if she feels speaking on her own behalf is too limiting?

<sup>44</sup> Here I am using the phrase "production of meaning" in reference to the Mapping metaphor.

<sup>45</sup> Caryl Churchill interviewed by Geraldine Cousin ("Common Imagination" 16); Interview with Jackie Kay (41).

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<sup>46</sup> This may be the reason that writers such as Brecht and Beckett (notably) directed their own work, thus decreasing the potential risk of distortion. However the critic still stands at the end of the process to interpret and validate, or not, what has been seen.

<sup>47</sup> Peggy Phelan argues for the validity of the subjective experience in *Unmarked* (148).

<sup>48</sup> In Linda Fitzsimmons's *File on Churchill*, which provides an overview of reviews on Churchill's work up until the time of publishing in 1989, almost all of the reviews offered from newspapers were written by men.



## **Chapter Four**

### ***The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution: Churchill's Exploration of Algerian Decolonisation Viewed in a Protean Contemporary Context***

In 1972 Caryl Churchill wrote *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, a stage play based on Algeria's struggle in the nineteen fifties against French Occupation.<sup>1</sup> Many of the characters were inspired by case studies in Frantz Fanon's important text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and the central character is based on Fanon himself. The text raises pertinent questions about the strategic application of power by oppressive political forces, the mechanisms of which are particularly visible in times of crisis, and about the forms and consequences of retaliation exercised by oppressed peoples. In this script Churchill addresses acts of terrorism as part of a continuum of oppression and retaliation, the dynamic of which results in pathological behaviour in both the colonised and the coloniser.

In the contemporary context there are inevitable reminders of ongoing global reactions following the rise of 'terror' and 'counter terror.' This association has particular relevance to the claims put forward in this thesis, and demonstrates within the current global political context, the central premise described under the section headed "Representation: Process Rather than Product" in Chapter One. Following Jacques Derrida's death in 2004, Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University, Paul Patton, was interviewed by Margaret Throsby at The Australian Broadcasting Commission's Classic FM station. He pointed out the Derridean perspective that the meanings of texts shift in different times. In this thesis I have described my understanding of the provisional character of representation and a contemporary reading of

this early Churchill play dramatically illustrates the manner in which meaning is derived through the interaction between the text and the social context in which it is received.

The complex forces that operate in terms of the exercise of power within a coloniser/colonised situation have resonance both in Churchill's text and in the context of purportedly increasing 'terror' attacks, globally. The script, citing instances of torture and terrorist bombings and their disparate constructions by coloniser and colonised, above all submits that the dynamics of power are played out largely in the arena of representation. It demonstrates that the symbolic employment of power occurs before, during and after its physical realisation. The interaction between power that is demonstrated through physical violence and that produced via language is shown to be symbiotic inasmuch as the physical imposition of force establishes supremacy while the rhetoric of truth 'justifies' the use of institutionalised violence. Thus force is argued as an indispensable and fundamental strategy used to reify and rationalise the manner in which the truth is couched. In her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* Elaine Scarry argues this point with regard to the relationship of the interrogation process to torture (18-21). Drawing on Amnesty International documents across a range of countries, she illustrates that there is a reciprocal link between the representation of power and its physical implementation:

At particular moments when there is within society a crisis of belief – that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation – the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of “realness” and “certainty”. (14)

In the aftermath of what was described in English speaking societies as “September Eleventh, the day the world was changed forever,” there was a tendency by the Western conservative presses to interpret the attack on the World Trade Centre as the point at which this particular historical chapter commenced. The assault continued to be portrayed as unprovoked and inexplicable, and dissenting debate in the popular press was discouraged.<sup>2</sup> In association with this there has been an almost tangible pressure to move away from the confusion of complexity into the clarity of simplicity, that is, to perceive the events purely in binary terms. This has involved a strategic conflation of disparate elements – the terrorist with the country that harbours the terrorist, with the race and religion of the terrorist, *his* posited disregard of women, children and the innocent, and with President Bush’s ‘axis of evil’.<sup>3</sup> In the process, individuals have been tactically brought in and out of focus as an acknowledgment of suffering at the human level from one side has been used to legitimise the infliction of often unacknowledged suffering on the other side. Integral to this binaric conceptualisation is the way in which a single subjectivity is assumed, and race, gender and religion are covertly invoked to anchor easy preconceptions and reinforce existing power relationships.<sup>4</sup>

Churchill’s text explores precisely these representational tactics in satirical fashion for a historical situation that bears some resemblances to the current conflict. For example she brings into visibility the processes used to interpret events following retaliatory aggression, in this case by Algeria towards France as an oppressive colonial power. I have drawn the link with the USA example to emphasise that the strategies of representation in

conflictual international contexts have persisted in remarkably similar forms to those identified thirty years ago in Churchill's text, and, before that, almost fifty years ago in Fanon's.<sup>5</sup> They would therefore appear to be remarkably resilient.

The strategic employment of the language that brings people in and out of focus is identified and subverted in Churchill's text. This is achieved through the playwright's recognition and description of the techniques of representation employed by powerful interests to maintain their economic, social and political advantages in corrupt circumstances. But of central importance to the play is the fact that the playwright has resisted an attempt to provide easy answers to the complex questions of power and oppression. The text recognises the binary representational strategies that become particularly visible in times of political crisis, and demonstrates how for the purposes of a clear identification of 'sides,' allies and enemies, complex individual allegiances are forced into containment under the procrustean group profile. However, its main emphasis is on the difficulties that this containment presents at the human level, and it is here that the main emphasis of this chapter is placed. The difficulties at the level of the individual are linked to the broader social context and Churchill uses mental illness as a trope for the pathology of the colonial society.

Following Fanon's original observations (*Wretched* Ch. 5), Churchill shows that where the individual is unable to reconcile his or her position within the nominated group, the person's behaviour, rather than the system itself, is construed as pathological or disordered. In *Hospital*, each of the characters, whether coloniser or colonised, possibly with the exception of

Fanon, manifest psychological disorders in a political environment that is itself dysfunctional in its violent oppression of the major portion of the Algerian population. In exploring the effects of a pathological environment on the individual, Churchill has drawn on the writings of R.D. Laing, notably *Sanity, Madness and the Family*,<sup>6</sup> and Fanon's exposé of colonial Algeria in the process of violent decolonisation. The script contains both familial-psychological perspectives, as she explores Laing's question regarding the influence of the family on mental illness, and Fanon's somewhat broader perspective as to the political and social influences that produce it.

Privileged French Colonials and oppressed Algerian Nationals are placed oppositionally within the text, with the historical Fanon as French war hero, highly-educated 'black' man and, at the time of the play, covert supporter of the Algerian revolutionaries, cast in a liminal and therefore threatening and threatened political position. To complicate matters further, Churchill has created the character of a young French woman, Françoise, whose position is similarly ambiguous in terms of her place within the colonial system. She is akin to what Albert Memmi called "the colonizer who refuses" (85), in her reluctance to participate in the inequity of the colonial system. When viewed in binary terms this is a seemingly incommensurable stance because as one constructed as Coloniser, she is structurally positioned to benefit from the colony's social and economic privileges whether she wishes to do so or not. However, as the script progresses it becomes apparent that she can be viewed as a character on whom are inscribed the interlocking forces of coloniser/colonised. Trapped in the role imposed upon her through the institution of the family by the patriarchal colonial society, she discovers that

the only way to reconcile the conflicting information of what she sees and hears and what she is expected to believe, is to create her own reality in 'madness.' She becomes, in effect, the receptacle for the unacknowledged truths of her parents, and on the broader level those of the colonial society. This is a position that she shares with the colonised Algerians, for whom the metaphor of the colonial family is lampooned in the text (118). As the coloniser's representative of the next generation, Françoise functions in the script as the damaged embodiment of the future manifestation of these discarded truths.

The action takes place in the Psychiatric Department of the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria around 1956, just five years prior to that country's independence after one hundred and fifty years of French colonial rule. The Psychiatric Department, headed by Fanon, treats both Algerian revolutionaries and French colonials, creating an ideal situation in which the broader social turbulence can be played out within the microcosm of the hospital. In 1956 Fanon was becoming involved with the Algerian independence struggle, and while this is not overtly portrayed in the text, it directs his character's orientation. The ten scenes move between the various psychologically damaged parties from both sides of the conflict, and a sense of continuity is maintained through Fanon's presence in all but one of the scenes.

Fanon is represented as an observer of few words whose perspective is implied, rather than stated, through strategically placed questions and silences skilfully contextualised in relation to the surrounding dialogue. His physical presence and relative absence of dialogue become a benchmark against which the other characters' words are measured.

By creating a protagonist of few words in a particularly articulate play, Churchill has employed a potentially dangerous strategy which in the hands of a less skilled writer could effectively ‘silence’ him from an audience’s perspective. In the translation from script to performance, issues of casting and interpretation of the script through the actors’ bodies is of prime importance, and is particularly critical in Fanon’s case. The casting of an actor capable of transmitting power through silence and physical presence is critical if the political potency of the text is to be fully realised. In a twenty-first century context of unstable subjectivities, the translation of the text, particularly in terms of race and gender, further compounds the level of complexity. The actor’s body can no longer be assumed to be an unambiguous signifier as the shifting composition of diverse audiences impacts upon how theatrical signs are read, and this is of particular importance where the play is attempting to disrupt facile assumptions about the interaction between race, gender and colonisation.

Churchill’s stage directions instruct: “Fanon is black and about 30. He is head of the psychiatric department at the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria. He wears white” (97).<sup>7</sup> However, a 2002 reading of these signs may no longer impact upon a predominantly white audience as they might have done in 1972. A contemporary staging might benefit from an alternative casting method, given changing representations of racial differences in the Western media informed by the intervening histories of decolonisation, significant participation on the world stage of important non-European figures, and the ongoing struggle for social, political and economic equality by African Americans.

One approach discussed by Joanne Tompkins has been ‘the staging of several actors to play the same character, various aspects of one subject’ (“Breaching” 502). She argues that this strategy provides the colonised subject with the opportunity to physically articulate the many applications, interpretations, meanings and values of subjectivity and identity politics. She suggests that the physicalisation of the psychological demonstrates the difficulty of moving from one subject position to another, and points out that when multiple casting for a single character is used, as the colonised subject moves from one location to another, the abjected traces of the various locations are revealed. This confronts a difficulty which she argues is not accounted for by Bhabha, for whom the undermining of the coloniser/colonised binary provides a fluidity of boundaries which enables both colonised and coloniser to access that which is generally considered the realm of the other.

From a purely textual perspective, Churchill’s decision to re-create Fanon as a man of few words provides a structural differentiation within the play between Fanon and the other characters so that his silences actually become a focus of audience attention and interpretation. At the same time Fanon is accorded the strategically ‘invisible,’ almost omniscient position of surveillance, subjectivity and authority so that the audience is encouraged to identify and align with his point of view.

Tompkins has pointed out that “usually, the actor who watches holds the power, although the voyeuristic activity also focuses the binocular lens back on the potentially invasive activities of anthropology and various sciences” (“Spectacular” 46). In this instance, the objects of the



anthropological gaze are the European characters with Fanon as the viewing subject, even as the European characters subject Fanon himself to the anthropological gaze. This presents a doubling effect with Fanon as subject watching the process of his own objectification, and the audience joining with him and then watching him as he watches his own objectification.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, however, Fanon's subjectivity and authority are clearly marked from an audience perspective, so that the gaze is always directed through him, at the other characters. Since this subjectivity in Western playwrighting (and anthropology) had been traditionally assigned to a white male positioned as the 'colourless,' genderless 'norm,' Churchill demonstrates a relatively early understanding of the necessity of marking whiteness as a racial category if it is to be effectively interrogated.<sup>9</sup>

Fanon holds the moral high ground in the script. This position is partly achieved through judiciously placed, penetrating questions which enable him to direct the flow of the dialogue, and partly by allowing outrageous racist statements and inferences made about his character and the indigenous Algerians by the European characters to go unchecked. These insults are importantly countered by dialogue in subsequent scenes. However, the guarded restraint that he demonstrates in responding to the other characters' verbal abuse suggests an implicit silencing of one who is seen by a ruling class to have 'risen above his station.' For example, in Scene Two, a fifteen-year-old Algerian boy is brought into the hospital after having killed "[h]is friend and his friend's mother and sister" (118). Fanon's subordinate, a young European doctor, uses the opportunity to present a pseudo-scientific diatribe against 'the African' whom he describes as "a lobotomised European [which]

accounts for the impulsive aggression, the laziness, the shallowness of effect, the inability to grasp a whole concept – the African character” (119). Fanon does not respond to any of these racial slurs, preferring to continue reading the police report that has accompanied the young prisoner, and finally simply stating, “Shall we go and see the patient now?” to which the young doctor responds, “You didn’t take anything personally did you?” (119). In a later scene the colleague’s behaviour becomes more overtly threatening as he talks about the possibility of transferring into police work. He expresses concern about what he perceives as Fanon’s sympathetic attitude towards the Algerian patients, saying “I’m not threatening you, a friend’s a friend, but it does worry me to see the way your mind’s working” (133). This is contextualised in a scene consisting entirely of a monologue by the Young Doctor with Fanon present but silent. The effect is satirical and disturbing, demonstrating in unambiguous terms the way in which dangerous narratives of truths are manufactured in the absence of external stimuli.

The perspective of the audience (or reader) is manipulated to shift alternately between participant and observer, identifying with Fanon as protagonist and then watching as his position is undermined. Within the ‘world’ of the play, the privileges accorded him by virtue of his position in the hospital are shown to be extremely tenuous. As the script progresses it becomes apparent that his European colleagues understand this to be a world in which his nominal position of power has been granted to him on a conditional basis. His ability to maintain this position is clearly dependent upon cooperation with the French colonial system, and this ultimately places him in an untenable situation as he recognises that the system not only works

to his own disadvantage, but actively promotes the 'illnesses' he is attempting to treat. This growing realisation throughout the script is paralleled by the development of Françoise's increasing pathology, and progressively accompanied by the satirically exaggerated, self-destructive fanaticism of the other European characters.

The characters of Fanon and Françoise function ambiguously in the script. Churchill places them in situations that obliquely contradict binary conceptions of race and gender, without directly reversing the binary. In this way she creates the prospect of a tension that might operate in a liminal manner in potential audiences, holding open a range of novel interpretive possibilities.

Primarily through the characters of Françoise and her mother, Churchill addresses issues of female oppression, responsibility and options for action within the colonised environment. The way in which the female characters are developed through Churchill's text prompts us to ask how different women are represented (or not represented) within patriarchal power struggles. The script allows us to ask some of the questions advanced over twenty years later by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. McClintock argues that the gendered behaviour underlying the whole of the imperial contest has been either overlooked or diminished in importance, particularly by male theorists of postcoloniality, and that colonised women suffered profoundly different outcomes as a result of colonisation than those of colonised men. Colonial women were also ambiguously placed within this process, although she does not pursue this argument beyond a preliminary discussion. Of colonial women

she observes that, “Barred from the corridors of formal power, they experienced the privileges and social contradictions of imperialism very differently from colonial men” (6).

The placement of white colonial women within the current postcolonial/feminist arena has tended not to be greatly distinguished from that of white colonial men, but juxtaposed against their otherness to women and men who have been subjected to European colonisation.<sup>10</sup> Discussion from this perspective is not only legitimate but also belated, relative to that which interrogates the plight of men.<sup>11</sup> However this perspective reinforces an approach that again traps the relationship within binary logic. It is important therefore to conceive of colonisation as a multifaceted gendered phenomenon, one that operates within designated racial, social and economic categories. This form of conception and representation is perhaps also an effective way of increasing the permeability of the boundaries separating one group from another, and breaking down the tyranny of the binary. The relative paucity of discussion in terms of the particular situations of colonial women suggests that this has been a difficult area of study to undertake. Perhaps the dramatic format provides a unique entrée to the politically sensitive dialogue in this area.

Only two of the ten characters are scripted as women, that is the young Françoise and her mother Madame, both of whom are French colonials. A third Algerian woman, who ultimately dies by tripping while carrying a bomb, is introduced through her husband’s narration. He is Fanon’s patient (Patient A) and has been actively involved in the resistance movement, having planted a bomb in a café patronised by the French. He now suffers debilitating panic

attacks as a result. Churchill's portrayal of the Algerian woman through the relationship with her husband is subtle in that it avoids closure or the temptation of absolute definition through his description of her since she is sketched as a person who remains something of a mystery to him. This unnamed woman has worked independently and secretly for the revolution as he did, but never spoken to him about it, or asked any questions about *his* activities, a source of great frustration to him. Her portrayal in the script is somewhat shadowy and reminiscent of Lola Young's observation regarding Fanon's representation of women of colour. Young argues that for Fanon, the 'woman of colour' "serves as the other of others without sufficient status to have an other of her own" (qtd. in Read 100). Although her treatment in Churchill's script might be superficially criticised for reinforcing this position, the independence of her actions from those expected and articulated by her husband, and from those expected of women generally in Western society, suggests that the playwright has deliberately incorporated an element of subversiveness in the characterisation. This is partly achieved through a device that Tompkins has called "splitting (and multiplication) of the gaze" which she argues "perform(s) – the locus of colonial disruption" ("Spectacular" 49).

The two European women are permitted to appear and speak on their own behalf, and as such are more concretely delineated in the text. However in some respects, they are similarly developed to encourage a double (or multiple) vision in the audience. Appearing to adopt the perspective of R.D. Laing,<sup>12</sup> Churchill presents what might initially be read as a misogynist view of the colonising mother in the character of Madame. Conventionally for the

time of writing, Churchill creates this character as the stereotypical version of a hysterical, middle-aged, middle-class, French colonial woman, wife and mother. This largely matches the treatment provided to Monsieur, Madame's officious civil servant husband. Here Churchill appears to place male and female colonialist experience and action on an equivalent moral footing. But although Madame is not a likeable character, her deference to her husband's wishes and rulings draws a clear distinction between his ability to speak and act at will, and hers. While not exonerating her complicit involvement in the demeaning and violent colonising process, a contemporary reading provides an understanding of Madame that demonstrates the need to evaluate her actions differently from those of Monsieur. Her life has been reduced to the point that she spends hours watching her catatonic daughter through the bedroom keyhole, while Monsieur continues with the 'important' administrative work of the colony, which includes actively participating in the torture of Algerian political prisoners.

Nevertheless, while illustrating the relativity of her identity and position to that of her husband, the portrayal of Madame is largely unsympathetic, sharply satirical, and leaves little room for perceptive interpretation. She embraces the privileges of the colony, won at the expense of the indigenous Algerians, and freely participates in the representational warfare that is argued here to facilitate the application of force. Her treatment differs from that of Françoise, Madame's apparently schizophrenic daughter, whose 'illness' is clearly marked as manifesting the ills both of the family and of the disintegrating colonial society and for whom the privileges of her position are perceived as a 'poison dress' that eventually destroys her (146).

Françoise is introduced in the first scene as a potential hospital admission with Fanon as her treating doctor and this immediately sets up the colony's fraught dynamics, significantly in the setting of a psychiatric unit within a hospital. Assumptions with regard to status, race, gender and agency are simultaneously called into question and unsettled in this first scene.

Employing a dual, feminist/ Fanonist perspective, Churchill reinvents Fanon's hospital department and, creatively engaging with his text, imagines the persona of Fanon himself as almost saintly in strength, objectivity, restraint and tolerance. These qualities are contrasted against the excessive intolerance, cruelty, dogmatism and resultant sickness of the Coloniser. This is a straight reversal of the binary usually employed in the service of the coloniser, but the political point is forcefully and satirically made. Left alone, the approach might be criticised for reinforcing simplistic binaric thinking, but no such easy resolutions are supplied. Instead the psychiatric patients display the excesses of human emotion that the power brokers have discarded in the reductive process of delineating ally and enemy. It is within these excesses that the silenced truths of the colony reside and are expressed in this play through Fanon's patients from both sides of the conflict.

A decade after Fanon's death, Churchill imagines his world as a place in which at least one white female voice, encoded in the language of 'mental illness,'<sup>13</sup> speaks out against the horrors of colonisation, from a coloniser's perspective. But in Churchill's script Françoise is provided with proportionally more credible space than the historical Fanon's predominantly masculinist writing suggests he would have admitted.<sup>14</sup> Françoise speaks with

a force that would challenge his perception of female subjectivity and romanticism:

**FRANCOISE:** What does he do, fuck you with a bottle? Pump soapy water up your arse? I can keep my mouth shut. I know who he loves and who he kills and who he's going to kill now. But you can't kill me because I was never born. There's no girl of that name here. You can do what you like but she won't speak (114).

Although the idea of Françoise is borrowed from Fanon's text, this is clearly Churchill's reinterpretation of his case study in a fictional representation that incorporates an Anglo-feminist vision of political resistance. The character appears to have been loosely drawn from Series B, Case 3 of Chapter 5 of *The Wretched of the Earth*, but has undergone a significant transformation. Churchill may have combined the elements of the colonised Françoise with Laing and Esterson's account of the subject of their first case study (Maya) in *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics* (31). In addition, as Elaine Aston has observed, Françoise is infantilised by her parents in a way that is reminiscent of Laing's case study of Julie (*Caryl Churchill* 12). The creative fusion of anti-colonial text with the anti-psychiatric effectively demonstrates the antecedents of Françoise's 'madness' as emerging from the ailing colonial society filtered through the desperate will of the family to hold on at whatever cost. This sets the scene for highlighting in Scene Two, the well-established (by this time, post World War 2), and continuing use of medical science and medical institutions as powerful instruments of state control. This is explored throughout with the Hospital functioning as a receptacle for those discarded psychological casualties of the colonial system in crisis, and stressed through the character of



the young European doctor who by the end of the play is considering enlisting in Police Intelligence.

In addition, by drawing Françoise's colonial family as noxious in Laing's terms, Churchill brings personal responsibility, and potentially, through recognition, personal *power*, back into the political situation. Churchill has drawn the family as the centre of colonial society and a primary indicator of the society's health. Françoise's family is highly secretive, abusive, contradictory, and in denial.

Françoise's language is disruptive, profane and powerful as it names the secrets harboured in the spare wing of the family home. She refuses to remain quiet or to reframe the obscenities of war in the ameliorating speech expected of women.<sup>15</sup> Her voice is represented in ways which subvert the double-edged interpretation (peace making /powerless) of the female character. Such an interpretation was offered and largely produced by the men of her nominal time and place, the historical Fanon included.

Fanon's ambivalence towards women and his differential treatment of women and men of colour, has been argued in recent years by postcolonial feminist theorists such as bell hooks and, as mentioned earlier, Lola Young (qtd. in Read 100). Hooks acknowledges Fanon's undoubted positive influence in relation to her self concept as a person of colour, while at the same time pointing out that, initially, as a young person, she had to distance herself from her identity as a woman to gain this value from his work.<sup>16</sup> Young points out that Fanon bases his assumptions, for example, about the relationships of black women with white men on "three largely fictionalised accounts – one of which is written by a man" (qtd. in Read 89). She concludes

that his pronouncements about the motivating forces of black women are ultimately based on patriarchal premises in which women are positioned as “the repository of the ‘race’” and where “the black woman, being neither white nor male, represents a double lack in the psycho-sexual colonial schema” (qtd. in Read 96-97).

McClintock also raises the question: “For Fanon, colonized men inhabit ‘two places at once.’ If so, how many places do colonized women inhabit?” (362). But Fanon was/is far from alone in this tendency to render female agency invisible. McClintock goes on to criticise Bhabha for continuing in this trend to defer, displace and disremember women, thus sidelining them in a postcolonial debate normatively assumed to be male unless otherwise stated.

The central positioning of Françoise in the text may be an attempt by Churchill to restore female visibility, but her designation of Françoise, a young, economically privileged white woman, as a key messenger regarding the destruction to come, might be seen as contentious from a range of perspectives. Firstly, it offers an oblique challenge to Fanon’s actual writings. It does this by contradicting Fanon’s politically expedient and stereotypical understanding of the homogenous and invariably questionable, if sometimes romanticised, motivations of white women (although not white men).<sup>17</sup> McClintock, referring to *Black Skin, White Masks*, notes Fanon’s “complicity with the stereotype of (white) women as romantically rather than sexually inclined, as giving rather than taking” (362). This suggests that in his early writing, Fanon has not fully interrogated the social antecedents of a conventional, although far from exclusive, behaviour at that time. It also sets

the stage for tautologically interpreting any other behaviour as deviant (bad, mad, or both), a position at variance with his avowed stance on human rights.

The positioning of Françoise might, however, be seen as a convenient way for enabling Churchill to provide a female character with the opportunity to inhabit the subject position in a way that is informed by the second wave of feminism at the time of writing. Churchill's play was written prior to a postcolonial/feminist theorising of the colonising effect of including all women under the same (white) umbrella, and might itself be seen as an unconscious act of imperialism, if the script were to be read as representative of the general experience.

There could, in fact, be an argument for reading it this way because *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* is a generic title with implications of universality and Churchill uses generic names for most of the characters, suggesting a degree of anonymity, and a generalising intention. On face value, the play might therefore be criticised as an inequitable, patronising and Eurocentric representation of a decolonising revolution, albeit sympathetic to the revolutionaries. It could be read as yet another privileged white person interpreting colonial history. In addition, as an English playwright, Churchill distances herself and her potentially English audiences from the role of colonialist by writing a play about French colonisation, a position that is later 'ameliorated' when she writes *Cloud Nine* which specifically engages with British colonisation. The distancing in *Hospital* might be seen to provide a comfortable buffer zone between the historical reality of British Imperialism and accepting a share of the responsibility, which accompanies an acceptance of the economic privileges of colonialism.

Her strategies, although flawed when viewed through the lens of current postcolonial theoretical understanding, can be explained more sympathetically when seen as a genuine attempt by a 'reluctant coloniser' to engage with the key questions surrounding colonisation. The issue of comfortable distancing, for example, provides an opportunity to present otherwise unpalatable information to an audience whilst attempting to retain its interest. The similarities with British colonisation are readily apparent and could be amplified by casting English actors who speak with their own accents. Through her focus on Françoise and her mother, Churchill is exploring two female perspectives aligned to her own experience, in terms of relative social privilege underscored by her class and race. At the same time she acknowledges other worlds of female experience, perhaps deliberately, through an ironic reading of hearsay (Madame's mixed interpretation of indigenous women discarding the veil, and Patient A's egocentric references to his wife's role in the revolution). So while not actually speaking an Algerian woman's experience, Churchill opens up for the audience the possibility of different female/feminist perspectives as race, class and gender interact, and also of an Algerian woman's experience as separate and different from that understood by her husband. The problematic of a middle-class white feminist/socialist author proceeding further in interrogating an Algerian woman's experience(s) is sidestepped by concentrating on raising questions about the perhaps equally complex character of the reluctant coloniser/colonised daughter.

Françoise's 'madness' enables her to say what cannot be safely said in the context of family secrecy. At the same time her mother reinforces her

apparent inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy by demonstrating her own unreliability in acting as a source of fact for her daughter. When Françoise describes the screams she hears from the torture, which is conducted in the spare wing of their house, her mother is quick to reinforce her previously learned uncertainty about what she does and does not hear.

**FRANCOISE:** I hear screams all night. I don't know how to hear the screams. I think I'm screaming myself.

**MADAME:** That's right, it's all your horrid dreams, the screams are all in your head (114).

In encouraging her daughter to doubt her own understanding of events and to simultaneously hold two contradictory pieces of information when politically expedient, Madame is schooled by her husband who 'corrects' her about the war:

*"There is no war and no revolution"* (110).

The ability to simultaneously hold two contradictory beliefs without the inconvenience of cognitive dissonance, that is to have the ability *not* to reason, is therefore seen as desirable within the unstable colonial context. Françoise's resistance to losing the ability to reason is ironically, contextually, interpreted as a loss of reason. She further loses credibility by using 'unacceptable' language. However, this language which is crude and applied in the active voice is entirely appropriate to the actions committed.

As a dramatic device this language has the effect of providing greater impact for what Françoise says, juxtaposed against the image of passive femininity presented by the slight body and girlish costume of the actor suggested in the casting directions.<sup>18</sup> The social mechanisms for rendering such language silent, and making its messenger invisible through psychiatric

incarceration, is played out for the audience immediately following

Françoise's 'outburst':

**MADAME:** I just can't listen to such language. It makes me feel quite ill.

**MONSIEUR:** Take her out of my sight, Doctor. Please take her away (114).

Françoise's communication alternates between an encoded prophetic 'madness' and catatonic silence. Her ability to speak or not to speak is initially manipulated by her parents, mirroring the torture interrogation process. In this her mother plays the role of the 'soft cop':

**FANON:** Do you feel ill, Françoise? What do you feel is wrong?

**MADAME:** Are you going to answer the Doctor nicely Françoise or shall Mummy do it?

**MONSIEUR:** You won't get her to say what's going on.

**MADAME:** Speak up.

**MONSIEUR:** You want to keep it dark now don't you my pet? It's nothing to be proud of is it?

**MADAME:** My husband gets angry and I would of course because the things she does are enough to make the most long-suffering mother annoyed but I tell myself again and again, 'do remember she's not herself, she's not herself', and so I keep control of my temper and really feel sorry for her.

**MONSIEUR:** Will you speak! I've got work to do. The whole country could rise up while we sit here waiting for Miss to think what she thinks she might feel, and would she care if my whole world - It is half past! (100-101)

Although no physical pain is being inflicted on Françoise, there is a clear sense of threat, and the process induces a high level of confusion about whom, if anyone, is advocating on her behalf and what is required of her. This

is further complicated by her relationship to her 'interrogators,' those who purport to nurture her have become her enemies, a relationship mirrored in colonial society in which the metaphor of family is freely used to legitimise the power relationship.<sup>19</sup> For Françoise, everything that had previously defined her world has been shown to be unstable and unreliable; even her own beliefs about the nature of reality are challenged. This places her in a position of extreme vulnerability, where she is unable to distinguish between the boundaries of self/other and between the boundaries of sanctuary and prison. Thus she frequently alternates between third and first person when referring to herself: "She's sorry, she's sorry. Hold me tight, don't let me get away. Hold me, hold me, hold me" (106). The text blurs the usually intimate meaning of "hold me tight." It is immediately associated with imprisonment when she says, "don't let me get away."

By Scene Six, unable to make herself understood, she ceases to speak at all, and by the end of the play, she experiences herself as having disappeared altogether.

In positing the dissolution of speech that occurs when the body is in pain, Scarry has highlighted the importance of speech in defining the self: "the voice becomes a final source of self-extension; so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body, occupies a space much larger than the body" (33).

Françoise's pain, while not physically inflicted, has a similar effect to that described by Scarry in that it ultimately causes the self to contract to the actual boundaries of the physical body, as her speech is systematically discounted, and her right to speak denied. Speech is interpreted not only in

terms of content, but also in terms of how it is delivered, and whom it is who speaks. Women's speech has been argued to be rendered unintelligible by the body politic, and requires ways of expressing itself that will be heard (Gatens 21-28). Luce Irigaray has debated this from the perspective of speaking as a woman (as distinct from speaking like a woman) and later by placing more emphasis on woman-as-subject involved in the construction of the world.<sup>20</sup> The use of profanity has traditionally been reserved for males and its appropriation by women might be viewed as an attempt to subvert the patriarchal power relationship.

Amelia Howe Kritzer has pointed to Churchill's use of "systemic poisons" in some of her more recent plays – *Mad Forest*, *Lives of the Great Poisoners*, and *The Skriker* (Rabillard 159). In *Hospital*, this theme as an embedded indication of social ills is initially manifested in Françoise's refusal of food. Françoise carries the pathology of the colony in her anorexic, abject body and the secrets of the dominant regime in her paranoid delusionary system and auditory hallucinations. In effect she becomes the embodiment of the colonial state, and the family relationship can be read as a map for what is happening to the crumbling colonial society at large. The artificiality of the separation of the domestic and the political, as argued so thoroughly by McClintock, is exposed in the colonial metaphor of Françoise's illness. She is no longer able to distinguish between the terror and suffering of those who are tortured by her father and his colleagues, and her own terror and suffering. It is especially instructive to consider the encoded message in the following monologue, which forms the tenth and final scene of the play.

**FRANCOISE:** The dress looked very pretty but underneath I was rotting away. Bit by bit I was disappearing. The dress is walking



around with no one inside it. I undo the buttons and put my hand in. Under the dress I can't find where I am. So when I take it off there's nobody there. They can't see Françoise because she was taken off upstairs and nobody came downstairs and into the room. My mother made that dress to kill me. It ate me away. That was a poison dress I put on. (146)

This speech is evocative on a number of levels, interrogating as it does the boundaries of the self and the nature of the phenomenological body. In terms of the body politic itself, however, it acts as a powerful metaphor for the future of the colony. It takes little imagination to see that the poison dress she has put on might be construed as the colonial privileges won at the expense of the Indigenous population. (*The dress looked very pretty but underneath I was rotting away.*) The text simultaneously calls to mind, and calls into question Memmi's caveat in the Preface of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*: "For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer" (15). It is interesting that Françoise describes herself as rotting in the final scene. But can she be convincingly construed as Coloniser at this point?

Her presence in the script poses the question as to who or what it is that finally constitutes a coloniser. Are place and circumstance of birth sufficient to designate one as coloniser/colonised? How much responsibility does the individual bear for her/his own class, race, gender or situation? The power to resist obvious inequity, not to mention brutality, which provides sometimes dubious privileges, needs to be interrogated. The degree of control exerted over the body of Françoise by her parents, following a patriarchal model of ideal French womanhood, leaves little room for active *recognisable* political agency or power. The sanctions applied in the absence of her compliance, such as incarceration in a psychiatric institution, might suggest

that she herself is metaphorically colonised after a model suggested by writers such as Anne Summers, Judith Williamson, and Maria Mies.

The forms of resistance available to Françoise in the limited world within which she is forcibly confined are that of ‘madness’ and metaphor. In addition, she effects an interruption of the family/colonising line as she removes herself from the likelihood of a ‘suitable’ marriage.<sup>21</sup> As forms of resistance, it must be noted that those available to Françoise all seem to involve inevitable/inescapable self-sacrifice and have a limited (local/domestic) impact on the perpetrators of the crimes themselves.

Even in Fanon’s terms, the character of Françoise might be described as colonised. In *The Wretched of the Earth* he talks of colonialism in these terms: “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: “In reality, who am I?”” (*Wretched* 250).

Ironically, in Churchill’s text, it would seem that it is Françoise who constantly asks, and is unable to answer this question, and that the person *least* likely to ask might be Churchill’s Fanon himself. This arguably creates Fanon as the most stable, and in the performative context, potentially the most powerful figure within the script.

These representations are therefore not simplistic, and provide a layered field where the coloniser/colonised relationship can be interrogated both inside and outside the binary. When employed, this binary is consciously and tactically used as a dramatic device to serve the political function of the play. That is, it is employed as an unequivocal condemnation of the brutal

colonial system that saw the reduction of the Algerian population from four million to two and a half million people in the first sixty years.<sup>22</sup> However, as Churchill shows, with the uprising after one hundred and fifty years of French rule, the acknowledgment of this damning aspect of Algeria's history has been conspicuously absent from the Coloniser's logic. She demonstrates how the coloniser's conception of history is produced by claiming and defining boundaries that exclude alternative conceptions. Terminology is an important component of this, and Churchill shows that the coloniser's rejection of labels such as war and revolution in favour of criminality are strategically employed to maintain political supremacy.

Finally what does this play have to offer to the contemporary reader thirty years after it was written? Perhaps it has taken on nuances from the intervening historical events that were less visible prior to the 2001 attacks on the USA. The political responses to this tragic event have highlighted the resilience and effectiveness of the seemingly crude representational strategies lampooned in Churchill's text. There has been a conspicuous reinforcement of the binary that privileges a dominant subjectivity. Boundaries have been mapped to redefine historical starting points so that aggression by the Other is interpreted as unprovoked criminal terrorist behaviour and contrasted with the aggression by a dominant power interpreted as legitimate political retaliation. The unequal construction of race and gender and their strategic employment in maintaining political advantage are (again) demonstrated by Churchill's play to be an integral component to the effectiveness of such strategies. These constructions legitimise inequities of economic, social and political power by

a persistent and intentional diminishment of the Other's morality, humanity and worth:

**MONSIEUR:** The violence is committed by criminals. It is not part of any revolution. The majority of the natives look to us to protect them and restore order. And it is only the French who can pacify the land. Because the Algerian naturally has criminal tendencies. But thanks to the large number of arrests in the area we are in control. Out of danger. Entirely in control of the situation. (110)

Perhaps there is nothing surprising in this discussion to feminist and postcolonial scholars, but the question remains as to the effectiveness of theorists in promoting their insights in the broader public arena to counter the hegemony of the popular press. In this script Churchill seems to have found a way of doing this that treads the difficult path between humour that enlightens as it entertains and uncomfortable, potentially alienating political commentary. Perhaps even more importantly, and relevant to a major contention of this thesis, in *Hospital* Churchill demonstrates a clear understanding of the critical importance of the subjectivity, embodiment and context in the production of identity, along with the practical importance of this constructed identity to the life that the person is enabled to live. Because the construction of identity directly affects the person's power to influence those aspects of social and political life that impact upon him or her, it is imperative that he or she is able to directly participate in this construction through an equitable claim to the subject position. In alternating the 'point of view' between so many who have been traditionally silenced, Churchill brings into visibility the hidden assumptions that underlie a more hegemonic approach, and this is the key strength of this play from the perspective of my broader argument. This focus on subjectivity is extended in the chapters which follow, firstly as played out

through the varying nineteenth-century fortunes of Judge Schreber, and then in the guise of the judge's wife of the nineteen seventies.

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<sup>1</sup> Sadly the text has never been realised in a professional production.

<sup>2</sup> This is particularly apparent when contrasted with pockets of scholastic debate such as that which appeared in the March 2002 edition of *Theatre Journal*.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase first surfaced in U.S. President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address, January 29<sup>th</sup> 2002.

<sup>4</sup> In times of crisis 'desirable' subjectivity appears to become more overtly defined. Jill Lane points out that "George Bush's "Address on Terrorism" was organised around a series of questions that, he imagines, Americans are asking" and that in doing so he "instructs us on the norms of citizenship" and "marks the norms of "American" questions in a time of fear and war" (109). Sue-Ellen Case pointed out in the same issue that the images of women under the rule of the Taliban in the current context might easily be mobilised as Medea-like figures. In images seen on Australian television, the veiled Muslim woman has been repeatedly shown since the perceived beginning to this particular conflict, and linked to both terrorism and the federal Government's harsh stance on the intake of refugees.

<sup>5</sup> Particularly in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Comparisons have been drawn between the responses to Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> and those of classic Greek tragedies by, for example, Janelle Reinelt (Oedipus), Elin Diamond (Agamemnon) and Sue-Ellen Case (Medea) as described above, in *Theatre Journal* March 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Co-written with Esterson, this book provides a case study which appears to have informed the character of Françoise.

<sup>7</sup> All page references to the three plays under discussion are taken from the collection of plays that appear in *Churchill: Shorts*.

<sup>8</sup> This is an approach reminiscent of that used in Jean Genet's plays which had apparently influenced Churchill. In a note to *Cloud Nine*, for example, she mentions Genet's influence on her casting decisions with regard to the character of Joshua. *The Screens* staged in 1966 concerning the French/Algerian war is particularly relevant to *Hospital* and *The Maids* uses the doubling effect fairly extensively.

<sup>ii</sup> By this I mean early for a white, middle-class English playwright, because such recognition had been implicitly flagged long before by Fanon, Memmi, Ellison and as far back as the latter part of the nineteenth century by Sojourner Truth. Through the character of Patient C, Churchill explores the prospect of "whiteness as terrorising" as Rebecca Aanerud has described it, referring to the work of bell hooks (Frankenberg 35 – 59).

<sup>10</sup> See discussions by Lola Young and bell hooks in *The Fact of Blackness* and also in Frankenberg, *Displacing Whiteness: Essays on Social and Cultural Criticism*.

<sup>11</sup> As per Memmi, Fanon, Ellison for example.

<sup>12</sup> Laing, 1964. A significantly heavier emphasis was placed on interviewing the mother as opposed to the father in female patients with mental illness commonly identified as schizophrenia, and this would have skewed the interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion on how women are 'produced' by society and incarcerated in psychiatric institutions when they 'fail' in this production, see Jill Matthews. Schatzman has also explored the encoding of real information in the symbolic language of Schizophrenia in a detailed comparison of Schreber's memoirs with extensive writings on child rearing by Schreber's father.

<sup>14</sup> The understanding I have of his writing (after hooks, Young, McClintock) is that the ostensibly generic 'he' is contextually marked as masculine unless specifically designated otherwise. This becomes apparent wherever subjectivity is made visible through relationship assumptions (for example, possessing a wife). In the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* the masculine pronoun is repeatedly attributed to all that is good (such as the use of the masculine 'brother' when addressing the Algerian revolutionaries) and the feminine pronoun is repeatedly attributed to all that is corrupt, devious and destructive (in describing European imperialism).

<sup>15</sup> For a synopsis of differences between female and male speech patterns and stereotypes based on studies conducted up until the early eighties, see Poynton, "Speaking as woman/man" (66-75).

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<sup>16</sup> See hooks: “Only by journeying through the body of the father could I connect with the mind” (qtd in Read 80).

<sup>17</sup> See page 46, footnote 5 in *Black Skin White Masks* for an example where Fanon draws the distinction between the motivations of white men and white women who ‘sleep’ with black women and men.

<sup>18</sup> This idea of confronting conventional gender expectations in language is explored further through cross-dressing and dialogue patterns in *Cloud Nine*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the dialogue between Fanon and the Young Doctor (118).

<sup>20</sup> See *This Sex Which is Not One* (135, 136, 144).

<sup>21</sup> An interruption to the paternal line has already been effected – by casting her as a female only child, Churchill displaces the patriarchal ideal of having a son to carry on the family name.

<sup>22</sup> *Arab Net*.

## Chapter Five

### Revolution through ‘Madness’ in *Schreber’s Nervous Illness*

*And so the Order of the World has been broken and God and I find ourselves in a situation that has never arisen before. His existence is now threatened by mine. (Churchill: Shorts 61).<sup>1</sup>*

Churchill’s fifty-minute radio play *Schreber’s Nervous Illness* opens with a monologue in which the central character outlines the relationship between God, himself and “the Order of the World”. He begins, “God was always in a precarious position” (61). It is a provocative opening and associations with all that God represents pre-empt the idea of a world that is soon to be turned on its head, a world in which he understands of God that “His existence is now threatened by mine.”

As for each of the plays discussed in this thesis, *Schreber’s Nervous Illness* operates on multiple interpretive layers that draw attention to different aspects of the story within the social and chronological contexts of its setting, its writing, and the ever-changing landscape of its telling. Earlier I alluded to the significance of the time in which these three plays were written. Second Wave Feminism was in ‘full sail’ in 1972 and the opening monologue would have resonated for men and women alike in the context of rapid social change in which the accepted hierarchies were under attack and “the Order of the world [had] been broken”. The religious symbolic is placed ‘centre stage,’ and in an environment of heightened feminist consciousness-raising the social implications were unavoidable. Man was made in God’s image and the Christian God had always been understood to be masculine. Women’s Liberationists, drawing on a

consciousness (or fear) that had begun with the elevation and escalation of science and industry in the nineteenth century, dared to reverse the mantra suggesting that God had been 'made' in the image of men. His threatened existence, it seemed, might be directly attributable not only to the rise of scientific knowledge but also, importantly, to the rapidly changing relationships between men and women in western societies. As the opening monologue is spoken, a sense of impending disruption is created both within the play and in the world into which it is broadcast.

This disruption resonates profoundly within contemporary consciousness as a loss of confidence in the certainty of a broadly agreed upon idea of social reality. In this play, Schreber's reality is made available through his ability to speak, to argue his case, alongside that of his treating psychiatrist. In the process it is the psychiatrist whose representations ultimately are shown to be the more tenuous. As the thesis title suggests, the play suggests that representations are negotiable, necessarily, in order to posit provisional truths. These are truths that in Schreber's case are diametrically opposed to those commonly accepted in nineteenth century Germany, but which were being entertained as potentially legitimate poetic or symbolic perceptions in the England of the nineteenth seventies.

John Tydeman produced *Schreber's Nervous Illness* and it was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 25 July 1972.<sup>2</sup> In December of the same year it was performed as a 'one-man show' by Kenneth Haigh, who had played the title role in the original radio version of the play. The review in *The Stage and Television*



*Today* following the live production was unflattering, describing Haigh's "coldly factual" presentation as "undramatic" and suggesting that "[his] objective approach limits his commitment to the subject" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 17). The reviewer concluded that "[t]he material is promising, but in practice it is by no means as challenging as one feels it ought to have been" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 17). In an interview with John F. O'Malley, Churchill acknowledged that, "[i]t worked much better on radio" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 17). Subsequently in the Introduction to *Churchill: Shorts* she wrote that *Schreber's Nervous Illness* had "that movement between being inside someone's head and out among extraordinary events that works particularly well on radio" (n. pag.). This is a point that will be discussed in more detail towards the end of the chapter.

The play is predominantly set in asylums in Leipzig and Dresden between 1893 and 1902. As with *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, it was based on the writings and identity of a well-known historical figure, in this instance Daniel Paul Schreber, a gifted scholar and member of the judiciary. Schreber lived in Germany throughout the second half of the nineteenth and into the early part of the twentieth century. At the age of fifty-one he was appointed Presiding Judge to the Court of Appeal in the city of Leipzig. However, some months after the appointment he had his first serious 'nervous breakdown' expedited by the heavy responsibilities that the new position demanded. Eight years before he had been treated for a short mental illness diagnosed at the time as "hypochondriacal delusion".<sup>3</sup> In the "Author's Note" (58) Churchill suggests that following his second breakdown, Schreber "spent ten years in asylums as a

schizophrenic and wrote his memoirs there,” adding that her script was largely drawn from these memoirs, which fortunately survived early attempts at suppression (58). Amelia Howe Kritzer writes that Churchill came across the *Memoirs* whilst browsing in a library and that the script “draws much of its force from the original” (32). In another short discussion of the play, Elaine Aston mentions the debate surrounding mental illness in Britain around the time of writing, and notes that R.D. Laing’s study *The Divided Self* “was, for a time, a controversial but seminal reference point” (*Caryl Churchill* 9). Aston suggests that “Churchill’s radio play may, therefore, be seen as part of the contemporary debate on Schizophrenia” (*Caryl Churchill* 9).

As mentioned in Chapter Four, there is some evidence that Laing’s writings were directly influential on Churchill’s thinking at this time.<sup>4</sup> Her framing of the published text with reference to the attempted censorship by Schreber’s family is therefore worth noting, given her probable knowledge of Laing’s well-known study of the nineteen sixties in which he proposes detrimental effects of some families on the development of schizophrenia.<sup>5</sup> Again in the “Author’s Note” Churchill writes:

What happened to Schreber after he left Sonnestein is not certain. It is said that his family bought up most copies of his memoirs and destroyed them. There is some evidence that when his wife died, four years after his discharge, he was again admitted to an asylum and died there five years later. (*Churchill: Shorts* 58)

Other sources suggest that Schreber’s wife died in 1912 following his own death, and that the time to which Churchill is referring was that of his wife’s debilitating stroke, and also the year in which his mother died.<sup>6</sup> The discrepancy

is worth mentioning if only to caution against conflating the historicized play with the historical document, while at the same time acknowledging the potential for history to extend the play's interpretation.

The script traces Schreber's attempts to grasp what is happening to him throughout the lengthy period of his confinement. At times he felt that his body was undergoing dramatic changes, most markedly that he was being changed into a woman so that he could bear God's children. At other times he felt that he was being deprived of his vital organs through a process of 'miracles'. Schreber was convinced of the validity of his reality, ultimately insisting on the right to contest the perception of his sanity, to argue for his own release, and to disclose the nature of his relationship with God through the *Memoirs*.

In this play, as in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, Churchill presents the body as the site at which power relationships are played out literally and symbolically. In Chapter Four I discussed Scarry's conception of the body in cases of torture as serving threatened ideologies by reifying power or lending them an aura of realness or certainty. Scarry suggests that using the body to make power concrete is the *prime* function of such abuse. If she is correct, then this in turn suggests important questions in relation to certain less laudable motivations underlying the physical treatment of the mentally ill.

Institutionalisation of those considered insane in the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, arguably had a number of features in common with torture. Treatments often included solitary confinement and sensory deprivation in padded cells, cold baths, dunkings and other forms of ill treatment, the use of

various contraptions for restraint, physical and psychological experimentation, surveillance, sedation, and perhaps most distressing of all, the consistent negation of the patient's experienced reality. Schreber's account of his internment include references to the above (66, 70, 72, 81) and this account, as it emerges in Churchill's script, along with the "Author's Note" cited earlier, draws attention to the brutality and ultimate ineffectiveness of such treatment in effecting a 'cure.' Furthermore, consideration of a cure appears inconsequential in comparison with overriding expectations that the asylum was primarily a social institution and that its main function was to separate the 'madman' from society in order to take control of those behaviours deemed socially inappropriate or dangerous. The interrelated areas of Schreber's assertions about God and those of his changing sexuality, along with the unusual behaviours that emerged from these beliefs, would have been seen as particularly inappropriate and dangerous in his case because of the powerful position that he and his family had held in Germany. This is a circumstance that will be expanded later in this chapter.

As argued in the previous chapter, gender attributions and the exercise of power are inextricably linked, and this relationship is rendered visible particularly in times of social conflict such as was occurring within Western societies at the time of writing. The production emerges within a social context of a relatively aggressive seventies' style of feminism, and the astute audience member is encouraged to reflect both upon the social significance and symbolism of the central character's gender dysphoria and its internal

significance to him as character and as historical figure. Conflict within the play is established via Schreber's struggle with his own identity, which results from his inability to undertake the role established for him. It is then amplified through his engagement with the asylum that attempts to 'correct' his behaviour. For Schreber the battle with the medical profession is interpreted via the changing character of his body, suspended in the process of 'becoming woman.'

Kritzer's analysis notes that this play "asks fundamental questions about definitions of masculine and feminine in western culture" (32). Kritzer suggests:

Conflict is generated in two ways – first through Schreber's courageous and strangely moving struggle to survive alien forces he feels are attacking him. Second, and more subtly, it results from the tension between two extremes of experience within the same personality: the model of power and exemplary rationality Schreber took on in his role as high court judge, and that of irrationality and powerlessness embodied in the 'woman submitting to intercourse' which he believed himself to be at times after his breakdown. (33)

In invoking the propaganda of binary associations between male/rationality and female/irrationality Kritzer has alluded to a key component of Churchill's earlier writing approach discussed at the outset of the thesis. In this play, as in the others, Churchill conducts detailed explorations into the hidden mechanisms of binaric representation and the consequences for the groups thus circumscribed. In each of these three plays she creates visibility through exposure or unmasking of socially powerful white male subjects: the French Colonial elite in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, Judge Schreber here, and the Judge in *The Judge's Wife*. She repeatedly draws attention to the reductionism of the binary when applied to the complexity of human

experience by exposing its inability to reconcile an organic, open-ended and contradictory human phenomenology with its mechanistic process and closed system of categorisation. Churchill's exposure of the binary as arising from a desire to control representation and to limit thinking and behaviour is expressed on the body, resulting in uneasy recognition and satirical humour. Here she demonstrates its contradictions through the manifestation of femininity on Schreber's highly acculturated male body, the form of which is couched in a (male individual's) nineteenth-century conception of female sexuality, subsequently transposed by the playwright in the context of a nineteen-seventies' British feminist understanding and representation:

**SHREBER:** I suppressed every feminine impulse. The female nerves that had penetrated my body in great masses could not gain any influence over my way of thinking, though I could not prevent when lying in bed, a feeling of soul voluptuousness, well-being without real sexual excitement. (76)

The idea of 'voluptuousness' as a core element of Schreber's female identity is repeated throughout the text. The pathos of his personal life combines with Churchill's satirical message, a satire that is partly achieved by linking his idiosyncratic understanding to a broader nineteenth-century misconception of female sexual functioning, related by the playwright in the volatile context of contemporary sexual politics that were emblematic of the nineteen-seventies. Voluptuousness is defined by the dictionary as "relating to, or characterized by luxury or sensual pleasure" and "(of a woman) curvaceous and sexually attractive" (Pearsall 2071). It suggests a conception of sexual objectification from a male viewpoint, projected onto women as exclusive to women. Churchill

exploits the farcical nature of the projection through Schreber's strategies to sustain this experience of voluptuousness in the guise of the woman that he believes he is becoming:

**SHREBER:** ... I am preoccupied with changing into a woman. I can deplore the situation but cannot change it. I must guard against false sentimentality.

My new attitude caused a change in celestial conditions ... I considered it my right and my duty to cultivate feelings of voluptuousness. Few people have been brought up according to such strict moral principles as I or practised such moderation in matters of sex. But to attract the rays I must imagine myself as man and woman in one person having intercourse with myself – it has nothing whatever to do with masturbation. (78)

Subsequently Schreber admits, "Constant thinking is impossible; it is also impossible to spend the whole day in a state of voluptuousness" (80).

Objectified understandings of female sexuality had been vigorously and publicly challenged by feminists from the nineteen sixties onwards, and the lampooning of Schreber's attempts to reconcile the divergent character of his desire with his conventional socialisation, emerges in this context. The idea of how women experienced their bodies was seen by many as having been historically hijacked by the male viewpoint and projected onto women. Schreber's fantasy represents a re-incorporation of discarded, unincorporated aspects of his own sexuality, in Julia Kristeva's terms, the abject. His escape into 'madness' had importantly begun with the recovery of this desire:

**SCHREBER:** ... One morning while still in bed I had the highly peculiar feeling that it really must be rather pleasant to be a woman submitting to intercourse. This idea was so foreign to my whole nature that if I had been fully awake I would have rejected it with indignation. (62)

There is a running joke here in which one of the Rays, the voices that Schreber hears, later asserts of his relationship with God, “Fancy the President of the Court of Appeal letting himself be fucked” (78). Underlying the shock value of linking so many taboos in this densely packed declaration, a ‘softer’ interpretation is possible. The emphasis is on the potential for damage to the person, to ‘minority’ groups and to society as a whole when such contradictions are disallowed or are interpreted negatively and restricted. Returning briefly to the idea of Diane Elam’s *Quaker Oats* boxes as cited in the Introduction to the thesis, this type of categorisation or labeling is an infinitely generative process. Binary representational systems respond to a *dynamic* and therefore unrepresentable human diversity by transforming it from process to object, and into proliferating subsets of essentialist notions and binary relationships. Anomalies in behaviour such as those exhibited by Schreber are reduced, converted to ever defined and controlled binary categorisation, and in this way, strategically contained.<sup>7</sup> The underlying logic of the binary is tautological and therefore closed to the possibility of challenge: Schreber’s dressing up in women’s clothing is seen as an indication of his ‘madness’ and in turn tolerated because he is ‘mad.’

In addition to society’s carefully orchestrated association between male rationality and female irrationality being questioned here, as suggested by Kritzer above, there is a visible separation between the socially endorsed legitimate (or legitimised) subject and its other. To be a legitimate subject is to be part of an elite minority group, one within which Schreber had once seemed



securely established. His dramatic shift of status creates a visibility that would be less apparent in those for whom the contrast between their previous situations and new situation is less marked. This visibility is further emphasised as Schreber resists and struggles to accept his reduction in status with his repositioning from one with the power to circumscribe meaning, to the object of such signification.<sup>8</sup> This is portrayed by the playwright as a tension between his desire to recreate his (public) identity through the *Memoirs*, and the determination of the medical and judicial system to create a public understanding of his identity according to their own representations. Schreber is permitted to maintain a conception of his own identity provided that in the public arena the dominant view of his insanity remains intact. This perspective is reinforced by his removal from the public and his continued incarceration, a circumstance that is shown by Churchill to have been maintained, in part, by a misunderstanding on Schreber's part.

Towards the end of the play Schreber discovers that he had been placed under *temporary* tutelage following his admission to the asylum at Sonnenstein in 1894 and upon learning this, applies to have his tutelage rescinded.<sup>9</sup> Because of his understanding of the process of law, Schreber is able to successfully argue his own case and after nearly a decade in the asylum he is released. In his summing up, the Judge from the Court of Appeal (of which Schreber had once been President) notes that although he is 'mad,' Schreber's intellect appears to have remained intact. He continues:

**JUDGE:** ... It only remains that the plaintiff might compromise himself by the publication of his memoirs. But one considers him mad in any

case. The Court of Appeal therefore believes that the plaintiff is capable of dealing with the demands of life whose orderly regulation is the object of the law. (91)

The playwright's juxtaposition of the last two sentences satirises the prerequisite of Schreber's 'madness' for "dealing with the demands of life whose orderly regulation is the object of the law" (91). Churchill frequently applies this type of structural device to disrupt habitual thinking patterns so that we are encouraged to listen more closely to the type of rhetoric that we ordinarily accept on trust. Churchill fully exploits the irony: ultimately Schreber is released not because he is deemed to be 'sane,' but because he is considered to be mad. Because of this, the Judge argues, his *Memoirs* are unlikely to compromise his position, presumably because he has no legitimate position left to compromise. At the same time his lack of social consequence suggests that his ideas do not constitute a threat to society.<sup>10</sup> The latter implies a particular risk in Schreber's case because of his previous position as President of the Court of Appeals, the societal body that is now brought in to rule on his case, and which has power over the ultimate determination of legality and truth. The public demonstration of irrationality and vulnerability of Schreber as a previous member of the court's ranks could call its seemingly irrefutable determinations into question. However, after years of incarceration, Schreber's distance from his former position and his status has diminished to the point where this is no longer a threat.

In her analysis Kritzer draws attention to the relationship between Schreber's 'madness' and his loss of power which is transformed on the body as feminine. By the time Schreber is released, his 'inappropriate behaviour' has

been reduced to the “wordless, inarticulate release of emotion” that Kritzer reminds us is “traditionally identified with women”, and which he expresses when alone and out of earshot (36).

Aston concurs with Kritzer’s point, identifying Schreber’s body as the site at which the conflict between expressions of power and gender are played out. Citing Hélène Cixous’s descriptor of ‘conventional man’ from *l’écriture féminine* Aston suggests that “In her radio play, Churchill uses the body of the ‘conventional man’ to ‘write,’ or rather to stage, the feminine Other” (*Caryl Churchill* 9). She explains this further in relation to Schreber’s preoccupation with changing into a woman, his cultivation of feelings of ‘voluptuousness’ and imagining of himself “as man and woman in one person having intercourse with myself” (78). Aston writes:

Schreber’s contact with the feminine Other is experienced not through logos (speech), which he uses in his madness to rationalize an exclusion of the feminine, but through the body as he imagines his physical transformation from man to woman. (*Caryl Churchill* 10)

Schreber’s transformation in the process of ‘becoming woman’ has been construed differently from a psychoanalytic perspective, offering additional interpretive possibilities for the play. Sigmund Freud was the first to attempt to generalize from the particular instance of Schreber’s delusionary system to a broader interpretation of its significance. Using the *Memoirs*, and without meeting Schreber at any stage of his analysis, Freud developed a theory on the mechanism of paranoia as being driven by repressed homosexuality, and he published on this a few months after Schreber’s death in 1911.<sup>11</sup> While Freud’s

analysis does not appear to have influenced Churchill's play, the impact of his understanding of Schreber's *Memoirs* on others in his profession lends the story an expansiveness that adds to its significance.

The Schreber story has captured the imagination of some prominent figures interested in the overlapping fields of psychoanalysis and philosophy. In addition to Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari all cited Schreber's story to inform and support particular aspects of their theories, and Morton Schatzman, influenced by Laing's theoretical perspective, linked the memoirs to an intriguing analysis of Schreber's childhood. Schatzman's study takes the writings of Schreber's father and the family history into account in a way that is touched on, but diplomatically avoided by Freud in his analysis. This diplomacy was provident because, as will be expanded presently, Schreber's father had been a highly respected member of German society and consequently the family was well known.

I would assume that Freud, as a person of importance from the Jewish community writing about a member of one of the most influential Christian families in Germany in the early twentieth century, had to be reasonably careful in extrapolating his conclusions to the broader society. Nevertheless he does suggest the possibility of an underlying familial complicity, and would have been aware of the social implications of exploring this further given the particularly elevated status of this family. Freud writes,

Anyone who was more daring than I am in making interpretations, or who was in touch with Schreber's family and consequently better acquainted with the society in which he moved and the small events of his life, would find it an easy matter to trace back innumerable details of

his delusions to their sources and so discover their meaning, and this in spite of the censorship to which the *Denkwurdigkeiten* have been subjected. (193-194)

In 1973 Schatzman took up the challenge, providing a detailed analysis of those aspects of Schreber's childhood that could be ascertained from surviving documentation and proposing a close relationship between Schreber's illness and the methods used by his father to mould his character. Of Schreber's father Schatzman writes:

The father's influence was large in his time and after he died. The father thought his age was morally 'soft' and 'decayed' owing mainly to laxity in educating and disciplining children at home and school. He proposed to 'battle' the 'weakness' of his era with an elaborate system of child-rearing aimed at making children obedient and subject to adults. He expected his precept, if followed, would lead to a better society and 'race'. He applied the same basic principles in training children as have totalitarian regimes, secular and religious. Like them he thought a child's obedience and discipline to be more important than anything else. He sired two sons; Daniel Gustav, the elder, went mad too and killed himself. (xi)

Schreber's father wrote authoritatively on a number of subjects, which most notably included detailed accounts of his recommended methods of raising children. He advocated, and within his own family implemented, extreme 'training' practices that in contemporary western society would be condemned as child abuse. Schatzman details the methods and physical devices recommended by the father for use on children, linking them to Schreber's delusory system into which he argues they have been ultimately transformed.<sup>12</sup> If Schatzman's analysis is correct, as a personal tragedy for the Schreber family this could have been a salutary lesson. However, Schreber the senior's authority extended

further than he himself could have imagined, imparting this particular story with a much larger significance. As founder of the *Schreber Associations*, his influence continued in Germany until well after the Second World War, and is in evidence to the present day.<sup>13</sup>

Referring specifically to the father's influence with regard to child-rearing practices on the generation of the Third Reich, Schatzman writes that his own book on Schreber's story is a political text about "the micro-politics of child-rearing and family life and their relation to the macro-politics of larger human groups" (10). He cites the work of Alfons Ritter who wrote a doctoral dissertation on Schreber's father, and suggests that: "Ritter, writing about Schreber, the father, in 1936, saw in him a spiritual precursor of Nazism." He goes on to say, "Ritter admired both Dr Schreber and Hitler" (152). Schatzman points out that "Hitler and his peers were raised when Dr Schreber's books, preaching household totalitarianism were popular" (151). He reinforces this claim in referring to Elias Canetti, a novelist and sociologist, who also drew a link between Schreber and the political system that was later instated in Nazi Germany, using only the *Memoirs* as data (Schatzman 151).

While such information is not incorporated in Churchill's text, it provides a fertile context for subsequent interpretations of the work in accordance with her interest in the destructive effects of excessive power, a recurring theme in her plays at this time. As for *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, the events surrounding Schreber's story are readily available, encouraging possible interpretations of the text to extend beyond the event of the play's initial

productions.<sup>14</sup> The historical underpinnings of the story, as shown above, have the potential to encourage a reading of possible antecedents to a major global conflict in the Second World War, and, having done so, perhaps to trace the intervening space towards current global conflicts for a current reading.

In *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, the confounding effects of power are realised in terms of an ultimate inability of the coloniser to sustain the uneven binaric relationship between coloniser and the colonised without suffering undesirable personal and political consequences. In *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, a comparable paradox is demonstrated in terms of one who has fallen from a place of great power to one of subjugation. Both texts explore the relationships and contradictions that exist within and between individuals in the manifestation of influence (or its lack) over self and others.

*Schreber's Nervous Illness* provides the opportunity for the astute reader or listener to speculate on the links between the family and Judge Schreber as the failed model of ideal potential leader, if not coloniser, as with Françoise in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*. Both Schreber and Françoise respond or retaliate with madness, and contain within their condition a microcosm of their societies' values with a prophecy of a world to come. In Françoise's case, this is ultimately realised in the demise of French Colonial Algeria and in Schreber's, as suggested by Schatzman's research, in the pathologically inflated state of the Third Reich. The story of Schreber's individual struggle, as with that of Françoise, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, can thus be conceived as "giving birth to" what they have called "the mass phenomenon":

It might be then said that the paranoiac, in the clinical sense of the term, makes us spectators to the imaginary birth of the mass phenomenon, and does so at a level that is still microscopic. (281)

This idea implies that by learning to understand the representations of the paranoiac, particularly those in key historical contexts, we may be able to discover a way of predicting major events. In Schreber's case Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "the mass phenomenon" as mentioned above, might be interpreted as having been realised almost half a century later in Nazi Germany, and in Françoise's in the Algerian uprising. The implications of this interpretation are profound – the paranoiac is presented as a hypersensitive gauge of pathological influences on the broader society. Like the caged canary in a mine, Schreber and Françoise each provide warning of danger through self-sacrifice. The issue is all the more poignant because in each case the warning remains unheeded.

### **Proliferation and the Body without Organs**

In *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, as in the other plays discussed in this thesis, as well as noting the undesirable effects of power on the subaltern, Churchill explores its undesirable effects on those in positions of control. As the former President of the Court of Appeals, Schreber is an advanced example of the latter. To maintain his position as a worthy member of the elite, the expectation is for him to accept responsibility and a masculine identity that ultimately feels inauthentic to him, requiring the relinquishment of authenticity



in order to consolidate the power base of his family, societal class, race and gender. In return he stands to maintain wealth, power, social respectability and family approval. The benefits of the trade become less compelling as he is unable to fulfil the role of the person he was trained to be and as his hopes of having a child remain unfulfilled. As discussed in relation to Françoise in Chapter Four, children represent the future, and in *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* this is extended to the demise of the Algerian colony. Schreber's inability to beget a child is similarly linked to a truncation of the future that extends beyond the individual to the demise of a pivotal family in German society. The absence of a child to extend his line into the future is a concern that Schreber expresses early in the play:

**SCHREBER:** ... After my recovery we had quite a happy life despite the repeated disappointment of our hope of being blessed with children. I was nearly fifty and did not like to think of the Schreber family tree coming to an end with me. (62)

Schreber transforms the sadness of this childlessness, as he becomes aware of God's plan that he is to be made into a woman so that he can bear God's children in order to repopulate the earth.<sup>15</sup> His vision is large and connects him to a broad, inflated imperative to influence world events. By way of contrast, psychoanalysis focuses attention away from the social symbolism, reducing the vision to personal psychology. Thus Freud confines this aspect of Schreber's delusion to an egocentric motivation, pointing out that his desire to have children may result from his wife's inability to conceive. According to Freud, "Dr Schreber may have formed a phantasy that if he were a woman he would manage the business of having children more successfully ..." (195).

However, when extended beyond the individual, the delusion incorporates nineteenth century fears of a rapidly changing understanding of God and the world challenged by Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and Freudian psychology. It incorporates entrenched social assumptions regarding female responsibility to procreate, and fault where a couple is unable to conceive. Finally it erases any possibility of female agency or involvement by presuming that Schreber as a sacrificial emasculated male of superior intellect and breeding would be a more fitting partner for God to repopulate the world.

The bearing of children to repopulate the earth is therefore a highly condensed metaphor chosen by Churchill from the *Memoirs*, with interpretations that contain a series of interrelated historical and contemporary political concerns. The metaphor incorporates and challenges reactions to feminism occurring at the time of writing such as a desire to maintain control of reproduction, as well as insufficiently interrogated assumptions of 'perfection' that led to the rise of Fascism, and the dangers of unrestrained capitalism. In the seventies, with feminism at the forefront of social consciousness, the implications for women would be most apparent. The metaphor incorporates a wish to be able to reproduce without women, to repopulate the world by cloning the 'ideal' (male) human being, and to reproduce on a grand scale, along with a desire to rewrite history and control the future.

All of this was to be realised via the body from which the object has been discarded – the impermeable, impenetrable and superficial 'body without

organs.’ The miraculous disappearance and reappearance of his organs forms a key part of Schreber’s beliefs:

**SCHREBER:** ... My stomach disappeared altogether so that I could not eat. Sometimes von W would provide a stomach for me by miracle just before a meal, but often he changed his mind and suddenly took it away again so that food and drink were simply poured into my empty abdomen and ran down into my thighs. I gradually went ahead with eating without a stomach and grew quite calm about everything that happened. This may sound extremely strange but what can be more definite for a human being than what he has lived through and felt on his own body. (72)

The last sentence begs the question, if it is not possible to depend upon one’s own senses, then what can one depend upon? If for Schreber the question is rhetorical, Churchill ensures that for the listener it is ironic. It is apparent to the audience that Schreber cannot rely on his body, the most tangible evidence of his existence, any more than he can rely on his mind or his capricious God. But for Schreber it is this body that has become his chief expression of resistance and revolution.

Deleuze and Guattari have linked the idea of revolution in their analysis of the Schreber story to his reported experience of the disappearance of his organs. They call this type of body the ‘Body without Organs’ (BwO), a term that they first coined in relation to Antonin Artaud. Stephen Barber summarises Deleuze and Guattari’s position, which they developed after listening to Artaud’s final recording *To have done with the judgement of god* in which he demands that “his new body should be organ-less and immortal” (6). Barber goes on to say:

In their speculations about ‘the body without organs’ ... Deleuze and Guattari find their ‘question of life and death’ in the image of a movement of constant desire, which relentlessly opposes all systematic organization. The vital observation that they make is that even in its most dense form, the ‘body without organs’ and the language used to project it may multiply themselves wildly and cancerously, in a parallel way to industry, money and the social state. For Deleuze and Guattari it is these proliferations which are so eruptively and dangerously productive in Artaud’s work. (6)

In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari speculate on Schreber’s experiences in relation to the BwO and what they describe as “the schizophrenic and paranoiac’s recreation of history in delirium” (279). They suggest that delirium can be conceived as having two poles, one of which, schizorevolutionary type, is seen in terms of resistance, and that this resistance is acted out as a form of revolution. The other pole of delirium they describe is “a paranoiac fascisizing (*fasciant*) type or pole that invests the formation of central sovereignty; overinvests it by making it the final eternal cause for all the other social forms of history” (279). Deleuze and Guattari employ Schreber’s case as a demonstration in which the often oppositional forces of the two poles are enacted on his BwO.

They conceive of the first as a (paranoiac, schizophrenic) person following “the *lines of escape* of desire” (277) rather than ‘remaining’ to work for reforms. In these terms Schreber becomes both *fasciant* and a schizorevolutionary. Deleuze and Guattari argue:

The revolutionary knows that escape is revolutionary ... provided one sweeps away the social cover on leaving, or causes a piece of the system to get lost in the shuffle. (277)

We may be prompted to ask about the nature of the social cover that is swept away and/or which pieces of the system get lost in the shuffle in Schreber's case. Schreber's escape into madness calls into question the viability of the middle-class family to invariably produce socially responsible citizens, and presumably results in the family's social humiliation. It is interesting that apart from references to Schreber's wife, his family of origin is scarcely mentioned. It is as if they have disappeared for him, as surely as he has for them. The publication of the *Memoirs*, which describes the nature of his withdrawal, threatens not just a family, but a model family; one that is held in high regard by the nation. Families that produce madness can generally be isolated from social responsibility. However as suggested earlier, Schreber's family was acknowledged as one upon which society might model itself. Because of this, Schreber's madness has the potential for social disruption or re-evaluation as discussed above in relation to Schatzman's work.<sup>16</sup>

### **God Was Always in a Precarious Position**

The play begins with Schreber announcing that "God was always in a precarious position," and Schreber's relationship with God is the key motivating factor throughout. For this reason it is important that the relationship and the significance of God to the play be addressed in this analysis. Notably, the relationship is defined in terms of Schreber's gender identification and God's struggle to remain independent although his nerves are strongly attracted to Schreber's.

I have emphasised throughout that these plays surface at a time in the western world when issues raised by the Women's Movement were again enjoying a period of popular debate and impacting on social practices through the Women's Liberation movement of the nineteen seventies. Bill Naismith, in his commentary on *Top Girls*, expresses the nature of these changes:

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.

...Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Eva Figes' *Patriarchal Attitudes*, all published in 1970, were best-sellers and widely influenced the feminist consciousness. (xxvi-xxvii)

At this time, Man/God's position might have been felt by both men and women to be more precarious than usual. Churchill ironically borrows credibility from the male voice, but the protagonist is a flawed male subject and Schreber's voice is that of a 'madman,' a spiritual antihero who speaks to us in metaphors. His is a voice on the radio before the days of stereo,<sup>17</sup> one that enters the mind directly like that of the Judaic God, the Word as thing in itself, antithesis of the Derridean conception, the Truth that precedes representation, capable of bypassing representation and imagery.<sup>18</sup> Schreber's voice, the voice of the 'madman' with delusions of grandeur, is a parody of the Godlike. In parodying the Godlike, the play broadly parodies the egoistic inflation of Man.

The script probes Schreber's position as a man or one created first and in God's image, and the playwright's as a woman writing about Schreber's inflated ideas of his own significance, with an idea of (a Christian) God. These

relationships bear a tangential association to one another, in that the tyranny of an inflated masculinity through connection of Man, or the male *genre*, with an exclusively male God is shown to have damaging repercussions for both men and women. If we follow a conception of God that Irigaray discusses in *Divine Women*, drawing partially on the work of Feuerbach, God might be conceived as the means by which man becomes a genre (3). In Feuerbach's conception, the process involves a lowering of god into Man in order to make man into God (3). The conflation of Man with God and God with the Father is an important component in understanding Churchill's play, if not the historical circumstances of Schreber's nervous illness itself. Freud was the first to draw the parallels between Schreber's dual conception of God more specifically as representing his father and his elder brother (194). But in Irigaray's terms, the delusion would not be confined to Schreber. The idea of a male God as necessary to enable men to become elevated to the position of a genre qualifies comment on the place of the *idea* of Woman. This is pertinent not only in Schreber's conception, but also the way in which this relates to his society and to that of Churchill's at that particular time and place. The relationship between God and man is a different one from that between God and woman, so that where God is conceived as an extension of man, it is this latter relationship that helps to legitimize the uneven nature of the relationship between men and women.

Schreber was a contemporary of both Nietzsche and Feuerbach, and extremely well read, and it is likely that their essentially destabilising ideas had influenced him and the society that produced him. In Churchill's script, it is

implied that Schreber has been influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. Here he reasons that his contact with God cannot be hallucinatory because he was not a believer:

**SCHREBER:** The hallucination of being in contact with God can only develop in someone who already has faith in God. But I was never a believer. My gift lay in cool intellectual criticism rather than an unbounded imagination. I had occupied myself too much with the doctrine of evolution to believe Christian teaching. (68-9)

As someone who had been raised in an aggressively devout Christian household, these ideas would need to be reconciled to some extent with his early belief system(s). If we conceive of him as a barometer of his own society, then this attempt at reconciliation would contain many of the underlying anxieties and assumptions of that society. One assumption might be born of the diminishing position of women and the inflation of men (both divine and worldly) in the Protestant faiths, and this might be linked, in part, to the loss of the Virgin Mary as a figure of inspiration.

Feuerbach points out that "Protestantism has set aside the Mother of God" (33). He argues that this will ultimately damage the faith:

Where faith in the Mother of God declines, there also declines faith in the Son of God and in God the Father. The Father is a truth only where the Mother is a truth. (33)

The problem here lies in how to reconcile the necessity of the feminine in the divine, with an ever-consolidating sense of male supremacy. One solution may be to appropriate the residual power of women in the Christian story. Perhaps in the male imaginary<sup>19</sup> only a man can play the ideal woman, because



she represents a male ideal.<sup>20</sup> Schreber does just this, and performs her in ways that can be linked to the major feminine archetypes represented in the bible. Initially he is to be turned into a woman so that he can be used sexually, left to one side like a whore.<sup>21</sup> His nerves exert a great attraction for God who will be unable to get free once entangled; Schreber literally becomes a femme fatale. He is then to become impregnated by God so that a new race of men can be born. In this way he conflates the various aspects of the Christian archetypes of femininity incorporated in such figures as Jezebel, Mary Magdalene, Eve and the Virgin Mary. Although these archetypal figures are contained within the context of a patriarchal religion, they are potentially powerful figures and their appropriation by Schreber within this script as a Churchill-appointed representative of his class and gender serves to reinscribe their relationship to and ownership by men.

God's precarious position and his attraction for Schreber are dangerous not only for God, but also for Schreber. As God wavers and shrinks to the human dimension, Schreber becomes larger by comparison, but he is no longer able to rely on this fallible God to elevate him to divine status. Without the presence of the divine, he is held to the earthly plane, unable to transcend his materiality, and perhaps it is this reminder of his materiality that creates a dilemma for him. As a Doctor of Law and an intellectual, Schreber's socialisation would involve a Cartesian privileging of mind over matter. According to Rosi Braidotti in her reading of Lacan, "What is guaranteed by the dualism of the Cartesian distinctions is the subject's continuity as a rational

entity” (24). If this were so, then for Schreber to incorporate both rationality and corporeality would be to attempt to reconcile incommensurable constructs.

Unable to acknowledge his corporeality as a male he becomes-woman, suspended in the becoming which is never realised except as a possibility in the distant future. The contention that the body is representationally aligned with woman, and the mind with man, is based on arguments put forward by a number of feminists including Elizabeth Grosz.<sup>22</sup> Margaret Whitford also sees it as an important point in relation to the divine. Her understanding of Irigaray’s conception of the divine draws on anti-Cartesian argument. She points out that “if women alone continue to represent the body, the sensible, then they are excluded from the ideal or transcendent” (141). But in this case, does Schreber’s becoming-woman, which is centered on a consciousness of (his idea of) the female body, actually take him further away from God, a position seemingly in conflict with his (fasciant pole) Ubermenschian aspirations? This interpretation is at variance with, but not necessarily opposed to that proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, a position that is defended by Braidotti.

### **Becoming-Woman**

Schreber’s process in becoming-woman, a process which is *necessarily* never achieved, in Deleuzian terms, provides him with, what Braidotti has called, “a new scheme for human subjectivity” (109) one that “does not aim at a mere reversal of the balance of power, but rather at overcoming the dialectic of identity/otherness which governs classical philosophical thought” (109). The reason Schreber might at some level want to move from his position of power

and privilege to one which embraces an alternative subjectivity might lie in its creative and liberating effect:

Deleuze presents the becoming-woman, the 'becoming-minority', as a way of moving beyond the dialectical antagonism between majority and minority, so as to arrive at a redefinition of human consciousness; for, he says, women constitute a minority cultural group, a sub-set of the patriarchal system. His thesis rests, like the others, on a certain desexualization, insofar as belonging to a minority is assumed to involve a creative and liberating determination (as opposed to the immobility of the monolithic majority) which is not a prerogative of women but the basis of a new subjectivity to be discovered by all those – men and women alike – who recognize that they are in a minority. Deleuze proposes a new scheme of human subjectivity, a new way of thinking the human being, beyond the Hegelian opposition between being and non-being, as being in process, in becoming. (Braidotti 108-109)

The idea of being in process or becoming is an attractive one because it is dynamic and open-ended, but for this reason it is also disturbing and potentially dangerous to those who might wish to limit the process. If power depends upon the ability to predict and control the Other, then the instability of becoming will be managed by incarceration, intimidation and undermining credibility, while at the same time attempting to freeze into the Hegelian being/non-being mode through labeling or static representation. Churchill uses the dynamic becoming mode of Schreber's madness (as she did with Françoise in *Hospital*) to maintain the liminal state in her script – to keep the question open. Schreber's becoming-woman represents a life-affirming phase in opposition to the catatonia of his BwO representing the death desire. This sets up an internal tension in the character that holds a mirror to the society that produces him.

This liminality is further assisted through the preferred production mode of radio in which the suppression of an immediate visual suspends possibility.

## Radio Production

*Radio is good because it makes you...precise. ...Then there's the freedom – you can do almost anything in a radio play, whereas you're tied to the possibilities of the set and the stage in the theatre. (Qtd. in Fitzsimmons 85)*

In this final section of the chapter I investigate the significance of Churchill's earlier comment that the play worked better on radio than it did as a live performance (Fitzsimmons 17). In this regard, some mention of the particular demands of radio may be helpful. Tim Crook has discussed radio's characteristics, and in the following excerpt draws a distinction between expectations of radio audiences and theatre-goers, a distinction that directly influences form:

The radio audience is not a captive one. You have not enticed a group of people into a theatre, closed the doors and turned the house lights down, and effectively imprisoned people for an hour and a half. Most dissatisfied theatregoers stick it out stoically or heroically. In radio, no money has exchanged hands and the moment of departure is quick and ruthless. (157)

Crook's comment assists an understanding of Churchill's forthright and provocative style in this play, and in her writing more generally. To recognise why *Schreber's Nervous Illness* appears to have worked better on radio than in live performance it may be useful to discuss those aspects of its subject matter that converge with the more abstract and intimate aspects of radio. This particular text deals with aspects of the mind, with the supernatural, with ideas of self, identity, and phenomenology. Such elements may well be disturbed by the external imposition of the visual. The combination of perceptual readings available or possible alters the interpretative relationship as the actor moves from

a radio play with multiple voices where it has been argued that “pictures in the mind can be changed or destroyed in seconds,”<sup>23</sup> to a single person live performance. The rapidity and freedom of the changes possible in radio are particularly relevant in the pseudo-epic performance of Schreber’s world. In this world the listener is conscious that Schreber is doubly held in the confines of an asylum and in a ‘place’ where his mind frees him to the point that he can live beyond the Earth itself, and is able to experience both:

**SCHREBER:** ... It is understandable that I lived for years in doubt as to whether I was really still on earth or on some other celestial body. I thought I might be on Phobos, a satellite of the planet Mars, and wondered whether the moon, which I sometimes saw in the sky was not Mars itself. (68)

Deleuze and Guattari make the point that cinema “is able to capture the movement of madness, precisely because it is not analytical and regressive, but explores a global field of coexistence” (274). For radio, sound enables the presentation and removal of any given reality in a split second. As a playwright Churchill has the licence to capture the performance of madness and its politics in ways that psychoanalysts are not free to do without jeopardising their paradigm and their reputation. Churchill’s statement at the beginning of this section suggests that the playwright’s licence is even greater in the case of radio. Radio has the capacity to operate as a free space where multiple sounds and voices are manipulated, to “capture the movement of madness” with an immediacy and speed which can work, as in this script, to sabotage initial attempts at analysis. Similarly, time and space are manipulated so that the listener is drawn into Schreber’s world in which it is difficult to gauge where and

when events are taking place. In radio, the absence of visual cues blurs the lines between the events reported by Schreber as a reflection of real actions on his body with those occurring within his mind as delusions or transformed childhood experiences, as Schatzman would argue. By way of contrast, in live performance the visual evidence distinguishes more clearly between mind and body and where a single performer performs the script, some of the interpretive advantage over psychoanalysis may be forgone.

Kenneth Haigh played Schreber in the radio production and again ‘live’ as a ‘one-man show’ at the Soho Poly.<sup>24</sup> While the immediate difference might, at first impression, be seen as that of moving from the auditory world to the visual, in some ways the opposite might be argued. Peter Lewis has described radio as a visual medium similar to that of a novel (10) and Frances Gray and Janet Bray, in an article that reviews radio drama since 1971, reiterate the apparently frequently expressed idea that “radio has been largely interpreted from its beginnings – as a medium with a ‘visualizing’ task to perform” (292). As such it provides an infinite landscape of possibilities for shifts of time and place which are in some ways more restricted in a ‘live’ performance space.<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of Haigh’s skill, the constant presence of his body in a monologue performance might operate to ‘tie’ the characters to a perceived single (embodied) subjectivity. Consequently, the embodiment of all of the characters in one actor more clearly designates the point of departure as that of the predominant Schreber character providing the impression of a position through which the other characters are referenced, filtered and integrated.<sup>26</sup>

Alternatively, the multiple voices of seven different actors in the radio production would be expected to more clearly provide a sense of multiple and competing subjectivities. The actors personifying the four Rays demonstrate a dramatically effective means of providing the sense of a physical expression of Schreber's internal conflict, paralleled by the external conflict between his understanding of the world and that of his doctor and former colleagues in the Court of Appeals. This view contrasts with that of Kritzer.

She argues that the use of one actor increases the complexity of the conflict that Schreber experiences as he battles with "issues of power versus powerlessness and rationality versus irrationality" (33). However, the interpretive difference between a single actor in a live performance space and multiple voices on radio presents a qualitative rather than a quantitative shift.<sup>27</sup> The use of a solo performer risks returning the story to a psychoanalytic perspective, a perspective that I have argued is counter to Churchill's political agenda. This perspective confines the problem to the individual. The script performed, as written, for multiple voices, takes the battle out of the individual psyche (the psychoanalytic conception), and returns it to the external social arena (a sociological conception), a place where Schreber's madness at times acts more as a protective barrier than it does a battleground. By alternately internalising and externalising the conflict, Churchill expands the responsibility for madness to include those who continue to support the social structures that construct and then construe his behaviour as a personal rather than as a social illness.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore if we conceive of madness as a state of abjection, a condition that

incorporates the disowned aspects of a society, as argued in the preceding chapter, then it must have negative consequences not only for the individual and the family, but also for the broader society.<sup>29</sup>

The idea of externalised conflict in Churchill's telling acknowledges the precipitating impact of others on Schreber's condition, and points to the broader social consequences of ignoring this as a warning sign. The external representations, achieved by using multiple voices, contest not only the gender binary but also those of rationality/irrationality; power/powerlessness, and, returning for a moment to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "birth of the mass phenomenon" in microscopic scale on the body of the paranoiac, the Coloniser and the Colonised.

The argument of multiple voices versus the solo actor might be expanded alongside Joanne Tompkins's insight into the use of multiple actors to play a single colonised subject as mentioned earlier in Chapter Four. While Schreber is not a colonised subject per se, he is controlled by social forces that define the colonising mind-set in a comparable way to that of Françoise in *Hospital*. I have suggested earlier, in relation to this play, that the boundaries between coloniser and colonised may be less clear-cut than a strategic essentialist, politically positioned argument might suggest.

Tompkins argues multiple casting as a performative way of showing the difficulties in negotiating the uneasy boundaries between Coloniser and Colonised, rendering visible the abject and disrupting the binary as each actor takes over from the last. In live performance, the previous actor remains as a



visible reminder of the abject; of what has been left behind as alternative aspects of the subject (embodied in other actors) move forward (“Breaching” 503).<sup>30</sup> In the radio play, the Rays represent aspects of Schreber’s subjectivity and are ‘embodied’ in the multiple voices of the four actors cast. Rather than claiming a continued visibility as one voice takes over from the next, the aural trace remains, an echo and a memory – the voices in Schreber’s head literally become the voices in the listener’s head. In addition, the use of multiple actors renders it easier to manipulate unexpected status shifts. From a pragmatic point of view the rhythm established by multiple actors can signal status variation as it communicates in terms of interruptions and line overruns, as can the attributes of vocal embodiment itself.

Voice on radio is the way in which the performance is ‘embodied,’ although the nature of this embodiment is fraught with ambiguity. Alexandra Keller has explored the liminal status of the voice, particularly the voice as it is produced through radio, as both separate from and integral to the body, in her article “Shards of Voice.” The voice emanates from the body, is modified by the body, but is not a part of the body. She asks what the voice is doing when it is not voicing, and in foregrounding its elusive quality, evokes a sense of mystery. The voice is both embodied and disembodied.

In live performance the voice may represent the disembodied or the idea without corporeal attachment performing a Cartesian split, when used as a voice-over. Perhaps it is also an ideal way for a Body without Organs to be performed because it is more readily conceived as nomadic process, or able to present itself

as “an unimpeded flow,” as Elizabeth Grosz has described the Deleuze and Guattari’s egg metaphor of the BwO (*Volatile Bodies* 169).

Eleanor Margolies’ recent article in *New Theatre Quarterly* discusses throwing the voice in live performance, to represent the spirit of the dead, and I wondered if the dead might not be the ultimate in Bodies without Organs. In this context it is interesting that Deleuze and Guattari have suggested that it is from the BwO, in the form of the catatonic schizophrenic, we get our model of death (329).

Allen Weiss, in an introduction to a special edition of *The Drama Review* featuring articles that examined the place of radio in performance, links Artaud’s body without organs and the advent of pre-recorded radio:

The confluence of these two events – Artaud’s final attempt to void his interiority, to transform psyche and suffering and body into art; and the technical innovation of the recording tape, which henceforth permitted the experimental aesthetic simulation and disarticulation of voice as pure exteriority – established a major epistemological-aesthetic shift in the history of art. (12)

In radio the voice is all that we have of the performer to suggest their persona or personae (although sound effects and positioning can provide a mood context which suggests aspects of character). Sound (volume, pitch, rhythm, proximity and lengths of silences between sound), the means rather than the end,<sup>31</sup> therefore becomes critically important in interpretation. The interpretive significance of the voice would be expected to take on a heightened importance. Thus the single female voice of Sheila Grant in the original radio production, against the other six male voices would be an important factor in interpreting the performance. Her lone female voice against that of Schreber’s in his process of

becoming-woman provides a tangible reference point against which his becoming might be gauged. The juxtaposition of her voice against the male voices might also suggest a degree of powerlessness, tokenism and silencing of the female element. Without a female voice at all, this might go unnoticed, with all-male casts not being particularly unusual at the time of production.

### **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, *Schreber's Nervous Illness* raises big questions: of the nature of Power, God, Gender and the comedic, tragic and potentially genocidal quest to produce the 'Ideal Man.' The script encourages speculation on the nature of the family, society and historical period that produced Schreber. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a convergence of some of the more significant events in the history of modern Western philosophy. Schreber's time, place and language was that of Nietzsche, and of Feuerbach, and he was a contemporary of Freud, who later used his *Memoirs* to develop a theory of paranoia. His father was an influential pedagogue whose ideas and practices provided a practical, devastating template for raising children and popularly influencing (or mirroring) a society that ultimately produced the Holocaust. Charles Darwin was Schreber's contemporary, and much might be said about the early influence of Social Darwinism on the society that followed him. Perhaps Schreber's characterisation contains the embryonic possibilities for resonating at all of these levels.

This chapter has ranged across varying issues, providing some indication of the parallel layers of meaning that are facilitated by Churchill's open

questioning approach. Such a style makes it impossible or foolish to assert that there is a single correct perspective on any of the works discussed here and resists attempts at providing closed solutions. In this play, the nature of the source material has provided Churchill with the opportunity to experiment with the legitimacy of enabling one of society's 'Others' to argue his case from the subject position. In so doing she raises compelling questions about the efficacy, appropriateness, and morality of a purely medical response to his behaviour. As for the other plays discussed, in *Schreber* Churchill allows silenced voices to be heard, and through juxtaposition of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' voices, the reinstatement of the abject, and a deconstruction of binary interpretation, she continues to facilitate the consideration of alternative perspectives.

*Schreber's Nervous Illness* seems to encode a myriad of interpretive possibilities, but it does so in a way that allows engagement in process rather than solution. For this reason I have extended my argument beyond that of a purely feminist response which might be seen to unnecessarily limit the extent of Churchill's project. Churchill's refusal to provide easy solutions is continued in *The Judge's Wife*, discussed in the chapter that follows.

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<sup>1</sup> As for *Hospital*, all page numbers referring to quotes from *Schreber's Nervous Illness* are taken from *Churchill: Shorts*.

<sup>2</sup> *Shorts*, 60. In the Introduction to *Shorts*. Churchill mentions that *Schreber* and *Hospital* were written around the same time.

<sup>3</sup> Morton Schatzman suggests that hypochondriasis results from the inscription of words into bodily experiences, and he relates this to Schreber's embodiment of his father's words. He says that "Some, possibly all, peoples bodies resonate to others' spoken words, inscribe transforms of the words, store them, and later re-experience them" (87).

<sup>4</sup> See Churchill's "Author's Note" on *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* on (96).

<sup>5</sup> Co-written by Aaron Esterson, *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Sigmund Freud Case Histories II, Volume 9*. According to this source, Schreber's wife became ill following her stroke on November 14<sup>th</sup> 1907 and Schreber was readmitted to an asylum thirteen days later. This suggests that either the stress caused him by his wife's illness precipitated a relapse, or alternatively, that she had been caring for him and it soon became apparent after her stroke that he was unable to care for himself. Given that Mrs Schreber was only forty-nine when she had her stroke, there is some likelihood that the latter was the case. It may even be that the strain of caring for Schreber caused her to become ill at such an early age.

<sup>7</sup> It is no accident that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals provided by the American Psychiatric Association has significantly expanded and refined its list of psychiatric illnesses with the publication of each successive volume.

<sup>8</sup> The fall of a modern man from his lofty position as High Court Judge, to that of a cross-dressing 'madman' is reminiscent of and satirises the tragic position of stories that have gone before, such as *King Lear*, and while dealt with sympathetically, creates new questions in the context of seventies feminism.

<sup>9</sup> He is eventually discharged in 1902.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that Schreber was a contemporary of his countryman Friedrich Nietzsche whose writings, such as *The Anti-Christ*, had considerable impact at the time and subsequently, but most of these were written before Nietzsche had a mental breakdown at the end of the nineteenth Century (1889). He remained so until his death in 1900.

<sup>11</sup> Freud argues that "Since paranoiacs cannot be compelled to overcome their internal resistances, and since in any case they only say what they choose to say, it follows that this is precisely a disorder in which a written report or a printed case history can take the place of personal acquaintance with the patient" (138). Because of the timing of Freud's publication, Schreber is necessarily denied the right of reply.

<sup>12</sup> Schatzman cites Dr Schreber (the father) as advocating that parents should demand the unconditional obedience of the child from birth in everything. He says "Given Dr Schreber's views about the parts fathers do and must play in families, it is likely he held God-like power in his family. Family members, who connected his presence with God's, were probably representing the family power system in cosmic terms. . . . Dr Schreber urged parents to urge, encourage, and induce children to be devoted to God" (15). His methods involved control over physical aspects of the child's development, often with the use of restraining straps to keep the shoulders back, a head holder, to prevent the child's head from falling forwards or sideways and others to prevent the child's movement in bed.

<sup>13</sup> Schatzman cites Niederland (1960) who claims that in 1958 there were over two million members of the Schreber Associations in Germany (13). The Schrebergärtens (designed to encourage outdoor activity and exercise for children) were absorbed into the Hitler Youth during the 1930s and there remain thousands of Schrebergärtens in Germany in the present day, used as allotments for recreation.

<sup>14</sup> In "True Blue and Dreamy" Matt Wolf quotes Churchill: "I'm not inclined with any of my plays to say, 'This is about that,' she told me before the play opened at New York's Public Theatre in May 1996. 'Plays are about the whole event that they are'" (51).

<sup>15</sup> This hope is thwarted by Flechsig, the doctor who has committed 'soul murder' on Schreber, and he realises that instead he is to be tossed aside for sexual misuse (65).

<sup>16</sup> See Freud's Case Study of Schreber. where Schreber is quoted as alluding to problems with his family which he attributes to soul murder. He describes his family as follows: "there is at any rate something more or less problematical about all of them, something not easily explicable upon the lines of ordinary human experience" (171). Freud continues: "But the next sentence which is also the last of the chapter, is as follows: 'The remainder of this chapter has been withheld from print as being unsuitable for publication'" (171). This is a clear example of collusion between family and social interests in maintaining an illusion of stability in the system.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on the effect of mono versus stereo presentation of radio plays see Jonathan Raban's paper on "Icon or symbol: the writer and the 'medium'" (Lewis 78-90).

<sup>18</sup> Isaac Unterman tells us that "The unwritten Torah, the Talmud, according to tradition, arose from God" (45). He also makes the point that "The Bible contains 600,000 letters, the number of Jews who were liberated from Egypt in the Exodus" (45). This implies that there is something

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sacred contained in the sum of the specific words used that cannot be confined to their specifically referential purpose.

<sup>19</sup> I use the word 'imaginary' as Moira Gatens has defined it to "refer to those images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity" (viii).

<sup>20</sup> The Deleuzian concept of man becoming-woman concerns me for this reason. For a man to move from a majoritarian position to a minoritarian position suggests a kind of colonisation of that position, or of what a man might think that position or mode of becoming is.

<sup>21</sup> In this he occupies an ambivalent position which could alternate between male and female subjectivity – experiencing himself as the whore or the man for whom the whore is object.

<sup>22</sup> Grosz writes: "Most relevant here is the correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female, where man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned. Such a correlation is not contingent or accidental but is central to the ways in which philosophy has historically developed and still sees itself even today" (*Volatile Bodies* 3).

<sup>23</sup> As discussed by Frances Gray and Janet Bray in "The Mind as Theatre: Radio Drama since 1971."

<sup>24</sup> According to Churchill's Introductory Note to *Shorts*. However, in Linda Fitzsimmons' *File on Churchill* (ibid.) the First London production was said to be at the King's Head Theatre on 5 December 1972.

<sup>25</sup> Gray and Bray also trace the relationship between radio and the absurd, providing some support for the argument that "Existing absurdist plays found in the radio an ideal medium in which to depict a constantly shifting reality, and exploited an aspect of it hitherto seen as a weakness – the fact that a radio 'set' has no substance" (293).

<sup>26</sup> I suppose the opposite could be argued – that the solo actor taking on multiple characters or aspects of character portrays a fragmented subjectivity. But I would argue that the form impacts on the political implications of the message. For the actor performing a monologue, there is increased control and interpretive power over the process, and much of the skill is in being able to move smoothly between characters, but at the same time ensuring that each is recognised as a distinct entity – unitary perhaps. 'Leakage' between characters (possibly the abject) is seen as bad acting.

<sup>27</sup> As Kritzer's idea of "gaining complexity" might imply.

<sup>28</sup> Using a Foucaultian perspective as argued in Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*.

<sup>29</sup> This idea of negative consequences is, paradoxically, based on the Freudian notion of repression, but here it is projected onto the social body.

<sup>30</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory Whitehead has commented that "Radio happens in sound, but I don't believe that sound is what matters about radio, or any of the acoustic media. What does matter is the play among relationships: between bodies and antibodies, hosts and parasites, pure noise and irresistible fact, all in a strange parade, destination unknown, fragile, uncertain" (96).

## Chapter Six

### *The Judge's Wife: The Other of the Other*

The contribution that Chapter Six makes to the overall argument, rests in the experimentations with shifting subjectivities that Churchill undertakes in relation to the three central characters in this television play, which occupies the third and final critical analysis undertaken here.

Churchill's comments on writing for television, in an interview with Linda Fitzsimmons in 1987, suggest that her television plays have not been as extensively developed as her scripts for live performance.<sup>1</sup> When describing her feelings about *The Judge's Wife* in particular, her remarks imply a sense of disappointment with the script:

I don't know whether it's the way I feel about television or whether that play is something slightly...well slick is the wrong word, but it's toward slick. It was a slightly deliberate case of seeing whether I could write a television play. (Qtd. in Fitzsimmons 18)<sup>2</sup>

Although Churchill describes *The Judge's Wife* in these somewhat dismissive terms, the text is included here because its interrogation continues to promote an understanding of her early and explicit engagement with the complexities of representational strategies in relation to the politics of gender, class assumptions and institutional power.

*The Judge's Wife* was the first of Churchill's television plays and was broadcast on October 2, 1972 on BBC2 as part of the *Thirty-Minute Theatre* series

(Kritzer 46). The drama begins with, and repeats in various stages of development and completion, images of the Judge's death in the woods at the hands of Michael Warren. Warren is the brother of a young revolutionary whom the Judge has recently sentenced for unspecified crimes.

While the plot traces and retraces the dramatic and lethal activities of the men, the emphasis on female character development and relationship within the conventional household setting, place the perspectives of the women centre-stage. The predominance of domestic detail pitched against an opening scene which takes place in the formal setting of the Judge's court, underscores an interrogation of male and female options for public influence and action at that time, and their interdependence.

Caroline is the title character and most of the dialogue takes place in the home, established throughout as her domain. Laurence, the Judge, is portrayed as an incorrigible reactionary and it soon becomes apparent that the more liberal members of the household, Peg the young Irish housekeeper, and Caroline's sister Barbara, consider his recent sentencing of the young revolutionary Vernon Warren to have been unforgivably extreme. Discussion around the dinner table becomes a contest between Barbara's attempts to persuade Laurence to adopt a more moderate approach, and Caroline's determination to silence Barbara, ostensibly in order to prevent the Judge's angry outbursts and to maintain the illusion of a competent and smoothly run household. As the play unfolds, the illusion begins to dissolve as a sense of impending threat descends, and there is the heavy understanding, generated by multiple repetitions of the murder scene,



not only that Laurence is about to be murdered but that he is, in a sense, already dead.

Notwithstanding Churchill's comments at the outset, this is another of her plays that has received less attention than it deserves. Although short, *The Judge's Wife* provides an intricacy of character politic and imagery emblematic of her earlier radio plays, and preparatory of her later live productions. The script merits reconsideration partly because of this and partly because in previous critiques of the play, Caroline's significance from a feminist perspective has been misunderstood, conflated with a superficial reading of her character and thus, in my view, doubly marginalized. I would argue against previous interpretations that have tended to concentrate on the Judge's character, and suggest instead that his wife's character, and its problematic identity, is the central idea around which the play revolves. The play's title, which simultaneously draws attention to, and erases Caroline's public identity, lends weight to this assertion. By naming the play *The Judge's Wife*, Churchill makes satirical reference to an accepted convention in which a wife's position and status was conflated with that of her husband and his professional standing in the community, a reference that is then supported in the text. The script explores the risks and consequences of negating a woman's independent identity in this way, suggesting an alternative, but not necessarily more satisfying life course that might have been available to Caroline in the form of that taken by her unmarried sister Barbara.

Caroline's representational function needs to be understood within the historical context of the production, as for the other two texts discussed in this

thesis, at the height of the Women's Liberation Movement. Paradoxically, this timing could explain the relative absence of comment regarding the potential of this character to function as a (feminist) political device. Portrayed in an apparently passive, conservative and subservient role, Caroline is an unlikely candidate for feminist support at a time when militant forms of feminism were de rigueur and older married women were effectively cast in the role of 'the Other of the Other.'<sup>3</sup> Although from a contemporary viewpoint it is apparent that Churchill is dealing in satirical extremity with the characters of Laurence and Caroline, both may have been perceived as naturalistic and largely uncomplicated within the parameters of the then dominant social mores, or worse, stereotypical. The pitching of Caroline's excessive submissiveness against the bullish theatricality of Laurence's character may in hindsight suggest even a sexist parody of the wife and the relationship that is best forgotten. As will be discussed presently, perhaps this is why Caroline's explicit and extreme submissiveness has been under-explored as a deliberate political questioning on Churchill's part. While the strategy of flagrant overemphasis of a character flaw is one commonly employed in satire, in this instance the playwright's satirical focus on Caroline's subservience appears to have been largely unsuccessful in being received as such. Like the extreme and often grotesque Hollywood characterizations of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, stereotypical, subservient and shallow behaviour in women was perhaps too much an established part of the semiotic vocabulary of film to be seen as out of the ordinary. Consequently, female mimetic behaviour played out in Hollywood movies became accepted as

an accurate representation of reality. While I am not suggesting that the issues surrounding race and gender discrimination are directly comparable, the motivations and techniques of representation that reinforce existing inequitable power relationships have remained surprisingly resilient and transferable. Caroline's internalization of such conditioning through self-censure and unwillingness to contradict her husband is extreme, as are her unsuccessful attempts to silence her sister.

Churchill's undertaking to represent the silencing internalised by women and practised by them on other women is problematic, partly because, as Dale Spender claims, "[t]he yardstick against which women's talk is, in fact, measured is that of **silence**" (qtd. in Poynton, 67; emphasis in original). Spender argues: "When silence is considered the appropriate behaviour for women then, quite conveniently in a sexist society, almost any talk a woman engages in can be considered too much" (qtd. in Poynton, 67). This suggests a dilemma in presenting silence as a focal point, because of the tendency to naturalize any form of extremity, an issue that Churchill herself raises in the final monologue spoken by Caroline in relation to the Judge's own excesses (161).

By engaging with a central character whose perceived social currency was, at this time, heavily dependent upon her husband's public role, Churchill has chosen a difficult subject. Nevertheless it could be seen as typical of her approach to take a critical stance to the issues of the time. Writing at a time in which the idea of 'sisterhood' was attempting to unite all women, Churchill interrogates differences between women in this script. Within the microcosm of the Judge's

home, juxtaposed against silent images of Warren's, where his mother sits crying in her kitchen, she investigates the impact of class on choice, and perspectives of political justification depending upon life circumstances.

Churchill's vision of Caroline is that of the conservative older woman *voluntarily* confined to the home in spite of being publicly negated by a male-referenced social system and unable to be incorporated by feminist theory of the time. Women's work within established (patriarchal) institutions was an activity that tended to be attacked, or at worst, ignored from the theoretical position of radical and materialist feminisms.<sup>4</sup> Recognising this as an unexplored area perhaps, Churchill casts Caroline as a stereotypical middle-class, middle-aged woman for whom her role as wife is pivotal, and by the end of the play we come to recognise that she may have managed this role not as a victim, but quite deliberately. Through her character Churchill explores female power within the private sphere of the home, and ways in which the characters of both Caroline and her sister Barbara attempt to influence the implementation of public policy through covert manipulation of the Judge's opinion and position.

Churchill's engagement with representational politics in this script occurs both at the level of the play's structure, predominantly through the disruption of chronological time, as well as through the character development, where stereotypical identities are established at the outset, only to be called into question in the final monologue.

Both the form and character development employed function with varying degrees of effectiveness to disturb contemporary preconceptions of that time with

regard to gender, power, and assumptions of cause and effect normally facilitated by chronological sequencing of scenes, a practice that underpins realism.

Perhaps most importantly for the current discussion, this is a play that explicitly interrogates the production of the subject. In the final monologue Churchill experiments with the deliberate and final re-presenting of one character (the dead judge) by another (his wife). This provides us with some useful insights into her interest in and understanding of the construction of identity by others, at a relatively early stage in her career. She experiments with the idea of subjective truth and its representation through an exploration of the characters' varying points of view regarding not only the meaning attributed to the events delineated through the story line, but also to the interpretation of character itself.

It is significant that Churchill uses the legal institution as the mode of exploration through which reality and truth are variously constructed. Not only does it point to broader implications than those of the idiosyncratic domestic sphere of this particular household, but it effectively calls into question the impartiality of the justice system by demonstrating the failings of its key practitioners, an extension of a theme explored in *Schreber's Nervous Illness*.

Finally, this production appeared some months after *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, inviting comparison between the two plays in terms of Churchill's treatment of the judiciary, gender, and shifting power relationships. Analysis of *The Judge's Wife*, when contextualised against the treatment accorded *Schreber*, provides additional insights into Churchill's immersion in issues concerned with the couching of alternative realities against conventional views of insanity and

legitimacy. With regard to the current text, I will discuss this in more detail under the heading of “Churchill’s Subversive Strategies of Representation.” Firstly, however, a survey of critical receptions of the production provides the context from which my argument has emerged.

### **Critical Reception**

While little detailed analysis has been afforded *The Judge’s Wife*, Elaine Aston, Amelia Howe Kritzer and Geraldine Cousin have each undertaken brief but discriminating analyses in the process of delineating the broad political framework of Churchill’s oeuvre. Aston in particular has brought her early work to the attention of those who might pursue its relevance to feminist theory and praxis in the future. In her book *Caryl Churchill*, she begins the discussion by providing brief reviews of *Lovesick*, *Schreber’s Nervous Illness*, *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*, and Churchill’s first full-length stage play *Owners*.<sup>5</sup> She describes commonalities of theme between these plays in the Introduction where she states:

This selection is designed to illustrate Churchill’s early preoccupation with ‘madness and civilization’, and explores her critique of the regulating systems of authority which determine ‘normal’ behaviour, and, conversely, marginalize and police the ‘abnormal’, sexually ‘deviant’, ‘insane’ or ‘criminal’, and so on. Although this work dates from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the gender politics (and racial politics in *The Hospital*) stage a number of issues pertinent to current feminist theorizings of sexuality, power, subjectivity, cultural identity and the (de-) construction of gender. (5)

*The Judge’s Wife* is seen as a departure from the themes explored in *Schreber* and *Hospital* in that its emphasis is on the Judiciary rather than on psychiatry as the central social institution under examination. Of *The Judge’s*

*Wife* Aston notes that, “In short, this early television play is replete with techniques of destabilization which are precursors of theatrical devices Churchill subsequently develops in her theatre” (*Caryl Churchill* 15). She lists these to include repeated flashbacks of a murder scene to disrupt narrative linearity, the doubling of roles, and the use of television as a meta-theatrical device. With regard to Churchill’s points of departure from chronological time in the play, Amelia Kritzer describes the complex manner in which she employs this strategy to disturb assumptions about cause and effect otherwise implied in the realistic form:

*The Judge’s Wife*, in common with a number of Churchill’s works for radio and stage, experiments with time. In this case the time manipulation disjoins the visual and aural elements of the production. Scenes that are propelled aurally – i.e., by dialogue – unfold in a forward progression, while those propelled visually start from their end point and progress backwards. This device undermines the cause-effect assumptions implicit in the realistic dramatic style. A double before-during-after construction permits the ‘during’ section to be seen as either dinner or the judge’s death, depending on whether the viewpoint is that of the judge or Caroline. The filmed sequences, of course, reverse the order to after-during-before. (48)

By deciding to opt for a distorted time line, Churchill explicitly calls into question ideas about the exclusive meaning attributed to events when causality is produced as a unidirectional phenomenon. She does this by exposing the hidden mechanics of the narrative form and demonstrating alternative ways in which a sequence of events might be construed. Specifically in this case, the non-linear dramatic form challenges essentialist notions of ‘natural’ legitimacy with regard to social position by virtue of class and gender by communicating the underlying construction process.

The reinforcement of a presumption of legitimate power in favour of patriarchal institutions, such as marriage, has typically been facilitated through the convention of realism according to a range of feminist scholars such as Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan and Peta Tait, in addition to Amelia Kritzer.<sup>6</sup> It is a presumption that was regularly bolstered by early male critics of Churchill's work for whom the departure from realism was more often seen as a lack of skill than an originality to be applauded.<sup>7</sup> However, reviews of her work from this period often combined a mixture of caveat and solicitous admiration that had the dual effect of demonstrating an even-handed approach to criticism and reinforcing the effect of the male critic's restrictive, superincumbent status above that of the emerging female playwright.

In 1972, reviewer Patrick Campbell summed up his overall impression of *The Judge's Wife* as follows: "The Judge's Wife was in short one of those plays which leave the critic with a strong sense of frustration, seeing so much originality just failing in the event to fulfil its promise" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 18). In 1997 Elaine Aston ameliorated this impression commenting that, "It is the 'promise' of things to come which, retrospectively, strikes the reader and viewer" (*Caryl Churchill* 15).

Initial reactions by Campbell suggest an orientation problem with regard to the play's point of view, in determining its merit. His response appears to rest on assumptions of male subjectivity (Laurence's) and acceptable form (realism) against which *The Judge's Wife* is measured, only to fall short, causing his frustration, perhaps in part because of the open, unresolved ending. Perhaps it is



also because of the incommensurable placement of Caroline as the final, active, defining subject against his unexplored assumption that the play is primarily about Laurence. Campbell writes:

Was the Judge really the Fascist pig everyone believed him to be or was he, as his widow passionately avowed, a revolutionary manqué, an apparent pillar of the Establishment whose pose as a right wing bigot was a deliberate subterfuge to encourage revolt against the very things he seemed to stand for?

This was the intriguing question posed by Caryl Churchill on Monday in a play of considerable intellectual content but one in which it was difficult to believe. Not because the premise itself was so outrageous – indeed it opened fascinating vistas and offered a possible rationale for the behaviour of certain politicians – but because of the occasional anomalies in story line and dialogue ... . (Qtd. in Fitzsimmons 17-18)

Again, at the risk of stating the obvious, the play's title is *The Judge's Wife*, and not *The Judge*, as Campbell's review might suggest. He tends to focus on whether the explanation for the actions of Laurence, the Judge, were correctly interpreted in the final monologue by Caroline, as the judge's widow, but pays no attention to Caroline's motivations in producing the speech in the first place. This narrowing of focus is, in my opinion, the primary reason that the work has been underestimated in terms of its relevance to an understanding of Churchill's oeuvre. It may be that the importance of the female characters' subjectivities were less obvious when the production was first viewed, because at this time the subjectivity of the male protagonist(s) tended to assume the default position in critical reviews, as perhaps they do in the majority of representational media today.

However, female critics have also viewed the play in ways that could understate Caroline's complexity. The difficulty with binary thinking is its

infiltration into the thinking not only of those most clearly advantaged by it, but also those of us who have matured with a literary tradition that has trained us to place ourselves, as women, in the male subject position. On the other hand, perhaps it is not so much the suggestions offered with regard to interpretation of the text that are problematic, but acting on the temptation to offer closure where the playwright has left the interpretation open.

An example of this is that Caroline has recently learnt that her husband had proposed to Barbara and was turned down prior to asking Caroline to marry him. Geraldine Cousin has consequently interpreted Caroline's monologue as a way of getting back at Barbara, and there is unquestionably some evidence in the text to justify this understanding (Cousin 106). In this excerpt from the final monologue Caroline attempts to undermine her sister's image of herself both as the more politically astute, and as one who felt she understood Laurence:

He wasn't just a right-wing bigot, he was a parody of a right-wing bigot. Didn't you think so? Didn't you think he rather overdid it? Or did you fall for the whole thing? Did you really? Did you never suspect? No? I thought you would, of all people. You're not so bright as you and I think. Sneering to yourself, poor Caroline, stuck with a senile fascist. You really did? He was very good, wasn't he, he could have been a great actor. ...But why, you're about to ask me. Do you find you don't understand your Laurence quite so well? (161)

Caroline goes on to explain that Laurence's idea was to:

...help make the establishment so despicable that everyone would see that it had to go. He could use his power so unjustly that someone would be forced to take it away from him. He wouldn't kill but he could be killed. He could give his life for the revolution. (162)

Significantly, Barbara has the last word, ending the play's dialogue with, "I don't believe you Caroline. I think you're making it up." The final *images* are those of the murder sequence ending with the judge lying dead in the wood.

This last section of the play is a fascinating exercise in the production of the subject through relational valuation. Here Caroline attempts to restate Laurence's character through reinterpreting his behaviour, and her own complicit behaviour as a result; she calls into question Barbara's (and perhaps the viewer's) understanding of what has gone before and she attempts to reassert her own competence by calling her sister's into question. Barbara disputes Caroline's representation at the end, but her motivations in rejecting Caroline's explanation are inevitably suspect because they are self-interested. In rejecting Caroline's explanation, her self-perception remains intact. It seems, then, that one condition necessary for subjective truth being accepted as a legitimate version of reality is agreement between the representing parties, but had Churchill opted for this resolution, the process itself would be less visible. Perhaps what Churchill is ultimately revealing is the false position of one claiming to be able to represent an objective truth.

The final monologue, however, contains more than this. It acts as a justification for Laurence's death such as that produced for example in war time, where the ameliorating nature of representation posthumously makes sense of death in a way that is acceptable to those left behind. Whether Laurence is finally a martyr for the revolution or a martyr for the establishment is a moot point. The important point here is that Caroline claims the right to make meaning and

chooses the former interpretation, which informs us as to how *she* would finally like to be identified. It is an act in which she attempts to free herself of her self-imposed conservative identity, producing herself as more radical than her sister. Simultaneously she endeavors to reinvent Laurence, to create him as a man of integrity. But at the end, Laurence is just as dead, and perhaps this simple image raises even more questions about both the futility of violence and the similarities between the effects (if not the philosophies) of extreme left and extreme right, than it does their differences.

Amelia Kritzer is perhaps less prescriptive than Cousin in her interpretation of Caroline's motivations in the final scene. She observes of Barbara's retort that, "This final line leaves the audience with no indication of whether Caroline's explanation constitutes bizarre truth, deliberate deception, or complex self-justification" (47). Apropos to the point regarding the conflation of left and right-wing political philosophies above, Kritzer talks about the predetermined nature of the roles of each of the characters, trapped in their actions by the oppositional system:

Although the ending makes no final assessment of Caroline's claim that the judge has actually helped the opposing revolutionary cause, the assertion provokes thought about political oppositions. It raises the question of whether political extremes do depend on, and thus automatically limit each other. (48)

She goes on to say, "Churchill's abrupt ending, however, fails to draw the issues of this play in suggestive directions, resulting in an indecisive rather than ambiguous conclusion" (49).

Kritzer's charge of indecisiveness seems to suggest that Churchill has lost control of her material at the conclusion, or that some authorial commitment to direction is required even where alternative possibilities are offered. There is, perhaps, a sense of being let down without any indication of which way to think about the material presented, a sense of being tricked by the playwright into feeling that the play was leading somewhere. Churchill, as we have seen at the outset, described the play as 'toward slick' and I would interpret this to mean that it may have seemed a little contrived. The symmetrical structure created by the monologues at beginning and end, introducing a Brechtian style of political commentary, and enveloped in images of the murder scene, invite the expectation of a level of directive commitment commensurate with the structural discipline demonstrated. So perhaps it is this tight stylization of structure that leads one to look for a tighter control over the political points raised at the end.

However, the approach might also be read as an attempt by the playwright to explore a series of difficult questions to which she did not pretend to have an answer. For example, the futility of violence could be considered a super-objective that permeates the plot throughout. Indeed the thematic importance of the universal capacity for violence and its unanswerable futility has continued to disturb her writing in subsequent productions from that time until the present. A handful of examples span three decades and range from *Owners* to *Light Shining on Buckinghamshire*, *A Mouthful of Birds*, *The Skriker*, *Mad Forest*, and more recently, in 2001, *Far Away*. In particular, Churchill has had a fairly long-standing interest in women's capacity for violence being acknowledged as

ultimately necessary for peace, as expounded in her interview with Geraldine Cousin.<sup>8</sup> Although in this excerpt she appears to place this interest prior to her work with David Lan on *A Mouthful of Birds*, her exploration of the capacity for violence demonstrated in the female characters from *Hospital*<sup>9</sup> suggests that she had been thinking of these issues prior to writing *The Judge's Wife*:

...there was a line of thought I'd had before we started work on (*A Mouthful of Birds*), connected with women and violence, and women being violent ...If we are to avoid the danger of a static polarization of women as peaceful and men as violent (and therefore, men just continuing to be violent), it's perhaps important for women to recognize their capacity for violence, if men are also to recognize their capacity for peacefulness ...So, part of the process towards being properly peaceful seemed to involve knowing what your power was, but choosing not to use it ...Then, if one stands for peace, it's from a position of strength and knowledge. (10)

In *The Judge's Wife*, the capability for violence is present in both Caroline and Peg, but it is more openly explored in the character of Peg. This potential is investigated both in others' representations of her, and in her own words and actions. Soon after the opening there is a scene where Caroline is scolding Peg for voicing protest to Laurence about the sentence he has just handed down. The stage directions read: "PEG is banging veal escalopes in the kitchen, and goes on banging while CAROLINE talks" (150). And at the end of Caroline's rebuke, "PEG goes on banging" (151). The gestus of handling meat and its association with a violent potential soon re-emerges in *Owners* through the character of Marion's husband, the butcher Clegg. But Peg is also drawn as a potentially violent character by others. Barbara says of her, "The number of sharp knives she has in there I'm surprised you can sleep" (153). And Peg presents herself as

potentially violent. When Laurence asks, “Have you ever tried to poison me?” she responds, “I’ve thought of it many times.” She then quits her job and takes the opportunity to speak her mind to the Judge saying, “Not till I tell you what I think of you. You remind me of a toad I saw one time run over by a tractor. It was sitting there like you swelled up and ugly and then there was nothing left of it at all” (157).

Caroline, although apparently submissive and peace-loving (“I’m always surprised when people don’t like me. I do like to be liked. How nice it would be to be liked by everyone” (157).) reveals her capacity for, and complicity in, violence by knowingly supporting Laurence on a course of action that will lead to his death. Kritzer identifies this complicity, and although rejecting the proposition that Laurence was any more than a reactionary bigot, nevertheless notes both Churchill’s involvement of Caroline in the Judge’s sentencing decisions, and Caroline’s covert rejection of the system that he represents:

By focussing on the wife Caroline and emphasizing the judge’s dependence on her support, the play implicates this peripheral figure in the unjust sentence imposed by the judge. Churchill thus calls to account those who do not exercise power directly, but nevertheless provide vital support to a repressive political system. Caroline’s final speech calls attention to her covert rejection of this system, regardless of what it indicates about the Judge’s actions. (Kritzer 47-48)

Here the description of Caroline as a ‘peripheral figure’ is interesting because Kritzer has recognized that the play’s focus is on her. Churchill’s focus then is on a peripheral figure, but with the Judge’s subjectivity usurping his wife’s until his death and her final monologue, and perhaps even then as he remains her focus of attention. What then is the point of this final monologue?

Whether Caroline's summing up is accurate, or whether, as Geraldine Cousin has suggested, she is purely reacting against her sister's independence and the knowledge of the past marriage proposal learned in the course of the previous evening, is less important than that for the first time we hear Caroline speak out. Churchill provides us with semiotics that indicate a degree of authenticity in the character that is absent prior to Laurence's murder. The stage directions leading up to the monologue read, "*It is the next day. CAROLINE is sitting on the sofa. She wears a dressing-gown. Her hair is unbrushed, her face crumpled. BARBARA is standing. They are two old women.*" This is significant when compared with the scene the night before: "*They have similar faces but BARBARA, with no make-up, short untidy hair, and indifferent clothes, is an old woman. CAROLINE, as she makes up, looks far younger, bland, without character*" (152). Caroline's mask has been removed, her defences are down, and she is tired. Whether or not the story she offers is truthful may be less important than Caroline's authenticity at this point.

As a writing strategy, the uncertainty of the story's truthfulness serves only to render the question of both Laurence's and Caroline's motivations more intriguing. The liminal status of the plot device encourages us to hold open the possibilities of the judiciary taking extreme positions in the exercise of power, and the unintended, opposite, and perhaps inevitable social consequences of such actions.

Caroline's complicity in Lawrence's complicated 'suicide' (or, if Lawrence was unaware of the consequences of his actions, his murder) provides



an unusual position from which to speculate upon her power base. Her actions in encouraging his apparent bigotry might be seen as covertly manipulative, or even violent, but within a Marxist political conception, defensible. This puts an unusual spin on Caroline's actions, given that female manipulation and violence is generally associated with the socially *indefensible*.

But there is also, in her monologue, a confession that she is bowing to the inevitable. Caroline believes that "(We're) dying out. If you're a pig you might as well cut your own throat as run around the yard squealing" (161). She suggests that her sister is blind to the bigger picture, in her final summing up of the situation, and implies that Barbara's "weak liberal slop" (162) does more to reinforce the status quo than to challenge it.

It is to be remembered that Churchill had been influenced at this stage by Fanon's writings, as discussed in Chapter Four. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, which heavily influenced *Hospital*, Fanon wrote of the fallacy of revolution without bloodshed, and perhaps this is one idea that has influenced Churchill in Caroline's diminution of her sister's moderating approach to an extreme situation. This is not to say that the playwright is advocating extremity, but perhaps it would be fair to say that she is raising the question of the effectiveness of a moderate position, and its actual result. Albert Memmi raised the same question in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, in a chapter titled "The Colonizer Who Refuses," concluding that one cannot simultaneously accept the privileges of an inequitable system and claim to oppose it. In both Fanon's and Memmi's conception, there is no place for a middle ground where colonisation has occurred. Has Churchill

drawn a link between this revolution and a colonial situation, given her explicit interest in this issue when writing *Hospital* earlier that year?

Caroline's speech at the end of the play plainly raises the issue of class when she says 'we're dying off.' This is further reinforced by the presence of Peg the Irish maid, and Peg's sympathy for Warren hints at both the class differential and a possible colonial-revolutionary component. This assumes that Peg's designation as Irish is not accidental or without the heightened semiotic significance with which everything within the context of ideal performance is endowed.<sup>10</sup>

Another critical aspect of Caroline's persona, and that of her sister, is revealed in the following excerpt, also from Caroline's final speech. The first part demonstrates the immense capacity for people to adapt to extreme and dangerous stances if it means maintaining advantage. The second part demonstrates the privileged class that Barbara and Caroline came from, in contrast to Peg. Caroline, like her mother, has continued in the tradition of having the cooking and cleaning done for her, and it is interesting to note that at no stage in the play does Barbara challenge this 'right' despite her claim to a liberal political philosophy. Here Caroline describes the process by which Laurence ostensibly became increasingly extreme, and suggests that perhaps the whole system is nothing more than a game of pretense:

He had to make himself worse and worse because at first we would think he was shocking and next day we'd meet someone at dinner saying far more stupid and aggressive things. Unless they were pretending too of course, unless every reactionary fool in the country is playing at it, it may all be a vast plot. Perhaps when we rode our ponies in Hyde Park, two little girls with ringlets, we were pretending, do you think so? We came

home to tea and mama's hands were cold and smooth. She was never the one who cleaned the floors. (161)

By having Caroline name the hierarchical social structure as a pretense, or a construction, Churchill simultaneously provides the possibility for alternative constructions. Reinterpretation thus becomes an effective form of deconstruction. In addition, this deconstruction has been effected, as argued earlier, by adopting a non-linear structure for the script, and it is this area that I will explore below.

### **Churchill's Subversive Strategies of Representation**

Churchill's experimentation with form is something for which she has become well known over the years. In an interview with Jackie Kay in 1989 she says:

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. (42)

This production is a case in point. It is possible to break the play up into several distinct but interrelated segments. One, which occurs throughout, is the recurrent sequence leading up to the Judge's murder in the woods at the hands of Warren. Each of these varies slightly from the other in its detail and stage of completion, and provides some hints as to the way in which the conservative and the revolutionary are locked into a pattern of inescapable destructiveness. Perhaps as Kritzer has implied, this pattern is demonstrated by Churchill to be maintained by a closed system limited by each party's oppositional binary relationship with the other. Churchill structures this as a loop of cause and effect without the clear

designation of a start point, and thus without political resolution. The playwright makes no clear nomination of the moral 'high ground' in the Judge's murder, even though the revolution itself is deemed to be necessary by all, if Caroline's version of the events leading up to the Judge's death is to be believed.

The recurrent motif of the murder scene is devoid of audible dialogue, providing it with a reminiscent quality, and raises the question as to whether this is a flash forward or a flashback. Both possibilities are simultaneously evident so that the 'present' of the play incorporated in the domestic scene is either actually already past or locked into a tragic inevitability. There is a sense of a death already accomplished even as the judge eats and talks with his wife and sister-in-law. At the dinner table he can't taste anything, or everything tastes wrong; he is in a sense, already dead. The text contains a number of semiotic references in kind: "*The JUDGE is wide-eyed in the bath*" (151). "*The JUDGE's clothes are laid out on the bed*" (151). "*The JUDGE is striking matches and putting them out between his finger and thumb*" (153). "*He sits impassive*" (153).

Just prior to Caroline's monologue at the end, and immediately following yet another filmed sequence of the Judge getting out of the car with Warren and being shot, we are shown, "*A still of the JUDGE lying dead in the wood on the front page of a newspaper*" (160). This shift from pre-emptive images and filmed sequence to a newspaper still brings the scene from possibility to actuality. Again we are enjoined to literally stop and reflect upon the cues that inform us that what we are seeing is an accurate representation of reality. In this respect the

newspaper might be considered another meta-theatrical device similar to that of the television identified by Aston, cited earlier in this chapter.

The filmed sequence of the Judge's death and the two monologues provide quasi-bookends framing the play's interpretation. The first of the monologues is the Judge's summing-up of Warren's actions and the sentence to be meted out, and the last, contextualised in relation to the opening, might be described as Caroline's summing-up of the Judge's actions and the sentence that he has served. Whether the actions of Warren or the Judge are couched as crimes or as social activism becomes the speaker's invention, but whether or not the speaker is believed is heavily influenced by his or her externally perceived identity. The male Judge in the context of the court setting in his wig and robes has one kind of identity; Caroline has another; and Laurence has the advantage in terms of having his representations believed. However, in both monologues what is normally hidden in the representation of another is revealed – the subjectivity of the speaker, and, as argued earlier, the relative and untrustworthy nature of their claims to Truth.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Churchill's technique in developing Caroline's final speech spells out an understanding of the value of playing opposites in order to achieve one's end. This is an approach that might be adopted, for example, by the coloniser who wants to subvert a system of power that unfairly provides political and economic advantage to his or her own group. Using variations on this theme, Churchill explores similar strategies in both *Hospital* and *Schreber*. In the former, the technique is used in Madame and Monsieur's inconsistent and

adaptive versions of the truth when discussing both Françoise's illness and the uprising, which Monsieur denies is either war or revolution. The effect is to elevate the opposite, and through humour, to diminish Madame and Monsieur's version of events and thus the views of those who support their political stance. In the latter, Schreber's reasons for behaving as he does, as interpreted by his psychiatrist Weber, are shown to be blatantly false when juxtaposed against Schreber's own version of events. In this way, the rational psychiatrist is shown to have a poorer grasp on reality than the psychiatric patient.

As signaled in the introduction, the behaviour of the Judge, when contextualised in relation to this earlier play, might also be seen to have echoes of insanity. These are exemplified in his paranoia regarding the food which he suspects has been poisoned (a response also developed by Churchill in the behaviour of Françoise in *Hospital*), and in his almost child-like dependency on Caroline who encourages this dependency. The co-dependent quality of the relationship is reminiscent of that in the earlier script between Madame and Françoise. Laurence's developmental regression is also suggested in his distractibility, his tantrums at the dinner table, and in his egocentric confusion of identity. For example, at one point in the play Caroline tries to change the subject when Barbara is speaking, challenging Laurence about his decision. Laurence says to Caroline, "Will you not interrupt me?" (155). Immediately afterwards, successfully distracted by Caroline from discussing the trial with Barbara, he throws a tantrum over a bowl of soup into which he has put too much salt, and orders the soup course removed from everyone at the table.

The Judge is developed through a series of juxtaposed images that Churchill uses to enable us to see the familiar through a prism of skilfully reconstructed associations. This pattern of deconstruction/reconstruction is present from the very beginning of this half-hour television play, and requires an immediate decision by the viewer to suspend the formation of easy allegiances.

The script opens with scenes of Laurence's death and then cuts to his summing up of Warren's case. The stage directions read, "*A close-up of the JUDGE, alive, in his wig.*" He begins speaking; "Every criminal is a revolutionary. And every revolutionary is a criminal" (149). The line is reminiscent of one spoken by Monsieur in *Hospital* where he says; "The violence is committed by criminals. It is not part of any revolution" (110). The creation of subjective reality demonstrated as a prerequisite to the legitimized imposition of force is thus shown to be an insistent theme in Churchill's writing at this time. Here, through an act of redefinition, the opposition is denied the right to interpret its own activities as justifiable opposition, because those in power already occupy the position of legitimacy.

The quick series of contrasts in the opening scenes between the Judge's death, itself a deconstructed series of shots played backwards to gradually reveal the way in which he died, is immediately afterwards juxtaposed against the Judge "*alive, in his wig*". He speaks his first words, conflating opposition or insurrection with criminality, and the cumulative effect functions both to disorient the viewer and to present an association between the Judge's murder and the revolution that has just been pronounced as criminal. The process is disorienting

because the Judge is challenging the accepted belief that the two words 'revolutionary' and 'criminal' should represent different clusters of associations. There is in this play, from the outset, a challenge to the reliability of our precepts schooled through selective constructs of reality presented to us via image and language; that is, what we are permitted to see and hear. The judge continues:

For they both act in defiance of laws that protect us, protect our property, protect what we in this society have chosen to be. And whether a man who comes against the forces of law and order presents himself to us as a criminal or as a revolutionary is irrelevant. In either case he is challenging our society. And he must take the heavy consequences. For our society is upheld by force and we should not be afraid to admit it. The forces of law and order are stronger than those of revolt and we will not hesitate to use our strength. (149)

Here the Judge, with the full force of his position and the institution that he represents behind him, asserts his right to define meaning by denying the defendant's right to do so, and spells out the mechanism by which such privilege is maintained. By using this strategy, Churchill is immediately revealing aspects of society that tend to become visible only in times of crisis, but which normally remain (more effectively) the hidden, subconscious, and therefore unchallenged assumptions upon which existing power relationships are based.

It is a strategy that she then takes to the extreme: a strategy that with the right dramatic delivery might strike the viewer as very funny, given the layers of meaning that it has acquired in the current fraught global environment. The Judge continues:

We have police to do what we want done. They are armed with truncheons, dogs, horses, cars, gas sometimes and sometimes guns. If necessary we have the army, and there is no limit to the force that could in theory be brought to bear against the country's enemies. To eliminate the entire population would be impractical but not impossible and goes to



show that it is not strength that we lack. So why do we pretend? Why do we not say plainly that we will use any means necessary to keep things the way they are? We will never be intimidated. Your violence will be met by violence and we are stronger than you. (149)

By making overt the elements of political force that are either denied in polite society, or understood to be a taboo subject, and by taking them to their logical, extreme, and fanatical conclusion, this speech has the potential to shock the viewer to uncomfortable laughter. Political humour is an important part of Churchill's work, providing the deconstruction with a degree of intrigue that keeps the audience emotionally engaged. By taking statements, and in this case also character stereotypes, to their logical conclusion, through the juxtaposition of odd and unusual associations with overly familiar concepts, and through the use of images that place the powerful in situations of vulnerability, we are encouraged to question through laughter. Perhaps humour is a device that causes us to hold open unfamiliar and unpalatable possibilities a little longer than we might normally do, which may be one reason why political satire is effective.

In this play, the inevitable fact of the Judge's impending and already-accomplished death is juxtaposed against the daily routine of bathing, dressing, eating and talking, and it is here that the Judge's vulnerability to ridicule is revealed. Stripped of his robes he is "*standing in the bathroom by the bath, which is running. CAROLINE undresses him. He is completely passive. He stands naked, fat, old, defenceless*" (150). At the same time there is, in this description, an invitation to see the human being beneath the social construction of the Judge

in his regalia, and it is this that prevents the play from slipping into one of simple parody and easy answers.

### **Silenced Women Reinvented as Disrupting Figures**

Before concluding, I would make mention of one more character in the play whom I find intriguing, and that is the silent figure of Warren's mother. She is shown only twice, but despite the fact that she doesn't speak, the images that she evokes are powerful. She initially appears immediately after the scene in which the Judge has passed sentence on Warren: "WARREN's MOTHER *is standing in her kitchen. She is in her fifties, shapeless, lined, tired. Tears are running down her face*" (150).

This image is directly followed by, "A close-up of PEG, an Irish girl in her twenties, her hair tied back off her face, wearing an apron." Peg speaks to the Judge who has just come in, "That was a heavy sentence, sir." Here, the comparative placement of the two scenes suggests that Peg is speaking as much for Warren's mother, the unacknowledged victim of her sons' actions, and those of the Judge, as she is for herself. Peg is younger and presumably not yet beaten down by the vicissitudes of life as Warren's mother appears to be, and thus able to speak out.

Speaking for the silenced or absent woman is a motif that appears in both *Hospital* and in *Schreber*. However, the strategy is more clearly identified in these plays than in *The Judge's Wife* where although she doesn't speak, Warren's mother does appear, albeit fleetingly. In *Hospital* and *Schreber* the absent female

characters, Patient A's wife, and Schreber's wife, significantly, are actualized by their husbands, and by their husbands' psychiatrists. As such, on one level, these characters serve to inform the audience with regard to the speaker's own subjectivity. However, like Warren's mother, the characters also appear as important points of reference suggesting alternative stories/realities on the periphery of the closed 'worlds' of the hospital/asylum, or in the case of *The Judge's Wife*, the Judge's home.

The second image of Warren's mother appears shortly after the first, juxtaposed against a scene in which we see the "*naked, fat, old, defenceless*" judge about to take his bath (150). There is a cut to a scene where Warren is sitting at a kitchen table. He "*half draws a gun out of his pocket, slips it back. His MOTHER comes in. She has been crying. She puts her arm round WARREN and he leans his head against her*" (150). Again, Warren's mother functions as a reference point against which the futility of her son's actions, and ultimately those of the Judge, are interpreted. The tears that ran down her face as she stood alone in her kitchen in the first scene are suppressed in the second where "she has been crying" but now acts as a support for her son as "he leans his head against her." While an intellectual assessment of this act of support implicates her in Michael Warren's destructive actions, in the same way that Caroline's acts of support implicate her in Laurence's, it simultaneously provides a *gestus*, which operates primarily at the emotional level. From this point of view, the tears in the first scene followed by the trace of tears and the gesture of unconditional love in the

second cause us to imaginatively extend the plot-line beyond the men's violent acts to their ultimate damaging and futile consequences.

If we return for a moment to examining Churchill's strategy here in terms of the binary, there is a potential disruption occurring. The absent female characters in *Hospital* and *Schreber*, and the silent female character in *The Judge's Wife*, each effectively operates to focus critical attention onto the men's activities. I would suggest that their capacity to do this could lie in the unresolved, liminal nature of the characters, underlined in the case of *Hospital* and *Schreber*, by an absence of embodiment.<sup>12</sup> Following Grosz's argument, in male/female binaries negative attention is deflected away from the male onto the female, and more importantly in Cartesian terms, onto the female body.<sup>13</sup> In this case, however, the character's ephemeral, disembodied nature largely prevents such attachment and focuses attention back onto the embodied male bringing his actions under scrutiny. In the case of Warren's mother, although embodied, her appearances are so fleeting that for the most part she functions as a memory for the viewer, and I would suggest her purpose to be similar to that of the absent characters in the other two plays.

## **Conclusion**

In this early text, Churchill demonstrates an engagement with representational politics in which the production of the subject is made manifest. She achieves this through the Judge's depiction of Vernon Warren as a common criminal and not as the revolutionary that Warren might prefer, and again through Caroline's reinvention of Laurence, and thus, of herself. The technique of

casting and recasting of characters through others' representations repeats a strategy employed by Churchill in *Schreber's Nervous Illness* and in *Hospital*.<sup>14</sup>

To finish where I began with this thesis, my own subjectivity, of course, has played a critical part in this interpretation of the script. My first encounter with the script for *The Judge's Wife* was in 1992, as a part-time acting student. Our director had been trying to obtain the rights to do the play in live performance and I was to perform the part of Caroline, the judge's wife. Unfortunately the rights for the production were not obtained and the project had to be abandoned. Nevertheless I had already begun the process of reading and re-reading the script, in anticipation of taking on the role.

The difficulty with reading a script, once a part has been suggested, is that it is difficult to avoid seeing the story from the imagined perspective of the character. Consequently, in anticipation of beginning rehearsal, in the Method tradition, I began thinking about Caroline's life, her reasons for behaving as she did, her relationship with her husband, the Judge, and those with the others in her domestic sphere – Peg and Barbara. Perhaps it was for this reason that I was struck by critic, Patrick Campbell's assessment of the production itself, which despite the title of the play, seemed to focus entirely on the Judge as protagonist (Fitzsimmons 17-18). Protagonists traditionally make things happen, a characteristic, as I argued earlier, commonly associated with men. In this instance a character presented in the title as subsumed by her husband's title would seem an unlikely candidate for challenging this gender-loaded perception. As I read the script, while Caroline appeared exaggeratedly subservient, someone who followed

her husband's lead rather than as one who initiated action, there was always the sense the most of her character would need to be realised through subtext. Perhaps she was an iceberg to be revealed as such only upon Laurence's death although this analogy seems a little too coldly inanimate given the sudden bottled-up passion of her final monologue.<sup>15</sup>

While I do not wish to labour the point regarding whether Laurence or Caroline is the *intended* subject of the play, any major shift in interpretation from authorial intention to audience reception is significant in the context of representational politics. Although the playwright's original intention is impossible to categorically ascertain, I find it difficult to believe that the character of Caroline was developed simply as a unidimensional and stereotypical subservient wife, given the contemporary zeitgeist combined with Churchill's considerable intellect and political awareness. In this instance, she had written a script in which only *one* of the three male characters had a speaking part compared with *three* of the four women.

It is here in *The Judge's Wife* that Churchill is beginning to explore a range of female perspectives through the identity markers of class, nationality, economic and social circumstance and choices made.

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<sup>1</sup> She says, "I don't think I've written a play for television yet which is a really deeply considered play like the plays I've written for stage" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 86).

<sup>2</sup> The interview is from an unpublished dissertation by John F. O'Malley titled "Caryl Churchill, David Mercer, and Tom Stoppard: a Study of Contemporary British Dramatists Who Have Written for Radio, Television and Stage" (1974).

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<sup>3</sup> The ideal feminist icon of the time is exemplified in feminist publications such as *The Female Eunuch* and songs such as Helen Reddy's "I am Woman" which were widely known in popular culture at that time.

<sup>4</sup> The former of these, radical feminism works to agitate for abolition of man-made structures, and the latter for a radical transformation of social structures. These definitions of radical and materialist feminism were borrowed from Elaine Aston's summation in *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (8-9).

<sup>5</sup> Of the plays cited here, all but *Lovesick* were written or produced in 1972. *Lovesick* was produced in 1966.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on this read Peta Tait's *Converging Realities* (26-34).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Michael Coveney and Charles Lewson commenting on *Perfect Happiness*, and Irving Wardle and B.A. Young on *Objections to Sex and Violence*.

<sup>8</sup> "The Common Imagination and the Individual Voice," 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Here I refer to Madame, Françoise, and the wife of Patient A, an unnamed Algerian woman, who trips and blows herself up while carrying a bomb.

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Aston and George Savona cite J. Honzl in pointing out that: "In seeking to understand the components of theatre and the relations between them, the Czech theoreticians established the premise that everything in the theatrical frame is a sign, that 'dramatic performance is a set of signs'" (8).

<sup>11</sup> Given this, it is interesting that the common interpretation of the play has suggested that it is Laurence's self-representation is the one which is most accurate, and raises the question again as to gender bias in determining truth and falsity.

<sup>12</sup> In *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, because it is a radio play, I am suggesting that embodiment occurs through the voice.

<sup>13</sup> As argued in *Volatile Bodies* (3).

<sup>14</sup> In *Schreber's Nervous Illness* there are secondary representations, as discussed, of Schreber's wife, and also where Weber redefines Schreber's actions according to his own personal constructs and professional paradigm. In *Hospital* this engagement occurs throughout the play in secondary representations of Patient A's wife, in Monsieur and Madame's interpretation of their daughter's actions, and in the colonial representations of the Algerian Nationals throughout the play.

<sup>15</sup> While I am tempted here to make some reference to the Titanic, that may seem a little too crass!

## Conclusion

*Like Pope Joan, Caryl Churchill is something of a heresy. She is a major contemporary British dramatist and a woman. No woman playwright is included in Benedict Nightingale's An Introduction to 50 Modern British Plays (1982) which covers the twentieth century up to 1975. One only appears among the fourteen dramatists in Methuen's two volumes of Landmarks of Contemporary British Drama (1986). Caryl Churchill is the one, and Top Girls is the play. (Naismith xxi)*

When I decided to make Caryl Churchill the subject of my thesis, I was aware that her heresy value had already begun to diminish considerably and her now commonly accepted status as a respected canonical female playwright might well present its own set of problems for my choice. In my reading of the Australian zeitgeist, there appeared to have been a trend away from investigating well-known playwrights in performance research, in favour of unusual, neglected and apparently less 'predictable' areas of enquiry. To express this more colloquially, in choosing to investigate Churchill I began to fear that I had chosen an unfashionable project – something that was just a little out of date, something that might be seen as 'a little too nineteen eighties'! Within the performance community at least, it seemed, Churchill might now be too well known and well accepted for an interrogation of her work to be seen to offer anything new or interesting to the field. As I began to write I started to feel a little like Schreber being admonished by the Rays, the voices in his head:

SCHREBER. Now I will wash.

RAY. We have already got this.

*Piano music.*



SCHREBER. This is beautiful music.

RAY. We have already got this.

*The piano stops.*

SCHREBER. I had better go to bed.

RAY. We have already got this. We have already got this.

SCHREBER *shouts to drown out the voices.* (77)

As it turned out, the voices of dissent *were* mainly in my own head and it was by continuing to read and to write about Churchill that I effectively drowned them out (with a great deal of encouragement and support from my long-suffering supervisor). Ultimately Churchill's work, and her canonical status in itself, have emerged as more than worthy of further investigation, and my misgivings themselves have been surprisingly instructive. Perhaps in some respects my concerns were characteristic of an ambivalent attitude that I sensed towards female canonicity, a topic explored in Chapter Three. Dale Spender's comments regarding silence as the standard by which women are judged, occurs to me here. (Poynton 67) For women, public self-effacement, if not invisibility, is a related standard.

Of course everyone is open to unfair criticism and a less than even-handed approach to external valuation of their work. It is not easy for men in the competitive market place either, and in Australia at least, the 'tall poppy syndrome,' the tendency to criticize the nouveau famous in particular, is sometimes seen as a characteristic worthy of national pride. Nevertheless, as one of the few (supposedly) canonised female playwrights, Churchill occupies a place

that is conspicuous for its peculiarity and not yet sufficiently entrenched to be taken for granted. To use a Northern Hemisphere analogy, one or two swallows do not a summer make, and those swallows are possibly the ones at greatest risk of extinction when they appear prematurely. This relates to a point that I might be accused of having labored in this thesis: that is, the importance of consolidating the gains towards fair play, particularly in the arts which in my view has a responsibility to lead the way in such things. One goal of the thesis has been to contribute to this consolidation for an established female playwright.

### **My Approach in Retrospect**

In approaching this study I have eschewed unity, finding myself alternately drawn towards two competing interests. These interests and their dynamic interaction have claimed my imagination and my thesis. I am interested in people and what drives them, and increasingly in how the pieces of ‘evidence’ that we gather about another translates into an entirely new creation – a public identity; our idea of the person. The identity in question is Caryl Churchill, not *the* Caryl Churchill, whom I have never met, but Churchill the character and playwright produced by the artistic community both through its engagement with a real person and as extrapolated or projected from her plays. The other main interest has been my fascination with Churchill’s writing, a fascination which has in turn drawn me into a relationship with (my idea of) the writer. My initial dilemma lay in deciding which of these interests to follow. Then it occurred to me that their juxtaposition could create an engaging backdrop (as distinct from a causal relationship) that might shift my perspective slightly off-centre. A different path can sometimes lead to unexpected discoveries. An important influence in

undertaking this approach has been Churchill's example itself. Bill Naismith in his commentary to *Top Girls* says, "As Caryl Churchill explained in an interview, she begins with 'content' and then finds the 'form'. 'You invent the rules, experiment all the time'" (Naismith 1).

The dialogue between the two halves of the thesis has been necessarily tenuous. I do not claim that it is possible to draw specific, direct and observable connections between what might have been said about (or to) Churchill and her subsequent writing. I merely suggest that at the various stages of her engagement in the writing process and of its interpretation, there is likely to have been an interaction between the art and the artistic environment within a contemporary and historical socio-political context. The implications of such an interaction might well be considered in political terms and inform the negotiation necessary for a writer to succeed critically and economically. This is particularly so where s/he has emerged from a group that, in terms of numbers in influential positions, has typically remained outside the artistic establishment.

Whether or not Churchill meets a credible 'minority group' criterion might be debated. After all she is 'white,' English, middle-class and Oxford University educated, and has strong connections within what might now be described as the theatrical establishment, even though many members of this establishment began with, and are still supportive of, innovative 'Fringe' performance. However, she is also a woman, and even now this detail impacts upon a broader public perception of importance.

This thesis has therefore emerged from my consideration of the relationship between the interpretation of Caryl Churchill's plays, her own representation as a female playwright, and the way in which, as a form of political activism, she has experimented with the configuration of representation. Churchill's works indicate, in my view, a long-term concern for human societies and the institutionalized alienation of politics and ideology that drives too many people in positions of power to extinguish their own and others' humanity. At the same time, she is an artist who has continued to exercise her creative uniqueness, placing that continuing development above settling for more formulaic approaches.

My own impulse here has been to act upon Julia Kristeva's advice and look again towards what has been discarded as informative of what has been positively acknowledged. In choosing three short scripts written before Churchill's success as a playwright had been recognised in any substantial way, I wanted to test the idea that suggested the first ten to twelve years of her writing career could be largely archived as the work of an apprenticeship. This particularly concerned me because I felt that much of the exceptional work of a writer is distilled in their early years, and I wondered whether this was the case for Churchill. Did the recognition of her work have more to do with the historical timing of her career along with her move from writing predominantly for the radio to the more hallowed ground of 'the stage' than it did with the value of her writing? Radio drama reaches significantly more people than live performance, with the exception of musicals and long-running events such as Agatha Christie's

*Mousetrap*. Despite this, or perhaps because of the suggestion of mass appeal, apart from a few notable exceptions by writers such as Samuel Beckett and Dylan Thomas, radio drama has been treated as a poor relation to live theatre in terms of critical acclaim. Similarly, so-called ‘full-length plays’ have tended to attract a higher status than one act plays.

The plays that I chose have been particularly apt in influencing my own perspective in relation to the changing world events in recent years. They have impacted on my thoughts about the ways in which representational strategy can be consciously and legitimately employed to alter not only one’s view of reality, but also personal and social reality itself. For me, what was new about this was not so much the idea itself as its realisation converging with the ‘spin’ on global political events that was occurring as I worked. This changed my understanding into a desire to do something about it. There is good and bad news in this realisation. The good news is that we are all capable of representing our view of the truth to those around us, and to the extent that we can do this we have some influence in changing the reality of our worlds. The bad news is that inequitable representational systems have had centuries to become entrenched and hidden in the language, and are resistant to exposure because they shape the way we think. Disruption of our existing world-view is resisted possibly because it has implications for our own psychological security. Churchill has shown that by exposing the tricks of representation, through the strategic use of humour and the reinstatement of subjectivities, we might ultimately choose different and potentially more functional collective realities.

The interplay between the events that were shaping the world and the events that were shaping my thesis, are important here also because of the extent to which the continued relevance of an artistic work is reliant on its ability to interact with changing circumstances. The unpredictable life or performative interpretation of a play arises as much from the external events, changing public attitudes and opinions as it does from the scripted material. I felt that *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* was particularly resonant with the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq in providing a new reference point for Churchill's insights into the Algerian revolution of the late nineteen fifties and early sixties. *The Judge's Wife* and *Schreber's Nervous Illness* raised questions about the right to speak and to be heard, and about its suppression both in the home and through social institutions to ensure that dominant interests are protected. Perhaps because all these plays display the hindsight of history, their messages appear prophetic, a result perhaps of the playwright's ability to clearly see what is happening in the present. Gifted writers such as Churchill can provide the template by which the relationships that make up a broader social truth can be placed under scrutiny, tested in the performance space years after they were written, and continue to extend our understanding.

### **A Final Word on Churchill's Success**

Over the years, Churchill has been involved with the Royal Court Theatre as a valued playwright. The importance not only of this theatre to her success, but of her importance to the theatre's success is documented in Philip Roberts' detailed history of the Royal Court Theatre, *The Royal Court Theatre and the*

*Modern Stage*. According to this account, Churchill has been involved in this theatre as a member of the council, as a supportive colleague to Max Stafford-Clarke, as a tutor to the Young Writer's Group, and as a writer who drew both critical acclaim and substantial audiences. Roberts makes reference to her importance to the financial viability of the theatre in his chapter "Holding on, 1987-1993." He notes of one difficult year in this period: "There was a predicted deficit of £9000 but the figure for the same time last year had been £40,000. *Top Girls* had significantly reduced that but no comparable show was available this time around" (186). Later Roberts remarks, "*Serious Money* was re-rehearsing with a new cast for Wyndham's, while the original cast went to New York. A Churchill play, not for the first time, was keeping the Court's head above water" (202). Churchill, it seems, has provided the performance community exceptional value in return for her success, and continues to do so with her latest productions. Her ability to do so without being distracted by her own success or compromising her artistic values can only be applauded.

As for her earlier works, I would welcome a re-exploration of some of these wonderfully rich texts both through performance and by taking their place in the reading lists of university curricula. As argued here, many of these works may well inform and be informed in unexpected and exciting ways when interpreted in the context of our current shape-shifting world climate.

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