

DBS SCHOOL OF ARTS

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**Spring will return and nothing will grow: The plays of Caryl Churchill through
the journey of second wave feminism.**

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Abstract

As a female playwright on the British stage at the peak of second wave feminism, Caryl Churchill presents many of the core issues and ideals at the centre of the movement. This thesis explores the ways in which the development and demise of second wave feminism are explored in Churchill's theatre from the early 1970s to the early 1990s. As a feminist and a socialist Churchill captures the range of issues faced by women in the UK and US at this time.

Beginning with an introduction to early feminism the analysis continues to the rise of the second wave explored through some of the seminal works published at the time. The socialist element is introduced in the UK women's movement with an outline of the socio-political climate in Britain and the divisions within the movement itself. This is followed by a brief look at the possibilities for the future of feminism in light of divisions and splits in the movement with reference to a post-humanist argument.

An exploration of Caryl Churchill in the theatre including a brief history of feminist theatre leads into a close reading of three of Churchill's plays that display strong feminist and socialist motifs. *Owners*, *Top Girls* and *The Skriker*, written across three decades punctuate various stages of the feminist movement and present three protagonists that embody the varying and mounting issues faced by women in modern society.

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate the innovative ways in which Churchill captures the waves of feminism and how they affect society over time. It is also to emphasise the importance of feminism, to explore its faults and search for possibilities in its future.

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“Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women”

- **Maya Angelou**

Introduction

A journey through the history of the feminist movement begins with a long road towards a single destination followed by a dead end. A new road appears which splits into many pathways that interconnect and eventually become a labyrinth of possibilities. To follow an individual directly involved in the movement as a guide would leave many areas unexplored. A view from above the ground looking at the expedition from a distance is what is first needed to fully understand the importance and complexity of all areas covered which is what this thesis sets out to do. As a leading light on the British stage Caryl Churchill acts as a guide through the maze of transformations of women in society. The many twists and turns are expertly navigated with innovative techniques that highlight the many social and political concerns at the heart of Churchill's plays. From those inspired by second wave feminism, to those produced by it and others left in its wake, three of Churchill's protagonists act as tour guides through this one particular section of the maze. Prior to their introduction it is important to fully understand their origins.

Second wave feminism peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mass social upheaval and the groundbreaking work of many determined and inspiring individuals brought the woman's movement back into the social consciousness and demanded the destruction of the existing patriarchal society. At this time Caryl Churchill began to write plays espousing feminist and socialist ideals. By placing women at the centre of the dramatic action and addressing a wide range of important socio-political issues Churchill played a significant role in the creation of a new feminist theatre. The significance of Churchill's work in the theatre is evident in its innovative style and technique; to understand its importance in a socio-political context it is useful to view it in line with developments in society.

1. Feminism: A History

Women fought for the right to vote, to be educated, and to be allowed equal opportunities in the workplace. The UK women's movement and its suffragettes gathered together in the nineteenth century to peacefully and reasonably rally support for their enfranchisement. Lack of progress and the increased need for action led to staged protests that escalated to minor acts of violence and eventually to the death of one of the movement's most staunch supporters. Emily Davison threw herself in front of the King's horse on Derby day following a declaration that a tragedy was needed for the cause. Tragedy on a global scale called the movement to a halt as the outbreak of World War one brought the struggle for suffrage to an end but also arguably led to votes for women. The women who put themselves up for ridicule and dedicated their lives to the belief that women should be treated as equal members of society were thanked en mass in the years following World War two by a new generation of women who widely accepted their place was in fact in the home and that their happiness depended purely on the establishment of a family. The work and achievements of the suffragettes was discarded, ignored and disparaged by both men and women. Before and even after the establishment of votes for women, many did not believe that they themselves were capable or worthy of making a significant decision. Upon entering a marriage, which they had spent their lives working towards, women sacrificed their rights as individuals and became at one with their husbands. They not only accepted the notion of the one minded family, they strove towards and happily gave up their own hard earned education to be part of it.

1.1 Sparking a Second Wave

In her ground breaking account of American housewives in the early 1960s, Betty Friedan stated some shocking facts that would no doubt have made the suffragettes wonder if their achievements were of any real significance. Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* following the realisation that there was a common and ever growing disillusionment in women in the United States. Friedan stated that by the mid fifties 60% of female college goers dropped out to marry and 14 million girls were engaged by the age of 17 which meant that by the time Friedan's account was published there were millions of young women in their early 20s with a large number of children confined to their homes. Friedan states "many women no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands. (1963, 15). These developments led not only to the reversal of many of the ideals and causes early feminists fought for but also to severe shortages in nursing, social care and teaching. While it was not ideal for women to be confined to certain types of work, the development of the skilled, trained woman in the workplace had been replaced by the acceptance of the home as the only source of happiness for a woman. According to Friedan the ideal of feminine fulfilment had been set as the American suburban housewife. New home appliances, cars and shopping were apparently the envy of women around the world who strove to create a life in line with the image of domestic bliss. Friedan states "In the fifteen years after World War 2, this mystique of feminine fulfilment became the cherished and self perpetuating core of contemporary American culture" (1963, 14). This idea of acceptance of the status quo and reversal of revolutionary behaviour was criticised not only for women but on a global scale, the universal stamp pressed upon society by the "culture industry" and the seeming non

existence of a revolutionary force within the members of this society form a section of the combined concerns of some of the most influential and dominant social, political and cultural theorists and philosophers of the twentieth century. In particular, the members of The Frankfurt School formed in the early 1930s with the aim not only to study and understand but also to incite change through social and political revolution. Influences and theories varied but the most influential members of the school agreed on the need for the re examination of Marxian concepts, the reversal of totalitarianism and monopolisation and the prevention of future destruction of society.

The idea of a woman's place in the world was explored in Europe in the 1940s by French writer Simone De Beauvoir. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* addressed the question of what place women occupy in the world, what their place should be and what had become of women in society. De Beauvoir believed that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman and that "women are torn between the past and a possible but difficult and as yet, unexplored future" (1949, 99). Friedan quotes De Beauvoir as an inspiration for her studies of US society which was sparked by her work as a magazine writer in the 1950s. Friedan began to discover a discontent in women and the future they had chosen and so she began to speak to women across the US about what she called 'the problem that has no name'. In the early part of the twentieth century between the two world wars the dynamic between men and women shifted, a huge number of men went to war, leaving women to take up roles outside the home. On their return men resumed work and women went back into the homes led by a desperate need for stability and return to the safety of the familiar. This emphasis on the complete and wholesome domestic sphere led to what Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse refers to as the "euphoria of unhappiness" Marcuse believed post

war prosperity had managed to keep the masses intellectually and spiritually captive. As a symptom of this malaise the feminist movement had collapsed and in many ways reversed. Freidan brought to light the fact that women were taught to pity those who sought careers and learned that “truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights - the independence and opportunities that old fashioned feminists fought for” (1963, 9). The intense repression of freedom, lack of mental stimulation and reversal of past progress are just some of the factors that created the unnamed problem that Freidan explores. While some experts claimed that ‘the woman problem’ in America no longer existed, others acknowledged that while a problem existed they were unable to identify a cause. One psychiatrist interviewed by Friedan stated “I don’t know what’s wrong with women today.... I only know something is wrong because most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn’t sexual” (1963, 17). The women interviewed describe the problem and their situations in various ways but overall a sense of uneasiness, unexplained emptiness and often desperation is clearly evident. “I feel empty somehow, incomplete”, “I feel as if I don’t exist” (1963, 18). Two years later The Rolling Stones released a song that could have been the soundtrack to Betty Friedan’s study (I can’t get no) Satisfaction was the clear message expressed by all of these women.

American suburban housewives were not the first to acknowledge these feelings of unexplained anger, constant tiredness and rapidly changing emotions. In Victorian England women with this complaint were advised to live as domestic a life as far as possible and to abandon any intellectual activities. Victorian writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote an account of her own experience with this ‘brain disease’ in her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Gilman was treated by Dr. Weir Mitchell; Dr. Mitchell developed his ‘rest cure’ to

treat women suffering for nervous disorders. Originally discovered for the treatment of shell shock victims after the Civil War, Mitchell adapted his methods for the treatment of women suffering from neurasthenia. Dr. Mitchell's treatment involved a combination of entire rest, excessive feeding, massage and electricity. Women entered the clinic, were secluded from family and friends and forbidden to sit up, sew, read, write or live any sort of intellectual life. Gilman endured the six week treatment and on her release was told by Mitchell to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" (Gilman, 1913) as long as she lived. Gilman believed the treatment led her to the brink of complete insanity. According to Elaine Showalter in her study *The Female Malady* "Nineteenth century medical treatment designed to control the reproductive system strongly suggests male psychiatrists' fears of female sexuality" (Showalter, 75). Women underwent extreme treatments for the preservation of brain stability. Dr. Edward Tilt argued that "menstruation was so disruptive to the female brain that it should not be hastened but rather be retarded as long as possible" (Showalter, 75). The most extreme of these treatments was Dr. Isaac Baker Brown's surgical practice of clitoridectomy, removal of the clitoris as a cure for female insanity. While Gilman wrote specifically about the treatments of Dr. Mitchell from personal experience, she was a socialist and feminist writer at a time when male medical professionals, ridiculed, mistreated and failed to cure what they believed to be female insanity. Victorian women were shamed, miserable and closer to insanity following these treatments. Dr. Mitchell did for the advancement of Victorian women what Sigmund Freud did for women in the early 20th century.

Betty Friedan dedicated a chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* to Freud entitled 'The sexual solipsism of Sigmund Freud' Friedan stated "It is a Freudian idea, hardened into an apparent fact, that has trapped so many American women today" (Freidan, 86). In his 1925 paper entitled "The Psychological Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes" Freud stated "Women oppose change, receive passively and add nothing of their own". (Freud, 1925). It is clear from this statement that Freud's views, analysis and theories on women were misinformed, misguided and proved damaging and dangerous to their place in society. Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse became responsible for the rehabilitation of Freud and his theories. Marcuse related Marx and Freud through the ideas of repression and destruction within society and the progress of civilisation leading to the progress of destruction. As a Hegelian-Freudian Marxist he believed in the need for revolution and the importance of Freud's theories of unconscious, repression and the relationship between the individual and society especially in attempting to understand Fascism. While Friedan acknowledges the importance of Freud's achievements and breakthroughs, particularly in his study of the unconscious mind, she also sees him as a product of his time and culture. Friedan claims "It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity" (Friedan, 61). And states "Much of what Freud believed to be biological, instinctual, and changeless has been shown by modern research to be a result of specific cultural causes" (Freidan, 87). In the 1880s Gilman believed that the curbing of her creative and intellectual life lead her to the brink of insanity. Simone De Beauvoir stated "It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separate her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice" (De Beauvoir, 641). And according to Friedan "The feminine revolution

had to be fought because women quite simply were stopped at a stage of evolution far short of their human capacity” (Friedan, 70).

At a school reunion Betty Friedan asked her fellow female classmates “what do you wish you had done differently?” The answers to that question inspired her to write *The Feminine Mystique* and her work has been credited with sparking second wave feminism. The years surrounding the publication of Friedan’s book were hugely significant for women. The contraceptive pill was legalised in the US in 1960 and the UK in 1961. The Equal Pay Act was passed 1963 in the US while in the UK the Married Women’s Property Act of 1964 allowed women to be the legal owner of any money they earned; prior to this everything a woman owned or earned became the property of her husband when they married. In 1966 Friedan established the National Organisation for Women and Juliet Mitchell published “*Women: the longest revolution*” which according to Maggie Humm was “the first steps towards a socialist feminist theory” (Humm, 88). At the same time in the UK Caryl Churchill had graduated from Oxford and was writing plays for BBC radio. From the outset Churchill’s plays were concerned with socio-political issues but it was not until the early 1970s and the establishment of alternative feminist theatre in the UK that Churchill began to release stage plays espousing feminism. According to the *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* “Churchill has stimulated and provoked some of the most important feminist thinking about the theatre” (Aston, 174). Churchill became part of the growing women’s movement and heavily involved in the newly established feminist theatre movement. Churchill’s early works were predominately concerned with both socialism and feminism she stated “I feel strongly about both and wouldn’t be interested in a form of one that didn’t involve the other” (Aston, 25)

Churchill's first professionally produced stage play *Owners* centres on a successful working woman who struggles to find a balance between her home and working life. In the introduction to the play Churchill names Eva Figes' book *Patriarchal Attitudes* as a work which may have influenced some of the character's in the play. Figes states that her book originally intended to be a work on women and society became a book largely about men. Figes asks the question whether gender is a biological difference or a social construction. This idea echoes De Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one" (1943, 13). The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the publication of a number of hugely important feminist works; many of the seminal texts in the movement were published within this decade. Juliet Mitchell's *The Longest Revolution* was published in 1966 and was seen as the first comprehensive study of socialist feminist theory. Theorist and activist Shelia Rowbotham wrote a number of works including *Hidden from History* in 1966 and *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* in 1973. In the US Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* radicalised second wave feminist writing, her work not only espoused the deeply entrenched politics of sexuality and male power but also began a new wave of feminist literary criticism. According to Maggie Humm;

"Millet's expansive understanding of politics – that the personal, sexual life was political – became the fundamental premise of second wave feminism, just as Millet's interdisciplinary, interrogative, autobiographical and moral style gave second wave feminism a new writing theory" (Hunn, 61).

In the same year Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch* in which she stated that women do not realise how much men hate them and how much they are taught to hate themselves. Just as Frankfurt School theorists criticised the manufacturing of culture as an

industry by western capitalism, Greer saw the manufacture of women's sexuality by western society as demeaning and confusing. Susan Brownmiller extended the radicalisation of feminist theory in *Against our Will, men, women and rape* in 1971. Brownmiller's controversial and ground breaking book aimed to change society's views on rape and to establish it as a serious and violent crime. Brownmiller clearly stated the current attitude's on the subject "No woman can be raped against her will", "she was asking for it" According to Brownmiller "Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation used against all women by all men" (Brownmiller P). Millet, Greer and Brownmiller's bold statements and controversial choice of subject matter set them apart from Friedan. While Friedan's work was beneficial to the movement and sparked a much needed revival, other activists began to see her views and actions as conservative. Freidan controversially disapproved of lesbian members of NOW and was believed to generally disregard women that were not white, middle class and heterosexual.

1.2 The many oppressors

The issue of class divide became increasingly prevalent in the movement, particularly in the UK, mass change in industries led to unionisation and mass social upheaval. In *Hidden from History*, Shelia Rowbotham explores the changing role of the state in the oppression of women beginning with the foundation of capitalism in Britain. Rowbotham states that she begins with the foundation of capitalism "Not because I think the oppression of women began with capitalism but because I think its form in the recent past relate more nearly to our predicament now" (Rowbotham, 1966, x). Rowbotham states a number of questions that surface throughout history which related to the modern women's movement, including;

“the conflict between population control and the right of women to control their own reproductive capacity; the political implications of separating sexual pleasure and procreation; the difference between developments in the working-class and middle-class family; ... the manner in which our work in the family has affected our position outside... the problem of organisation and strategy: how to retain our autonomy without isolating ourselves from other movements” (Rowbotham, 1966, x).

In *Hidden from History* Rowbotham includes feminist and socialist concerns that encapsulate many of the themes and concerns Churchill explores in *Owners*. Churchill’s career escalated dramatically following the release of this play and led to her becoming the first female resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre from 1974–1975. For the first 500 years of theatre in the UK it can be argued that productions were written about men, by men for men. On the male dominated stage, female characters were generally undervalued, dependent, feeble, incapable and expected to play on a secondary level to serve men. Alternatively they are evil and hated. Churchill strove to show real women as strong, independent and diverse characters, illustrating their plights, victories, failures and mistakes but creating them as individuals and not projections of male fantasies.

In Churchill’s plays the depiction of the failures of women are just as important as the celebration of their victories. In *Owners* Marion begins the play as a powerful and successful business woman but loses her focus when faced with a former love and the acquisition of a baby. Churchill states that her plays “contain things that had been building up in me for a long time, political attitudes as well as personal ones” (Krhzer 61). Her views on patriarchal attitudes are clear in the character of Marion’s husband Clegg. Clegg, a

butcher, states "On your back and underneath is where I like to see a lady. And a man on top, right on top of the world. Because I know what you ladies like, you like what I give you. I didn't say you mustn't move at all but just in response." (A2 S6). As Marion's own actions lead to tragedy she stands by her decisions and states "I might be capable of anything. I'm just beginning to find out what's possible" (A2, S8). Unfortunately it seemed that divisions within the feminist movement would prevent women from finding out what was possible. The work/life balance was just the beginning of splits in views, beliefs, lifestyles and methods of activism. The reincarnation of the movement had just begun and cracks were already beginning to appear. The problem for the movement was that individual actions and decisions could prevent women on a global scale from finding out what was possible.

Churchill wrote and produced *Owners* at a time of massive upheaval in Britain, The early 1970s saw mass working class struggle with workers striking across Britain. Shelia Rowbotham stated that working class women experienced 'double oppression' in their home and work life. The aim of Socialist/Marxist feminist according to Maggie Humm in *Feminism A Reader* was to extend "the critique of class developed by Marx and Engel into a feminist history of the material and economic subordination of women" (Humm, 87). In his study *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and The State*, Frederic Engels linked the changes in the material conditions of people to the organisation of the family. Particularly critical of the Bourgeois woman whose sole purpose was to provide a legitimate heir, Engels states that this marriage of convenience differs little from prostitution the only difference being that the wife unlike the courtesan sells complete control of her mind and body. Slightly less critical of the proletariat marriage Engels saw that the lack of property ownership negated the need for an heir and allowed the woman to work leading to a

measure of equality. Overall Engels believed that “the fight for women’s liberation can not be separated from the fight against capitalism” (Cliff,10). The primary objectives of working class women were equal pay, maternity leave, equal job opportunities and equal terms and conditions of work. The forerunners on this fight in Britain were the Ford sewing machinists in Dagenham who stood up from their machines and received pay increases equalling 92% of their male counterparts; while not equal pay this move was an inspiration to many other female workers. The strength of these women was not fully felt in the women’s movement as class divide cast a shadow on the greater women’s movement. With no fusion between the women’s and trade unions movement, their individual strengths remained divided. In his book *Class Struggle and Women’s Liberation*, Tony Cliff put this down to working class women not having enough time for ‘consciousness raising’. One feminist who had worked in factories gives her account on this issue

“Experimenting with more ‘open’ relationships, or even trying to live communally takes up a lot of time, energy and discussion which simply are not at the disposal of women factory workers... other people’s more exotic lives are not a possibility for them. Home and marriage was the most important thing for the women working on the line. .. For a start, you are so tired out by work and have so little time that you need to have a stable routine and reliable domestic set up.” (Cliff, 172).

Exotic lives open the action of Churchill’s 1981 production *Top Girls*. The incredibly constructed and innovative opening scene of *Top Girls* introduces six diverse women from across history. In *Top Girls* Churchill illustrates how extraordinary women have been punished throughout history for courageously attempting to be outstanding but also plainly displays that socialist concerns are just as important to her as those of the feminist

movement and in the course of this play she links Engel's theories on their inherent connection. Churchill's drama concerns the need for collective justice for all women, she does not believe that being as good as a man and doing little to help other women is progressive or productive. The restrictions and limitations on women must not only transcend gender but also class. According to Rosemarie Tong in her study of Feminist thought "The main goal of the Marxist feminist is to "identify the operation of gender relations as and where they may be distinct from, or connected with, the processes of production and reproduction understood by historical materialism" (1989,7). Criticism of Marxist Feminism stemmed from its focus on capitalism as the main oppressor of women and the negation of the true needs of the female in society. According to Rosemarie Tong "When Marxist feminists speak about women's oppression, they argue that capitalism is the primary oppressor of women as workers and that men are, at most, the secondary oppressors of women as women" (198, 65). Alternative feminist theory included psychoanalytic feminism which saw the root of women's oppression deep within the psyche. Borrowing from Freud's work on female sexuality, psychoanalytic feminists revised and reinterpreted Freudian psychoanalysis. While this analysis did not provide a complete explanation for women's oppression it does highlight the need for women to look within the psyche and examine the reasons this inferior position remains. The abolishment of this subordination was the aim of the radical feminists who did not believe in reformation but the complete destruction of institutions that reinforced the patriarchal ideal. Radical feminists studied the way in which sexuality and gender had been used to subordinate women and how the enforced idea of "natural order" supports the system. According to Rosemarie Tong "The task of weaving these several strands of feminist theory together seems to have been taken up most effectively by socialist feminists" (1989, 7). Socialist

feminists employed a dual-systems theory to explain women's oppression in terms of capitalism and patriarchy. Viewing capitalism as a material structure and patriarchy as a non material structure the theory aims to explain both individually as well as their relation to each other.

In *Top Girls* Churchill alternates between capitalist and patriarchal issues and certainly illustrates the ways in which they are connected. The effects of both are illustrated in a scene between the protagonist Marlene and her sister Joyce. According to Janelle Reinelt "Churchill stages the class tensions and political differences between the sisters to mount her critique of a feminism without socialism" (Reinelt, 180). Bitterness, poverty and the sense of unfulfilled lives were issues faced by many in working class Britain in the 1980s. While the middle class rose to new levels of capitalist success, advancements in production and importation of goods led to mass unemployment and poverty particularly in working class areas of Northern Britain. The shift from a healthy employment level and relatively egalitarian society in the 1970s to the mass deindustrialisation of the 1980s was pinned on the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Unemployment had become a worry in Britain with almost one million people unemployed in 1979. The conservative party victory of 1979 fed into this worry but instead of ending unemployment, the levels rose to almost 3million by the early 1980s. Coal mines, factories, shipyards and steel mills all closed with entire industrial towns left desolate and abandoned. Churchill's views on this situation are not limited to the female perspective but her views on the state and conditions of the working class are clear in the characters of Joyce and Angie. Angie is a character who is introduced in various Acts of the play, from an encounter with her friend Kit to a visit to and from her 'aunt' Marlene, Angie is the character to whom Churchill attaches the greatest level of

concern. Marlene unapologetically steps on others to achieve her goals, her sister Joyce is trapped in an economic and social rut unable to escape the limitations in her life but Angie is the future and the product of both of these women, held down and unable to progress due to circumstances which are beyond her control.

Ironically the election of the first female Prime Minister in Britain did little for the women's movement, the class struggle became prevalent and Thatcher's resistance of Socialism was so strong that it earned her the nickname "The Iron Lady" coined by Yuri Gavrillov in 1976 in the Soviet newspaper Red Star. There are endless Thatcher quotations that portray her thoughts on women, Socialism and society. Her unequivocal feelings towards the women's movement were clear when she alleged "The feminists hate me, don't they? And I don't blame them. For I hate feminism. It is poison." She also claimed "The battle for women's rights has been largely won." She stated "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families" and she believed "I owe nothing to Women's Lib."

The lack of belief in the importance of a unified society or the fact that there is any society at all combined with a complete lack of interest in the progression or importance of the woman's movement are major factors that led to Thatcher being vilified within the movement. Author Linda Grant states;

"Thatcher's premiership was a wrong, contradictory note for feminism; we regarded her as a man dressed up in a skirt suit. Or a woman who used the traditional weapons of sex and flirting to get what and where she wanted." (Guardian, January 2012).

It is impossible to deny Thatcher's achievements as a woman in politics, she remains the only female Prime Minister in British history and while characters like Marlene saw these achievements as something to strive towards, the greater female population felt no positive impact from her time in office. The succeeding generations may even have suffered. The women of Angie's generation, those finding their way in the world of Post Thatcherite Britain are explored in Churchill's 1991 play *The Skriker*. Two young women are visited by a mythical creature that preys on their misfortunes and tricks them into giving up their hopes and ultimately their lives. In *The Skriker* Churchill moves from the concerns of Second wave feminism by way of Thatcherite Britain to a world of mythical underworld creatures and lives destroyed by poverty and mental instability, in a world where the needs and issues of young women are abandoned and their futures stolen.

The progression from liberal feminism into the branches of Marxist, psychoanalytical, radical and social feminism split the movement but the multileveled approach to the theory of feminism was not seen as a disadvantage to all. Rosemarie Tong states;

“That feminism is many and not one is to be expected because women are many and not one. The more feminist thoughts we have, the better. By refusing to centre, congeal and cement their separate thoughts into a unified truth too inflexible to change, feminist resist patriarchal dogma” (1989, 7).

1.3 Is this the future?

Further original theory on the progression of feminism continued into the mid 1980s.

American feminist theorist and philosopher Donna Haraway published her *Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985. Haraway, also a philosopher of science and technology utilised the metaphor of the cyborg to make an original argument against the presuppositions of essentialist feminism and identity theory. Exploring the relationships between humans and machines and the social relations of science and technology Haraway uses the cyborg as an example of the human/machine hybrid. She describes the cyborg as “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction, a condensed image of both imagination and material reality resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity.” (Haraway, 1985). Haraway sees the blurring of boundaries between human and machine as a positive progression towards the destruction of traditional gender roles. Haraway’s aim in the theory of the cyborg as a progression is to subtract the idea of ‘natural’ from the discussion on gender and sexuality. If something is viewed as natural it can not be changed, it is how it is meant to be. In an article on the manifesto Hari Kunzru explains the way in which Haraway’s article reinforces the idea of how this idea of the natural limits possibility.

“if women (and men) aren't natural but are constructed, like a cyborg, then, given the right tools, we can all be *reconstructed*... Basic assumptions suddenly come into question, such as whether it's natural to have a society based on violence and the domination of one group by another.” (Kunzru, 1997).

Haraway notes that machines become more and more advanced while the general population seem to become more and more lifeless and accepting of the views of dominating forces. As Haraway states “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we

ourselves frightenly inert.” (Harraway, 1985). The advancements in machinery and the artificial intelligence installed has led to a decreasing divide between human and machinery, according to Harraway the notion of human has become blurred while relations with machines, objects, things are no longer clear. While there is general fear and apprehension about some of these advancements, Harraway encourages change and the acceptance of the cyborg mentality while calling for openness and the pleasure and the confusion of boundaries. The results of this post humanism would be freedom of men and women alike from hierarchal, predefined, restrictive and oppressive boundaries. Harraway states “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (Harraway, 1985). As a progressive playwright Churchill consistently breaks boundaries and created her own political mythical character in *The Skriker*. Both Harraway and Churchill recognise the need for a completely new concept of feminism and pave the way for enlightened thought on the subject.

In the section entitled "*Fractured Identities*" Harraway discusses complications in the feminist movement that arise from social differences. She aptly identifies social barriers that fragment women and turn them against each other. “Painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of woman elusive” (Harraway, 1985). The concept of women and women’s work is also explored drawing attention to the new working class, the new family structure and the ways in which women in the household have been drawn into the capitalist system by their need to support their families. As a progressive feminist and socialist playwright Caryl Churchill addresses all of these concerns from the early ideals of second wave feminism

through the splinter groups and on to the exploration of new possibilities for the movement. While experiencing imposed limitations of women not only in society but also in her work in the theatre Churchill continually produced plays which espouse feminist and socialist ideals through innovative and groundbreaking dramaturgy.

2.Churchill in the Theatre

Caryl Churchill began writing in a theatre dominated by men; a theatre in which action on and off stage was driven by men for men and about men. Five hundred years after the first successful theatre was built in England, the first women's theatre festival was held in London in 1973. The theatre censorship act of 1968 had allowed playwrights and companies more freedom to bring thoughtful and provocative plays to the nation and led to Feminist drama evolving in the mid 1970s. In 1974 director David Hare founded the Joint Stock Theatre Company to perform social drama and feminist plays. The Joint Stock method of production involved collaborative working methods, scripts were developed by the company. According to Christopher Innes in *Modern British Drama*, "Collective creation became the sign and example of female, as well as socialist, principles" Innes goes on to state the Joint Stock mission statement on this mode of production "one... to expose ourselves and our problems/ Two... to create a play about it/ Three... to rehearse and perform that play" (2002, 236). Churchill produced a number of plays with Joint Stock and on the experience stated "Though I still wanted to write alone sometimes, my attitude to myself, my work and others had basically and permanently changed" (C.C 1982). Another group that Churchill wrote with at this time was Monstrous Regiment, a feminist touring theatre group that worked in a similar fashion to Joint Stock. In the introduction to her 1976 play *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill explains the reasons why she was attracted to work with these companies "This was a new way of working, which was one of its attractions... a touring company, with a wider audience, also a feminist company – I felt briefly daunted, wondering if I would be acceptable, then happy and stimulated by the discovery of shared ideas and the enormous energy and feeling of possibility" (C.C 1982)

A hugely important factor of Churchill's work is her ever changing and innovative styles and techniques. In the opening scene of *Top Girls* Churchill developed an innovative use of overlapping speech patterns to illustrate the similarities in the characters and their inability to learn from each other, this coupled with the solipsistic speeches of these characters demonstrate a lack of solidarity which is a theme that continues throughout the play. With German playwright Bertolt Brecht as an early influence, Churchill uses Brechtian epic dramaturgy to abolish the idea of the traditional woman on stage and develops a "social and multivalenced approach to representing women's experiences" (Reinelt, 53). Brecht created epic drama in the theatre by stripping away and expanding the stage picture and the drama to make it relevant to the audience. Brecht strove to make the audience understand and reject the unfair, excessive conditions of the capitalist world and illustrates the need for suffering and sacrifice and the unwillingness of human beings to do either. Churchill too shows the necessity of sacrifice but for her it is the seemingly necessary sacrifice of professional women, to sacrifice the domestic and the maternal to truly succeed in a capitalist world. Churchill continues to utilise similar techniques in her plays, like the doubling of historical characters with modern day counterparts which according to Christopher Innes "indicates there has been no essential improvement in the female situation" (2002, 518). Churchill continually manipulates traditional time and stage conventions to demonstrate her interest in both ideas and issues along with theatrical forms. As an example *Top Girls* is constructed from loosely connected scenes which do not join together seamlessly or chronologically. From the previously mentioned historical dinner table in scene one the audience are transported to contemporary Thatcherite Britain in scene two, this juxtaposition of two drastically unconnected scenes is employed by Churchill to create a space for examination and ambiguity.

In the years between *Owners* and *Top Girls*, Churchill wrote a number of plays with feminism at the core, *Vinegar Tom*, written in association with Monstrous Regiment is set during the 17th century witch hunts in Britain and explores the practice of persecuting, torturing and executing women who did not conform to traditional ideals. In her introduction to the play Churchill details her decision to use this period as the setting of the play and the reasons she felt it prominent and relevant to modern society “I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the continuing attitudes to women in general. The women accused of Witchcraft were often those on the edges of society, old, poor, single, sexually unconventional” (C.C 1982). The unconventional is explored greatly in the play that established Churchill as a prominent British playwright, *Cloud Nine* first performed in 1979 and written with Cillian Murphy explores the sexual hypocrisy of British colonialism. *Cloud Nine* falls on the side of the political for Churchill, a story of class and racial discrimination, homosexuality, bisexual and biracial relationships and adultery, the play juxtaposes Victorian times with present day exposing the lack of progress in ways of thinking about sexuality. The play traverses a gap of decades between Victorian India and 1979 London while the characters age only 25 years, this is another of Churchill’s innovative techniques to destabilise the normal and encourage the audience to question the meaning of the play. As Brecht stated it is “more important to be able to think above the stream than to think in the stream” (Brecht, 44). To further encourage thinking above the stream the play is cross cast with gender, race and age all discarded. Women are played by men, young boys played by women and roles switch between acts. The idea of gender and sexuality as a social construct has been explored by many philosophers and theorists of aesthetics. In her 1990 study *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler asks “Does being female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is “naturalness” consisted

through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?" (1990, x).

The idea of gender and sexuality as a construct of society is an issue that is continually discussed and examined by theorists. If gender and sexuality are outside of the natural order and simply a performance imposed by individuals the progression maybe the post-humanist ideas of Donna Harraway, to think beyond gender and humanity and find pleasure in the blurring of boundaries. In *The Skriker* Churchill further develops her innovative dramatic techniques and explores the ideas of a post-humanist world in which mythical and often genderless characters roam the earth and take advantage of the humans that have been mentally and morally destroyed by the society they live in. Churchill's use of physical performance is employed in this play with much of the action performed and not verbalised. The power of Churchill's theatre lies in her subversion of theatrical norms to allow the audience to engage in the questions she poses. According to Amelia Howe Krhzer "Churchill creates disrupted narratives by using shifts of style and viewpoint as well as interposing anti-narrative devices, the cumulative effect of such a play is less to tell a story than to examine and question a social construct" (13). With a plethora of incredible work to delve into in the study of Churchill and her connection with both feminism and socialism a line from Marion in *Owners* through Top Girl's Marlene and culminating in *The Skirker* provides an insight not only to the feminist movement but also the progression of Churchill's own theories and areas of concern.

3 Close readings of plays

3.1 Owners

As Churchill's first professionally produced stage play, *Owners* is an important work not only in its message but also in its position as the play that brought Churchill to recognition on the British stage. The beginning of Churchill's unique style is evident in the subversion of traditional roles placed in a realistic style and traditional structure with inconsistencies of action and self-parodying dialogue. According to Sanford Sternlicht the main themes addressed by Churchill are "plight of the powerless, the exploitation of women and oppressive dreams that burden human beings" (2004, 198). The exploration of these themes on stage begins with *Owners*. The play centres on Marion, a successful businesswoman who forsakes her career and almost her sanity in the pursuit of what she believes to be the perfect life. Marion is the woman who believes she can 'have it all' until society and her own insecurities and weaknesses prevent her from reaching her goals. While on the surface she appears to be strong and progressive, Marion struggles to find a balance between advancing as an individual and constructing a conventional family unit. The character in the play who Churchill believed was most likely inspired by Eva Figes work *Patriarchal Attitudes* is Marion's husband Clegg. Clegg is a butcher; the play opens on his last day in his shop which has been put out of business by a large supermarket chain. Clegg's feelings towards Marion vary throughout the play; he appears to be proud of her achievements yet states "She can stand on her own two feet which is something I abominate in a woman" (A1 S1). He fantasises about killing her and even though she is independent and more successful than he is, he views her as his possession. It is revealed that Marion has had a mental breakdown and spent time in a mental hospital. Clegg recalls

“When Marion was in hospital they tried to tell her she’d be happier and more sane as a good wife” (A1 S1). Almost one hundred years after Charlotte Gilman’s public damnation of such treatments, the treatment of women’s nervous disorders in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s remained similar to the work of Weir Mitchell in the 1800s.

In *Marion*, Churchill created a character who has been inspired by the ideals of the progressive women’s movement, successful and independent Marion has disregarded the advice of the her doctors and chosen a busy and stimulating life outside the home. One of the first important statements made in the play is Marion’s. Visiting Clegg on the day his own business is closing down, Marion comments “I know very well it’s a sad moment, I can’t be a failure just to help” (A1 S1). She has had some difficulties in the past but has become the leading force in her family unit. That is until she comes into contact with Alec and Lisa the tenants of a flat Marion has bought and intends to sell. It transpires that Marion has been romantically involved with Alec in the past and is willing to sacrifice the life she has built to be with him. Alec lives in a state of inertia, unperturbed by events including the decline of his family, his impending eviction, his mother’s illness and his ex-lovers intent to purchase his new born baby. Clegg longs for a son and Marion decides that the most efficient way to fulfil all aspects of her life is to take Alec and Lisa’s new born baby. By playing out the procurement of a property and a human life in tandem Churchill draws a parallel between ownership of property and of people. As a study of capitalism and the decreasing value on human life, *Owners* illustrates the ways in which a materialistic society treats those less fortunate as lesser human beings, weighting the value of human life lower than that of property and status.

In her introduction to the play Churchill comments on the characters of Marion and Alec and of

“wanting one character with the achieving attitude of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’, the other the ‘sitting quietly, doing nothing’ of the Zen poem. The active one had to be a woman, the passive one a man, for their attitudes to show up clearly as what they believed rather than as a conventional male and female behaviour”

(Churchill,1984) .

In a conversation with Alec about his future Marion states “You don’t know what you’re capable of till you suddenly find yourself doing it” (A2 S3). Alec shows some form of enterprise by deciding to return to work as a glazier. In response to Marion’s advice that he should aim higher or at least take extra caution, Alec replies “Some people take care of themselves and they’re all right. Some people take care and they’re not. Some don’t take care and they’re all right, some people don’t and they’re not.” (A2S3) Marion goes to extremes to procure what she desires, sacrificing many important aspects of her life but she is in full belief that her choices are those of a successful and worthwhile individual while Alec would rather leave life to chance and continue on whatever road he finds himself on. According to Amelia Howe Krhzer in her book on the plays of Caryl Churchill *Owners* illustrates the “philosophical contrast between the western ideal of individual achievement and the eastern one of passive acceptance” (Krhzer, 62).

Neither Alec nor Marion fill the traditional roles of husband and wife, Alec fails to provide for his family while Marion has not provided Clegg with a son and refuses to be a dutiful partner. Krhzer states the reversal of roles illustrates Churchill’s “concerns about how the entrenched system of gender relations functions with property ownership to limit power of

choice” (Krhzer, 65). While Marion has progressed to a successful life outside the home she has become entrenched in capitalism and adopts traditionally male traits and attitudes to achieve status. On her refusal to return care of the baby to Lisa, Marion states “Every one of you thinks I will give in. Because I’m a woman is it? I’m meant to be kind. I’m meant to understand a woman’s feeling of wanting her baby back. I don’t. I won’t. I can be as terrible as anyone” (A2S6) . Marion’s refusal to accept the traditional female traits of passivity, kindness and maternal instincts are positive for her as an individual however her refusal to empathise with Lisa’s needs illustrate the ways in which women fail to unite and work together toward a shared and equal future.

Churchill represents ownership and the preoccupation with possession as a destructive force within the family and society. The house is not only a setting and an area of conflict in the play; it is also a symbol of many of the central ideas in the play. The house represents the unequal division between classes as well as gender therefore encompassing Churchill’s awareness of the issues of both. According to Krhzer “Churchill uses the construct of a house unequally divided, to show how private property destroys caring and community” (Krhzer, 64). At the end of the play the house is burnt down, this is a powerful illustration of the call for complete destruction of the structured society that the house represents. In the closing scene of the play Marion says “I might be capable of anything, I’m just beginning to find out what’s possible” (A2S8). In producing *Owners* Churchill opened up a new level of experience for women in theatre.

3.2 TOP GIRLS

In the opening scene of *Top Girls*, as previously referenced, seven women from across history meet to toast the success of Marlene, the only character who ties this scene to the remainder of the play. The historical characters are a mixture of mythical, artistic and literary figures including Isabella Bird, an explorer and Pope Joan, a woman who disguised as a man rose to the top of the Catholic Church rankings only to be found out when giving birth in the middle of a papal parade. Isabella and Joan represent women who achieved their goals by imitating men. On the opposite end of the table are Lady Nijo, a Japanese Courtesan and Griselda, a peasant girl who married a prince. Nijo and Griselda used their femininity to procure their desires. The fifth of Marlene's guests is Dull Gret, a monosyllabic woman with a story of revenge. When most of her guests have arrived Marlene raises a toast "We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements" (A1S1). While all of these women have great stories including grand journeys and achievements they have all endured pain and suffering at the hands of the men in their lives. Their stories all contain great tragedy, each one remaining submissive to men and in no way furthering or helping the cause of other women. Christopher Innes states that what unites all guests at the dinner party apart from Marlene are "the gruesome tribulations they have overcome that they find a common bond: attributes which repulse Marlene, who sees herself as independent of men" (2002, 518).

According to Sanford Sternlicht in *A Readers Guide to Modern British Drama*, in this scene the "very idea of unique, individual achievement is purposely deconstructed by Churchill" (2004, 201). He goes on to state that the scene illustrates the ways in which "individual achievement, fame, or notoriety of women is of little significance if the society they lived in

were so restricted that only a few exceptional women could break through gender barriers.” (2004,201) At the Top Girls dinner party Marlene has achieved what her dinner guests had failed to, she has reached her goal of corporate success independently from any man. However, Churchill exposes Marlene’s achievements as insignificant in that they do not benefit anyone but Marlene herself. The repercussions of Marlene’s individualistic mentality are played out in the remainder of the play.

Scene two set in the Top Girls recruitment agency in contemporary Britain show Marlene and her female colleagues in their working environment. A number of Marlene’s colleagues and their interviewees are played by the same actors from the Prima Donna dinner party. Churchill employs this theatrical device to illustrate the ways in which woman from across the ages experience the same obstacles and hold similar relationships to each other. Scene two opens with Marlene in an interview with Jeanine. Jeanine is a young secretary who would like to improve her working life with a view to travel. Marlene’s early advice includes not telling prospective employees that she is engaged or has any interest in having children. While Marlene prides herself on her own self made success she questions Jeanine on her decisions based on what her fiancé is interested in. Marlene’s questions are designed to silence Jeanine and by the end of the interview Marlene has railroaded Jeanine into applying for positions below her expectations. By disparaging her ability and questioning her motives and possibilities Marlene has not only failed to nurture Jeanine’s aspirations but has almost entirely crushed them. The interview scenes in *Top Girls* further explore the theme of women’s failure to communicate with each other. Marlene’s Thatcher like mindset is evident throughout scenes at the agency. Jeanine is just the first in a series of women who wish to broaden their horizons but are discouraged and derided by the Top Girls recruiters.

The next victim of the Top Girl's interview process is Louise; Louise has already established herself in the business world and explains some of the barriers she has experienced in her career "I've spent twenty years in middle management. I've seen young men who I trained go on, in my company or elsewhere, to higher things." (A2S1). Louise goes on to explain how she has gone unnoticed in her career but still prefers to work with men "I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work!" (A2 S1). The interviewer Win asks Louise a series of questions which, as with Marlene and Jeanine, are designed to silence her and to make her question her desire for change. The common desire expressed by the interviewees is their search for a change. When questioned why she is making a change Louise replies "Other people make changes" (A2S1). There is no understanding between the women in these scenes. Win states "I think I understand you sufficiently" (A2S1) this is clearly not the case. The life of a Top Girls employee is not as rewarding as it may seem, in a conversation between Nell and Win it becomes clear that these women experience the same concern as those they are interviewing. Although Marlene has been made Managing Director of the company the opportunities are scarce and they themselves "wouldn't mind a change of air" (A2S1). Aspects of their personal lives do not seem to affect their treatment of those who come to them to seek help, whether it is a role they have decided to play or jealousy that others have the courage to step out and make changes or fear that these women could progress higher than they themselves, there is no sense of encouragement or genuine help.

A sense of shock from most is clear that Marlene has earned such a high promotion, first referenced by Nell and Louise in the fact that their colleague Howard was not given the job 'because he's a fella' came as quite a surprise not least to his wife. Mrs. Kitt arrives at the

office to express her own feelings on the situation “What’s it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he’d get over it as something normal” (A2S1). Churchill makes it clear that although women began to move up the ranks in business and public life their presence was not widely accepted. As Mrs. Kidd receives no sympathy from Marlene she proclaims “You’re one of those ballbreakers, that’s what you are. You’ll end up miserable and lonely. You’re not natural” (A2S1). Questioning the idea of the natural becomes so important in the subversion of traditional gender roles, if something is deemed natural it means it cannot be changed, Marlene is not natural to society but this is because she has adopted male traits, not because she has taken a progressive step to shun any gender classifications. Marlene encompasses the ideals of second wave feminism which encouraged women to rise above the patriarchal limitations placed on society; she has however adopted the individualistic mentality which prevents the unification and progression of the movement. In Marlene, Churchill creates a character who personifies her objections to women who “often pride themselves on being as good as men... and do little for other women” (2004, 197). According to Sanford Sternlicht Churchill’s agenda “calls for collective justice for all women” (2004, 197).

In Act Three Churchill’s focus shifts to the economic and the political, feminist undertones remain but the socialist aspects of Churchill’s drama come to the fore. The class divide becomes visible; set in the kitchen of Marlene’s sister’s house, Marlene’s sister Joyce has become bitter and frustrated in an unfulfilled life of poverty. Marlene, returning to the domestic sphere from a life of patriarchal imitation sees the life she left behind in search of success.

Marlene is welcomed enthusiastically by her niece Angie, Angie had visited Marlene at the office in the previous scene and Marlene had been less than kind about Angie and her prospects. This harsh view becomes even more surprising when it is revealed that Angie is in fact Marlene's daughter. Joyce and Marlene's conversation slips quickly to conflict, first about their mother whom Marlene has visited that day. Joyce becomes agitated at Marlene's comments about their mother, particularly when questioned why she visits her weekly. This question is posed in a heated exchange and Joyce replies quickly "How would I feel if I didn't go?" (A2 S2) This escalates Joyce's anger; does she only visit to make herself feel better? The anger is thrown straight to Marlene and her decision to leave the family home and her child in the care of Joyce. Marlene shows no remorse for her decision stating "Of course I couldn't get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed?" (A2S2). This subject becomes a vicious exchange over Angie, Marlene claims that Joyce took Angie while Joyce claims that her care of Angie resulted in the loss of her own baby. Both women continue to fire accusations and revised versions of history at each other to prove their own points. What both are in fact doing is reinventing the past to justify the present.

Tears and laughter punctuate the conversation as Churchill masterfully portrays the relationships between family members particularly at times of conflict. Joyce is beaten by society but refuses to be a victim, her husband has left her for another women, and her explanation "I was going to an evening class. So he had this girlfriend" (S2A2). The link between Joyce's attempts to broaden her horizons and the breakdown of her marriage are placed closely here, possibly to illustrate the challenges that working class women face not only in society but also in the home. The conversation turns political as Marlene states her

support of the Thatcher government “She’s a tough lady Maggie. I’d give her a job” (A2S2).

Conflict returns as Joyce describes the government as “filthy bastards” and the argument continues exposing their divided views;

MARLENE. Who’s got to drive it on? First woman prime minister.

Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / you must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

JOYCE. What good’s first woman if it’s her? I suppose you’d have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms. Hitler. Got a lot done (A2S2)

These two sisters are at opposite ends of the spectrum in 1980s Britain, as previously discussed the Thatcher government escalated the middle classes and the upwardly mobile while little more than abandoning those in the working classes. Joyce is bitter that she has been left behind while Marlene reworks history to justify her decisions. Both women were forced to make great sacrifices that should not have been necessary. Sacrifice is the issue at the centre of the play, from the historical dinner party through the interviews to the sisters at the kitchen table. According to Sanford Sternlicht “Marlene sacrificed Angie in order to have her career. Her guilt is palpable. No woman should have to make that decision” (2004, 202). The decision to leave Angie has great ramifications on the child’s life, continual references to Angie’s simple nature and lack of ability illustrate the ways in which the younger abandoned generations of woman left without support and opportunity become further divided from society. The issues of sacrifice, abandonment and the prospects for future generations of women are further explored in Churchill’s later plays.

3.3 The Skriker

In *The Skriker* Churchill continues to explore the complexity of theatrical performance by adding original and ground-breaking devices to further distort time and stage conventions. There are many aspects of the play that enable Churchill to connect with the audience on a surreal and psychological level. The mode of communication moves beyond dialogue with a large portion of the stage time filled with choreography, theatrical movement, music and imagery. In an introduction to the play, Churchill states “a number of stories are told, but only one with words” (Foster, 113). Of the twenty-six characters in the play only three speak. Christopher Innes believes “Churchill’s aim is clearly to involve the audience on an irrational and psychological level” (2002, 527). The character list includes two teenage girls and The Skriker along with an array of mythological, historical and fictional characters. The Skriker is a character from English mythology, a banshee like figure whose shriek heralds imminent death. The mythical figures, often of grotesque and disturbing appearance are taken from English and Irish mythology. represent the unconscious mind and lend themselves to the central theme of the obsessive dreaming of the powerless. Their actions are invisible to the characters at the centre of the play. The duel action on stage along with the folklore characters in a real world setting destabilises meaning in the play and draws the audience in on a heightened psychological level. Churchill describes the character of The Skriker as “A shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (Churchill, 243). The play, first performed in January 1994, opens with a long soliloquy from The Skriker. Throughout the play The Skriker speaks in poetic language, in a stream of consciousness form filled with word association. This style of dialogue forces the audiences to pay close

attention to each word spoken, nothing can be taken for granted, and meaning must be sought deeply within the action.

The traditional action of the play centres on the lives of Lily and Josie, two teenage girls traversing the difficulties of modern life. The real world setting is not contemporary but also not overtly futuristic. According to Christopher Innes, the hideous appearance of the mythical characters is “implied to be a result of ecological breakdown and of mental disturbance and social forces that threaten these vulnerable young women.” (2002, 527) If *Top Girl's Angie* is a product of contemporary British society, Lily and Josie are the aftermath of an unrevised view of this society. Their first appearance in the play is in a mental hospital where Josie is being held over what transpires to be the murder of her ten day old baby. Lily is now pregnant and it is immediately clear that both girls are alone and isolated in the world. On Josie's request to be taken out of the hospital Lily replies “I'd love to take you out of here, Josie. I'd love it if I had a place of my own to take you and look after you, I'd love it”. (1991, 250). Confusing and fragmented conversation between the two girls implies that neither are sure of what they want and have no direction or guidance in their lives. Josie is not sure if she wants to leave, to be looked after or to be punished. Lily wants to look after Josie but also leave and start a new life, it is also clear that Lily is unable to decide if she can trust Josie.

It is Josie who shows immediate distrust of The Skriker and wishes that The Skriker's attentions be turned to Lily, a request that she soon regrets. According to Amelia Howe Kritzer “The play implies that humans annihilate themselves through their inability to resist evil, when they do they cast it off, they find their lives unbearably empty” (Kritzer, 116). Vast character differences between the two girls are evident in their interactions with The

Skriker, Lily is kind and vulnerable while Josie is callous and paranoid. As an old woman begging in the street Lily gives The Skriker money and affection to which she is awarded financially however this comes at a cost. In the same situation Josie refuses The Skriker and is left with toads falling from her mouth. At this point it seems that fulfilling The Skriker's wishes leads to repayment however unbeknownst to Lily each granted wish comes with a curse. In her first conversation with the Skriker Lily meets a middle aged American woman at the bar who insists on explanations about television, electricity and aeroplanes. The constant questioning of these advancements in technology feed into Lily's fears and insecurities. The Skriker admits "I knew you were desperate, that's how I found you" (Skriker, 268). Feeding of the desperation and desires of the girls allows The Skriker to take advantage and further destroy any remaining good in their lives.

The treatment of the girls in the play mirrors directly the situation of many young, vulnerable females in society, particularly those pushed to lower levels by those in power. The Skriker lures both girls to the underworld on different occasions, if women in modern society are held down by patriarchy; women in this world are dragged down to an even lower level. Here Churchill may be implying that if change does not occur the ramifications of acceptance will lead to a more desperate and destructive state. In an immediate post Thatcherite society this idea strikes a strong political note which is continued at the underworld banquet. At the banquet Josie is advised not to eat or drink as she will be unable to leave if she does. Despite the fact that some of the feast is made up of twigs, leaves and beetles Josie is drawn in by the glamour. According to Kritzer this scene symbolises the way "humans sell themselves and harm others in order to possess, display and consume things that have no intrinsic value" (Foster, 118). The allure of a feast is all it

takes for Josie to abandon her future and it is The Skriker who leads her to do so. In the political climate at the time of the play's original production it was suggested that The Skriker was a mythical representation of Margaret Thatcher. With single minded persistence, strong persuasive abilities and the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable The Skriker claims "I am here to do good I am good" (Skriker).

Alternatively The Skriker can be seen as a mythical form of Churchill's other rapacious women. In *Owners* Marion makes no attempt to support or even sympathise with Lisa, Marlene does not encourage or nurture the aspirations of working women who seek her help and as an escalation of this The Skriker preys on these particularly weak women, not only to crush their spirits but to steal their futures. As the predatory females escalate their victims become further weakened. Just as Donna Haraway utilises the image of the cyborg to illustrate the possible progressive future of the women's movement, Churchill develops the mythical character of The Skriker to personify the negative progression of the current movement. Addressing current and possible future issues for women in society, *The Skriker* is a challenging, ground-breaking, expertly crafted theatrical performance which demands thorough examination and attention to realise its multiple and key ideals.

Conclusion

As a progressive and influential art form theatre has been growing and developing for over five hundred years. In light of this it is incredible to think that the first prominent female playwrights on the English stage only emerged in the last fifty years. If a place of open minded expression and overt creativity could not see past gender, it is of little surprise that the society it influenced remained in a repressive patriarchal state. The progressive nature of theatre makes its failure to women even more disappointing. Helene Keyssar states “When feminists confront traditional theatre, they must deal with more than stages, curtains, scene elements and lights, they must find ways to reshape a material practice that has been used to legitimize and maintain hegemony” (1983, 7). In theatre Caryl Churchill development her artistic style in tandem with her evolving political and social beliefs. The constant political and creative evolvment and aesthetic intricacies of her work have made her one of the most important dramatists of the last forty years. By constantly questioning and subverting the conventions of the theatre and paving the way for other female dramatists Churchill became the antithesis to the characters she created.

Churchill herself states

“[I know] quite well what kind of society I would like; decentralised, non authoritarian, communist, non-sexist –a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives. But it always sounds both ridiculous and unattainable when you put it in words”(Churchill, 1982).

As representations of the wider women’s movement the characters discussed in this thesis, Marion, Marlene and The Skriker, are tangibly linked in their development and their

relationships to society. Each one embodies the failings of society towards women and as the women's movement disintegrated from the public consciousness these character's morality and humanity further disappeared. Churchill's focus in her more recent work has shifted toward wider political issues while feminist theory has split into many guises. At a time now when raunch culture and the reclamation of the female body is viewed to be the height of female progression The Skriker is right in thinking "Yes everyone sometimes thinks they're beautiful and deserve better than this and so they do" (Skriker). All of these women deserve better and if the importance of progressive feminist thinking is lost, the idea of this something better may be to their detriment rather than their enhancement.

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