

Theatricality and Empowerment in the Plays of Caryl Churchill

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Caryl Churchill is a materialist playwright. In her work, she begins with the material conditions which testify to the power relations within society at a given time in history. She builds her plays, which range widely across such subjects as the witch-hunts of the seventeenth century in *Vinegar Tom* (1976), the sex lives of contemporary Londoners in *Cloud Nine* (1979), and the workings of an international financial center in *Serious Money* (1986), upon detailed research into the situations they represent. In her ongoing analysis of capitalist patriarchal society, she continually calls attention to the connections between its governing ideologies and actual material conditions. Grounded in such social realities, Churchill's plays make clear just how difficult the fulfillment of her demands for processes of personal and social change must be—especially in the current environment of reaction, disillusionment, and despair. However, Churchill balances her recognition of the limitations posed by oppressive conditions with a uniquely theatrical expression of her belief in the possibility of change.

While Churchill presents the structures of oppression through the narrative and thematic elements of her plays, she uses the formal elements of theatre to challenge the inevitability of oppression and empower audiences to seek change. Her application of highly theatrical techniques to the portrayal of grim situations results in a dialectic between imagination and material conditions. This dialectic confronts audiences with a dual sense of material reality and imaginative possibility. It models for audiences a process by which to analyze and challenge historical conditions.

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Although the issues and themes dealt with by Churchill may be encountered in the plays of other politically oriented playwrights in contemporary Britain, her use of theatrical form to alter the relationship between play and audience sets her work apart. She rejects "the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax,"¹ and she rejects that structure's underlying assumption of audience passivity. Churchill challenges audiences to join their imaginations with hers in seeking answers to the difficult questions posed by her plays. She does not ask audiences to suspend disbelief or surrender to the playwright's point of view. Instead, by encouraging imaginative reciprocity, her plays empower the audience to question and see new possibilities in what has previously been accepted.

While reconceiving theatre in a number of important ways, Churchill's work demonstrates the value and increasing potential of theatrical representation for feminist-socialist empowerment. Even her early plays incorporate a feminist critique of representation through questioning of and experiment with the time and space boundaries of theatre—for example, in the deliberate confounding of sequentiality in *Traps* (1977). Ultimately, however, all her plays support Herbert Blau's statement that the current trend, particularly among academics, to denounce the "illusory apparatus" of representation "may be a powerful rhetoric," but constitutes "a pretty feeble politics."² Churchill's attitude toward the apparatus of theatre is evident in *Softcops* (1984), a play about the repressive potential of the state which she based on Michel Foucault's treatise, *Discipline and Punish* (1975; English trans. 1977).

In *Softcops*, theatre empowers both spectators and performers. In the opening episode of *Softcops*, the star performer (that is, the man intended for execution) uses the scaffold as a stage upon which to represent defiance of authority. Inflamed by his example, the spectators dismantle the public execution, transmuting the Brechtian object lesson so carefully planned by the dedicated agent of the state, Pierre, into an exercise in theatre of the absurd. This prompts calls for the return to a theatre of cruelty, in which the condemned are subjected to public torture; however, the proponents of burnings and disembowelments eventually have to acknowledge that the deterrent effect of such punishments depends on arousing the dangerously volatile element of imagination in a large crowd of people. The chain gang further demonstrates the disruptive potential of spectacle by staging un-sanctionable representations of freedom which incite the public to riot. According to the pragmatist Vidocq, the best an authoritarian state can hope for from the apparatus of representation is that people will be attracted to displays of singular and romantic incompetence, such as that of the publicly lionized petty criminal Lacenaire, and thus diverted from using their collective power.

Total control by the state is achieved only when Jeremy Bentham's introduction of the panopticon inverts theatre's—and, of course, society's—power equation. No longer are a small number of specially chosen "robbers"

watched by the masses: now the masses are watched by a small number of specially chosen "cops." The panopticon renders representation obsolete by turning the power of an authoritarian gaze equally on public acts and private activities. The former spectators, who are now objects of direct state power, find their minds fastened to the "fine, rigid frame"³ of their immediate material conditions, their ability to question or resist suppressed, and their capacity to imagine alternatives extinguished. Churchill thus points to a vital alliance between theatricality, the imagination, and the resistance to oppression.

Theatricality, defined by Roland Barthes as the "density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument,"⁴ implies movement, complexity, and choice. Traditional, Aristotelian drama subjects the anarchic theatricality associated with such ancient forms as the Dionysian festivals, the Feast of Fools, and the Commedia dell'Arte to a phallogocentric discipline. It constricts movement within a linear plot, subordinates complexity to unity, and reduces choice to a pattern of binary oppositions. Traditional drama, thus, has functioned as a discourse of patriarchy and the ruling class. As Churchill reinvigorates theatre and marshals its own energy to overturn the patriarchal forms with which it has been identified, she models a process through which oppressed groups can use their collective power to overturn and re-form society.

In reasserting the anarchic potential of theatricality, Churchill's plays shake up patterns of perception that audiences may take for granted. That is why surprise is so often an important ingredient of her plays. In *Top Girls* (1982), a brusquely efficient female business manager prepares a party in a fashionable restaurant, and her guests turn out to be women from history and myth. *Fen* (1983) begins with the abrupt interposition of a statistic-laden monologue by a twentieth-century Japanese businessman into a wordless scene of preindustrial rural life. The conversation of the fast-track financial dealers in *Serious Money* is delivered at breakneck speed--and in rhymed verse. Surprise initiates a process of education about the play's subject which condenses for the audience the period of self-education in which Churchill has engaged during the creation of each play.

While they introduce new material, the plays deal with familiar social patterns. Surprise therefore serves to alienate, in the Brechtian sense, the information presented. It functions to "free socially conditioned phenomena from the stamp of familiarity which protects them from our grasp,"⁵ to use Brecht's words. Grasping both the unfamiliar situations of farm women or City stock traders, and the familiar power relations which constitute oppression, enhances the capacity of audiences to question, analyze, and make choices.

Churchill's plays are structured around a before-during-after continuum which offers a paradigm of stasis, change, and revised, but open-ended, stasis. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), for example, presents a group of common people before, during, and after the English Civil War. The early

scenes of upper-class greed and lower-class suffering give way to what Churchill has described as "the amazed excitement of people taking hold of their own lives, and their gradual betrayal as those who led them realized freedom could not be had without property being destroyed."⁶ Final scenes present the aftermath of the failed revolution: some individuals retreat into solitude, some admit defeat and join the victors, while some keep the spirit of rebellion alive on a personal level. The bleak outcome is, in this play as in others, countered by the structure that models an ongoing process in which every ending is also a beginning.

When there is a happier outcome, such as in *Cloud Nine*, of which Churchill writes that "all the characters in [the second] act change a little for the better,"⁷ the positive change is no more definitive than is failure in *Light Shining*: the end is still the beginning, and there is always more to be done. In fact, the famous Betty/Betty embrace at the end of *Cloud Nine* offers a visual emblem of the closure that is simultaneously an opening. The before-during-after pattern of construction characterizes nearly all Churchill's plays for radio, television, and film. This structure asserts for drama a function as a dynamic and open-ended process that interacts with historical conditions, rather than that of merely a closed and static artifact which attempts to reflect history.

Through the frank theatricality she injects into the conventions of role-playing, Churchill creates movement in an area of theatrical production which has previously been dominated by the fixed relationship between player and role. In most traditional theatre--and particularly in the conventions of social realism inherited from Ibsen and Shaw--the player/role relationship has been defined as a binary, hierarchized opposition. Hierarchized opposition, as H  l  ne Cixous has pointed out, constitutes one of the major thought patterns in patriarchal society.⁸ This separation of diverse phenomena into unequal oppositional pairs, such as sun and moon, culture and nature, mind and body, separates everything in the universe into two categories--the masculine and the feminine. Feminist psychologists such as Nancy Chodorow have theorized the function of such opposition in stating that the achievement of subjectivity in patriarchy depends on the denial and repression of all that is defined as not-man. The player/role opposition reifies this pattern: its true man/false man doubleness replicates and validates patriarchy's essential division between man and not-man.

In specifying the doubling and re-doubling of roles, as she does in all her major stage plays, Churchill deconstructs the patriarchal opposition between player and role. In place of the static and closed player/role dyad, her plays offer an active engagement of player and role in a multiplicity of relationships. In *Vinegar Tom*, players alternate between historical roles defined by the text and undefined appearances as the singers of contemporary songs; at the conclusion of *Vinegar Tom*'s historical narrative, two players are hanged in their roles as seventeenth-century women convicted of witchcraft, and

immediately reappear acting the roles of performers in an Edwardian-era music hall act. In subsequent plays, most players enact a variety of roles without disguising the doubling. This deliberate player/role discontinuity replaces the aura of inevitability in player/role pairings (whether in theatre or in society) with a dynamic of displacement which implies the possibility of experiment and choice.

The roles engaged with by a given player may diverge or even conflict, as when one person plays both worker and boss in *Fen*, both "cop" and "robber" in *Softcops* (1984), or both child and adult in *Top Girls*. In the few instances where Churchill does maintain a given player/role combination as a stable dyad throughout the play, such as Marlene in *Top Girls* or Pierre in *Softcops*, the rigidity of this relationship emphasizes the extent to which the character functions as part of the oppressive status quo.

That Churchill's technique of fragmenting the actor's presentation into multiple, inconsistent, and sometimes conflicting, roles serves to equalize, as well as open, the relationship between player and text is borne out in her most frequently employed method of working. Most of Churchill's major stage plays have been created through a workshop process organized around research and improvisation and carried out by the company which performs the final written text. Churchill has made it clear that many of the ideas in these plays originated in the workshop improvisations. Rewriting during the rehearsal period--even of plays not produced in workshops--gives further indication of the reciprocity between player and text that characterizes the creation of Churchill's plays. No longer is the player 'man' and the role 'not-man': the monologues of personal sexual experience in *Cloud Nine*, for example, derived as they are from the self-narratives of members of the company, manage to somewhat blur the distinction between the imaginative and the documentary. The words a given player is speaking might actually be her own. With a reciprocal, rather than hierarchical, relationship between player and role producing movement in her major plays, Churchill empowers audiences with a materialistic conception of the individual and society, as articulated by Rosalind Coward and John Ellis: "Marxism conceives at once of a subject who is produced by society, and of a subject who acts to support or to change that society," and "this human subject is constituted in ideology and by history, and at the same time acts to make history and change society."⁹

Complexity, as a characteristic of theatre, occurs as a result of the density of signs which constitutes theatricality. Theatre, uniquely among the arts, has the ability to simultaneously present conflicting signs to the audience, via the multiple elements of staging. Since most traditional drama is derived from the Aristotelian tradition, such drama tends to limit complexity, and thus narrow the range of possible meanings, through imposition of a standard of narrative and thematic unity that mimics the artificial unity of the engendered subject in patriarchy. Churchill's plays enlist a wider range of theatre's potential for multiple, diffuse, and paradoxical meanings to confront the audience with

deconstructions of artificial unities. Juxtaposition, rather than integration, of related episodes, overlapping of dialogue and action, as well as the time shifts and visual paradoxes for which Churchill has become known, give the stage plays their complexity. The best known of Churchill's successful uses of complexity is the Betty character in *Cloud Nine*--a stereotype of Victorian femininity played by a man. Considerably less well known, and perhaps less successful in their execution, but equally important in a consideration of Churchill's technique, are her many other experiments in dramatic form--for example, the television play *The Judge's Wife* (1972), which has action simultaneously running forward and backward, or the final scene in her science fiction play *Moving Clocks Go Slow* (1975), which is both seen and not seen.

Churchill enhances complexity and choice by replacing the unified and coherent viewpoint--the argument which provides a rhetorical underpinning for most politically oriented plays--with a fragmentation of her voice into many different viewpoints. Churchill's tendency to view a problem from a number of different perspectives originates in her radio plays, which most often deal with middle-class characters inhabiting the middle level of a power structure that rewards them for oppressing others and for collaborating in their own oppression. Such characters present themselves in different perspectives as villains or victims. A psychiatrist, to give one example, in the radio play *Lovesick* (1966), uses aversive conditioning to extinguish the "sick" desires of a rapist-murderer, a gentle homosexual, and a sexually voracious teenage girl--then, when his own obsessive desire for the beautiful Ellen proves unattainable, turns this psychological technology on himself. In the stage plays, differing viewpoints are most often presented by separate characters with different narratives relating to the central issue. A clear example of how the multiple viewpoint works occurs in *Fen*, when the different women of the village offer Val their own ways of coping with the denial of desire in the oppressive system which they have all, in different ways, internalized. Multiple viewpoint serves a crucial function in the stage plays, complicating every argument with counter-arguments, every variant of experience with other variants. The full strength of all viewpoints is maintained throughout the play. Thus, the multiplicity is not reduced, at the end, to a single voice which simplifies and chooses for the audience. Seldom is a clear choice offered; for example, despite the efforts of several critics to target one or another character in *Top Girls* as the socialist-feminist hero of the play, Churchill's point is the lack of satisfactory models and the need to imagine new alternatives and construct new models. This incitement to choose, recombine, and imagine is what Churchill's plays offer the audience, energized and informed through the multiple viewpoint.

Churchill's recent collaboration with David Lan, *A Mouthful of Birds*, takes as its central action the rediscovery of complexity and multiplicity through the destruction of artificially constructed individual identity. That Churchill regards such rediscovery as having profound political significance is

evident in the final action of the play. Four women who exist on stage both as contemporary, working-class English who experience an episode of spirit possession and as characters from *The Bacchae* of Euripides, reverse the dictates of traditional mythology and choose to remain together on the mountain--the scene of anarchic resistance, frenzied dismemberment, and imaginative regeneration.

The complexity of meaning in Churchill's plays is energized by the dialectic between imagination and material conditions, which alternately seems to hold out or deny the possibility of changing the social relations which dictate gender, class, and racial oppression. By means of her own theatrical imagination, she combats the tendency to see the material conditions she presents with often devastating accuracy as immutable limitation. The complexity of theatre allows for moments when, just for that moment, Churchill achieves the impossible synthesis between imagination and material conditions. One of the most moving of such moments is the final image of *Fen*, which occurs after Val's death has released the power of imagination in the world on stage. Val's mother May--who always wanted to be a singer, and for that reason would never sing--sings, in a few seconds of mute release. The oppressive conditions of her environment that dictate denial of her desire have not changed, and the strength with which May has always enforced that denial so rigidly within herself also continues as it is; but in the waking dream of imaginative inspiration the audience hears (on tape) "what May would have liked to sing . . . something amazing and beautiful."¹⁰ That brief moment in which the not possible is realized communicates Churchill's confidence in the potential of oppressed people to transcend the limitations of their material conditions, and her challenge to audiences to go beyond what she has been able to imagine in the process of re-forming society.

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Notes

1. Caryl Churchill, interview, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*, ed. Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987) 76.

2. Herbert Blau, "Shadowing Representation," *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 191.

3. Caryl Churchill, *Softcops, Softcops & Fen* (London: Methuen, 1986) 33.

4. Roland Barthes, "Baudelaire's Theater," *Critical Essays* (Chicago: Northwestern UP, 1972) 26.

5. John Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 192.

6. Caryl Churchill, note to *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1985) 183.

7. Caryl Churchill, note to *Cloud Nine, Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1985) 246.

8. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: UGE, 1975) 115-118.

9. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) 61.

10. *Fen*, production note 54.

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