The Curse of the V: Contemporary Feminist Movements and Performative Dichotomies in the Plays of Caryl Churchill

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Abstract
Caryl Churchill mixes historical setting with shallowly defined characters and dissociative references to the contemporary within her vast body of work. She seeks to deny her audience the opportunity to blindly accept the entertainment of narrative theater, forcing them instead into a realm of discomfort where they must identify the unsavory elements of history with their own lived experience. This research began with the questioning of previous critical models which examine characters as autonomous beings rather than as personified themes, and asks how Churchill responds radically with theater as a medium to events pervading her own experience as a woman and as a professional. Specifically, this study uses five of Churchill’s plays, Owners, Vinegar Tom, Cloud Nine, Top Girls, and The Skriker, in order to investigate how the playwright uses the constructed worlds and created identities of Brechtian epic theater as a rhetorically analytical device, responding to the simultaneous progress and stagnation of the Women’s Liberation Movement, the Sexual Revolution, and Second Wave Feminism.
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I. Introduction: The Little White Pill

A dress to kill your mother in. A pin to prick a “witch.” A toy gun to reify gender stereotypes. A singular banana to connote the metaphorical hunger of a professional woman. A couch to bring opposing women together. Innocuous objects all, used to do violence to the female form and to the patriarchal restraints which govern it. These images stem from the radical mind of Caryl Churchill: the feminist playwright to end all feminist playwrights, although to sell her as solely such seems a grave injustice. In reality, her work transcends definition or compartmentalization. One is never on solid ground in the complex scenarios Churchill weaves for her audience. The only assurance which can be made in consideration of Churchill’s expansive and unruly portfolio is the consistently revolutionary nature of her work. In her use of radical theatrical devices through casting choices, dialogue, and socio-political undertones, Churchill repeatedly pokes at the underbelly of the status quo, particularly the predominant male hegemony. Her favorite subject in the sixties and early seventies, the burgeoning years of a career spanning five decades? The problem, the seemingly irreconcilable issues which plague a generation of women in transition.

In her line of female-oriented critique, Churchill plunges the depths of numerous problems confronting contemporary women which, at the time, flew below the theatrical radar—understood as reality by women who struggled with them daily, but remaining for the most part unspoken on stage. Her plays illuminate such issues as the perceived value of the female body, female sexual repression, and the nearly impossible quest to “have it all”—family and successful career. This territory of socialist feminist playwriting, though by no means unique to Churchill, cannot be found in a form more striking or more successfully critical amongst the work of her contemporaries and followers. Churchill proves so irreconcilably different and radically
outspoken from other writers of the time—female, feminist, or otherwise—that she defies comparison. As professed by playwright April de Angelis as she performed the famous dinner scene from Churchill’s celebrated *Top Girls*, “My politics at the time were pretty simplistic, really just about writing bigger parts for women. But you saw Churchill's work and it really made you question why you were writing” (qtd. in Ravenhill). De Angelis added, “Churchill is a playwright with a body of work that has continually responded to the ‘form and pressure of the times’, as if she has turned the idea of what a play should be over and over, revisioning it beyond the accepted imaginative boundaries, to produce plays that are always revolutionary” (de Angelis). Playwright Mark Ravenhill similarly described Churchill’s penchant for all things new and revolutionary, her admiration for creating work that would make an audience pause for thought: “Her plays have perfectly expressed the anxieties and possibilities of the moment in which they were first performed, and yet have managed to seem new in subsequent revivals” (Ravenhill). It is important to note, however, that the new, particular species of playwright to which Churchill alone can claim to belong, the producer of modern, socialist drama with women and women’s issues at its heart, cannot be said to have simply sprouted from the ground spontaneously. A product of her time, Churchill’s societal critique, however revolutionary, could not have originated in a vacuum. Rather, influential works such as *Owners*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, and *The Skriker* were responses to the problems of women originating in the decade that was the sixties—issues which rapidly vanished and germinated in equal turns, one form of oppression resolved before leading into another. Churchill’s work during the sixties, seventies, and beyond was informed by the rapidly changing world of women around her. Everything—yes, really, everything—ultimately coming back to the Pill and the advent of the Sexual Revolution.
The introduction of mass-market oral contraception in Britain in 1961 may seem a rather mundane, vaguely obvious point of departure for the development of the feminist movement. However, the arrival and availability of unrestricted contraception shaped not only a woman’s ability to stake claim to her own body, but also paved the way for a huge leap in women’s liberation accomplished in the span of a mere decade—the evolutionary equivalent of a paramecium transforming into a fetal velociraptor in a single puff of smoke. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, women’s access to birth control—both the physical devices themselves and relevant literature on the subject—was summarily controlled by white men; available only to be whispered in the ears of those who could afford it by clinicians and to be denied repeatedly to the working class poor (Capo 36-38). Repressive, undeniably phallocentric laws such as The Comstock Acts in the United States outlawed the distribution of birth control devices and related information, relegating contraception to the sexual underworld. As a result, those seeking birth control often became associated with unsavory subjects such as prostitution and venereal disease (Wojtczak). Public information on contraception did not become available in Britain until the 1820s, and even then remained something to be whispered, concealed, and passed through back alleys. This embargo on contraceptive knowledge forced women to use ineffective means of birth control, such as the popular and risky withdrawal method used widely during the 19th century, or, as a last recourse, abortion (The Long Sexual Revolution 41). In light of this embargo on contraceptive information and practice, women were often forced to choose between abstinence followed by potential abuse from a partner desirous of sex, and the risks of pregnancy and abortion, both of which could often end in death (Wojtczak). Although birth control became increasingly available amongst various social classes, its existence proved no less taboo (Rowntree and Pierce 10). When charged with conducting a census on family
limitation practices in Britain in 1945, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists professed that, “to attempt house-to-house questioning on a national scale was to foredoom the inquiry to failure” (Rowntree and Pierce 2). The sixties, in a wave of radical feelings and ideas, forever changed this perceived taboo and resulting power struggle for reproductive rights between the sexes—by no means solving the prevalent issue of male to female suppression, but altering irrevocably the sexual status quo.

Amidst opposition from Catholic sectors and male doctors, high levels of female interest in early trials of “the Pill” through the Family Planning Association (FPA) and other such organizations gives a decent snapshot of women’s understanding of their own oppressive sexual predicament (The English Sexual Revolution 115). In short, women were ready for change, and ready to accept control over their own reproductive rights. Within the span of a few years, oral birth control became the contraceptive of choice, the first medication capable of eliciting side-effects affecting the entire body ever prescribed to such a large percentage of the population (The English Sexual Revolution 117). Over 75% of women born between 1945 and 1959 took the Pill during their lifetime (The English Sexual Revolution 109). In July of 1962, 150,000 women identified as being on the Pill. This number more than tripled in the span of two years, with 480,000 women using the drug in 1964, and increasing to a little less than half the female population, 48% by 1969. Oral contraceptives proved so influential that the national birth rate declined rapidly before leveling off in 1977 (The English Sexual Revolution 116). Women cited all manner of reasons for embracing the Pill—freedom from pregnancy, carefree, “plastic” sex (The English Sexual Revolution 109) and dramatic decrease in routine hassle and pain resulting from menstrual periods (The English Sexual Revolution 116). The most compelling argument for the Pill, however, remained the simple but all-important fact that oral contraceptives offered
women the first non-invasive contraceptive option which did not rely on male cooperation during the sex act (*The English Sexual Revolution* 114). Birth control ushered in a complete reversal in traditional sexual roles as the woman now took on the conventionally male-held position of assumed contraceptive responsibility (*The English Sexual Revolution* 121). With the advent of the first widely-used, female controlled contraceptive device, women finally had dominion over a territory that in the past had been inexplicably dominated by men: their own vaginas.

This sexual renaissance, though, for women was not without its drawbacks. Side effects included weight gain, hormonal fluxes, possible drop in libido—the continuation of a woman’s life as a physical cycle of beauty and pain (*The English Sexual Revolution* 117). Some criticized the Pill not only for its adverse effects, but as an extension of a male hegemony once again dominating the decidedly “subordinate” gender. Radical feminist groups in Britain and abroad denounced the Pill for its perpetuation of male dominance:

How is birth control practised in our society? It’s a familiar story to women. We go to a doctor, lowering our eyes, embarrassed at our dependency, with a mixture of fear and anger, we stumble through that horrible sentence, ‘What do I do not to get pregnant?’ Remember, we are asking this of a male doctor, behind whom stands the whole power-penis-potency complex (PPP). What do you think he’s going to tell us? Right! ‘Get high on our latest special, the PPP’s Pill!’ ‘Great new wonder drug!’ It launches formal attack on the pituitary gland (fondly known as the master gland of the body—which means that our entire hormonal system is assaulted) and ‘saves us from pregnancy’ in exchange for a two-page long list of side effects—nausea, edema, vomiting, bleeding, cramp, mental depression, bloating, changes in menstrual period, etc., with a risk of thrombophlebitis,
pulmonary embolism, cerebral thrombosis, etc., etc.—which our male pharmacist or male doctor threw in the waste basket, and which we will never see. What we do see are little booklets from the drug companies, decorated with roses, tulips, and peach blossoms full of reassuring babbling. (qtd. in Marwick 701)

In the eyes of many women, the Pill merely extended the gendered control of the female body through the male medical lens, with the doctor as the omniscient wielder of power over the female form. This opinion, while contrary to the general consensus of benefits the Pill afforded, demonstrates the problems that accompanied the solutions oral contraceptives offered, a recurring theme throughout the history of the Women’s Liberation Movement. In her comprehensive analysis of the Pill as a driving force of the feminist movement, Hera Cook examines variant opinions on its validity as an object of positive female change, “The notion of sexual liberation or sexual revolution was rejected by feminists in the early 1970s on the basis that it was primarily men who had benefited from the greater permissiveness and that female sexual autonomy was still denied…These interpretations are hard to reconcile with the changes in women's lives, as exactly the opposite took place: from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s there was an unprecedented retreat from government and community attempts to control women's sexual behaviour and an erosion of female deference” (110-111). Radical feminist Germaine Greer encapsulates this rejection of the Sexual Revolution as synonymous with female empowerment, quipping, “If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your own menstrual blood - if it makes you sick, you've got a long way to go, baby” (Greer 51). Whether the pill aided male suppression of women or enhanced women’s liberation while interesting to debate is, in an analysis of how radical changes in female perception could have created an author like Churchill, irrelevant. What does matter in context are the changes in
public perception regarding women and women’s advancement that occurred as a result of the Sexual Revolution.

It is less the physical Pill itself which so radically changed women’s reproductive options, but rather the shift in perception regarding women’s sexuality that occurred as a result of. The view of women previously held in earlier decades—the image of the female as a factory-like, mechanical automaton responsible for the production of the next generation and little else (Capo 33)—was at least substantially blurred if not entirely reconstructed during the sixties. Access to contraception generally served to liberate women sexually—no longer forced to hold their desires in check in order to avoid pregnancy, sexual liberation changed forever previously held views of women and sex. Women began to be seen as inherently sexual beings rather than as mere receptacles for male sexual pleasure. Finally, women began to recognize and reclaim the own sexuality, giving voice to desires that had long been seen as taboo, existent but unspoken. This was a full one-hundred and eighty degree shift from the age-old Madonna-Whore binary so prevalent throughout history, which classified women desirous of birth control and wanting sex for pleasure as dangerous and subsequently, to sap their standing and credibility, whores (Capo 25).

Marriage served as yet another established institution the Pill took a crack at during its rise in the 1960s—the Sexual Revolution heralding in many cases the slow but certain death of the nuclear family (Marwick 394). Taking control of their reproductive rights for many women became synonymous with rejecting the traditional tenets of the British housewife. “One time in three daddies and mummies are not married” (qtd. in Marwick 394) proclaimed Marie Claire magazine in 1966 in an article lovingly entitled, “Love and the Miniskirt.” Marriage, with the consistent goal of children at the end of the tunnel, more and more frequently fell by the way
side. Militant voices in the Women’s Liberation Movement went even further, riding the waves of reproductive rights afforded by available contraception by denouncing the institution of marriage altogether. Germaine Greer in, *The Female Eunuch*, branded marriage in the traditional sense as a glorified version of slavery, “The housewife is an unpaid worker in her husband’s house in return for the security of being a permanent employee: hers is the reductio ad absurdum of the employee who accepts a lower wage in return for permanence of his employment. But the lowest paid employees can be and are laid off, and so are wives. They have no savings, no skills which they can bargain with elsewhere, and they must bear the stigma of having been sacked” (Greer 315). Many young British women shared this sentiment, if not quite as strongly then at least in practice. More and more young people adhered to the tenets of “free love” choosing to live together while forgoing the typical first step of marriage. Cohabitation became the norm rather than the exception, disrupting the expected, stereotypical roles previously assigned to women (Moynahan 269).

This decline in the importance of the traditional family was perhaps one element which spurred on the increasing number of women in the workforce. With opinions on women in professional settings changing steadily, the greatest opposition to working women stemmed from men, and, more surprisingly, married women (Marwick 763). More specifically, married women in lower working classes, often with many children and less opportunity for personal advancement, more regularly and vocally opposed women’s right to work professionally outside of the home. In Arthur Marwick’s *The Sixties*, he explains, “In general it was concluded, opposition to women’s work increased as one went down the social scale” (763). Having numerous young children and, more often than not, children close to each other in age served as a significant barrier to employment of women in lower classes (Marwick 764). By contrast,
women in higher economic standing were gradually becoming less hedged in by their familial attachments, beginning to usurp the traditional pattern of patriarchal dominance in the family. Again, women’s employment in the sixties became less about sex—although certainly in the workplace women remained outnumbered and often harassed by men—and more about class, with women in lower economic standing more dependent on and subservient to their husbands. By 1965 in Britain, the percentage of women in paid employment had reached 50% (Marwick 259), resulting from an upshot in women’s employment in general, but also from a more substantial rise in employment among women with children. Though restricted somewhat to the upper classes, “more and more young women with children were taking up employment, and there had been spectacular growth among the upper middle classes. Women who worked also had more other activities (distractions)” (Marwick 764).

The decade that is the sixties in a sense served as a Petri dish, combining multiple factors into one glorious, mad-scientist potion which resulted in a complete change in how women viewed themselves, and, in turn, how society viewed women. Demands for equal rights, women moving into the workplace, the collapse of traditional marriage—these factors alone, without the chemic boost provided by available birth control might have decidedly fizzled, leaving nothing but the faint odor of change behind. Rather than peter out into nothingness, the Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain grabbed the Pill from its neighborhood pharmacy and ran with it, constructing a decade seemingly from scratch that would heavily influence the position of women in those to come. As is always the case, advancement in any sense, while certainly desirable, often brings with it a Pandora’s Box of subsequent problems which were either nonexistent or unimportant before said advancement occurred. In the case of women, the Sexual Revolution, and all its friends during the 1960s, women became equal parts liberated and
restricted in ways never before experienced. The conflicting desires of family and work, the supposed commodification of a woman’s body, the stigmas attached to female sexual desire—to all of these problems which trace their lineage back to the dawn of oral contraceptives, Caryl Churchill in some perverse, alternate-universe paradigm, owes a smidgen of grudging thanks. While the frenzied battle for female liberation waged, simultaneously oppressing and inspiring Churchill as a woman and a playwright, the stage—if you can grant a girl one obvious metaphor—was set for an immutable voice to emerge, to unapologetically question a system expanding decades beyond its origin in 1961, founded on pillars of one tiny, white, innocuous pill. Responding to the simultaneous liberation and oppression of the female beginning in the 1960s and spanning to the 1980s and beyond, Caryl Churchill presents us with just a few of the innumerable problems facing women in a new age of feminism. In her plays *Owners, Vinegar Tom, Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, and *The Skriker*, Churchill uses such radical theatrical devices founded on contrast—the contrast between male and female, between binary, archetypal female characters, and between events modern and historic—in order to critique the established male hegemony and its adverse effects on female identity, advancement, and interaction.
Interestingly enough, this piece started out as a meditation on a topic of untold depths: bananas. More specifically, how the consumption and collection of phallic objects at work in this play makes one an owner, and how submission to the appropriated symbol of something as nonthreateningly biodegradable as a banana casts you unmistakably as the owned.

About

Images courtesy of Shutterstock, Daily Mail, and Best of British Sweets
II.  *Owners*: Establishing the Haves and Have Nots

Following her initial foray into theater through a series of radio and television plays in the sixties and early seventies, Caryl Churchill staged her first play in 1972 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. *Owners* centers around Marion, a shark-like business woman dead set on acquiring the property rights to a certain apartment; Lisa, the quavering but resentful housewife and resident of said apartment; Lisa’s husband Alec, an old flame of Marion’s and possibly the most apathetic character to ever grace the stage at the Royal Court; Clegg, a laughably failed, misogynistic butcher, and Marion’s husband; and Worsely, Marion’s pathetic, discarded love interest for whom half-hearted suicide attempts are a cherished pastime. Amidst this dispute over Lisa and Alec’s apartment, various smaller dramas unfold among these caricatured players, all centered around the idea of ownership. This ownership takes various forms throughout the play, be it the custody battle over Lisa and Alec’s child, Clegg’s plans to murder his too-progressive wife, or Clegg and Lisa bumping uglies as a means to an end. Critical reviews for the most part label Churchill’s first serious dramatic attempt as referential of past playwrights such as Joe Orton and David Mamet (Gold), featuring one-dimensional characters and entirely too transparent a critique of capitalism (Jones). Reviews accused the work of pandering to an audience optimistically perceived as analytical without quite managing to hold their attention: “Churchill's 1972 work…is unflinchingly cynical and morally indignant, attitudes wrapped in a biting, caustic wit. But Churchill's sense of storytelling at this stage manages to be intellectually challenging without making for very good drama. She wanders, quite aimlessly, amid soap opera, shrill black comedy and social analysis. Her script never really comes together” (Smith). What such reviews fail to take into consideration, however, is the central point of owners and owned functioning as a commentary on women’s roles rather than the British economy.
Especially considering the historical context of the time period from a feminist perspective, the enactment of legislation important for both ownership and for women’s rights passed just three years after Churchill’s play was first performed—most notably the 1975 Equal Pay Bill and the Sex Discrimination Act. Despite the historically relevant connections *Owners* makes between possession of real estate and ownership of the self, Churchill’s examination of binary female characters is left unexamined by many critics, surprising as it later becomes one of the cornerstones of her socialist-feminist theater. Rather than focusing on the possessive power plays in *Owners* as geared towards economic advancement or socialist satire, this section examines the gendered conflict between the products of established patriarchy and increasingly progressive women’s roles. As encapsulated by a *New York Times* review of a 2005 revival, “What validates such prejudicial ‘-isms’ is, after all, the mindset of the ‘-ists.’ Sexists…Paternalists. These guys are Owners. In *Owners*…the most aggressive, acquisitive mogul on stage is, however, the female of the species” (qtd. in Milvy).

Finding its catalyst in the Sexual Revolution, a new age of feminism saw women ushered into an era equal parts liberated and oppressed, and in turn gave rise to a new kind of hybrid being constantly evolving to meet the oxymoronic specifications of the day. In the wake of the sexual liberation that oral contraceptives offered, women increasingly advanced into roles previously exclusive to men. Women now had the option to move from the home to the workplace, from buying groceries to buying stock, and from owning heirlooms to owning property. In her first staged production, Churchill enters into a discussion of these changing women’s roles against the backdrop of a seemingly simple dispute over the rights to a run-down apartment. What should function as a casual real estate transaction becomes a discussion of opposing female roles and the power struggle not just between men and women, but
increasingly, between variant iterations of the female species. It is Marion, the steely and successful real estate agent, who affords the first glimpse of what will prove to be an archetypal figure in Churchillian canon: the piece-meal being defined by her sexual appetite or professional success, if not a combination of the two.

The Marion archetype, for all intents and purposes, describes the breed of woman born out of the sexual revolution. That is, women directly affected by or influenced by the rise of oral contraceptives and family planning, who often used this reproductive independence as a catalyst for their entrance into the professional sphere. As previously discussed, this type of woman typically, though not exclusively, hailed from the upper classes, higher social and economic standing generally allowing women to transition more easily into roles as workers and, in some cases, heads of house (Marwick 763-764). This female archetype as presented in Churchill’s work is contrasted against those women more tightly bound by their economic or social circumstances. These women, housewives such as Lisa, typically originate from more humble backgrounds, low income and placement in social hierarchy connoting less opportunity for female advancement, usually stemming from the more traditional domestic model of women as wives and mothers with men as patriarchal familial heads.

Cold, calculating, and with a single-minded focus on personal advancement, characters such as the enterprising Marion and her metaphorical offspring appearing in Churchill’s subsequent work embody the trials of women casting off these traditionally held, often expected roles relegated to the wife and mother figure. The interplay between two personifications of these binary models, the more progressive figure of Marion, a professional woman in a position of power, and her antithesis, Lisa, the overworked housewife, set against a backdrop of comparatively ridiculous and impotent male characters allows Churchill the freedom to examine
the repercussions of feminism post-1961. In Owners, Churchill utilizes binary opposition of the domestic figure with the sexually autonomous professional, highlighting their mutual lack of fulfillment by caricaturizing male presence and allowing her audience to focus on the meaningless consumption and pursuit of ownership her leading ladies employ in an attempt to fill an unfillable void.

Before delving into the psyche of the perverse products of modern womanhood as evident in Marion, it is necessary to examine what serves as the frequent binary counterpoint to the empowered female professional—the second, less ferocious but no less hungry archetype in Churchill’s repertoire: that of the housewife. Lisa, a stay-at-home wife and mother to an ever-growing brood, is immediately cast as a passive, impotent woman, if not immediately subservient to her dispassionate husband then at least unable to act without his stamp of disinterested approval. Her first appearance depicts her in a decidedly compromising position that does not bode well for her empowered female chops. Entering into an obviously ransacked apartment, she refuses to call the police simply because Alec cannot be bothered to, and half-heartedly advises her not to go through all the trouble. Lisa is depicted as a product of her circumstances, destined to be relegated to the role of a housewife as a result of her upbringing and class. She fulfills the role her own mother prepared her for, a traditional structure of male governance and female subservience. She does so grudgingly, dreading the implication of a new child and the additional domestic burdens its birth connotes. Though his analysis centers on owning in the physical sense, Darren Gobert perfectly captures the sharp distinction between Lisa’s predetermined fate and Marion’s agency as a professional, “Owners demonstrates the capacity of Ownership to foment discord, either between competing claimants to property or between those who own and those who do not” (46). Adding a tragic element to her character, it
seems that Lisa both recognizes and resents her predestination as owned rather than owner, passively begrudging figures like Marion who clawed their way to success, and her posh neighbor Mrs. Crow who was born to excess. Lisa remarks:

Mrs. Crow keeps saying, nobody wants a property with tenets. As if it was rats. Why don’t they put poison down? She says, if you’re an owner, dear, you expect to own. Why don’t you save up and get your own place like I did? She got that house before the war for two hundred pounds and now it’s twenty thousand. I wasn’t born when I could have got it for two hundred…If I have to do one more thing I’ll scream. When I think of the night and nappies I hope this baby’s never born. (*Plays: One* 23-24)

With such statements, Churchill outlines the problems of women relegated by chance or class to traditional female roles. Lisa’s existence is dominated by men and the products of established systems often geared in their favor. Even relatively harmless male figures such as those Churchill employs in *Owners* easily manipulate Lisa—Clegg uses her sexually in order to spite Alec and Marion; Worsely easily maneuvers her into a comically one-sided negotiation for her apartment. Marion, a female who has fashioned herself into a vision of stereotypically “male” dominance through her professional and sexual exploits, takes Lisa’s child with little to no resistance. Lisa’s status as an oppressed domestic figure stems not simply from men, but from age-old structures of a male-dominated society. One can surmise that her low economic and social standing left her few options in deciding her future other than the predetermined roles of mother and wife, and excluded her early on from the opportunities made available to sexually potent figures such as Marion. Lisa is thus barred from fulfillment by a lack of opportunity rather than the failure of progress. In a world that yields female advancement only to the pseudo-
masculine power of Marion-like figures, Lisa struggles with one simple and devastating problem: she is not and cannot hope to be an owner.

While men continue to shape Lisa’s personal world, by contrast, Churchill begins her discussion of the Marion archetype by effectively erasing men as the natural antagonist to female advancement. The natural enemy to progressive female figures such as Marion is the stereotypical patriarchal male, a pillar of antipathy towards women seeking “radical” advancements to their social, economic, and political status. Certainly Marion’s husband, Clegg, offers a version of this male resentment; his musings on a woman’s proper place in the natural order at times seem extracted from the footnotes of a particularly chauvinistic textbook—he dubs Lisa a “handy receptacle” for his sexual release (*Plays: One* 56). Constantly referring to his wife as property, profiting from her success while complaining about her independence, Clegg takes on the somewhat comical role of a disenfranchised, bitter leech. Unable to exist without Marion and hating the idea of a woman eclipsing his perceived masculine superiority, Clegg privately curses his wife with utterances straight out of the “uber-patriarch” entry of the dictionary, such as this gem referring to Marion’s professional status: “It’s like having a talking dog, and it’s on the front page at breakfast, the radio at dinner, the television at night—that’s mine, look that’s my clever dog. But a time comes when you say, Heel. Home. Lie down” (*Plays: One* 11). This hatred of strong female figures is further exaggerated and made ridiculous through Clegg’s increasingly elaborate murder plots against his wife, which are formulated but never acted upon.

Clegg’s continued description of his plans to kill his wife—be it with weed killer or by chopping her into pieces and boiling them—in their ridiculous scale and empty threat, undercut completely his projected identity as the complete patriarchal package. At his core, Clegg is a failure. Beyond his piddling murder plots lies further evidence of his incompetence in all things—his butcher
shop’s financial ruin, his inability to interest his wife sexually, his lack of virility in producing an heir to his meat empire, his failure to take on the role of familial dominance he believes to be his right. Churchill’s clear and immediate portrayal of Clegg as both a symbol of antiquated patriarchy and as a failure to his gender serve a purpose beyond the satiric. By placing such exaggerated examples of male incompetence in juxtaposition with Marion’s success, Churchill colors the continuation of an outdated, exclusively male-dominated system as comically pathetic. Nataša Tučev’s claim that Marion is, in fact, the most masculine of the assembled characters, rings true in this sense, as it further mocks the cowed male assembly in the face of her confusing female virility. Tučev writes: “Ironically, Marion's own 'act of liberation' comes down simply to her discarding all femininity and identifying completely with the mainstream patriarchal tradition of conquest, pride and greed” (343).

Marion, as an empowered male-female hybrid, is the point of reference by which all other characters function. Churchill emphasizes this pattern in regard to Owners’s male characters—Worsely, the semi-suicidal partner and hopeful love interest of Churchill’s leading lady, functions similarly to Clegg, attaching himself to Marion and constantly seeking her attention through doleful, half-hearted suicide attempts to no avail. In fact, Worsely as a character reverses the long-reiterated trope of female characters as one-dimensional subsets of male counterparts. Worsely’s characterization as pathetic and subservient relies entirely on Marion for development—in her absence, he would simply disappear in a mournful puff of smoke. This one-sided power dynamic can be seen in nearly every interaction between the two, specifically in his dogged loyalty to Marion despite her continued rejection of him, “I’ve too much on. I’m caving in. I owe a great deal to Marion and I don’t altogether want to—do anything she’ll disapprove of, however much she’s—disappointed me” (Plays: One 58). Alec, too, exemplifies a character
exaggerated to flatness, unable to muster up the merest ounce of passion in any situation. Whether casually pulling the plug on his aging mother or professing his undying love for Marion, Lisa, and his children, Alec predictably leaves emotion so far out of the equation that it might be vacationing in a black hole:

MARION: You love me more than a complete stranger. 
ALEC: I couldn’t say for certain. I can say I love you and Lisa. But it wouldn’t matter if I never saw you again. 
MARION: It’s no use being loved like that. You love your children more than someone else’s. 
ALEC: Not necessarily. You see. (Plays: One 47)

The inflated, almost pitiful depiction of men the author deems to use renders Clegg, Worsely, and Alec mere caricatures—vague, satirical sketches of what men become in the face of a powerful female antagonist. Through their one-dimensional depiction, men in Owners—be they power-obsessed yet impotent, an exercise in self-pity, or the physical manifestation of apathy—become referential to their female counterpart in Marion, effectively becoming background noise in a play centered indisputably around a powerful, female Owner. Churchill’s rendering of male characters as seemingly obsolete reappears in successive works (such as the castrated second act of Cloud Nine, or Top Girls, a play devoid of a single male presence) but also lends itself to the introduction of binary opposition of archetypal female figures, which will become the broad focus of her numerous feminist plays.

Reflecting the increasing opportunities for women to carve out a niche in a previously male-dominated society, Churchill presents the first in a line of professional female characters to
be explored in her feminist canon: Marion. Best described as hungry, the species of woman to which Marion belongs acts as the essence of a professional woman in the early seventies liquefied, calcified, and personified, a persona aptly described in Smith’s review of the play, “Marion, for instance, is a rising real-estate doyenne with a touch of Lady Macbeth about her: She almost relishes the escape from motherhood her career affords” (Smith). Marion uses this removal from traditionally perceived female pursuits to cement her status over male characters. In her constant belittling of her husband, her one-sided interactions with men, and her steely business dealings, Marion exerts control and a power heretofore reserved for males in all her actions. Pareia Bakhshi argues that Marion is a female model positively challenging ideas of heteronormativity and performative gender roles:

By creating such a female character, who has appropriated masculine roles and traits, Churchill has been able to achieve her goal of challenging not only the heterosexual discourse but also the false assumption of confirming the fixity of gender roles and gender attributes. As a result, what is proven is what (Judith) Butler has cited and that is the constructedness and performativity of gender roles.

It is demonstrated that it is possible for the subject to enact and show the attributes that do not conform to its biological sex and the established norms considered to be appropriate in the heterosexist society. (234)

However transgressive Marion’s display of hybrid masculine-feminine traits may be, Churchill uses her interactions with male characters to demonstrate the unhappy side effects of such transgressions necessary to overcome male dominance. Take for example Marion’s mundane encounter with a man on the tube, a scene that captures the problem of that breed of professional
woman Churchill repeatedly investigates, begging the question of the unstated price of female success:

The boy that took my money smiled right in my eyes, and later when I saw my reflection in the train window I was smiling and smiling. I hardly knew it was me…But after all what is that? I don’t know him. He doesn’t know me…Not who I am. Not what is important about me. Not my ideas. And what I’ve done. And what I’ve got. Not me. (Plays: One 45-46)

Made evident in this exchange is the fact that Marion views the event as unprecedented and is unable to respond to male attention based on her female sexuality rather than her masculinized business persona. In her mind, her inherent value as an individual and as a woman is based entirely on what she has and what she has done. The base interaction of a male figure appreciating her in a shallow, passing manner strikes Marion as nearly incomprehensible, as she does not quantify her worth based on such principles. Traditionally perceived feminine values of beauty and sexual appeal do not concern her—described as owning expensive clothes but not being particularly well dressed, we see Marion values the trappings of power rather than of obvious femininity. Her inability to reconcile herself as an object of male desire points to an unintended but perversely necessary masculinization of strong female figures. In order to attain success, Marion has partially divorced herself from womanhood and becomes a hybrid species of unidentifiable gender that cannot contextualize passive male attention. As she holds business meetings in strip clubs, turning negotiation with Worsely into an odd version of real-estate centered foreplay, it becomes clear that outside the realm of physical possession, Marion does not understand the concept of desire as it typically functions.
This is not to say that Marion and all subsequent professionals in Churchill’s repertoire enjoy a life-long state of satisfaction which domestic life prohibits. Marion’s social power is belied by an evident sense of emptiness in her personal life. As described in a review of Jean-Francois Revon’s 2005 production of the play, “Marion (is) a hugely successful London landlord and property manager whose skill at owning other people's homes is rivaled only by her appetite for more, more, more” (Jones). To combat this emptiness, she is seen repeatedly snacking—messily eating chocolate, unperturbed by red wine stains as in her mind they simply give one the opportunity to buy a new shirt (Aston & Diamond 36), “I was throwing the dress away in any case. I hate old clothes. I love to throw them away. And get new ones” (Plays: One 21). Similar to her quest to acquire Lisa and Alec’s apartment, Marion’s brand of consumption seems directionless, purposeless. “Chuck it in the bin,” she says, disdainful of meat purchased just seconds before her entrance; throw it all away and start afresh seems to be her approach to all matters in life (Plays: One 12). She uses—people, property, food—not to the last drop but to their first. Marion is the type of person who will open a box of cereal, leave the bag unclipped, and toss the stale remains, her thoughts not on the waste but on the enticing prospect of buying more. She seeks validation in the form of instant gratification, and failing that, swiftly forgets what she initially pursued and settles for the next in a line of frenzied interests (Aston & Diamond 36-38).

In her analysis of Owners as a “defiance of phallogocentrism” Bakhshi understands Marion’s obsessive consumption as a vindication of her position as a liberated female figure: “Marion's excessive possessiveness is another characteristic that unveils her defiance to the traditionally assigned roles imposed on subjects under the patriarchal hegemony. She is pathologically disposed to possess and own not only the houses and apartments as a real estate
developer but also humans” (233). Although Marion’s professional position and ravenous pursuit of success identify her as a powerful female figure, the voracious need Marion feels to own and possess is more closely tied to the sense of fulfillment she lacks as a professional woman. Her pursuit of Alec, tied to her pursuit of the apartment, seems entirely driven by Alec’s apathetic attitude; if he showed any signs of wanting Marion in return as Worsely does, he would be humored for the briefest of moments and then forgotten. Similarly, the custody battle over Lisa and Alec’s baby interests Marion not due to a newly materialized maternal instinct on her part, but simply because there is a battle to be had over it. This desire to possess what belongs to Lisa might be seen as competition between two opposing forces, however, in light of Marion’s treatment of Lisa as a being inherently less than her, reading her desire for ownership as a spiteful gesture does not function. Lisa, Alec, the baby, Worsely—all these figures become mere pit stops on Marion’s never ending quest for a sense of fulfillment. She takes so that she will have what others possess. There seems to be no real point to this brand of consumption; it serves merely as a reminder of Marion’s understanding of female advancement as a state of complete happiness and fulfillment—something she conspicuously lacks. Her constant snacking and repossession from others reads as an attempt to remedy an emptiness she believes she should not feel as an autonomous, successful professional. Her search for tangible, quantifiable happiness dominates her existence, constant consumption pointing perhaps to a sense of simultaneous entitlement and disillusionment felt by a legion of women off-stage. Promised advancement, adherents to the church of gender equality like Marion and the professional women she in turn represents are left studying the progress heralded by an enlightened age in contrast to their actual position in society, blinking in confusion and wondering where such progress operates, where it
exists. Where is my happiness? Each bite of chocolate, each successful deal seems to demand.

You promised me I would have it, if I worked hard enough. Give it to me. Now.

The Marions of Churchill’s archetypal character pool may operate a rung above domestic figures in the play’s social hierarchy, but they are continually portrayed as empty shells, lacking their operative adjective. Perhaps her personal experience as a working woman leads Churchill to identify with the figure of the professional more than her traditional antithesis, and, subsequently, to glamorize her Marions a degree more than her Lisas. Jean E. Howard in her discussion of owning and owing within the Cambridge Companion accepts Marion as the superior female archetype in her analysis of the play based on her relative power in comparison to the “bedraggled and impoverished” Lisa (36-37). While the disparities in agency between the two figures are apparent from the outset, casting Lisa as a “loving mother” (37) simply too tired and poor to care for another child in turn casts Marion unmistakably as the villain. This negates Lisa’s own expressed disillusionment with her domestic role embodied by her half-hearted attempts to reclaim the infant once it is taken. On the contrary, one of the tenets of Churchillian socialist-feminist drama is its refusal to accept one feminine model as more correct than the other, emphasizing instead the shared doom of polarized female character types. Although she may portray the power of women like Marion in a positive light, the absence of fulfillment and happiness on both sides of the female equation remains one of the hallmarks of Churchill’s theatre practice. This becomes especially evident through the direct juxtaposition between Lisa and Marion’s views on female identity and value, views expressed through contrasting mantras directly confrontational to the other. Marion advises, “Do what you want. Get what you can,” (Plays: One 43) a sentiment which is preceded by a short but poignant sentence from Lisa, its implications resonating to shake the strict established female binary, “I may not earn as much as
you, but I’m not nothing” (Plays: One 42). The contrast between these two statements points not only to the characterization of Marion and Lisa as each other’s respective model of opposition, but also to the fact that, on some level, women trapped in a polarized system recognize and, in some cases, seek to escape from this system. Whether or not such an escape is possible remains a murkier question. Beginning with Owners, Churchill introduces the idea of a trade-off, a structure which becomes increasingly rigid and progressively pessimistic in her later works. You can be a Marion or a Lisa she tells us, but nothing in between. In order to attain one status, all facets of the opposing must ultimately be sacrificed.

Owners uses this construction of archetypal binary as the breeding ground of a more directly antithetic, antagonistic relationship between two breeds of women, constructing a model of contrast which will be dissected, its sanity questioned, in Churchill’s plays throughout the later seventies and mid-eighties. In the relationship between Lisa and Marion, there are no winners and no losers; there are simply women trapped in a purgatory of wanting without apparent hope of getting. Through the removal of an obvious enemy in the form of strong, oppressive male figures for Marion in comparison to the continuation of the patriarchy spearheaded by such pathetic male figures in Lisa’s case, we begin to see the first signs of inter-female resentment that will inevitably explode in Churchill’s subsequent work. This stockpiled resentment as seen in Owners will eventually lead Churchill’s women to turn on each other, the audience watching in vague horror as an intended symbiosis is rendered cannibalistic by deep-set resentment on both sides. This girl-eat-girl competition and homogenized, gendered hate in Churchill’s feminist theatre reveals itself in greater detail through the use of yet another form of opposition: the contrast between historical sexism and modern sexism as seen in Vinegar Tom.
ABOUT

When fingers are pointed, somebody hangs. At least that seems to be the case in Vinegar Tom. A play about witches with no witches in it—it was that intriguingly oxymoronic idea that brought this particular piece to life. I felt it was necessary to somehow portray that the women throwing deadly shade were doing so circumstantially, not out of some inherent cannibalistic tendency or bred-in hatred of their own sex, but as a last recourse, recognizing the restrictions of their historical context. Thus the tom cat, a lanky and toothy witch’s familiar, grins gleefully as he controls two opposing women, both interrogated at pin-point and both destined to hang.
III. Vinegar Tom: Female Taboos and Antagonistic Community

The year 1975 stands as a seminal moment in the history of British pop culture, introducing the world to enchanter named Tim and definitively putting an end to the debate over whether a five ounce swallow can carry a one pound coconut. With the release of Monty Python and the Holy Grail a legion of people with far too much time on their hands developed a strange type of film-specific eidetic memory, able to quote entire scenes verbatim at the drop of the hat. A pervasive moment for comedy, the film very nearly invaded the minds of audiences domestic and abroad, taking root with all the persistence of a homicidal, flying rabbit. Sandwiched between The Holy Grail’s constitutional peasants and hunt for the perfect shrubbery lies an exercise in circular reasoning that has reached a near cult status in the Western zeitgeist, inspiring countless internet memes and, perhaps, one socialist-feminist playwright.

BEDEMIR: Quiet, quiet. Quiet! There are ways of telling whether she is a witch.

CROWD: Are there? What are they?

BEDEMIR: Tell me, what do you do with witches?

VILLAGER #2: Burn!

CROWD: Burn, burn them up!

BEDEMIR: And what do you burn apart from witches?

VILLAGER #1: More witches!

VILLAGER #2: Wood!

BEDEMIR: So, why do witches burn?

VILLAGER #3: B---... 'cause they're made of wood...?

BEDEMIR: Good!
CROWD: Oh yeah, yeah...

BEDEMIR: So, how do we tell whether she is made of wood?

VILLAGER #1: Build a bridge out of her.

BEDEMIR: Aah, but can you not also build bridges out of stone?

VILLAGER #2: Oh, yeah.

BEDEMIR: Does wood sink in water?

VILLAGER #1: No, no.

VILLAGER #2: It floats! It floats!

VILLAGER #1: Throw her into the pond!

CROWD: The pond!

BEDEMIR: What also floats in water?

VILLAGER #1: Bread!

VILLAGER #2: Apples!

VILLAGER #3: Very small rocks!

VILLAGER #1: Cider!

VILLAGER #2: Great gravy!

VILLAGER #1: Cherries!

VILLAGER #2: Mud!

VILLAGER #3: Churches -- churches!

VILLAGER #2: Lead -- lead!

ARTHUR: A duck.

CROWD: Oooh.

BEDEMIR: Exactly! So, logically...,
VILLAGER #1: If... she... weighs the same as a duck, she's made of wood.

BEDEMIR: And therefore--?

VILLAGER #1: A witch!

CROWD: A witch!

BEDEMIR: We shall use my larger scales! (Gilliam et al.)

*The Holy Grail*'s grasping logic based on water fowl and relative buoyancy represents a satire of historical witch hunts not entirely dissimilar to Churchill’s *Vinegar Tom*. Although Python sketches are not typically celebrated for their realistic or empowering portrayal of female characters, this pervasive pop culture moment might easily have influenced Churchill’s dramatic take on witches and their accusers, first staged just one year after *The Holy Grail*’s release. In fact, the mocking nature in which she alludes to certain historical texts—most specifically *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 1487 German idiot’s guide to finding and burning all things witchy—as well as her tendency to parody historical views on women and witchcraft reads as none too dissimilar to the rationale of a medieval John Cleese, who portrayed one of the many logically fallacious peasants.

Contrary to Monty Python, Churchill’s foray into witch territory, while at times darkly humorous, was not composed with the intent to amuse, or even to entertain. Although humor occasionally creeps into the piece—especially through the enumeration of historical accusations of female witches, ranging in severity from infant consumption to erectile dysfunction (in men and livestock; just in case the family horse is looking a tad listless, you know who to blame)—at its core, *Vinegar Tom* exists as a commentary on the changing definition of feminism during the seventies (Institoris, Kramer & Summers 44). As Austin Quigley puts it, “What we remember...is the unsettling contemporary relevance of an image, apparently archaic, that is
forcefully and disturbingly reconstituted. No one who has seen the play will ever think about
witches or women the same way again” (28). By relying on characters at once historic but, on
some level, contemporarily aware and resentful of the tangential nature of their oppression,
Churchill paints the modern constructions of a male-dominated society as equally questionable
as their historical counterparts. Similarly, Churchill’s use of Brechtian musical interruptions
draws attention to the often contradictory image of womanhood to which contemporary women
are expected to aspire. The lives of Churchill’s characters, ordinary women within a community
set hundreds of years in the past, readily evoke the changing contemporary views of the female
body and a woman’s designated role within society. By alluding to modern women’s issues and
the increasing traction of the feminist movement, Churchill’s audience is invited, even coerced,
to swallow her take on the modern female experience rather than leave it to dissolve passively on
the tongue.

Commercially speaking, the Western image of the female body had begun evolving into
something very close to the occult. *Playboy* magazine, initiated in the early 1950s, sold legions
of eager men on the dream of female flesh removed from the demure, the virginal, and, most
importantly, from the confines of marriage. By the decade of *Vinegar Tom*, the magazine had
increased its annual sales from one to six million copies worldwide (D’Emilio and Freedman
302-303). *The Sun* began featuring its own version of the centerfold on November 17th, 1970,
with *Penthouse Pet* of the month, Ulla Lindstrom, debuting as the very first *Page 3* girl. These
glossy images of buxom blondes unbuttoning co-ed sweaters and winking seductively
accompanied a legion of comparable media platforms which solidified a slowly-evolving fantasy
of the female form. The world of advertising in particular capitalized on the increasingly
sexualized image of women à la *Playboy* and *Page 3*: “Advertisers projected a sexual definition
of the female, informing her that, ‘blondes have more fun’ or that a certain brand of toothpaste would give her mouth, ‘sex appeal’…” (D’Emilio and Freedman 312). While the male population exercised their masturbatory rights, Playboy in hand, the seventies gave way to a significant wave of feminist backlash against what many women labeled an overt objectification of the female body in mainstream media and pop culture. Even long-standing cultural constructs such as beauty pageants were called into question. The Miss World Pageant of 1970 came under significant fire in the United Kingdom from various feminist groups who gathered outside Royal Albert Hall to hurl insults and stink bombs at contest goers and participants in protest of what they perceived as an inherently chauvinist practice (Peck).

Such gender performativity perpetuated by media and pop culture outlets was challenged by new theories on sexual practice and evolving female sexuality which arose out of the feminist rhetoric. American feminist Anne Koedt captured the importance of such work, condensing previously clandestine knowledge of female anatomy into the ever-popular clitoral orgasm theory in her 1970 article, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm”:

Men have orgasms essentially by friction with the vagina, not the clitoral area, which is external and not able to cause friction the way penetration does. Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men; our own biology has not been properly analyzed. Instead, we are fed the myth of the liberated woman and her vaginal orgasm - an orgasm which in fact does not exist. What we must do is redefine our sexuality. We must discard the "normal" concepts of sex and create new guidelines which take into account mutual sexual enjoyment. (Koedt)
The women of the seventies capitalized on these changing views of female sexuality and the newfound autonomy offered by oral contraceptives, taking notes from texts such as Sex and the Single Girl which advocated a life of few attachments and serial sexual partners, proclaiming, “reconsider the idea that sex without marriage is dirty…sex was here a long time before marriage. You inherited your proclivity for it” (Gurley Brown 12). Sex sans contractual obligation intimately wove its way into the fabric of the seventies, so-called “free love” replacing the older generation’s hang ups on housewifery and marriage (D’Emilio and Freedman 315).

Women living in the wake of the Pill’s rise to prominence were becoming less and less satisfied with their allotted roles of wife, homemaker, and mother, turning to authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Greer and, before her, Betty Friedan, whose Feminine Mystique punctured the balloon of domestic bliss as it entered into the literary mainstream and revealed that women often sought fulfillment through sexual affairs when they could not find it in batches of deviled eggs and piles of laundry (Friedan 15-20).

Churchill’s first distinctly feminist production serves as a thinly veiled commentary on such revolutions in female sexuality and agency, a gut response to the rapidly evolving women’s movement around her. Vinegar Tom, the one-act play written in conjunction with socialist-feminist theater collective, the Monstrous Regiment, was conceived, gestated, and born within a single year, debuting at the Humberside Theatre in 1976. Written for women, by women, the play centers around a group of would-be “witches” living in a community situated at an unidentified point in the seventeenth century. The wide range of female characters within the play are diverse in their ages, occupations, and relative autonomy, and become physical manifestations of the various, progressive stages of a woman’s life. Joan is a widow past her expiration date; her daughter, Alice, is a single mother with a promiscuous streak; Susan, Alice’s
friend, is an entrenched and vaguely dissatisfied housewife with a child on the way; Margery, Joan’s neighbor, is also unhappy in her domestic life, unable to keep her husband’s interest as he becomes obsessed with the open sexuality of young Alice. Ellen, an older woman living on the outskirts of the village, serves as a well of feminine knowledge for the women of the community, a “cunning woman” whose powerful potions and independent lifestyle seem attractive to younger women such as Betty, a free spirit confronted with the idea of a forced marriage. The interplay of this community of women quickly turns sour as those who refuse to conform are singled out and persecuted as witches by both the men of the village and, less predictably, by each other.

Although the thread of a narrative connects the community’s women and their girl-eat-girl accusations of witchcraft, the play comes across as less of a pleasing, two-hour reprieve from reality and more of an exercise in intellectual labor. Churchill presents her audience with a symbolic witch hunt—not to be taken at face value and not meant to entertain. In lieu of characters her audience is presented with a rough outline of them; rather than maintain the illusion of a fictive world, Churchill breaks up historical scenes with songs performed by actors in contemporary wardrobe addressing modern topics. The songs serve as a cacophony that jars and distracts, combatting the misty, dead-eyed appreciation of theater experienced by audiences who become engrossed in a narrative instead of bothering to deduce its meaning. Amelia Kritzer describes the heavily Brechtian influence as it presents itself in works such as *Vinegar Tom*:

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. (*Theatricality and Empowerment* 126)

By assigning the same actors to portray multiple characters—functioning representationally rather than fully assuming a character’s identity—and interjecting dialogue with songs referencing contemporary phenomena, the audience is denied identification with individual characters through Brecht’s favorite device of historical alienation, and is therefore encouraged to link a historical occurrence with their own reality (*Invisible Bodies* 193).

Churchill has often been quoted describing *Vinegar Tom* as a witch-centric play sorely lacking in witches (*Plays One* 133). True to her word, the women of *Vinegar Tom* are depicted as just that—average women attempting to navigate a series of milestones in the female existence. It is through their transgression of typical, assigned gender roles within the historical context which identifies each “witch” as such—Alice represents a distinctive challenge to male sexual power, holding sway over men in the community through her sexual potency. Betty walks about alone in the dark, does not swoon at the thought of marriage, and must therefore be bled by a male doctor to rid herself of such thoughts. Ellen, as a cunning woman, lives on the fringes of the community and possesses knowledge which might challenge that of male physicians. Joan is past her prime, living alone and thus undercutting the model of the nuclear family when, by all unspoken rules, she should simply fade into the background and accept her role as a widow in silence. Susan, however timidly, has rejected her intended role as a mother and wife by aborting her child. There is no pagan potluck in the forest, no ritual poultry sacrifice, no double bubbling to be seen from these assembled “witches,” who instead deal in the female routine, discussing sexual frustration, pregnancy, rocky marriage, and the joys of an inverse correlation between beauty and elapsed time. By removing the witchcraft from the witch hunt, Churchill turns our
attention to more modern examples of female oppression. The witches of *Vinegar Tom* might just as easily translate into modern day “bitches,” average women whom a patriarchal society has labeled and condemned for refusing stereotypical female gender performance. The entire narrative of a community witch hunt takes a back seat to the metaphorical connection between burning accused witches and the bra-burning of their contemporary sisters—women who, like the cunning woman, the widow, and the unmarried single mother of Churchill’s tale, existed decidedly outside of the norm yet firmly within the jurisdiction of societal views on gender and sexuality.

Using the obvious comparison between past and present typical of epic theater, Churchill sheds light on changing views of female sexuality and women’s roles in opinion and practice, examining a historical sexism eerily applicable to her modern reality. In this way she reiterates and expands on the concepts of gestus, epic structure, and historicization as defined by Janelle Reinelet (9), devices which, in Brecht’s own words, dissociate the audience to such a degree that they begin to inject the self into the void where narrative typically takes over:

> As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement. (Brecht and Wilett 201)

If *Owners* represents Churchill’s Brechtian reaction to the dawn of oral contraceptives, then *Vinegar Tom* serves as her response to the Pill’s far-reaching and double-sided fallout. On one hand, she addresses the more positive products of increased sexual liberties, specifically, the
normalization of female sex drive. While she touched on this subject somewhat in *Owners* through her characterization of Marion as a consumer of real-estate and men, in *Vinegar Tom* Churchill presents us with characters such as the sexually awakened Alice, whose take on male-female relationships veers away from the purposeless consumption Marion displays. Churchill repeatedly emphasizes in her plays the idea of women having sex simply because they want it—a desire not based on the quest for ownership, but for satisfaction. This sexual desire is made apparent both through Alice’s inferred sexual experience—when asked by her lover, Man if the size of him frightens her, she breezily comments that it is not so very much bigger than any of the others she has seen. Churchill also allows Alice to assume a role as sexual consumer transgressive to the historical setting through her professed love of the act itself, not based out of any romantic attachment to her partner: “I could do with it now, I can tell you. I could do with walking across that field again and finding him there just the same. I want a man I can have when I want, not if I’m lucky to meet some villain one night” (*Plays: One* 146-147).

Zahra Khozaei Ravari takes the sexual exploits of the character as a product of submission to preassigned gender roles and lumps Alice in with the other oppressed female figures in the play: “These women are the weakest members of the community.” However, Alice’s status as an, “unmarried, rebellious girl” which Ravari claims detracts from her power actually adds to it in a sense—her sexual encounters with men like Jack prove this, literally giving her possession of a man through her ability to emasculate him as a sexual partner. As Elin Diamond puts it: “Jack endows Alice with the power of the phallus in order to repossess his organ, but then, newly authorized and empowered, he must subdue her by ‘seeing’ her as, labeling her a witch” (194). Alice’s sexual appetite and the powers it gives her will not remain unchallenged by the male-driven and female-perpetuated accusations of witchcraft to come; her sexuality will eventually be
persecuted by the men and women of the community and resign her again to the subservience of her female counterparts. However, their mere presence within the historical setting gives her an autonomy outside of the time period’s constraints.

Austin E. Quigley argues that reading *Vinegar Tom* as an epic play meant to imply the connection between historical female oppression and modern iterations of sexism is a leap, “easy but unproductive” to make (29). His analysis turns instead to the predestined label of witch assigned by men, yes, but eventually accepted and perpetuated by women themselves: “…there is…an interest among men in regarding women as evil, an interest that suffices both to engender and reinforce a tendency among women to regard themselves in similar terms” (29). True, Churchill shows us the eventual deterioration of figures such as Susan and Betty, who come to gradually accept their status as declared witches based on acts they view as evil through a patriarchal, constructed lens. However, Churchill uses Alice to stand in contrast to those women who endorse their own male-assigned role as witches. Alice functions as a sort of epic puppet, words and deeds of a second wave feminist escaping the mouth of a figure in 17th century skirts and bonnets. Her full and astute recognition of her own position in the patriarchal hierarchy harkens back to Brecht, embodying one of his favorite, so-called alienation techniques which reveal the historical setting as a contemporary construction. In this case, the alienation technique in effect deals with character voyeurism, as it gives contemporary powers of autonomy to Alice within a time period devoid of such female volition, aligning with Brecht’s idea that, “people's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different” (71). Alice therefore understands, as a contemporary female audience would understand, the construction of male dominance in society. When held in jail and questioned by witch hunters Goody and Packer, she repeatedly denies her association with the Devil:
PACKER: Why won’t you confess and make this shorter?

ALICE: It isn’t true.

PACKER: Tell me your familiars. Tell me your imp’s names. I won’t let them
plague you for telling. God will protect you if you repent.

ALICE: I haven’t any… (Plays: One 171)

Thus Alice actively combats the same label which Susan passively accepts as gospel.

Demonstrating a lucid awareness of such arbitrary assignments as inherently sexist, undoubtedly false, she displays a gendered agency denied to every other female within the context of the play.

She functions as an outlier made to vocally question the status quo as enforced by her neighbors and friends. Even as she hurls insults at Man, she expresses at once a simultaneous comprehension and resentment for a system run by “bastard” and, “devil” which has in turn labeled her “whore, damned strumpet, succubus, and witch” (Plays: One 137)—a being powerful in her own right but still unquestionably the devil’s servant. This, in turn, delineates the limits of Alice’s permitted agency and Brechtian freedoms of speech—although she recognizes the forces which oppress her, she, like the rest of the accused, cannot hope to escape the implications of her assigned role as witch. The only difference between Susan’s acceptance of her “witch” self and Alice’s denial of it is their respective understanding of what transpires—while the submissive wife and the stubborn whore meet the same fate, Alice simply meets it without anesthetic.

Going beyond mere illumination of finite categories of wife, virgin, and whore, Churchill questions their very existence. In the opening scene, Man—a collective, nameless being—asks Alice, “What are you then? What name would you put to yourself? You’re not a wife or a widow. You’re not a virgin. Tell me a name for what you are” (Plays: One 137). In this scene, Churchill seems to poke holes in the supposedly rigid societal roles women are slated to fill,
asking why they must be consistently defined through their association with men. She suggests a depressing futility that inevitably accompanies any attempt to fill these one-dimensional roles—Churchill invites her audience to accept the fact that there is no wife, not even a virgin without a touch of whore, and vice versa. The song, “If You Float” in particular acts as a sort of sing-song dirge for the hopes of becoming the perfect wife, the ideal mother, the whore of your dreams:

Fingers are pointed, a knock at the door
They’re coming to get you, do you know what for?
So don’t drop a stitch
My poor little bitch
If you’re making a spell
Do it well
Deny it you’re bad
Admit it you’re mad
Say nothing at all
They’ll damn you to hell. (*Plays: One* 170)

Although the binary relationship between the whore (Marion) and wife (Lisa) is examined more profoundly in *Owners*, Churchill continues to use opposing models of sexual liberation and domesticity to investigate the line between wife and whore, this time through Alice and Susan. Although a clear divide exists between the sexually active, male-independent figure in Alice and the entrenched housewife in Susan, the separation between the two is not as clearly emphasized as the opposition between Marion and Lisa as sexual and occupational rivals in *Owners*. By contrast, Alice and Susan are initially depicted as friends; Susan is seen in the opening acts of the play expressing her concern over the pressures of domestic life to Alice, who in turn describes her contrasting sexual exploits and frustrations:
SUSAN: You always say you don’t want to be married.

ALICE: I don’t want to be married. Look at you. Who’d want to be you?

SUSAN: He doesn’t beat me.

ALICE: He doesn’t beat you.

SUSAN: What’s wrong with me? Better than you.

ALICE: Three babies and what, two, three times miscarried and wonderful he doesn’t beat you. (Plays: One 147)

Here we see the beginnings of a distinct separation between the two archetypal female figures, mirroring that of Churchill’s previous and future works. Although Alice does not have the comparable workplace opportunities that Marion enjoys, it is her sexuality—a force which grants her the power to literally and figuratively emasculate a man—that separates her from domestic figures such as Susan and Lisa. Alice’s proclamations on the joys of womanhood are not lost on a modern audience and serve as a sort of subtitle track to the themes of sexuality and the female body that will be questioned throughout the piece: “Blood every month, and no way out of that but to be sick and swell up, and no way out of that but pain. No way out of that till we’re old and that’s worse. I can’t bear to see my mother if she changes her clothes. If I was a man I’d go to London and Scotland and never come back and take a girl under a bush on my way” (Plays: One 146). Such historically irreverent ideas define Alice as a character functioning in the Brechtian sense—the alienation of historical context allows her a verbal agency which recalls the complaints of contemporary women. She serves as a mouthpiece to universal female complaints emboldened by the contemporary tendrils Churchill attaches to what would otherwise exist as a period piece. Though other female characters express their frustrations, they do so passively, and to little effect. Susan may complain about her domestic situation, but she is hard
pressed to take action to remedy it—even after agreeing to an abortion she sees her decision in the light society paints it: decidedly witchy. While she remains relatively trapped within the confines of marriage, Alice exists apart, rolling in ditches and stabbing the nether-regions of male voodoo dolls.

Again, the power structure between these two female models leans decidedly in favor of the Alice/Marion side at first glance—as they take in Susan’s future standing knee deep in diapers, a contemporary audience may find themselves agreeing with Alice, “Who’d want to be you?” (Plays: One 147). However, Churchill evens the playing field by ensuring that both figures, wife and whore, are persecuted by the male dominated society in which they live. Perhaps Alice’s lifestyle seems preferable to Susan’s, but in the end, both stand accused of witchcraft and may hang for their supposed crimes. Their shared doom emphasizes the idea of mutually assured destruction, lady-style, which Churchill is so fond of illustrating, and which will become even more important in future works, particularly *Top Girls*. Although the spurned Jack first accuses Alice of witchcraft after she supposedly steals his manhood, ultimately Susan strikes the final blow, enumerating Alice’s crimes as if possessed. In so doing, however, Susan also seals her own fate—her accusation demonstrates that she was in league with a witch according to the authorities, thus effectively signing her own death warrant. Here, Churchill points to a disturbing trend in second-wave feminist society. Although men could and have been labeled as the ancient and perpetual enemy of the feminist movement, women within microcosmic female communities actually hamper feminist progress when they turn against each other in favor of personal advancement. In a 1982 interview with *The Observer*, Churchill quipped, “If it involves oppressing other women, feminism doesn’t work” (Radin). The “witches” of *Vinegar Tom* can attest to this statement—Susan and Alice stand an equal chance of hanging at the play’s close.
Even Ellen, who innocently provided evidence of Joan’s status as a “witch” to Margery, hangs alongside the woman she indirectly ratted out. Churchill gives her audience a chilling look at what the dissolution of female communities could herald, the image of Ellen and Joan swinging from the gallows a sharp, poignant interruption to an otherwise bloodless play.

Although the cannibalistic, girl-eat-girl side of evolving feminism takes precedence within the context of Vinegar Tom, Churchill, like even the most discerning of feminists, does not forget to spend some of her capital smashing the patriarchy. The increasing sexual liberties afforded by oral contraceptives served to proportionally increase female desire for sexual autonomy in other areas. The seventies in particular saw a rise in female distrust of male doctors, especially the practice of pelvic exams, which prior to drastic medical reformations that began in the seventies showed little to no concern over the patient’s comfort level or even their understanding of the proceedings (Kline 43). Feminists recognized the innate hierarchal structure of gender at play within the confines of a gynecological exam: “I was naked, he was dressed; I was lying down, he was standing; I was quiet, he was giving orders” (Frankfort 10). Vinegar’s witches reflect this disillusionment—Alice, Susan, and Betty, young women in their sexual prime, turn to the knowledge of the cunning woman rather than the male doctor using the antiquated and seemingly barbaric practice of bleeding to cure imagined disease. Similarly, proponents of the Women’s Health Movement abandoned the overwhelmingly male medical sphere in favor of midwifery practices and feminine health guides written, researched, and compiled by women (Kline 35-39).

This comparison is intriguing not just for its parallels to new developments in the world of female health, but also as it points to a close relationship between a woman’s sexuality and her perceived deviance. The arrival of the inquisitors Packer and Goody in the final scenes of the play marks a distinct shift from the previous autonomy demonstrated by Alice, Ellen, Joan, and
Betty, to a more familiar set up for the time period. No longer do we see seventeenth century women acting as comparatively empowered feminists of the 1970s. Instead, the ensuing witch hunt takes on a decidedly sexual tone, as the women accused are stripped, shaved, and pin pricked down south, because, “Devil hides his marks in all kinds of places. The more secret the better he likes it” \textit{(Plays: One} 172). Female sexuality, then, becomes dangerous and occult, its power to subjugate men (as demonstrated by Alice’s exploits with Man, and, later, with Jack) something to be quelled through a reassertion of male dominance. Men in these sequences return to their familiar position, standing over women, exposing them, offering them a choice between absolution achieved through marriage or death. The scene in which Packer pokes the naked thighs of the accused witches is, according to stage directions, not meant as torture, but as a form of humiliation and psychological manipulation, one that establishes physically and symbolically who wields the power, or, in this case, the pin. Female sexuality both historically and within the play is often associated with the devil as it reverses traditional gendered hierarchies to a certain degree. In order to avoid such an upheaval, women were, and, to some extent, still are, relegated to certain inescapable roles, always by association with men. Sexuality therefore becomes inexorably linked to a woman’s designated role in a given society.

This emphasis on the body and its powers of determinism in the gendered hierarchy continues as Churchill uses the break between modern and historical to show her the desire of characters to escape from the pattern of objectification and sexualization. Through musical numbers, such as “Nobody Sings,” the audience becomes privy to a clandestine world of women and women’s issues. Pain, sex, emotions, hormones, aging—topics that remain unspoken to men permeate interactions between communities of women:

\begin{quote}
I woke up in the morning, blood was on the sheet
\end{quote}
I looked at all the women when I passed them in the street…

Nobody sings about it but it happens all the time…

Nobody ever saw me, she whispered in a rage.

They were blinded by my beauty, now they’re blinded by my age…

Oh nobody sings about it, but it happens all the time. (Plays: One 141-142)

Musings on the mystery and taboo of the bodily female experience resonate throughout Vinegar Tom, perhaps revealing the influence of collaboration with the Monstrous Regiment—especially considering the feminist theater collective was fond of using group exercises to muse on female sexuality, among other things, a sort of literary look-at-your-vagina-in-a-mirror-on-a-yoga-mat—as well as Churchill’s own preoccupations with similar movements within the feminist second wave (Aston & Diamond 23-24). The sentiments expressed in “Oh Doctor” align male medical knowledge with resulting female fear, but also with a growing resentment from the women subjected to poking and prodding, analysis and diagnosis on a one-way, guys-only street. “Stop looking at me with your metal eye,” “Give me back my body,” “Why are you putting my brain in my cunt?” (Plays: One 150) were demands made, questions asked within and without of the context of Churchill’s drama. The concept of the male gaze—the objectification of the female with the male as an active participant and the woman as a passive outlet—was already a well-established problem in theater, begging the question, “the problem for the woman-as-viewer, the female spectator…how can she ‘look’ when the economy of the gaze is male?” (Feminist Theatre Practice 42-43). Churchill and other female writers of her time attempted to escape the phenomenon of the male gaze through the collective; groups such as Beryl and the Perils and the Cunning Stunts arose during the seventies as a means of empowering female writers and writing parts for actresses that might otherwise have been difficult to find. The community of women in
Vinegar Tom, although it ultimately takes a grim turn, initially reflects the shadow of feminist optimism in Churchill, a Churchill that suggests female symbiosis as the key to feminist success. Mohammad Zadeh examines the sudden transition from friend to foe between Alice and Susan in particular, noting that their initial friendship is corrupted by the man-made narrative of wife and whore (314). Furthering this observation, the generational attachments between Ellen as a potential mentor to Alice and Betty (she offers to impart knowledge of herbal medicine to each) are similarly weakened by the construction of the “witch” as a male method to discredit and destroy autonomous females, and broken entirely through the girl-on-girl finger pointing that ensues. Ultimately, it is the distance created by men but maintained by women that Churchill wants her audience to accept—she tells us that the male gaze plants the seed of destruction that antagonistic female relationships reap. While the initial warm-and-fuzzies in Vinegar Tom fizzle quickly, Churchill sets up a forward-looking expectation of the transformative power of female community which will be granted permission to evolve further in her next feminist production, Cloud Nine.

In the context of Vinegar Tom, we see the gradual erosion of the traditional, male-versus-female opposition. Increasingly, it is groups of women who throw each other under the bus, who point the proverbial finger, and who cry witch. This grim, cannibalistic turn mirrors trends within the evolving feminist movement, and will become a recurring theme in later works, particularly Top Girls. Just as the accused witches burn each other—and, subsequently, themselves—Churchill shows us an inside view of the girl-eat-girl business world of the 1980s to be explored in Top Girls, and the effects of a political system headed by a Prime Minister who may be a woman, but who is decidedly not “a sister.” Vinegar Tom represents Churchill’s first foray into overtly feminist drama, and as such, it serves as a preliminary push into the collective psyche of
an audience, asking questions that will be explored in greater depth in works to come. Although many queries lie just beneath the narrative of witches and snitches, Churchill above all seems to be asking: as women move into new sectors of society previously barred to them, are gender perceptions redefined, expanded, or do they remain static and hamper progress? This, along with a more hopeful look at female communities and the identity-constructing powers of masturbation, will be examined in detail in the pages of Cloud Nine.
ABOUT

This piece was a meditation on taxidermy and curiosity cabinets, which connects quite nicely with the Victorian sexual repression as seen in *Cloud Nine*. In the first act, female characters (amongst other minorities) are relegated to the role of decoration—they exist behind a plane of glass, a nice accent piece for your living room but no more. The second act allows characters such as Betty to move from collector's item to self-realization through sex and masturbation.
IV. *Cloud Nine*: Deconstructing Gender Performance through Transgressive Community

While the feminist movement raged on in the background, an equally powerful turning of the tides was about to occur in the world of British theater. 1968 heralded the fall of the Lord Chamberlin and a definitive end to the official state censorship of theatrical performances that had for years prevented images or themes of sex, general profanity, violence, and most notably homosexuality on stage (Megson 32). In one fell swoop, a rigid and long-standing code had been eradicated, and the theatre community reacted as you might expect—namely, with sex, more sex, and, eventually, gay sex (Gardner). Although *Cloud Nine*, easily one of Churchill’s most recognizable and most frequently staged plays, reared its head long after the Lord Chamberlin’s timely demise, it is important to recognize that not only did the rejection of visual and thematic restrictions brought about by the eradication of official censure allow the play to exist, but they also profoundly dictated its content. While other playwrights responded to the removal of restrictions by immediately flipping a giant middle finger and depicting what had in the past been rendered completely invisible, *Cloud Nine* belongs to a gentler, second-generation category of plays which benefitted from 1968’s mini-revolution but still hesitated to fully realize the kind of unbridled sex-and-violence-fest one might expect to emerge after such a long and intense period of creative repression. 1968’s fallout teased Churchill with a newfound ability to let it all hang out that still challenged the collective, prudish nature of an audience not yet ready to grasp at the precise implications of what a play could become in a post-Chamberlin world. If *Vinegar Tom* tested the waters of experimental theater after the Lord Chamberlin’s disappearance, *Cloud Nine* rode on its coat tails and effectively lobbed a boulder into the deep end.

Churchill’s choices of casting in particular indicate a simple need—not necessarily a mandate, but an informed decision—to make certain topics palatable for her still-blushing
audience, whose sexual hang-ups likely mirrored those of the Victorians on *Cloud Nine* ’s stage. While her employment of purposefully transparent cross-gender casting certainly has its rhetorical purposes, it also serves to prevent a chain reaction of proclamations approximate to: “The room’s startin’ to spin real fast...because of all the gayness” (McKay et al.). *Cloud Nine* delivers shock-less shock value, a sort of watered-down vodka shot of schema interruption that reminds a red-faced audience that seeing an *implied* gay relationship between two opposite-sex actors unfold is more confusing than confrontational. This is a pattern Churchill adheres to throughout, seeking to de-mystify the previously taboo by exposing that which was once deviant in controlled doses within controlled environments. Blush-inducing topics are spectrally present—female masturbation is spoken of, its invisibility in society challenged through its stark, public description but maintained as it is heard, not seen. The public, but not too public, exposition of such acts highlights the transformation of Churchill’s female characters, an objectified (literally) daughter and a sexually repressed mother whose eventual sexual experiments allow the dissolution of the heteronormative masks they are initially forced to wear. This pattern of nothing shown, everything suggested continues throughout the piece—as Churchill decodes the sexual hang-ups of the theater, careful not to spook her audience, she also points to parallel hang-ups coming under feminist scrutiny. The transformation of woman into sex object, the privatization of female sex and sexuality, the perverse connotations of feminine hygiene and health are referenced and challenged as the women on stage and the actors who portray them grapple with similar issues, navigating their journey to self-realization with sexual discovery of the id.

Originally staged in 1979, *Cloud Nine* shows the cracks on the happy mask of the patriarchal, nuclear family and the ineffectual nature of its imposed repression of considered,
“base” desires. Churchill demonstrates both the relative progress and failings of second wave feminism through the stark contrast between acts, a Brechtian modern-historic juxtaposition accomplished through the use of cross-cast actors and the manipulation of two drastically different settings and time periods. The sequestered African homestead of Clive, an English colonial administrator and living embodiment of Victorian patriarchy, plays host to a myriad of closeted sexualities and hidden affairs that conflict with the repressive, imperial control its lord and master claims to exercise. Drawing attention not merely to Clive’s failings as a patriarch and colonial power but also to the more general failings of age-old sexual conventions to curb human desire or sexuality, Churchill casts certain marginalized characters with opposite gender actors. A male actor portrays Betty, Clive’s mulling wife. Similarly, Edward, Betty and Clive’s son—constantly impressed upon to embody the trademarks of masculinity he fails hopelessly to enact—is portrayed by a female actor. Victoria, Betty and Clive’s daughter, is so unimportant as to be rendered inanimate, represented by a doll. Joshua, the native servant, is played by a white man. Although in variations of the script this technique has been perceived as a farcical, even comic device, Janelle Reinelt examines the rhetorical significance of even the small gendered mannerisms thrown into question by Churchill’s radical casting decisions: “The impact of cross-casting reverberates throughout the play. Even simple actions become powerful social gestures. When Betty rearranges the folds of his/her skirt, the manner of arranging is clearly a learned gestural nuisance. Its very awkwardness draws attention to the arbitrariness of feminine social grace” (*Elaborating Brecht* 50).

Churchill continues to makes her more symbolic intentions clear within the play’s opening musical number, as all the characters subjected to this reversal reveal their simultaneous desire and inability to conform to what is expected of them. Betty admits, “And what men want
is what I want to be”; Edward confesses, “What father wants I’d dearly like to be”; and Joshua declares, “What white men want is what I want to be” (*Plays: One* 251-252). Churchill shows us the results of repression, subtly poking fun at those hoping to enforce it. While Clive busily chases after the independent widow, Mrs. Saunders, his devoted wife lusts after family friend Harry Bagley, accomplished explorer, interracial homosexual, and pedophile. Harry proves interested in exploring more than jungles as he expands on his secret, half-hearted dealings with Betty, casually solicits sex from Joshua and, later, from young Edward, who happily reciprocates. Ellen, Edward and Victoria’s governess, struggles with repressed sexual identity, becoming almost an afterthought as she attempts to express her love for Betty unsuccessfully. The audience is made to recognize the disparity between Act I’s two homosexual characters—while Harry’s homosexual transgressions must be quashed by marriage, Ellen’s are not even acknowledged. So does Churchill craft a sex-filled and sexually repressed whirl of a first act with enough cross-casting to confuse even the bravest of theater-goers, but, again, this is not a play designed to entertain. As if to throw that fact in the faces of her audience, Churchill presses on by introducing another radical theatrical device—a historical alienation tactic taken to the extreme as it directly juxtaposes the modern and the historic.

Act II of *Cloud Nine* moves somewhat miraculously into the contemporary era of sexual revolutions. While the first act takes place in British colonial Africa during the height of imperialism, the second act follows the same characters, aged twenty five years, but living in contemporary London of 1979. Following a similar pattern to *Vinegar Tom*, but with more obviously direct contrast between modern and historic, Churchill juxtaposes the inherent sexism of the Victorian age against the comparative liberation afforded by the fallout of second-wave feminism. In the amount of time it takes to do the time warp, the audience is treated to a rapid
dose of character development which invites comparison between contemporary and past, all the while keeping a critical eye on the future. Within the context of the 1970s, the caricatured figures of Act I come into their own; all previously cross-dressed characters are now played by correctly gendered—and, in the case of Victoria, human—actors. Through the assignment of appropriately-gendered actors to her characters, Churchill comments on the autonomy the modern age allows previously marginalized figures. She examines the female members of the cast in minutiae, depicting their experiences with transgressive sexual practice as a means of self-liberation. Victoria, no longer a doll, comes to life in the second half of the play, abandoning her lukewarm marriage to bandwagon feminist, Martin, in favor of an experimental lesbian relationship with militant feminist, Lin. Edward becomes as open about his sexuality as the seventies allow him to be—almost but not quite. His relationship with Gerry puts gender roles under the microscope, examining what it means to be feminine, to be masculine, and what the consented, even desired assumption of stereotypes means. Betty is perhaps the most dramatically altered character, her 1970s self being liberated enough to divorce Clive—who is mentioned, but seen only once, fleetingly, as a ghosted version of himself in Act II—and, later, to describe an act of masturbation which borders on the cosmic. Churchill adds yet another layer of character play by recycling the same seven actors in the second act but assigning them to different roles. She leaves the reassignment of roles up to interpretation and directorial choices, allowing for several variant and meaningful redeployments of Act I’s versions. In the original production for instance, the actor who played Clive became the only remaining gender anomaly in the second act, Lin’s young daughter Cathy. The strong Victorian male figure thus becomes a bad joke, a poorly disguised man in skirts and pigtails spouting nonsense like, “Yum yum bubblegum. Stick it up your mother’s bum” (Plays: One 289). Act II becomes a sort of mirror image of the first,
with minor cracks that still need adjusting in Churchill’s eye. The confused and dysfunctional nuclear family, a slave to convention as depicted in Act I is replaced by a piecemeal, patchwork version in the modern age—Victoria and Lin become the matriarchs, Edward willingly assumes a more traditionally feminine role as caretaker and child-minder, and Martin nearly disappears along with the rest of the heterosexual males. The only gender anomaly which remains is the tomboyish Cathy, daughter of militant feminist and lesbian Lin, who attempts to control her daughter’s gendered mannerisms in a similar dynamic to the repressive force of Clive on his “feminine” son. Cathy’s cross-gender casting remains an obvious eyesore indicative of progress needed and not made, revealing perhaps the negative repercussions of militant feminism turned sour, or perhaps that gender stereotypes persist in the modern age, no matter how progressive we consider ourselves to be.

As a product of epic theater’s influence, Cloud Nine relies heavily on contrasts, both between the contemporary and antiquated setting and between the embryotic and evolving stages of its characters. Ruby Cohn in her analysis of Modern socialist theater describes the first act as “dominated by men,” reinforcing the pre-assigned roles of female and native informant (466). Adhering to this interpretation, in order to show us the progressive nature of the modern age and her character’s paralleled progression, Churchill must first establish the Victorian imperialism of the first act as a comparative dark age. As Brecht remarked on his ability to recreate the modern world on stage, “I have (before me) all the possibilities but I cannot say that the dramaturgical ideas which I…call non-Aristotelian, and the epic manner of acting they entail, represent the one and only solution. However, one thing has become clear: the modern world can be described to modern men only when it is described as an alternate world” (qtd. in Politzer 99). Churchill establishes the sense of other with a hint of familiarity, taking us to another time and continent
during an imperial age heavily focused on that which is “other,” while still insinuating connections between its gender structure and our own modern version. In Act I, Clive—acting as a manifestation of both imperialism and traditional patriarchal dominance—dictates the performed identities of all those within his familial circle, wielding perhaps his most profound influence on Betty. Not only does he literally control the action on stage, calling and dismissing other characters as they make their entrances and exits, he becomes the focal point by which every other character must define themselves. The opening song—also a Brechtian device which draws attention to the theatricality of the piece—is a musical exposition for the assembled characters, perfectly capturing the dysfunctional brilliance of Churchill’s happy family as all the gender-warped players sum up their failure to align with Clive’s male expectations:

CLIVE: My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be,

And everything she is she owes to me

BETTY: I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life

Is to be what he looks for in a wife.

I am a man’s creation as you see,

And what men want is what I want to be. (Plays: One 251)

This passage marks the beginning and the end of Victorian male dominance as described by Cohn. The combination of Clive’s self-congratulation mixed with the obvious failure of Betty to be “everything a wife should be” points to a slipping of the total control wielded by the stereotypical male of the Victorian age. His assurance of his position as master and commander of this small, sexually repressed universe is belied by the simple fact that although Clive may control the action and effectively repress the sexual identities of his household, the comic effect of reverse-casting as seen in Betty, Edward, and Joshua insinuates that although his dominance
may be complete, it is far from effective. His wife, everything that he dreamt a wife should be, is a man. His son, whom Clive is teaching to grow up to be a man, is a woman. The numerous affairs and romantic intrigues which occur beneath Clive’s nose without his knowledge reinforce this idea of waning patriarchal capital, the decline of the male as the head of the nuclear family, or perhaps the decline of the traditional family itself. “Elsewhere in the empire the sun is rising” (Plays: One 256), Clive muses in the first scene, drawing a comparison between the decline of imperialism and the decline of the gender hierarchy the Victorian enclave brings to a contemporary audience’s mind. Clive’s declaration suggests that the little slice of English civilization he and his family exist in, one founded on absolute male dominance, is a rapidly fading relic of a bygone age, to be swiftly overshadowed by the increased sexual liberties of the 1970s as present in Act II. In this fashion Clive’s microcosmic community of surface-level obedience is a depiction of 1879 made to evoke the changes and challenges of a transgressive 1979.

Although the inter-act time jump is the most obvious device at play indicative of feminist progress in the modern age, Churchill subtly re-emphasizes the contrast between Victorian colony and contemporary London through her manipulation of public and private space. While the colony of act one by way of its physical removal from traditional Western society allows some characters the agency to experiment with their “deviant” desires, the social hierarchy of Churchill’s constructed, Victorian oasis remains under Clive’s strict, if somewhat oblivious dominion. Harry’s homosexual encounters, for instance, are more easily expressed and concealed as a result of the transient lifestyle and perceived masculinity of explorer and adventurer in a colonial context. However, when he unwittingly reveals his predilections, Harry reintegrates himself into Clive’s heteronormative fold—he immediately concurs that his homosexual
tendencies are repulsive and is quickly married off to the resigned, lesbian governess under Clive’s direction. Again, the first act cements Clive as the point of departure and reference for all other characters and makes of him a symbol of England at its imperial, mercantilist zenith; the household and its denizens are his territory, expected to adhere to the patronizing rapport between husband and wife, father and son, colonizer and colonized.

As a counterpoint to the private, domestic, and male-centric setting in the first act, Churchill uses public spaces such as trains and parks as a method of normalizing the sexual experimentation that occurs within their borders, offering a tangible measurement of comparative progress between the acts and demonstrating the historical-to-modern break from complete male dominance. Gone is Clive’s carefully maintained Victorian tide pool. In its place, Churchill gives us a venue for experimentation and self-examination in which previously indecent acts become decent—or at least decent topics of conversation, skeletons in the closet aired out in the second act, they are normalized through their shared context and unrestricted display. The park, in this sense, becomes a kiddie pool in which to test the waters with acts that had previously required suppression.

Within the context of the liberating second act, Betty no longer needs to project her sexual fantasies onto Harry when they cannot be satisfied by her one-sided relationship with Clive. Act II’s contemporary setting allows her to realize the failings of her marriage, but her seemingly casual mention of divorce from Clive is molded into something defiant as she announces it in the public space of the park. By having characters such as Betty make such public, dramatic transitions from sophomoric affairs conducted in the brush to the casual announcement of divorce, Churchill offers her characters the benefit of the contemporary and communal setting which allows for and subsequently normalizes sexual experimentation.
Churchill’s Victorian pupae thus burst from behind the glass of their curiosity cabinets, transformed from anomalies laboring in obscurity to individuals emboldened by communal experimentation and en route to self-realization. Their transformation from objects of farce to self-actualized, identifiable humans creates in the audience a distancing effect from what is occurring on stage that allows for contemplation, for connection to the real and the real-life that epic theater often invites. Elizabeth Russell describes this as, “…psychological ‘distance’ between actors and audience in the first half of the play (the audience observes but does not feel involved in the events) which turns into serious subjectivity in the second half; one is being asked to look into oneself and question deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles and draw political conclusions from them” (155). The reaffirmation of sexual and self investigation that occurs through the use of a public setting ultimately invites Churchill’s audience to draw comparison to the paralleled decoding of sex and sexuality—particularly female sexuality—occurring off-stage.

Churchill uses her plays as living devices to examine and critique trends within the modern feminist movement. Again, references to the Women’s Health Movement can clearly be seen, specifically in the concern for female orgasm and sexual enjoyment over the male. A number of characters express their opinions in this area within Cloud Nine, from Mrs. Saunders, who denies a marriage proposal from Harry, saying, “Mr. Bagley, I could never be a wife again. There is only one thing about marriage that I like” (Plays: One 284) to Martin, the hapless husband of Victoria, who expresses simultaneously his bandwagon support of feminism while chiding his wife for not appreciating his sexual prowess:

I’m not like whatever percentage of American men have become impotent as a direct result of women’s liberation, which I am totally in favor of, more sometimes I think than you are yourself. Nor am I one of your villains who sticks
it in, bangs away, and falls asleep. My one aim is to give you pleasure. My one aim is to give you rolling orgasms like I do other women. So why the hell don’t you have them? (*Plays: One* 300-301)

In this particular sequence Martin becomes the shadow of a diminished Clive still living and breathing in the modern age. Although his control over his wife is far less effective or complete than that of his Victorian counterpart, Martin represents a sexually egocentric figure playing a role similar to the one explored in the dynamic between Mrs. Saunders and Clive in Act I, even considering his claims of feminist support and desiring to give his wife sexual pleasure. Although the latter might be true, by confronting and accusing Victoria as to why she exists in a realm apart from, “other women” and, in a sense, blaming her for her apparent lack of sexual gratification, Martin shows the shadow of the repressively patriarchal social structure present in 1879 still kicking one hundred years later. He paints his wife as deviant and other, abnormal in some unnamed sense to be corrected internally and without his knowledge. Abdol Hossein Joodaki and Pareia Bahkshi link Martin and Clive’s categorization of female sexuality as unnaturally “other” (*à la* *Vinegar Tom’s* societally transgressive witches) with theories of gender performativity and phallogocentrism as defined by Judith Butler (*Gendered Stylization* 99).

Under this rhetorical lens, the cross-cast characters in the first act then become manifestations of gender performative tropes—reifying compulsory heterosexuality by, “…portraying a wide spectrum of gender identities, including gay and lesbian identities, Churchill emphasizes the possibility of the emergence of gender identities who do not match the historically settled and cherished gender categories in the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and troubles and denaturalizes, ‘the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality’” (*Collapse of Heterosexism* 129). In this sense the gendered performance of the
characters on stage is as false and caricatured as the relationship between the actor and the character they portray. Betty and Victoria’s shift from cross-cast male actor and inanimate doll to faithful, aptly-gendered interpretations in the second act offers a hint at societal regression even in the midst of Churchill’s most optimistic feminist play. As Diamond puts it, Churchill demonstrates through her cross-casting that, “…gender and servitude are culturally coded effects of language and behavior” (194). The ability of her characters to evolve out of their pre-assigned shells under the contemporary influence of the second act reinforces Diamond, Joodaki, and Bahkshi’s understanding of the piece as a commentary on patriarchally constructed facades. Betty’s ability to evolve out of her cross-cast self, Victoria’s transformation from doll to experimental lesbian—Churchill corrects the installed identities of her characters, progressively turning away from male involvement as she absents the masculine and domineering forces of Clive and Martin almost completely from the play’s second half, moving instead to focus a character transitioning from the depths of Victorian oppression to an existence and sexual maturation completely devoid of repressive male input.

Having already established the cultural trend of female objectification, of rendering the female form into a nearly mechanical outlet intended to evoke male pleasure, with Alice’s sexual rebellion within the confines of Vinegar Tom, Churchill moves one step forward in Cloud Nine by subtly implying a connection between objectification and the narrative of one-sided sex with the emphasis on male pleasure. As the feminist movement attempted to change the narrative of heterosexual intercourse, shifting the focus to female satisfaction rather than a vision of woman as a receptacle for male release, Churchill’s characters come into their own in a similarly rebellious fashion, challenging the remnants of Victorian patriarchy as they do so. Whether they participate in public four ways or experiment with long-repressed carnal urges, Churchill’s
accurately gendered cast stands in contrast to the cross-dressed farce of the first act as they transgress and transform in equal measure. Surprisingly, Betty breaks from her cross-dressed Victorian iteration of the self and proves to be the most dynamic example of feminist critique on sexual revolutions present in *Cloud Nine*. Her monologue on her experimentation with masturbation, something she had previously perceived as deviant based on her experience in childhood and her perception of Clive as the intended recipient of sexual pleasure, is climactic in more ways than one, a transformative experience that leads to self-realization that, “…there is somebody there” (*Plays: One* 316).

Though her sexual experiment is discussed relatively late in the play, it represents an act both transgressive in its egocentrism and in its outright defiance of Clive, Maud, and the sexual repression they symbolize. Betty’s masturbatory act in modern times doubly challenges the patriarchal status quo as it admits to the natural existence of and need to fulfill female desire while simultaneously introducing an example of a sexual act completely divorced from the male. By masturbating, Betty exempts herself from the code of Victorian vanilla sex instilled by her first masturbatory experience as a child, during which Maud pulls her out from under the table, and Betty bumps her head, becoming “sick” and associating the act with pain (*Plays: One* 316). In her second attempt set purposefully within the confines of the transformative second act, Betty becomes the sole participant in a female-centric orgasm—she both demands and provides the sexual release in this arrangement, completely reversing the narrative of her previous sexual experiences which were universally centered on Clive. In this sense the act of masturbation becomes synonymous with one of protest. Betty challenges her mother’s perceptions of masturbation as deviant and to throw a symbolic middle finger at the ghost of Clive from Act I:
It felt very sweet, it was a feeling from very long ago, it was very soft, just barely touching, and I felt myself gathering together more and more and I felt angry with Clive and angry with my mother and I went on and on defying them, and there was this vast feeling growing in me and all round me and they couldn’t stop me and no one could stop me and I was there and coming and coming. Afterwards I thought I’d betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them. (Plays: One 316)

Betty’s transformative masturbatory experience also challenges the Victorian sexual conventions held by members of Joint Stock’s theater collective and perhaps by Churchill herself. The Women’s Health Movement which influenced the associated writing workshops of both Vinegar Tom and Cloud Nine certainly had a thing or two to say about the subject. Our Bodies, Ourselves examines masturbation as reclamation of sexual autonomy divorced from male involvement. Nearly all the testimonies included in the section devoted to female masturbatory habits express a feeling of autonomous power linked to self-discovery: “I never even knew about masturbation. When I was 21, a man touched me ‘down there’ bringing me to orgasm. (I didn’t know the word either). Then I had a brilliant thought—if he could do it to me, I could do it to me too. So I did…” (Our Bodies, Ourselves 197). Compare this testimony to Betty’s own realization during her masturbatory self-exploration: “I thought if Clive wasn’t looking at me there wasn’t a person there…I thought my hand might go through into space…my hand went down where I thought it shouldn’t and I thought well there is somebody there” (Plays: One 316). Betty in this sense becomes more than a character moved mystically from Victorian repression to sexual liberation. Her experience with masturbation in particular reveals a woman matured—if not fully self-realized then at least on the road to becoming so—but also a character representative of the
communal female struggle to overcome long-held sexual conventions and taboos reminiscent of the patriarchal stranglehold Clive exerted over his wife in the first act.

Churchill connects these sexual opinions and practices perceptually outside the status quo back to the progression of the feminist movement in the seventies, particularly as it pertains to the relationship between females and sexual fulfillment. More and more women began to feel entrapped by the Victorian prudishness which traditionally surrounded sex in Britain, and, more specifically, questioned the unspoken moratorium that had somehow been placed on female desire and pleasure. Even as early as the 1950s studies indicated that women in Britain as well as the United States were more sexually deviant than they would like to admit. While most of these figures focused rather unsurprisingly on male statistics, studies such as Alfred Kinsey’s 1948 and 1953 investigations on male and female sex behaviors revealed that three fifths of women surveyed had masturbated, and over ninety percent had engaged in petting (D’Emilio & Freedman 285-286). More contemporary studies revealed that women’s sexual behavior was becoming more frequent and occurring at an earlier age. Masturbation, particularly in young women, was happening more and with increasing frequency. In general, discourse on women and sex began to become increasingly focused on feminine pleasure, a facet of intercourse which had been heretofore repressed or even ignored. In addition to the rise of masturbation in women, cunnilingus came into vogue during the seventies, becoming a relatively common experience for young college-aged women. This marked a drastic cultural departure from the closeted, sex-hungry ladies of Kinsey’s day (D’Emilio & Freedman 335). Churchill directly references such changing and changed sex trends as Clive performs cunnilingus on Mrs. Saunders, showing us an example of sexual practice deemed “deviant” still occurring under the Victorian umbrella of 1879. The transgressive fact that this act is, in fact, occurring, is diminished as it takes on a
decidedly one-sided tone, Clive forcing himself on an initially unwilling woman only to very quickly get his jollies and get out, oblivious, unconcerned, or both as to whether his partner gleaned any satisfaction from a sex act meant to incite female pleasure:

CLIVE: The Christmas picnic. I came.

MRS SAUNDERS: I didn’t.

CLIVE: I’m all sticky.

MRS SAUNDERS: What about me? Wait.

CLIVE: All right are you? Come on. We mustn’t be found.

MRS SAUNDERS: Don’t go now.

CLIVE: Caroline, you are so voracious. Do let go. Tidy yourself up. There’s a hair in my mouth. (Plays: One 264)

Clive uses Mrs. Saunders very clearly as a means to an end, an object meant to give him pleasure and nothing more. Although the act occurs in a public space it is rushed and hurried, its participants must rush to completion to avoid being discovered, and button themselves up again afterward to similar effect. Clive, the initiator and intendant of the resulting pleasure, remains hidden beneath Mrs. Saunders’s skirt the entire time, giving the audience the feeling that even though he may be on his knees, he remains in the dominant position so familiar to him. The fact that their encounter occurs in secret and initiated by and for Clive maintains the trend of disregarding, or even demonizing female desire, something Clive repeatedly labels as dangerous and unknown: “…this dark female lust” (Plays: One 277) or, alternately, “dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous” (Plays: One 263). The inherent societal taboos on female
sexuality are questioned within the context of *Cloud Nine* and in the context of the paralleled feminist movement as a whole.

The increased preoccupation with female orgasm can be linked to the rejection of female objectification that had gradually come to the forefront of the feminist movement during the late seventies:

This new generation of feminists…saw control of their bodies as a key piece in their quest for liberation. Despite the negative sexual epithets that were often thrown at them—frigid, castrating, dyke, frustrated, or, simply ugly—women’s liberation was not, ‘antisexual.’ Rather, the movement was attacking the sexual objectification of women, the reduction of women by media and by men to little more than their sex appeal or their reproductive organs. (D’Emilio and Freedman 313)

One of the products of this rejection of female sexual objectification came in the form of a previously unheard-of end all manual on the topics of sex, relationships, and general well-being written by women, for women. The Boston Women’s Health Collective published the initial edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, in 1970. The modern manual is now something of a monster, an eight hundred-odd page text that has expanded exponentially from its original, more humble newsprint incarnation, purchasable for seventy-five cents (Aston & Diamond 22). *Our Bodies* was born out of a frustration with the invisibility of issues like female health and sexual well-being in a male-dominated medical space. The guide became the Bible of the Women’s Health Movement—moving beyond labeled diagrams and clinical description of sex, it delves into various topics concerning women. Reinforcing the importance of female communities by
including italicized testimonies from real-life women, *Our Bodies* becomes a record of shared, collective female experience. Women’s health collectives sprung up in droves during the mid-seventies in the United States and Britain, focusing on the creation of a well of accessible, communal knowledge gleaned through lived experience and rejecting medical knowledge compiled, delivered, and controlled overwhelmingly by men. *Cloud Nine* reflects the intentions of such collectives in its transition from a male-controlled world in Act I—which leaves the minorities beneath its sway trapped in ineffectual disguises—and the female collective in Act II, which in part drives the development of characters such as Victoria and Betty.

Betty’s development as a character is profoundly reliant on sexual maturation, but is also made evident through her interactions with other previously marginalized characters. Although much of the critical material on *Cloud Nine* is stretched by the sheer number of issues at play—gender, sexuality, race, class—the use of contrast in order to send a message of transformation, both societal and specifically referent to a character, is oft repeated in reference to Betty and her dealing with other characters-in-transition. Helene Keyssar analyzes Betty as Churchill’s main mode of conveyance of the evolution universally experienced by the cast of characters in Act II. Betty is the locus of Churchill’s critique and dissemination of heteronormative, performative gender masks as presented in Act I: “Mediated by Betty and her relations to others, *Cloud Nine* dramatizes the transformation of a woman from object to subject” (465). The contrast between Victorian Betty and her 1970s self is remarkable but still believable given the epic time jump, and furthers Keyssar’s claims by demonstrating Betty’s recognition of her previous sexual repression, a historical awareness not unlike that of Alice in *Vinegar Tom*. Churchill outlines Betty’s character dynamism through subtle clues in dialogue. Recognizing that her son’s relationship with Gerry is a sexual one might seem like a hand-to-the-head, *duh* moment from a
more contemporary perspective, but again, the key is contrast. While Ellen’s fairly obvious attempts to express her lesbian feelings for Betty were entirely dismissed in Act I, “It’s the loneliness here and the climate is very confusing” (Plays: One 281), Betty of 1979 has the awareness and willingness to accept her son’s predilections, the same predilections which she actively tried to curb in Victorian times: “I think Edward did try to tell me once but I didn’t listen. So what I’m being told now is that Edward is, ‘gay’ is that right? …Well people always say it’s the mother’s fault but I don’t intend to start blaming myself. He seems perfectly happy” (Plays: One 319-320). Betty’s announcement of divorce from Clive early on in the second act remains the most obvious of hints dropped at her evolutionary maturity—we are given the impression that the concept of divorce—or of an unalienable right to be unhappy in one’s marriage and actually do something about it—would be a concept both foreign and unthinkable to the Betty seen in Act I.

The second act in general affords Betty a dose of reality as a character, whether it is through the admitted failings of her marriage and her resulting resentment of her husband, or in her recognition of her mistakes as a mother. Betty’s children are an afterthought in the first act, more often tended to by her mother, Maud, or by the governess. Her role as a daughter being constantly corrected and advised by Maud reflects in Betty’s own parenting, as she ineptly attempts to control Edward through slaps and half-hearted appellations to “be a man like your Papa” (Plays: One 275). Her parenting style mirrors her character’s default referencing of Clive in all things—when Edward refuses to relinquish Victoria’s doll, Betty slaps him and bursts into tears, and Clive must step in as the indulgent patriarch to smooth over the incident, a rapid return to his preferred state of Victorian veneer. Act II introduces a Betty who recognizes and confronts her maternal demons, both as a daughter and as a mother herself. Michael Swanson’s take on
Betty as a mother in the second act connects the strained mother/daughter relationship of Maud and Betty to the initial rift between Betty and Victoria. Swanson goes on to examine the altered, ameliorated rapport between Betty and Victoria made possible by Betty’s divorce from Clive and the mothering techniques fostered by her association with him. The “male dominance which has taught her to be an oppressive mother” as reinforced by her husband and her domineering, pontificating mother is abandoned in favor of a certain mutuality Swanson describes (Swanson 51); it is Betty’s dissociation from her previous identity as a mother and her attempt to construct a new one which drives her interactions with her children as Act II progresses. She admits to her anger at her mother, but more importantly to a desire to avoid repetition of this dynamic with her own children, particularly Victoria. When Betty asks to move in with Lin, Victoria, and Edward, she expresses a desire to relive her experience as mother and caretaker with a more positive outcome:

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

    VICTORIA But she thinks of herself as my mother.

    BETTY I am your mother.

    VICTORIA But Mummy we don’t even like each other.

    BETTY We might begin to. (Plays: One 317)

Betty expresses here a desire to become accessible, likeable to her children and open to their curious, collective lifestyle choices in a way her own mother and her first act self never would have. Lin’s comment, the suggestion to cast off the label of “mother” reads as a message which belies the idea of motherhood and female identity being inexorably linked, or even related. Betty
is herself but she is also a mother, and must reconcile these two identities into one cohesive whole, something she failed to do as a cross-dressed version of herself in Act I. The last image of the play is one of Betty from Act I and Betty from Act II embracing each other on stage, an image that can be interpreted as a reference to her increasing self-acceptance and exploration by the end of the second act—she literally embraces the version of herself that attempted so unsuccessfully to enact a narrative of femininity designed by men, for men, and dually embraces her present self liberated through the allowances of the era and through her own decoding of personal sexuality.

Critics often dwell on the Betty/Betty embrace and its indication of good things to come. There is progress to be made, but manageable progress, steps we are aware of and that will reasonably be taken. This cultural self-awareness derived from the play’s optimistic end stems from the Brechtian modern/historic comparison Churchill’s plays so readily adhere to. By using what has been dubbed by Amelia Kritzer as a “before-during-after” (*Theatricality and Empowerment* 128) approach to depictions of the past and present, Churchill opens up room for possibilities. Rather than merely recreating a historical period, she glamorizes and demonizes elements of it, exaggerating and downplaying to her own ends and leaving her audience with a sense of possibility rather than the vague sense of having learned how something *was*—the feeling of walking away from museum text after the obligatory ten seconds have passed. As open ended as the play is, the positivity expressed in the end of *Cloud Nine* quickly gives way to something sour. The dream of lesbian lovers, gay brothers, and liberated mothers living in a flat together and singing Kumbaya is thoroughly erased by the time *Top Girls* rears its ugly head. As tentatively optimistic as *Cloud Nine* may be, it reveals multiple red flags which hint at the disintegration of female community— the Marxist socialist critique identified by Michelene
Wandor juxtaposes the ideas of intellectual Victoria and coarse, low-class Lin revealing the impending importance of social and economic standing as a deconstructing force of such communities (91). The final musical number, “Cloud Nine,” deployed as yet another Brechtian alienation technique, similarly questions the direction of burgeoning communities of women established within the second act, poking fun at the piecemeal family Victoria and Lin have created and wondering dubiously at its success:

The bride was sixty-five, the groom was seventeen

They fucked in the back of the black limousine…

The wife’s lover’s children and my lover’s wife

Cooking in my kitchen, confusing my life

And it’s upside down when you reach Cloud Nine

Upside down when you reach Cloud Nine. (Plays: One 312)

The disintegration that had been hinted at in 1979 blows up in the faces of feminists by the eighties in a play which takes an overwhelmingly negative stance on the women’s interactions and female communities that had seemed so tentatively optimistic in Cloud Nine. The class differences as seen through relative intellectualism between Lin and Victoria may have been perceptible, but will seem piddling next to the decades-long classist resentment between sisters Marlene and Joyce. The collectivity of Cloud Nine also disappears as Churchill makes a turn back to the girl-versus-girl aesthetic explored shallowly in Vinegar Tom and shows us a business world devoid of the tenets of sisterhood; a cannibalistic trend which parallels the political trends of the day, Churchill being none too fond of Thatcherism’s effect on everywoman.
ABOUT

Top Girls and, coincidentally, its accompanying art piece, is at its core an exploration of who is on top and who is on bottom in the world of women, with the answer being “no one” on both counts. Of course there is a binary role which appears to come out ahead, the upper class professional girl, championed by Margaret Thatcher throwing up a peace sign. However, the so-called “bottom” girl (Joyce, in Top Girls) has only to remove her hands and “high flyers” like Marlene and her dinner companions will fall and fall hard. Getting ahead often means stepping on someone else, but in Churchill’s constructed realities, it does not often equal happiness.
V. *Top Girls*: We’ve All Got a Long Way to Go

The same year that *Top Girls*, what many consider to be Churchill’s magnum opus and certainly her most overt commentary on feminism, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, somewhere in a gilded dining room Margaret Thatcher, first female prime minister of the United Kingdom, sat at a banquet commemorating the end of the Falklands conflict. The year was 1982. As Thatcher rose from her chair, she suavely invited the all-male attendance of foreign dignitaries to join their spouses—who had only been asked to after-dinner drinks—waiting outside, saying, “Gentleman, shall we join the ladies?” (Moore 2). Like Thatcher adopting the moniker of a gentleman for an evening, Churchill’s characters in *Top Girls* often define themselves in masculine terms, attaching balls where none exist in a transition to a new breed of woman necessitated by the pervasive sexism of the business world. The play’s lead, Marlene, a top executive at Top Girls Employment Agency, is one of these ballsy ladies, and like Thatcher, straddles the line between perceived femininity and high executive power typically reserved for men. Marlene outwardly projects a respect for women and for female progress throughout history, but her political leanings and interactions with other women quickly dispel this image, making it clear that only “top girls,” like Thatcher, will receive her respect. Even the historical and fictional feminist icons of Marlene’s own dreams fall short of her expectations. The famed opening scene of the play, in which Marlene celebrates her recent promotion by playing host to an assemblage of historical female icons at yet another dinner party—an oneiric, femme fatale version of Thatcher’s—does little to cement the glimpses of constructive female community or the hopeful image of Betty embracing her ghosted self seen in the late seventies. Indeed, while the time jump of *Cloud Nine* allowed its marginalized female characters to explore their newly autonomous selves through sex, the women of *Top Girls* seem to revel in doing just the opposite. Although the party is billed as a communal celebration of top girls at the top of their
game, it becomes from an onlooker’s perspective something more closely akin to watching a tank-full of narcissistic sharks tear into a ribeye steak printed with the words, "LOOK AT ME AND MY ACCOMPLISHMENTS!" The business world Churchill presents her audience with may be entirely devoid of men, but it is no less competitive, no less cannibalistic for it. On the contrary, the lack of opportunity for women in the workplace seems to necessitate girl-versus-girl mentality and brutality.

On the guest list of what might be the world’s most passive-aggressive dinner party are various figures from different points in history, all women, all vaguely obsessed with themselves: Isabella Bird (1831-1904) was an English explorer and naturalist who traveled independently throughout many regions of the world; Lady Nijo (1258) was a Japanese courtesan to the emperor before eventually becoming a Buddhist nun and wandering throughout Japan; Dull Gret is the subject of a Brueghel painting, depicted as wearing an apron over her armor and leading a group of women into hell, battling devils as they go; Pope Joan is a figure, possibly mythical, said to have dressed as a man and been elected Pope between 854-855 before being debunked after giving birth during a public procession; and Patient Griseldla is a fictional character described by The Clerk in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales and is subjected to multiple tests of her wifely obedience, including having her children taken away and supposedly killed, in addition to planning her husband’s wedding to another woman. Churchill clearly intends to show us the empowered, female company Marlene categorizes herself in, and encourages her audience through the brief biographies of the party guests to anticipate a grand, feminist summit, the formation of the Fellowship of the NuvaRing still riding the high of female collectives as established between Betty, Victoria, and Lin in Cloud Nine. However, she quickly throws a brick through this theory as the assembled icons of feminist history dissolve into a series of near-
monologues almost entirely independent from what the others are saying, a constant stream of self-centered bragging punctuated by endless backslashes that mark the place where one character talks over another:

NIJO: Ah, you like poetry. I come from a line of eight generations of poets.

Father had a poem/in the anthology.

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

MARLENE: They didn’t have Latin at my school. (Top Girls 4)

This contradictory and competitive environment is established early on through the interplay between top girls historic and modern. Each of the assembled party guests outlines their personal histories without reference to the other; as they spout off their impressive curriculum vitae simultaneously, the audience is left with the impression of being talked at, not to. This cacophony introduces immediately the element of competition which becomes so prevalent later in the piece. Yes, the party was dreamed up by a drunken Marlene passed out on her couch as a celebration of her accomplishments, but in the face of female success as evident in another woman, the feminist icons of the past must reaffirm their own importance or be forgotten entirely. Churchill does not endorse this brand of passive aggressive female competition however, allowing for poignant moments in between the jumbled monologues which expose the various hardships each woman endured to attain her status of relative agency in her individual, historical context. Nijo, for example, became an Emperor’s courtesan through a manipulation of her physical appeal, swapping humble pastoral beginnings for a position of power—the feudal Japanese equivalent of Marlene’s executive power. However, in making this exchange, she suffers what would be defined in modern terms as rape—her life as a courtesan also necessitated
that she give up her children and conduct love affairs in secret. Joan faced similar barriers to achieving her position of masculine power and was forced to completely obscure all traces of her femininity in order to retain her role as Pope. She also loses her newborn child and life when her identity is eventually discovered, stoned to death as the crowd shouts, “The Antichrist!” (Top Girls 17). Griselda became attached to a powerful male through marriage but was forced to demonstrate her obedience by sacrificing her children and suffering public humiliation. Yap Bie Yong and Jenny M. Djugdung focus on the dinner scene and its marginalizing, gendered implications. Although the top girls are purported to have reached a female zenith, their adoption of traits either specifically masculine or feminine effectively paints them into a corner of hybridity that cannot be escaped: “All of them have tried to beat the system either by adopting what are considered to be masculine or feminine traits, yet all of them are either trapped in the social construction of feminine traits or betrayed by their own bodies” (162). Thus betrayed, Marlene’s selective embodiment of male/female traits and the effectiveness of her constructed hybridity is called into question. It betrays her and the other half-and-half top girls who have attained some semblance of traditionally “male” power through their performative masks—in this sense the power they have gained through artifice is seen as analogous to the cross-cast, ineffectual masks of Betty, Edward, and Victoria in Cloud Nine. This is particularly evident for Marlene; her gender nonconformity alienates her from sectors of each rigid gender category. She can never be wholly both. Marlene, yet another woman who has achieved success through personal sacrifice, effectively sums up Churchill’s vision of the price attached to the label of top girl, “Oh God why are we all so miserable?” (Top Girls 18). Again, each woman is adept at judging the other’s choices but unable or unwilling to see the flaws in their own journey to
autonomy. Even in the opening scene, Churchill paints a disturbing picture of the cost of success and the failure of feminism to connote sisterhood or to create functioning female communities.

This pessimistic view of female communities and modern feminist progress utterly transformed from the careful optimism of Cloud Nine reflects a parallel, declining optimism felt by legions of women during the shift in executive power from male to female hands heralded by the election of Margaret Thatcher. After winning the general election to become prime minister in 1979 (coincidentally, the same year Cloud Nine premiered at the Royal Court) Thatcher’s rise to power was taken and billed as a huge step for feminism in the United Kingdom and from a global perspective. Thatcher stands as a singular female figure in history, someone who did not fully shatter the glass ceiling but at the very least drilled a sizeable hole in it, someone who might easily be invited to Marlene’s next dreamed-up dinner party. However, it soon became apparent that Thatcher’s policies would more often than not fail to take women and women’s rights into consideration. Thatcher became a leader much more closely aligned with her political conservatism and her party than with her gender, failing, like Marlene and the top girls of Christmas past, to support other women attempting to move up in the world. June Purvis in her Women’s History Review quickly sums up Thatcher’s take on women and feminism in politics, a self-centered, survival-of-the-fittest mentality almost identical to the dream-killing interview Marlene later conducts with the hopeful Jeanine:

Margaret Thatcher became an important role model for some aspiring women, a woman who succeeded against all the odds, in a man’s world. But the tough, determined Margaret Thatcher was a disappointment to many other women. She was no feminist and indeed once said that feminism was poison. Since she saw no reason to see women as a separate entity to men, she did not pursue women-
friendly policies, for example, in regard to childcare, nursery provision or equal pay...She did not promote able Conservative women into her cabinet, Baroness Young, the Leader of the House of Lords, being the only woman to hold office under her premiership of eleven and a half years. The hard ladder up which she had climbed was drawn up and not extended to other women. (Purvis 1016)

The validity of Thatcher as a feminist figure is a consistently debated topic. While most women can agree that her ability to rise to the top of a male-dominated political bureaucracy is laudable, her denial of the feminist movement which, at least in some sense, allowed for her personal success has led to a female criticism of Thatcher almost as intense and objectifying in nature as one might expect the male response to be. In their analysis of Top Girls, Erdinç Parlak and Ahmet Biçer adhere to the reading of Top Girls as denouncing Thatcherism for both its negative socialist implications and the toll it took on female advancement. This examination of the text is closely linked to the dissemination of female community constructed within Cloud Nine, a recurring theme within the cold business dealings of the text which Parlak and Biçer argue mirrors the perverse, gender-denying trends within Thatcher’s right-wing conservative policies: “Women were seen by the government and its policies as individuals, not as a part of a movement or even of a group; and third, the movement itself was growing increasingly fragmented and difficult to characterize as society moved to the right. So, the feminist women found themselves as powerless individuals rather than as a powerful contingency” (122). This rising feminist rejection of Thatcher as a supposed beacon of positive change in the movement was mostly due to her heavily conservative political stance, which often left entire economic classes of women hung out to dry. Alicia Tycer notes, “Thatcherite policies affected low-income mothers in immediate ways, with cuts in maternity provisions and ending of free school meals.
During the 1980s, working mothers had increasingly to fit their family responsibilities around multiple part-time jobs” (qtd. in Tycer 21). Joyce, a middle class mother working a dead-end job to make ends meet, now fits readily into a contemporary mold, her pronounced distaste for Thatcher within the context of the play understandable. Other women felt similar resentment towards a female leader apparently unconcerned with women’s issues. To mark the release of the 2012 bio-pic, *The Iron Lady*, *The Guardian* collected a series of personal reflections on Thatcher from various feminist professionals. Writer Linda Grant mused,

> Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative party at the height of the women's movement, yet she was completely apart from our campaigns, our passions and our identity. She was the middle-aged woman with the hats, the pearls, the teeth, the strangled high-pitched voice, and the policies which had nothing to do with equal pay for work of equal value, free abortion on demand or take back the night marches. Her freedom to run for office depended on the traditional accoutrements of a wealthy husband and getting the work of having two children out of the way in one pregnancy. Thatcher's premiership was a wrong, contradictory note for feminism; we regarded her as a man dressed up in a skirt suit. (Walter et al.)

Although such statements demonstrate reasonable outrage at Thatcher’s frustrating refusal to realize feminist progress or even consent to acknowledge issues such as accessible abortion, sexual harassment, women’s unions, or equal pay, they also fall into the trap of transforming a powerful woman into a half-and-half being with the face of a woman and the business-savvy balls of a man. This is a trope Churchill reiterates to her advantage in order to examine the
reversal of gender performativity as seen in *Cloud Nine* and indicate a shift towards a hybrid model even more conflicted than the consumption-driven Marion of *Owners*.

By honing in on and personifying Thatcher’s oxymoronic stance on women, Churchill allows her audience to easily identify Marlene as a fictional, distilled reincarnation of Thatcher, a walking, talking commentary on Churchill’s own political frustrations with the Iron Lady from a socialist-feminist perspective. Marlene, like Thatcher, the grocer’s daughter, comes from relatively humble beginnings, in this case a dysfunctional, lower class household which she views as a trap and uses professional success to escape. Marlene also denies the work of other women which permitted her accomplishments, both from a historical and contemporary standpoint. Victoria Bazin supports this argument within her commentary on various “waves” of feminism she views as dependent on the other—“there could not be a third without a second” (115). This dependence of contemporary feminism on its often forgotten or diminished history—a dynamic Bazin interestingly describes in mother-daughter terms, with third-wave feminism as the moody, exhaustingly cool daughter indifferent to her mother’s role in forming her current person (116)—can be extended to include Marlene as an embodiment of Thatcher, and as an autonomous character. During the opening dinner scene for example, she fails to understand and accept the restrictions of time and place, immediately condemning members of the party for actions she considers beneath her, her judgements stemming from her position as a powerful, professional woman of the 1980s. Her patronizing tone when addressing Griselda is especially evident, and demonstrates her personal rejection of the opportunities, though still somewhat limited, afforded to contemporary women by the Women’s Liberation Movement:

GRISELDA: Marlene, you’re always so critical of him./Of course he was normal, he was very kind.
MARLENE: But Griselda, come on, he took your baby.

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

MARLENE: I don’t think Walter likes women.

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

MARLENE: He just had a funny way of showing it. *(Top Girls 22)*

In this sequence Marlene applies her own logic and worldview to Griselda’s time period, ignoring the variance in their perspectives brought about by the gap in opportunities for female advancement that exists between their respective eras. Similarly, she neglects to consider the involvement of women like Jeanine and, most glaringly, Joyce, in her life, without whom her personal accomplishments might not have been possible. In this sense Marlene is every bit a Thatcher clone, a powerful woman at the top of her chosen field without the slightest inclination to assist other women in making the same transition from bottom to top girl.

Churchill extends her feminist-political commentary, focusing on Thatcherism and its specific effects on women through the comparative disparity in class between Marlene and Joyce. The two women are immediately identified as opposites on the economic, political, and social spectrum. In addition to the difference in their occupation and lifestyle—Marlene as a high-powered, sexually virile executive and Joyce as a barren, beat-down housewife and low-wage worker—Churchill clearly contrasts the posh elocution of Marlene with the rough brand of speech Joyce displays, connoting her lower class. Their main class distinction is economic in nature—Marlene shows up to the house bearing gifts and expensive whiskey, financial indicators
that anger Joyce as she takes them as symbols of Marlene’s success thrown in her face out of spite. The economic and social gap between the two widens ever farther as they discuss Joyce’s role in raising Angie, an act which has, in Joyce’s estimation, effectively trapped her in an unsatisfying lifestyle just as it allowed Marlene to advance professionally. Marlene’s blithe dismissal of Joyce’s domestic entrenchment demonstrates her own failure to recognize the importance of place and time as contributing to her own success:

JOYCE: How could I have left?

MARLENE: Did you want to?

JOYCE: I said how/how could I have left?

MARLENE: If you’d wanted to you’d have done it. (Top Girls 76)

Marlene’s minimization of Joyce’s economic and social stagnation as a result of motherhood is made clear by her professed vision of all-encompassing female success. Marlene’s fantasy of the woman-who-can-have-it-all comes across as wildly unrealistic and in clear denial of her own journey to success, taken at the expense of, not in conjunction with, motherhood: “I know a managing director who’s got two children, she breastfeeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because she’s an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money” (Top Girls 80). Marlene’s perception of success is clearly contingent on money, money being indicative of power. However, her evidence of the woman who breastfeeds in board meetings comes across as an urban legend, the white lie women tell themselves in an attempt to break down the rigid, unforgiving walls that separate the roles of professional and mother. Churchill intentionally manipulates the timeline of her piece, placing this scene which occurs chronologically a year before the scenes proceeding it at the end.
of *Top Girls*. This conversation between two opposing, symbolic forces—Marlene and Joyce, professional woman and housewife—is meant to leave an impactful impression on her audience, and in a sense culminates much of the work Churchill has done in previous plays concerning binary female archetypes.

Marlene goes on to say: “I hate the working class which is what you’re going to go on about now, it doesn’t exist anymore, it means lazy and stupid. I don’t like the way they talk. I don’t like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits and brothers and sisters—,” which triggers a similar response from Joyce, “I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring” (*Top Girls* 83). Their exaggerated, polarized views on class indicate an intensely divisive rapport operating as an antagonist to the progression of feminism in Britain. In Churchill’s own words, class distinctions function as a much more prevalent factor hindering women’s progress in the United Kingdom than in the United States by comparison:

> When I was in the States in ’79 I talked to some women who were saying how well things were going in America for women now with far more top executives being women, and I was struck by the difference between that and the feminism I was used to in England, which is far more closely connected with socialism. And that was one of the ideas behind writing *Top Girls*, that achieving things isn’t necessarily good, it matters what you achieve. (Goodman 15)

This reflection on the importance of social class in constructing feminist identity also harkens back to Churchill’s critique of Thatcher, and her own beliefs on the idea of the prime minister as a feminist figure which closely mirror those of other feminists of her time—reluctant to say the least, and tinged with vague resentment: “Thatcher had just become prime minister; there was
talk about whether it was an advance to have a woman prime minister if it was someone with politics like hers: She may be a woman but she isn’t a sister, she may be a sister but she isn’t a comrade” (qtd. in Besko & Koenig 79). Joyce and Marlene seem to feel the same way about each other—they are literally sisters, but increasingly divided by their polarized political views and their mutual disdain for the social function of the other. Thatcher is no sister, and Marlene is described by Linda Fitzsimmons as a turncoat to her fellow women and those of the middle class she managed to escape as well: “Marlene has betrayed her class. Her allying herself in Act I Scene I with an anti-oppressionist stance…rings hollow in light of her actions in the rest of the play” (Fitzsimmons 21). Marlene then becomes directly inflammatory to Joyce, the antithesis of her lifestyle and her politico-social views.

Though Marlene seems to consider her own ballsyness as the direct cause of her professional success, Churchill uses the construction of antagonistic female communities to question this self-made image and the historically relevant progress of the feminist movement. Marlene toasts herself and her fellow top girls at their celebratory dream dinner, saying confidently, “We’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (Top Girls 13), but Churchill casts a shadow of doubt on this statement, changing the exclamation to a question mark as she portrays the open antagonism between different “types” of women. Visible within the veiled competition between Marlene and her co-workers, the self-obsessing dinner party scene, the patronizing tone of Marlene’s interview with Jeanine, and, most notably, Marlene and Joyce’s dysfunctional relationship, Churchill’s doubt as expressed through toxic female interactions and decay of female communities in Top Girls likely reflects a disappointment in feminist progress, the stagnation of the 1980s brought about by long-held sexist policies and the effects of Thatcherism. Multiple
“feminist” acts passed during the mid to late seventies attempted to ease the way for aspiring female professionals with varying degrees of success. The Equal Pay Act, for instance, was passed in 1970, and prohibited unequal wages and working conditions for women laboring alongside men. Organizations such as the Equal Opportunities Commission and a separate institution created by the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 attempted to regulate recurring issues of sexual harassment or discrimination which inevitably greeted women in the professional sphere, claiming to “render unlawful certain kinds of sex discrimination and discrimination on the ground of marriage, and establish a Commission with the function of working towards the elimination of such discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity between men and women generally; and for related purposes” (British Library). However, it remained painfully clear that the United Kingdom struggled to keep up with feminist progress occurring elsewhere in the world. The French had granted women the right to open their own bank accounts without the permission of a male relative or husband in the late nineteenth century. The United States enacted a similar law in the 1960s; the United Kingdom, dragging its feet, finally followed suit in 1975. Inevitably, even legislation that was passed did not necessarily guarantee change.

According to the European Commission, the gender pay gap for the United Kingdom, defined as, “the relative difference in the average gross hourly earnings of women and men within the economy as a whole,” stood at a whopping 19.1% in 2012, the seventh highest percentage of any EU member state (ec.europa.eu).

Continuing her pattern of constructing binary female figures, Churchill identifies Marlene as a sexually and socially liberated figure, blurring the line been masculinity and femininity in a professional context. While Joyce is identified as an embodiment, however resentful, of female domestic responsibilities, Marlene becomes her complete opposite, a confusingly sexless being
in the same camp as Marion of Owners. Marlene’s desire to collect success closely mirrors Marion’s obsessive consumption. Just as Marion’s stereotypically “masculine” need to consume property and sexual partners identified her as unnatural and disconnected from her female sexuality, Marlene and other “high-flyer” (Top Girls 47) girls like her find that professional advancement often necessitates becoming something other. To emphasize this rift, Churchill gives us a brief but poignant interaction between Mrs. Kidd, wife of Howard, a man who was passed up for a promotion in favor of Marlene. Mrs. Kidd attempts to convince Marlene to give up her job to Howard because he is a man and has a family to feed, the subtext being that Howard has been emasculated by Marlene’s success, a fact which is further emphasized as he never appears on stage, but remains at home, passively championed by his wife. As Marlene refuses, Mrs. Kidd remarks, “You’re one of these ballbreakers/ that’s what you are. You’ll end up miserable and lonely. You’re not natural” (Top Girls 59). Marlene becomes an object of pointed hate, as her refusal to occupy gender performative roles highlights Howard’s failure as a masculine figure—she has not only taken his job, but robbed him of the essence of his manhood by undermining his assurance in the professional sphere. While Mrs. Kidd denounces Marlene’s success and desire for it as unnatural, a pox on her desirability as a female, Marlene’s co-workers celebrate it. Fellow top girls Nell and Win represent yet another iteration of toxic female communities; they are frenemies who at once laud and envy Marlene for her new promotion. Their one communal act is to minimize Howard by saying, “Howard thinks because he’s a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene’s got far more balls than Howard and that’s that” (Top Girls 46). At once Marlene is identified as both ball-breaker and ball-possessor, made manly by her professional success and sexual exploits but womanly in her appearance, her desire to distinguish herself as a top girl. Churchill illustrates a complicated and often contradictory image
of what it means to be a woman in the workplace, the sharp, perceived delineation between female roles and female professional success, which at times seems to necessitate becoming, at least in theory, somewhat of a man. Marlene’s hybridity serves as a constant reminder that even as Churchill’s girls grope towards and win positions of power, they still talk about their success in masculine terms. This demonstrates the omnipresence of the male in the business world, belying their complete absence within the confines of the play, their comically emasculated implication.

Churchill continues her commentary on antagonistic feminism through the two juxtaposed interview scenes which occur after the opening dream sequence. In the first iteration, Marlene interviews a potential job candidate, Jeanine. Throughout the entire process, Churchill leaves her audience with the distinct impression that the initiative and hunger for advancement Marlene values in herself is perceived by her as childish in Jeanine. Jeanine, whose low-tier position and top-tier goals may have been almost identical to Marlene’s at age twenty, is consistently dismissed throughout the interview, her expectations deemed wildly unrealistic, even considering that Jeanine’s aspirational job is not entirely unlike the one Marlene currently holds. Jeanine’s evident commitment to her fiancée and the idea of a domestic life outside of work forms the basis of Marlene’s low opinion and patronizing attitude. Based on her desire for domesticity and career success, something Marlene has been conspicuously unable to achieve or even to attempt, Marlene immediately denies her own professed belief of, “Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes,” (Top Girls 86) and categorizes her client as destined for early professional retirement followed by wave upon wave of diapers:

JEANINE: I’m saving to get married.
MARLENE: Does that mean you don’t want a long-term job, Jeanine?

JEANINE: I might do.

MARLENE: Because where do the prospects come in? No kids for a bit?

JEANINE: Oh no, no kids, not yet.

MARLENE: So you won’t tell them you’re getting married?

JEANINE: Had I better not?

MARLENE: It would probably help.

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

MARLENE: Saves taking it off. (*Top Girls* 31)

This exchange demonstrates the direct opposition between domestic and professional figures—to be explored in further depth through the comparison of Joyce and Marlene—as well as Churchill’s commentary on the perceived absolutism of female roles. In Marlene’s mind two separate and opposing worlds which cannot coexist—business and domesticity. Jeanine, an aspiring member of both, is a risk not worth taking. The patronizing tone she adopts with Jeanine in reference to the clash between her marriage and professional plans wars directly with the mythic hybrid figure, “breast feeding in the board room” she later describes to Joyce. Churchill re-emphasizes Marlene’s dismissal of domestic figures such as Jeanine by re-casting her as the same actress who portrays Griselda in the opening scene. Their connection is made evident through similarities in their comparative dialogue and in their interactions with Marlene. The same hesitancy and self-doubt that Jeanine expresses as she describes her ideal career can be
seen in Griselda’s speech, in which she attempts to justify her decisions to a judgmental Marlene and begins to doubt herself:

JEANINE: Yes I know. I don’t really…I just mean…I’d like a job where I was here in London and with him and everything but now and then—I expect it’s silly… (Top Girls 32)

GRISELDA: I do think—I do wonder—it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to. (Top Girls 27)

The similarities in their dialogue prove equally irritating to Marlene, who cannot conceive of planning her life around a man. Just as Marlene viewed Griselda as a failure due to her passive nature and dependence on a male figure, she similarly rejects Jeanine, mentally barring the submissive housewife from ever entering her cut-throat business world. Ironically, Churchill also includes a subtle dose of parallelism between Jeanine’s hesitant, “I might do” and Marlene’s later use of the same line. Jeanine’s “I might do” contains within it the hope of having long term prospects after she gets married and has children. Marlene’s version expresses the same optimism she mocked in Jeanine and Griselda, as she challenges Joyce’s assertion that she will never have children due to her all-encompassing work life:

JOYCE: Have a child now if you want one. You’re not old.

MARLENE: I might do. (Top Girls 81)

Here Marlene directly addresses the business/domestic dichotomy she so rigidly upholds. She purports that anyone can do anything they set their mind to, yet despairs at Jeanine and, later, Angie’s prospects because they do not match the model of successful womanhood she herself
fits. However, her own tentative admission that, perhaps, in the future, she may want children clashes sharply with the fact that she has thus far been unable to reconcile her professional self with the idea of motherhood. Marlene’s contradictory beliefs mirror the rigidity of female social roles—the lie of “having it all” only serves to emphasize the constant shortcomings experienced by both binary roles.

Churchill further mocks the self-imposed double standard of antagonistic female relationships on work and domesticity in the second interview scene. This candidate, Shona, is interviewed by another executive, Nell, and initially has a far more positive experience than Jeanine. Triple cast as a waitress during the dream sequence and as Angie’s friend Kit, an aspiring chemist, Shona becomes a mixture of a silent, service-industry working woman, laboring away in obscurity (the waitress has no lines) and a young girl with large dreams who has yet to be infected with self-doubt akin to Jeanine’s. Shona’s professional accomplishments and confidence set her apart immediately from the hesitant Jeanine, and Nell responds in kind by using inclusive, pluralist diction that Marlene never employed in reference to her interviewee: “Because that’s what an employer is going to have doubts about with a lady as I needn’t tell you…They think we’re too nice. They think we listen to the buyer’s doubts…” (Top Girls 61). This kinship is also rationalized as a result of Nell’s triple casting—the same actress plays Jeanine and Griselda. Nell’s desire to move on from Top Girls Employment Agency is based on her recognition that Marlene has erased whatever hope she had at upward movement, but also on her romantic entanglements with men. She flirts with the idea of a marriage reminiscent of Griselda’s to a wealthy man and—based on the opinions of her previous selves—lacks Marlene’s immediate dismissal of women who attach themselves to men. In Shona Nell sees someone who might conceivably take her place if she ever decided to leave. However, the
creation of a sense of kinship between Shona and Nell based on past accomplishments quickly becomes a bad joke as it is revealed that Shona’s resume is completely falsified. The two then immediately revert to the familiar tone of veiled antagonism employed by Marlene in her dealings with Jeanine and, later, with Joyce, as Churchill shows her audience the fragility and superficiality of supposed sisterhood in a male-dominated business world.

Marlene serves as a reminder of the ferocity women must display in order to rise above their male counterparts, a ferocity which often chips away at personal relationships. Beyond anything else, Marlene is hungry for tangible accomplishment, her seemingly obsessive need to get the next promotion, move into the bigger office warring in intensity with Marion’s consumption-driven love of apartments and chocolate bars in *Owners*. Also similar to her chocolate-covered sister, and as the audience will come to fully realize through gradual revelation of the past, Marlene has stepped over quite a few people both professionally, but, most notably, in her personal life in order to attain professional achievements. Her sister, Joyce, takes the brunt of Marlene’s quest for success, removing the significant roadblock of unplanned pregnancy from her sister’s path. Angie, in reality Marlene’s biological daughter, knows Joyce as her mother, Marlene as her aunt. The monstrous offspring of Marlene resents her “mother” while elevating her “aunt” to near-goddess status, admiring Marlene’s professional panache and economic success while simultaneously detesting her distant yet overbearing mother. Angie serves as a somewhat pitiful incarnation of the rift between the sisters—unknowingly, she admires Marlene for a professional success that Churchill seems to suggest could not have existed had her “aunt” accepted the burden of being her mother. Victoria Bazin argues Angie as a force not of strict division between the two polarized sisters, but as an indication of potential political transition and the barriers which prevent it:
It is Angie who represents the revolutionary force within the play, and it is Angle's "frightening" vision of the future that suggests the possibility of political change. It is not, however, that Angie represents the way "forward" but rather that she represents both the way forward and the way backward. She is the dialectical embodiment of a Janus-faced feminism caught up in the whirlwind of progress, a feminism that is always and inevitably complicit in forms of oppression even as it protests against inequality, prejudice, and exploitation. (132)

While the precise meaning of Angie’s “frightening” will be examined in detail further afield, Bazin’s interpretation of Angie as representative of positive change is a pill difficult to swallow. Aside from her own characterization as a hopeless, disenfranchised figure abandoned by Marlene and vilified by Joyce, the rift she creates and exacerbates between the two sisters solely by existing is much more effective at setting up Churchill’s female characters for confrontation than reconciliation. The debate over Angie, as well as the polarized political and economic views between the two juxtaposed women, again places them on opposite ends of Churchill’s female spectrum—Marlene versus Joyce, whore versus Madonna smack-down in which neither emerges victorious. In fact, it seems no one emerges victorious, or even with a participation trophy in *Top Girls*—the openly veiled antagonism between Marlene and Joyce is just a concentrated, less anonymous version of the girl-eat-girl tinge Churchill’s business world takes on, a kill or be killed environment that celebrates female advancement but actively prevents feminist progress. As she juxtaposes yet again the roles of mother and professional woman, housewife and masculinized hybrid, Churchill points to a similar opposition within the feminist movement—specifically the choice between work and family many women were faced with as they transitioned into the professional sphere during the 1980s.
As discussed in relation to *Owners*, the female ability to control reproduction as allowed by oral contraceptives, contraceptive devices, emergency contraceptives, and abortion (legalized in the U.K. excluding Northern Ireland in 1967) often facilitated female transition into the professional world (British Library). Women in the UK began using the Pill to keep their families small and to allow themselves time between births to develop a career (Summerfield 62). However evident this transition might have been, it was far from smooth or immediate. In 1951 women in the United Kingdom comprised thirty-one percent of the total workforce, a number which rose to forty-three percent by 1980. Of that forty-three percent, sixty-three percent of working women remained in jobs traditionally held by their sex—that is, clerical and administrative work or work within service sectors, roles which typically paid less than positions in male-dominated industries such as business and finance (*A Dictionary of Contemporary History*). Even considering the disparities in available industry work between women and men, the women who did find work in service or administrative duties were often discriminated against both sexually and financially, accepting lower wages than a man might for doing the same job and swallowing a healthy dose of harassment along the way. Unsurprisingly, even during the eighties women seldom advanced to positions of executive power; married women did so even less frequently, often seen as a liability as they might leave at any time to start a family or have another child (*A Dictionary of Contemporary History*). Despite increasing legislation allowing for paid maternity leave and guaranteed re-hire after pregnancy (*A Dictionary of Contemporary History*), working women often found themselves facing the difficult choice between success at work or happiness at home. As Penny Summerfield notes in *Women in Britain Since 1945*, “Even women in their professions and in well-paid managerial jobs were putting their families first and sacrificing their careers for those of their husbands. In spite of the
egalitarian tone of the post-1970s era, married women’s rising labor force participation coincided with persistent gender divisions at work and at home” (66).

Churchill examines this rift between motherhood and professional success through her comparison of mother-daughter relationships between Joyce, Marlene, and Angie. The need to choose between work and home certainly holds true for Marlene—she admits to having had two abortions in her day in order to maintain her professional status, and gave up Angie to pursue her career. Joyce’s situation—divorced and saddled with Angie as well as with the care of her aging parents—paints a somewhat grim picture of what Marlene’s fate could have been if she had stayed in her hometown and settled into a domestic lifestyle like her sister. In that respect, the dynamic between each of the sisters and Angie takes on new meaning. Angie, the nature-versus-nurture conundrum eternally dividing Joyce and Marlene, is a constant reminder of Churchill’s no-win scenario, of the unhappy housewife and the miserable businesswoman. Michael Swanson in his analysis of mother/daughter dynamics within several Churchill plays describes the relationship between Angie and Marlene as mutually affectionate and in some ways more successful than the rapport between Angie and Joyce: “Angie and Marlene are quickly much closer than Angie and Joyce will ever be, sharing secrets and smiles” (55). Although Swanson also cites another instance in which Marlene, mirroring Joyce, identifies Angie’s lack of future prospects, describing her as “…a bit thick…a bit funny…She’s not going to make it” (*Top Girls* 66), he fails to comment on the pity and apparent superficiality that define the Angie-Marlene relationship.

Certainly Angie adores Marlene—she absconds to London to visit her, thinks (rightly so) that Marlene must be her biological mother, and plans on moving in with her. Marlene shows affection towards Angie as well, even as she recognizes that she will inevitably go nowhere in
life, at least no farther than Joyce has managed to go. However, both ends of this relationship are almost entirely materially based. Angie idolizes Marlene because of her professional power and the jet-setting, clothes-buying lifestyle it affords. Marlene, similarly, constructs her relationship with Angie based on material things. She immediately casts herself in the role of “fun aunt,” perhaps even becoming a sort of absentee father figure, bringing gifts that act as both a hopeful Band-Aid intended to cover her long-time absences and a subtle reminder of her economic superiority, her ability to provide. In addition to functioning materially, the mother-daughter dynamic between the two must consistently operate on Marlene’s terms in order to be successful. Marlene accepts and enjoys her dispersed visitation; the opportunity to get out of town and play Auntie Marlene for a day is a novelty, a role-playing blip on her top girl radar. As soon as Angie initiates contact with Marlene however, the sweet-talking, present-giving narrative is completely reversed. When Angie decides to visit Marlene in London and appears unannounced at her office, Marlene is immediately uncomfortable, almost visibly annoyed. Most shocking of all however, is that fact that she does not recognize Angie upon seeing her—evidence that outside the context of Joyce’s home, Angie does not exist for Marlene. Her career is her baby, and Angie is simply an obligation, a hobby to partake in every two or three years.

Based on their brief, sporadic interactions throughout the play’s crisscrossing timeline, it is obvious that Angie adores and emulates Marlene, while simultaneously resenting Joyce to the brink of hatred, a feeling made evident as she puts on the dress Marlene gifted her and announces that, “I put on this dress to kill my mother” (Top Girls 44). But saying that Marlene and Angie are close, and share a more intimate bond than that which exists between Angie and Joyce is immediately flawed—it is always easy to love your fun aunt, someone who shows up now and again, showers you with gifts and cool stories, then leaves, in comparison to a mother, who could
shower you with gifts, but will instead nag you to take the damn trash out. Comparing the Angie-Marlene dynamic to the Angie-Joyce dynamic is also problematic as Angie’s symbolism becomes more important than her physical self. To Marlene, Angie is an object of guilt, something she should possibly feel a type of responsibility for but has clearly abandoned in favor of professional advancement. For Joyce, Angie is the physical manifestation of every opportunity afforded to Marlene and denied to her. Even if Joyce did take Angie of her own volition, she has undoubtedly suffered for Marlene’s mistake, losing her husband, personal freedom, and a biological child through miscarriage as a result. Through these two dysfunctional relationships, Angie is cast as a pitiful figure, humored out of guilt by one mother, and hated out of years of pent up resentment by another. As if to add insult to injury, Churchill also uses her as a symbol. As a representation of the rift between Marlene and Joyce, between career woman and housewife, Angie’s existence embodies the final word spoken in the play, a single, reiterated, “Frightening.”

Much emphasis is placed in critical spheres on this final exchange between Marlene and Angie, which is also the closing scene of *Top Girls*:

*ANGIE comes in.*

MARLENE: Angie? What’s the matter?

ANGIE: Mum?

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

ANGIE: Frightening.

MARLENE: Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well you’re awake now, aren’t you pet?
ANGIE: Frightening. *(Top Girls 87)*

It was certainly with purpose that Churchill chose to organize the play as she did, ending her piece with this final word from Angie and a conversation between Joyce and Marlene that occurs one year before both the dream dinner party and confrontational interviews which begin Act I. One analysis of this quote is described by R. Darren Gobert: “And it ends with Angie’s somnambulant prophecy about a future in which top girls like Marlene and Thatcher continue to be rewarded: ‘Frightening’” (Gobert 4). Although this is a valid analysis of the quote based on Churchill’s overwhelmingly negative review of Thatcher made evident throughout the piece, Angie’s so-called prophecy comes across as less of a vision of doom for women like Joyce, destined to remain under the heel of Marlene-types, and more a commentary on the nature of female communities, the decline in the idea of “sisterhood” accompanied by a transition into a bloody, girl-eat-girl dynamic that produces unloved and futureless byproducts like Angie herself. Especially considering Churchill’s past neutrality concerning which binary model of woman supersedes the other, it seems that Angie prophesizes a collective doom rather than an impending curse on the working-class housewife. Austin E. Quigley sums up the decaying theme of female community which had once acted as a positive transformative device in *Cloud Nine*:

The play’s final tableau, characteristically multifaceted and characteristically dividing individuals from roles and each role from another role, presents us with a complex image of multiple representation: of a child rejected by an adult, of a daughter rejected by a mother, of an unsuccessful person rejected by a successful person, a woman rejected by another woman, and one individual rejected by another individual. It is an image not of achieved but of aborted community. (46)
Churchill’s pessimism concerning the direction of the feminist movement is evident throughout her commentary on female relationships in *Top Girls*. Marlene’s self-congratulatory and unintentionally self-mocking statement which caps the end of the first scene, “We’ve all come a long way” (*Top Girls* 13), pairs nicely with Angie’s final assessment of female relationships as they appear within the piece, “Frightening” (*Top Girls* 87). A dramatic counterpoint to the tentative optimism she expressed in *Cloud Nine*, a distilled representation of the hopeful direction of the Women’s Movement in the seventies, is replaced by a business world far more focused on back-stabbing than sisterhood, mirroring the political climate and historical trends of the day. Betty embracing herself has been completely erased, replaced by Marlene and Joyce’s hateful, politically and economically fueled argument and the image of Angie standing in a pretty dress with a brick in hand, threatening to kill her mother. In *Top Girls* Churchill examines antagonistic female relationships just as she did in *Vinegar Tom* and *Owners*, but this time, there is conflict beyond the single binary stand-off of Marion and Lisa, Alice and Susan, Joyce and Marlene. Like the finger-pointing witches of *Vinegar Tom*, Marlene is pitted against every other female figure in the play. Her success is achieved at the expense of others—not in conjunction with them. She neglects women who have helped her achieve her success, but her success still does not equate happiness. Churchill shows us a depressing construction, a variety of women from various points in society who are constantly feeding off of each other to collective detriment, with no ability to transition into less cannibalistic roles. There is no hope for Marlene to merge into motherhood; there is no hope for Angie to become successful; there is no hope for Joyce to emerge from her domestic hell. Churchill’s girls, top and bottom alike, are similarly doomed. The dramatic irony of Marlene’s, “We’ve all come a long way!” (*Top Girls* 13) is
painful in this sense—her forced optimism is, in Angie’s words, frightening—frightening for all women involved.

What could possibly repair the damage done to communities of women, to relationships between mother and daughter, sister-to-sister that Churchill encapsulates in this single word, in the image of a matricidal brick left burning in her audience’s psyche? As it turns out, nothing short of the supernatural. Within her 1992 play, *The Skriker*, Churchill uses the demonic presence of a shape-shifting faerie to plague two opposing models of motherhood into cooperation. The “good” and “bad” mothers, Lily and Josie, must form a pact to avoid their mutually assured destruction at the hands of the shapeshifting, genderless manifestation known only as the Skriker, whose offerings of wishes to be granted or curses to be meted out are never quite as they appear. In a sense Churchill’s foray into myth and fantasy loosely linked to contemporary ills becomes a commentary on motherhood far more perverse than *Top Girls*—an examination of a binary in which one woman is gestating a child, the other having just murdered her newborn daughter. In this sense the world of *The Skriker* continues to frighten—showing audiences a confusing, trance-like world with vague blotches of reality thrown in, Churchill drags her audience to the Skriker’s Underworld home by the ear with a repertoire of radical theatrical techniques which test the limits of traditional theater.
ABOUT

Although the mythically confounding shape-shifter that is the Skriker appears only once as a couch, the image of something otherworldly and malign rising from between two cushions along with your lost remote and an old raisin to haunt you is a startling one to say the least. The pills falling down from above are symbolic of many things—both the pill-centricity of the Sexual Revolution and the episodic madness of infanticidal Josie, committed to a clinic for the ultimate maternal sin.
VI. *The Skriker*: Shape Shifting Female Relationships

Churchill’s penchant for experimental techniques often intertwines two disparate worlds—one of past and one of present—which create at some level a feeling of discomfort made to infect her audience with doubt, preventing their identification with the characters therein. The world of *The Skriker* merely coagulates this device Churchill has been using throughout her career—creating multiple layers of the artificial which reveal just enough of reality to make her audience pause and go, *hmmm*. While the dissociating realities in her previous body of work rely heavily on the Brechtian juxtaposition of historic and modern events, *The Skriker*, first produced in 1994, extends the sense of disconnection from what transpires on stage by creating a heterogeneous mixture of a mystical otherworld and a drab vision of the concrete present made oppressive by the main characters’ collective psychosis. The play centers on two women, Lily and Josie, and their interactions with a strange, supernatural figure known as the Skriker, described by Churchill as “a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (*Skriker* 2). The Skriker is joined by a host of other mythical figures who appear from time to time yet remain invisible to those on stage: a Kelpie, a Brownie, and someone called Bucket Man just to name a few. As the Skriker appears to both women in various forms, she alternately harasses and supplicates them with promises of wishes to be granted, desires to be fulfilled, eventually enticing both of the women to visit her home in the Underworld. The Skriker is a figure at once malevolent and pitiable—her incarnations belie her faerie abilities, her desire to be accepted by Lily in particular wars with the vindictive anger she displays when her attempts at human connection are rejected. She is also a cryptic being who speaks in half-truths, alternating between pedestrian speech and extended, four-page monologues of schizophrenic, dissociative language such as, “Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater, daughter could spin span spick and
spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonnesse under the castle for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved” (Skriker 1). Many critical analyses of the Skriker have approached these monologues as a commentary on environmental degradation and preservation—Graham Wolfe, in particular summarizes the environmental connotation of the piece, “Those commentators attempting to extricate meaning from The Skriker have predominantly focused on ‘damage’” (234), while Churchill herself identified the play as an exploration of, “damage to nature and damage to people” (qtd. in Damaged Myth 168). However, it is Churchill’s examination of motherhood and female agency which leaps out at her audience when considered through a feminist perspective.

Belying its connection with the supernatural “other,” the Skriker is identified repeatedly as a her—though her transformed incarnations include one male iteration and one brief and deeply amusing appearance as a couch, the Skriker’s preferred selves are the disenfranchised and unloved sectors of female identity. An orphaned girl, an old homeless woman asking for kisses on the street, a young foreigner looking for female friendship in bars—these identities the Skriker adopts not only allow her easy emotional access to Josie and Lily, but also cast her as a figure indicative of the collective female self. She appears frequently as a pitiable figure, soliciting love: “Do I smell? It’s my coat and my cunt. Give us a hug. Nobody gives us a hug. Give us a kiss. Won’t you give us a hug and a kiss” (Skriker 8). Her female-centric shapeshifting takes on the tinge of vast, untapped female knowledge, the desires and wishes of legions of women incarnated in flesh. The Skriker is therefore distilled, transient female identity, wanting to be loved, failing to be recognized. The old woman longing for love, the child wanting a
mother are nothing more than reiterations, ghosts of past characters such as the discarded Angie or the unloved and aging Joan in *Vinegar Tom*.

Katherine Perrault extends this reading of the Skriker’s collective female connotations and examines the character as a model of female identity corrupted and formed into a twisted perpetuation of the patriarchy: “Viewed as the essence of that which is woman, the Skriker is deformed and corrupted by years of her own ensnarement: her dysfunctionality results from succumbing to the hegemonic practice of defining her reflection in the patriarchal mirror—which Churchill manifests in the Skriker’s subversion, seduction, and eventual domination of Josie and Lily” (50). The Skriker’s incarnations as disenfranchised versions of womanhood reinforce this idea. Under the patriarchal lens, the old woman becomes loveless, the child motherless, the American tourist friendless. Churchill seems to be showing her audience images like that of the pathetic, unloved Angie from *Top Girls*, visions of what women become in the absence of constructive community. Perrault’s reading of the Skriker as a boogeyman, a woman turned into a man by the constraints of a patriarchal society, is strengthened through Josie and Lily’s relationship, their decision to come together in order to survive the unwanted enchantments of the Skriker. Two forces on opposing ends of the spectrum of motherhood, one embracing it, one utterly denying it, are initially polarized by their separate lifestyles, but are eventually brought together by their fear of what their wishes have unleashed.

The Skriker first appears to Josie in a mental hospital as a patient—Josie has been institutionalized after killing her newborn daughter. Lily, initially unaware of the Skriker’s advances, is expecting a child of her own. Interestingly enough, Churchill provides little information on the two women beyond their relation to pregnancy and motherhood, identifying their reproductive choices as their defining traits. The relative choices between the two women
act as indicators of their respective camps of femininity, Lily as predestined for motherhood and Josie as a violent opposition to its implications. Dr. Suranjana Bhadra examines Josie’s infanticide as an act of euthanasia, an attempt to spare her unborn child from the wholly female problems which will inevitably confront her later in life. Josie’s madness perhaps exemplifies the entrapment of modern women steeped in the materialistic society from which deliverance is an impossibility. Moreover, such a heinous, abnormal act may have been prompted by the unconscious instinctive drives of a mother only to prevent her child from enduring the terrific and nightmarish future awaiting her in the contemporary world” (Bhadra 18). While Josie expresses that she did not kill her daughter out of maternal rage, “What can a ten day old baby do that’s naughty?” (Skriker 6), she provides no concrete statement of why she chose to commit such an act. When pressed on the subject, Josie responds only, “Licence to kill, seems to me” (Skriker 6). She has no expressed reason, other than her right to decide, her right to reject motherhood. However tempting it might be to immediately label her act of infanticide as a product of her madness or as an abnormal female compulsion as Bhadra does, Churchill uses Josie’s violent act as a representational rejection not of the child itself, but as a strangely normalized rejection of motherhood. This is reaffirmed during the scene in which the Skriker presents herself as a young, motherless girl. The pregnant Lily, well on her way to becoming a mother, immediately latches onto the abandoned, pitiful Skriker. Her maternal instincts veil the Skriker’s true identity and allow her to spontaneously adopt the child as her own, making her blind to the girl’s unsavory characteristics: the jealous rage of an unloved creature which leads her to pound on Lily’s pregnant stomach as she is recognized and rejected. Josie, by contrast, is immediately distrustful of the child, “Do you like this child? …She’s horrible. There’s
something wrong with her” (*Skriker* 15). The Skriker thus acts as a device that unveils the polarized choices of the two examples of motherhood seen in the two women.

Again the choices of the two women within the piece are juxtaposed, contrasting sharply and resulting in two different but equally unsavory fates. Lily sacrifices herself for her child, going to the Underworld in order to appease the Skriker and redirect its malign influence away from her daughter. As identifiably good and maternal as her actions are, they prove ineffectual—made evident as Lily returns to reality to find that centuries have passed only to confront her great granddaughter who has become monstrous, repulsive, and who rejects the sight of the predecessor who allowed for her existence:

SKRIKER: …Are you my grand great grand great are you my child’s child child’s? But when the daughters grand and great greater greatest knew she was from the distant past master class, then rage raging bullfight bullroar.

*The GIRL bellows wordless rage at LILY.* (*Skriker* 29)

Josie’s actions, conversely, are more self-preservationist. She rejects her child not out of annoyance or a misplaced idea to play God, or to spare it from the cruel world, but to spare herself from motherhood, a role she entirely and instinctively rejects. Although the Skriker curses Josie for her lack of compassion to the weak—cursing her to vomit frogs when she refuses to acknowledge the faerie’s old-woman self—it is through her ego-centrism that Josie is able to recognize the Skriker’s transformations and to escape from the Underworld of her own volition.

In this sense, Josie’s rejection of motherhood could be seen as an admission of her failings as a nurturing figure, and a confession to the self revealing a hidden desire, a hidden pleasure taken from escaping the normalized societal role of the maternal figure. The Skriker’s seductive
promises, her allotment of wishes, reveal and normalize Josie’s concern for the self, as well as Lily’s self-sacrificing nature, neither condemning nor condoning either option. Josie’s act of infanticide is similarly neither lauded nor damned. Judgements are made in a reversed timeline to that of *Vinegar Tom*, initial antagonism eroding in favor of coerced cooperation that begins to detract from the exclusionary and hostile female relationships seen in previous plays. Although the relationship between Josie and Lily is far from ideal and is not devoid of judgement or resentment, Churchill uses the figure of the Skriker to emphasize the circumstantial nature of their opposition. She depicts a fractured relationship brought about by the dichotomy of their pre-assigned roles and mended partially by forces beyond their control or understanding.

Churchill’s two variant embodiments of motherhood—the accepting Lily, the rejection from Josie—reflect a similar binary model of acceptance for women seeking abortions in a historical context, a societal taboo on the topic of doing violence to the self, to the child. The Abortion Act of 1967 gave women in the U.K. (excluding the stalwartly Catholic Northern Ireland) the right to abortion (Kenyon 718). However much this newfound reproductive agency marked a significant step forward in the feminist movement, the granting of legalized abortion was still incredibly dependent on the consulting doctor or gynecologist’s opinion and was seen by many as a reaction to a growing public health concern rather than as a consideration for women’s advancement (efc.org.uk). The health concern in question was, of course, women seeking illegal abortion who often died in the process or as a result of complications after the procedure—about forty women per annum (efc.org.uk). The act allowed for termination of pregnancy based on medical or psychiatric advisory, in effect acting as an exception to illicit abortion rather than an instatement of legal abortion. A decent chunk of women received or were considered for pregnancy termination in consideration of their mental health—during its first
year, sixty-five patients were evaluated psychiatrically, referred by general practitioners or gynecologists to determine their eligibility for abortion. Of these, less than half (49%) were approved, most often based on depression or past family or childhood issues (Kenyon 718). Only in 1990 was the act extended to allow termination of pregnancy up to 28 weeks into term rather than its previous 24. Josie, a contemporary, twentieth century woman, could easily be identified as a remnant of the feminist past, a woman in a psychiatric ward for killing her child who might have once been denied an abortion by overwhelmingly male-controlled medicine based on her lack of discernable madness. Rather than leave her character to proceed with unwanted motherhood in resigned silence, Churchill allows for the shocking act of infanticide as a final recourse for a woman whose decisions might have never been in her hands. In this sense, Josie’s act changes from infanticide to an expression of retroactive abortion—a choice made to correct a choice revoked. Again, Churchill perceptibly leaves a void in exposition behind her characters—Josie’s past is all speculation, the connections made to historical acts a reflection of Churchill’s past, reiterated use of epic theater and her commentary on the feminist movement.

The continued juxtaposition between accepted and rejected roles of motherhood as seen in the interplay between Josie and Lily reflects trends present throughout Churchill’s previous work. However, by introducing the Skriker as an outside and all-encompassing opposing force, Churchill begins a slow return to the construction of community as seen in Cloud Nine. The experimental use of nonsensical, dissociative monologues casts the Skriker as a malevolent other, the antagonist which serves to connect rather than divide binary female figures which, in Churchill’s previous work through the minimization of antagonistic male presence, had nothing to rebel against but themselves. The Skriker as an embodiment of the collective female self personifies decades of female-to-male oppression—the embittered product of the patriarchy.
Comparisons have been made between Churchill’s experimental theatrical mode and the morphing transience of the eponymous Skriker herself, “Like the Skriker, Caryl’s theater constantly shape-shifts in form, while thematically, the damage and dangers of an unequal, unjust, manmade world are a constant preoccupation” (Continuum Encyclopedia of British Literature). Wolfe focuses on the unifying powers of the Skriker in his analysis of shapeshifting as a radical device in Churchill’s work, fixating on her use of bold, linguistic experimentation, “The strangeness and symbolic obscurity of these creatures is exceeded only in the Skriker itself, whose eight-minute prologue announces one of Churchill’s most radical experiments with language” (234). Both these analyses of the Skriker’s experimental speech and mystical being are heightened by the presence of otherworldly creatures, dissonant song, and a general aura of mystery preserved about the two main characters. Josie and Lily are not developed even to the static extent of figures such as Marlene and Joyce, Lisa and Marion. As such, the deconstruction of their opposition becomes believable, especially in the face of the concentrated manifestation of abandonment and oppression that is the Skriker.
VII. Afterword: Responding to Churchill through Creative Practice

Although Churchill’s experimental use of character and language often renders her pieces less accessible, it allows for a continuation and maturation of themes present within a timeline of her feminist theatre. Her use of juxtaposition—whether between historical and contemporary, sexual liberation and sexual repression, or perceived good and perceived evil—reflects both the progress and stagnation of the lived female experience. As evidenced by the great divide between real-estate devouring, sexually voracious consumers like Marion and Marlene and the reluctant, often failed domestic model of figures like Lisa and Joyce, women’s roles, despite countless legal, economic, and social advancements achieved through feminist progress, remain voids to be unsuccessfully filled and never vacated. Churchill’s moments of optimism as a playwright suggest that the kind of feminism which endorses mutual oppression perpetuated by women can never effectively achieve the hazy, far-off goal of women’s liberation.

Looking forward, she cannot help but look back to the realm of history which drives so many of her plays. Churchill contrasts the hope of female collective and the early, untainted optimism of sexual autonomy and vaginal reclamation as gifted by the Pill with the unfulfilled promises of her reality. Her plays are a different sort of capitalized Pill, one of stark realization rather than contraception. Swallow it and you might not feel a happy glow as you gaze upon the wondrously removed exploits of narrative protagonist and antagonist. Drink it down and you may not sleep through the night with visions of chipper musical numbers whose empty lyrics fade to white noise and soothe you to unconsciousness. Churchill promises none of that. What she will provide is a dose of reality—a reality half-concealed by dissociative setting, time, and character, a Pill hidden but unquestionably there, its acrid taste still blatantly perceptible in your unsuspecting apple sauce.
The pieces created in conjunction with this research are an extension of Churchill’s need to use radical and experimental devices in order to comment on trends within her time. Churchill’s creative approach to female realities prompted analysis of the oppositions present within her pieces as well as within identifiably and uniquely “female” experience. This analysis is achieved through an experimentally jarring visual medium. The accompanying mixed media pieces are designed to dissociate the viewer from the passivity of viewed image by mixing the fantastically hybrid with the grotesquely real. They, like the selected plays, mix elements of stylization, of monstrosity with the concrete and the starkly real. The hybrid ladies of Churchill’s feminist theater are not unlike the strange, half-and-half creatures in the assembled artwork; not entirely dissimilar to the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality achieved through the overlay of stylized women and creatures with black-and-white photographic images. Like Churchill’s characters, the pieces are merely a means to an end, not meant to be visually or aesthetically pleasing. Instead, they ask questions that Churchill poses to her audience: why this and not that? Why wife but not executive? Why professional but not mother? Why Madonna and not whore? Neither Churchill’s work, this research, nor the accompanying art pieces will definitively answer any version of that question—they can only chip away at its foundation, one little Pill at a time.
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