

**Feminism and future in Caryl Churchill's  
*Top Girls*: a chance for hope**

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## **Abstract**

This final project is an approach to Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. The play inquires about woman's success in a patriarchal and capitalist society. Written in the historical context of the arrival of Margaret Thatcher at the government, the play reflects on the confrontation of different feminisms in the 1980s. The other central topic is the sacrifices made by women not only in contemporary western societies but throughout diverse cultures and history. The main objective of the project is to demonstrate how Churchill proposes a revision of feminism with the integration of the diverse voices which lead to a better future. Through analysing the use of the overlapping dialogue, the doubling roles, the all women-cast and the episodic and circular structure, the hints to improve the future are drawn. All in all, *Top Girls* claims the necessity of equality not just between sexes, but among women as well.

**Keywords:** feminism, Thatcher, socialism, superwoman, sisterhood

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## 1.- Introduction

Among all the subjects, authors, plays, movements, etc. I have discovered during my studies, the one that has caught my attention most is the perspective of gender in the literary critics. Gender issues were always on my agenda, but since I studied *Género y literatura en los países de habla inglesa* in the second year, I have been more and more interested in it. It is not just in the field of literature but in the artistic creation in general, in how the use of sexist language contributes to perpetuate sexism, in the way the media carry on maintaining inequality, in how the political parties construct their discourses around this subject and, in short, how much work is still left in our everyday life to be an egalitarian society.

On the other hand, I would want to take advantage of the opportunity of this “first attempt at a research project” and delve into a genre I would like to have studied more deeply during these years, theatre. The language of the theatre has been used throughout history to deal with universal matters. To dive into a play and imagine to be in the characters' shoes can be a very useful learning process that raises awareness among the audience. It arouses profound effect on our feelings, emotions and consciousness, and therefore it can be used as a catalyst for social transformation and progress.

Finally, Caryl Churchill is an English contemporary playwright with a very recognised and vast work and, after reading about her major plays, I decided *Top Girls* would be the main focus of this final project for different reasons. When I read the play, it fascinated me from the very beginning for its non-naturalistic technique to deal with a current issue as much as the confrontation of different feminist perspectives in a subtle way. It was staged in 1982, three years after the conservatives formed government under Margaret Thatcher, the first and so far only female British Prime Minister. She is one of the figures who changed the social and political scene in the 1980s not only in her country but all around the western world. This historical moment serves as background for Caryl Churchill to question the way a successful woman scales in the social ladder in a patriarchal society.

Apart from that, if our emotional education is made of references, mine is made of songs such as Morrissey's “Margaret on the Guillotine”, Hefner's “The Day That Thatcher Dies”, novels such as Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters Club*, films like Shane Meadows's *This Is England* and from now on, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. All of them are very different

ways to show a picture of a tough but undoubtedly fascinating moment in Britain.

In the field of equality, the 1960s and 1970s were decades of exhilarating action among feminists, the Women's Liberation era. At the end of the latter and in the beginning of the next, the movement had given evidence of its division. The 1980s has been judged a moment of growing pessimism. Although many measures have been taken in the field of women rights, the movement has given hints of exhaustion and the decade was considered a backlash in feminist progress. This is the context of the play that is going to be examined.

Concerning the significance of the author, Caryl Churchill's work has been analysed by scholars in press, books, journal articles and doctoral thesis in English and other languages. The main topics in these studies are focused on her treatment of the abuses of power from a feminist stance. Besides, her contribution with the use of non-naturalistic techniques and the overlapping dialogue gives her a prominent position in contemporary drama.

One of her most successful and recognised plays is *Top Girls*. It is not only currently staged in English-speaking countries but it has been translated as well. For instance, Projecte Ingenu and Teatre Akadèmia performed the play in Barcelona during November and December of 2015. Thirty-three years later, its confrontation between the liberal and the socialist feminism is still fully applicable.

The questions about what does it mean success in a capitalist and patriarchal society; or if there is any feminine way to achieve power; or if oppression is only exerted by men in the patriarchy... are not answered in the play. Following the Brechtian tradition of the epic theatre, Churchill is very respectful with the audience. It is the spectator who has to evaluate and take his/her own position after having seen this confrontation between the bourgeois feminism and the socialist stance, individuality versus sisterhood. In this light, the audience's reflection is the first step to take action outside the theatre.

As the play has an open-ending, the interpretations are diverse, although in some aspects most of them coincide. Among the different analysis of *Top Girls* I have had the occasion to read, critics generally agree that Churchill is confronting different feminist perspectives: the liberal feminism represented by the protagonist, Marlene, and the socialist stance, in the voice of her sister Joyce. The play reflects a moment when different feminisms are confronted to face a backlash and new challenges. Some of the authors have considered this confrontation a lack of unity and the reason for the second-wave feminism's failure.

Marlene's condition of feminist has been questioned by a number of critics since her responses are influenced by patriarchal models of success. This is the manner Churchill makes the audiences examine closely liberal feminism. At the same time, the protagonist has been accused of being class-blind for having abandoned her working-class family to achieve her wishes of climbing the social ladder.

The conclusions among the scholars can be divided into two opposing trends. A group interprets Churchill's message as a pessimistic one, i.e. feminism is divided and there is no future for it. The other group sees optimistically in the play an opportunity to reflect on the mistakes. My analysis will try to point out the hints which signal a path to follow if we want to improve equality and justice in our society.

To complete this brief state of the art, it would be advisable to turn to the first sources. The first director of the play, Max Stafford-Cark wrote: "We're a bit unused to happy endings in modern drama ..., they went out in the sixties. Nowadays we usually end plays on a melancholic note of elegant despair. It suits the political climate" (Naismith li). This elegant despair has led Caryl Churchill to be accused, in her own words, "of being both too optimistic and too pessimistic... and of being too philosophical and aesthetic and not sufficiently political" (Keyssar 100). From my analysis, I infer that, in spite of these accusations, Churchill allows the public to imagine a chance for the hope of a better future and not in a naïve way, but giving proofs of feminism's flaws and weaknesses. Therefore, the point to demonstrate will be that the message conveyed by the play is that feminism is still able to give answers for social change after the 1980s backlash.

With regard to the methodology used, the first approach to the bibliography has been made through the following data bases on the Internet: Linceo +, Trobes (Universitat de València Catalogue), Lion, Jstor, Google Scholar, Teseo, Dialnet and OATD. After looking for the information, every source has been checked and the original sources have been carefully read. The sources that I have had no accessibility have been removed from the initial bibliography.

With the first reading, the main topics and items have been marked and classified to make feasible a comparison between the different treatments and opinions. The headlines of the classification cover the historical context (Thatcher, superwoman, yuppies/swells), different feminist concepts (bourgeois, liberal, feminine writing, bonding, sisterhood, individuality, intra-sexual oppression), political notions (collective, class, oppression, individuals) and thespian theories and devices (epic theatre, Brecht, alienation, Aristotle, structure, overlapping dialogue, doubling roles, all-women cast).

The second reading of the sources, based on the classification of the topics and the contrast and examination of all the information, has led the analysis to the conclusions. The analysis and interpretation of the different issues have been made from a socialist feminist approach, taking into account Churchill's declared commitment. The effects of the overlapping dialogue have been analysed from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic point of view in addition to the gender perspective.

In a work like this, it is important to distinguish between *drama*, the printed text of a play, and *theatre*, the actual production of the text on the stage. The following analysis has been based mainly on the text but without forgetting in some moments the staging.

As to the structure of the work, it has been organised as follow. After this first introduction, the second point is dedicated to the context of the writing and backdrop of the play, which coincides in this case. The third part pays attention to the playwright's work and her political stance. The next section analyses the conditions women have to face in contemporary western society and throughout history, as well as the different perspectives feminism has adopted to deal with them. In this part, it has been analysed too the theatrical devices Churchill uses to convey her message. Finally, the conclusions have been drawn from the analysis.

## **2.- The arrival of Margaret Thatcher**

The 1960s and 1970s were the decades of the Second Women's Liberation Movement. Two decades of consciousness-raising and feminist struggle for the liberation of women from male oppression and social supremacy. In the words of Lynne Segal

for many feminists of the left the 1970s really was, and ever will be, our decade. For early second-wavers, it was a time when we argued, campaigned, and studied, ceaselessly, wanting everything to change: equality, personal liberation, community building, peace and international solidarity with the oppressed everywhere, were all equally on our mind (Rowbotham et al., "After Thatcher: still trying to piece it all together").

Among the feminists the climate was optimistic. There was a possibility of equality in the near future. As Elaine Aston collects, the founding company member of Monstrous Regiment, Gillian Hanna remembers:

To be a woman in 1975 and not to have felt the excitement of things starting to change, possibilities in the air, would have meant that you were only half alive ... It seemed as natural as breathing. But much more exciting than breathing. Exhilarating. The sense of being in the right place at the right time, in step with a great movement in history, *part* of history ourselves. We were part of a huge wave of women and we were going to remake everything. It gradually dawned on us that we didn't have to go out and join any movement. We were already in it. We were the Movement. (Caryl Churchill 17)

Nevertheless, the end of the decade brought an atmosphere of pessimism to the United Kingdom. Racial tension, unemployment and numerous strikes led into the “winter of discontent”. In this panorama, and after two Labour governments, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in May 1979. Her defence of the Victorian morals, with the separate spheres in binary opposition public/private for men/women, was represented in the photographs that showed her stirring a pot in the kitchen, carrying the shopping or posing with her husband and sons. Mark Hussey indicates in his article “Mrs. Thatcher and Mrs. Woolf”, that “her own foray into public life could be justified by the attitude that she was surrounded by ninnies, 'wets' as she termed them, who would not shape up to their masculine responsibilities and so had to be rescued by a 'nanny', a schoolmarm.”

From the very beginning of her first term, one of her aims was to finish with the Welfare State that has been prevailing from the World War II. Keynesian theories would be substituted by the Enterprise Economy in its way towards a radical capitalism. Opposing the state – in her view, the source of all the extreme economic situation – was the individual. To this idea points one of her most repeated statements: “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families” (Thatcher in Monforte 35). The privatizations and the consequences of her economic measures were the increase of unemployment, inflation, deindustrialization and economic recession. The outcome is depicted by Georgiana Vasile in “The Female Voices in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982): Sisters or Foes”:

Thatcher's emphasis on individualism was creating a new climate in Britain, offering a small privileged part of the population the possibility to earn much more money than before, but at the same time depriving the vast majority of employment opportunities, thus producing an ever wider divide between social classes. It is exactly this reality that Churchill captures in *Top Girls*. (244)

This was the proper environment for the spring of two prominent new figures: the

*yuppie* and the *superwoman*. The former is the acronym of Young Upwardly Mobile Professional or Young Urban Professional, a young professional who earns a lot of money and that is more interested in his professional success and sophisticated urban life than in the tough situation lived by other people outside his/her status. Again, individuality versus collectivity. Among this category, there was the *swell* (Single Women Earning Lots of Loot), a term that could be applied to Marlene as we will see.

The other controversial figure, the *superwoman*, as Elaine Aston claims, was originated by Thatcherite politics that

promoted the image of the high-flying female achiever who was capable of transcending class boundaries and of attaining material success at home and in the workplace. The reality was somewhat different. Very few women were in a position to gain access to paid positions of power which would enable them to combine work and family life. (*An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* 76)

The paramount example of this figure was the Prime Minister, a superwoman capable of excelling not only in public and professional areas but in private and domestic as well. Lizbeth Goodman describes: "The tabloid press of the time frequently represented the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, as a self-made career woman, the daughter of a grocer and mother of two, transformed into the ultimate symbol of the capitalist 'superwoman' politician" (*Literature and Gender* 232).

### **3.- Caryl Churchill's work and commitment**

Caryl Churchill (London 1938) is one of England's best-known and most respected contemporary playwrights. She began writing when she was a student at Oxford University. After finishing her studies, she got married and, while bringing up three children, wrote short radio dramas for the BBC. In 1974, she became the first woman writer in residence at the Royal Court Theatre. Later she collaborated with theatre companies such as Joint Stock Theatre Company and the feminist collective Monstrous Regiment. Up to today, she has written more than forty-five plays and has received twelve awards in her career.

Churchill has staged her work in alternative, mainstream and even commercial theatres. Goodman defines her plays "undeniably and strongly feminist in terms of content and intent" and also "highly progressive and unconventional in terms of form" (*Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To each Her Own* 214). Although she enjoys quite



strong popularity in certain circles and both in Britain and in the United States there is a lot of research done in universities about her work, the playwright and poet Jackie Kay complains about her position as women of theatre in an interview with Goodman:

There isn't the equivalent of a Pinter among women, or at least, there isn't that equivalent treatment. Even Caryl Churchill, who is probably the most famous and the most well-respected woman playwright in the country, doesn't get the kind of status that someone like Pinter does, even though her work is just as pioneering as Pinter's. (*Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre* 251)

Her commitment is obvious, and she has admitted it in several occasions, as when was interviewed by Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig for *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*: "It's almost impossible not to take [a moral and political stance], whether you intend to or not ... Whatever you do your point of view is going to show somewhere. It usually only gets noticed and called 'political' if it's against the statu quo" (Westmaas Jones 7).

Or in the quote that serves as the beginning of Elaine Aston's study published in 1997 about the playwright:

[I know] quite well what kind of society I would like: decentralized, nonauthoritarian, communist, non-sexist – a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives. But it always sounds both ridiculous and unattainable when you put it into words. (3)

Notwithstanding, she is aware of the danger of being labelled if she wants to be attended by a great amount of audience. In the commentary of *Top Girls*, Bill Naismith provides Churchill's statement about this aspect: "If someone says 'a socialist playwright' or 'a feminist playwright' that can suggest to some people something rather narrow which doesn't cover as many things as you might be thinking about" (xxi). Thus, although she is reluctant to be labelled, there is no doubt that her approach to the political topics is permeated with a socialist feminist stance. Her plays deal with so many topics, that if they are classified in just one field, a lot of nuances and viewpoints might be lost.

It is undeniable the rejection the word *feminist* provokes in some sectors, thus it is totally understandable if she is to arrive at the maximum of audience, to hide in some sense 'the word'. If the final goal is to change society, then the strategy should be carefully planned and the focus must be aimed to the essential, i.e. the change.

From a more theatrical point of view, Churchill acknowledges Brechtian influence in her work (Monforte 59). Although she admits not being a specialist in Brechtian theories,

she acknowledges her debt to the master with the character of Dull Gret taken from the painting by Brueghel. This painting is the subject of a Brecht's essay on alienation and dialectics (Bazin 120).

The epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht aims at social change. Like Aristotle, the German poet sees drama as a feature of pleasure with the capacity to heighten the enjoy of life. Contrary to the Greek philosopher, Brecht rejects the effect of the catharsis that leaves the audience complacent. What he expects from the audience is to maintain a critical stance to recognise injustice not only on the stage but in society. Raising conscience in the theatre to take action in actual life, to contribute to social reform. Hence, he develops a series of techniques to remind the audience that what they are enjoying is a representation of reality, not actuality. The constructed nature of the play is underlined and, in doing so, Brecht expects to make the audience aware that reality is likewise constructed and, consequently, changeable.

The influence of Brecht was prolonged during decades. In this sense, Bill Naismith asserts that one of the most significant development in British theatre between 1968 and 1978 was the rise of socialist theatre. "This socialist theatre, a non-didactic political, has involved the audience directly in judging not only the action but also, to an extent, themselves as part of the society which is being examined dramatically" (xxiii). The epithet *non-didactic* in this context should be interpreted as respectful to the spectator, in the sense that the playwright asks questions, but does not give answers. The author let the audience interprets and look for their own answers.

The play that is going to be analysed combines both stances feminist and socialist. Interviewed by Emily Mann in 1987, Churchill stated:

What I was intending to do was make it first look as though it was celebrating the achievements of women and then – by showing the main character, Marlene, being successful in a very competitive, destructive capitalist way – ask, what kind of achievement is that? The idea was it would start out looking like a feminist play and turn into a socialist one, as well. (*Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* in Westmaas Jones 11)

In her book, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres*, Lizbeth Goodman considers *Top Girls* an exemplary feminist play

because it is experimental in form, using overlapping dialogue and skewed time frames; because it 'reclaims' women from history and gives them voices; because it brings together many different people in its audiences, encouraging contemporary

women and men to look at the situation of the working mother and career woman, without suggesting that there are easy answers or that everyone should try to be a 'superwoman'; and because it reached massive audiences and focused public attention on the real conflicts which many women face in juggling work and family responsibilities, in the context of societies which do not yet provide adequate resources for working women. (227)

#### **4.- *Top Girls*: feminisms and politics, and theatrical devices to deal with them**

In this chapter it will be analysed how Churchill employs a series of theatrical devices to ask questions about the situation of women in society. The devices that will be analysed are the all-women cast, the character's names, the deployment of spaces, the time structure, the doubling of roles and the overlapping dialogue.

*Top Girls* begins with a celebration, a dinner party in a London restaurant to celebrate Marlene's promotion to managing director. There are five guests, five women from the past: the English traveller Isabella Bird (1831-1904); the Emperor's courtesan and later Buddhist nun, Lady Nijo (1258 – after 1307); Dull Gret, the woman in an apron and armour who leads a host of women fighting the devils in the Brueghel painting *Dulle Griet*; Pope Joan, who is thought was a woman disguised as a man who reigned as pope between 854-856; and Patient Griselda, the submissive wife of Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. In an enthusiastic conversation, all the characters from the past, some of them historical, others from artistic works and a kind of legendary character, tell their own story.

The Scene Two is situated with the backdrop of the first Thatcherite years of government and explains the story of two sisters. Marlene escaped from her hometown to London when she was young to become a successful *yuppie* but she has paid a great price abandoning her daughter and family. The other sister, Joyce, has remained in their little town, near her parents and rearing her sister's daughter, Angie. Her life is very tough but she has not betrayed anybody. The future for Angie, as a mentally handicapped and poor girl, is foreseen even darker than Joyce's life.

From the difference between the first and the rest of the scenes, it could be said the

narratives used in the play are fragmented and surrealistic, two characteristics that have been attributed to postmodernist works of art. Another feature of postmodernism is that the piece raises questions rather than venturing to supply answers. *Top Girls* is written in a moment when women are looking more closely at the feminist movement, and interrogating themselves about the validity of bonding and sisterhood's politics. The concept of bonding in this British context can be understood not only in terms of genre but in class terms too. According to Chris Beasley, "socialist thought has historically been more influential in Europe, Britain and countries like Australia than in North America" (60). One of the outcomes of Margaret Thatcher's arrival was the increase of polarization between these mindsets: liberalism versus socialism. It is this opposition what inspired Churchill, as she explains:

It was also that Thatcher had just become prime Minister; and also I had been to America for a student production ... and I had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I'd ever met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. All of those ideas fed into *Top Girls*. (Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill* 38)

The fact of leaving open questions lead the critics to a number of interpretations. Dr Keith Peacock suggests that the playwright identifies this division among feminists as a failure of second-wave feminisms:

Churchill's socialist-feminist interrogation of women's status in Britain under Thatcher ... concludes that in spite of its high profile during the 1970s, the feminist movement had not significantly advanced the cause of women because it had not spoken with a unified voice. The mere presence of a woman prime Minister, herself a bourgeois feminist, offered no greater opportunities for the majority of women who could not or did not aspire to be "top girls". (Bazin 119)

Victoria Bazin, on her part, does not interpret the play as a critique of feminism, but rather as "an attempt to understand the place of feminism in relation to wider social and economic changes taking place at the time" (Bazin 120). Feminism, as any other philosophic or political theory, can not be reduced to the winners and losers scheme. In this vein, Georgiana Vasile agrees with Bazin:

What Churchill does is to document and examine the contradictions inherent in feminism during the time when she writes the play. *Top Girls* does not find the

causes nor the solutions for female oppression, nor does it privilege one feminist tendency over another, nor does it categorize women as sisters or foes, but simply records the voices of different women (daughters, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, wives, mistresses and co-workers), each with its own historical, social, cultural, political and economic background and its different contexts of oppression, struggling to survive and rightfully claiming its own place within the complex and contradictory world of feminism(s)." (255)

Elaine Aston, in her study of the author, opposes critics such as John Russell Taylor who vacillates if Marlene, who stands for the figure of the bourgeois feminist, is a heroine or not. Contrarily, she does not hesitate in her analysis: "Marlene's male-identified subject positioning is an unequivocal indexing of Churchill's critique of bourgeois feminism" (*Caryl Churchill* 40). Indeed, if we attend to the author, when she describes the genesis of the play, she explains that it was "to show that just to achieve the same things that men had achieved in capitalist society wouldn't be a good object" (Naismith xxii).

Thus, one of the central questions of the work is, in words of Benedict Nightingale, "what use is female emancipation ... if it transforms the clever women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, weak and helpless? Does freedom, and feminism, consist of aggressively adopting the key values that have for the centuries oppressed your sex?" (Naismith xxxv). Here, it should be added, that although in rough outlines the author might have done that question, probably, Churchill would not have used the word "your" insinuating that feminism is a matter of women instead of a matter that all the society must have into consideration.

Marlene celebrates her achievement with a group of prominent women from the past and from the social imaginary. She is continuing a kind of saga of fighting women. She thinks her achievement is a collective one, but it is not true. She has become a "top girl" at the expense of other women, her family, and even her daughter. Marlene wants to be evaluated by the women she considers her pairs. As Christopher Innes has argued: "For Marlene, who sees herself as their modern equivalent, these figures justify the competition for power in male terms" (Monforte 196). Their lives stand for the exploitation that women have suffered through history and, in particular, for celebrating the feats of some of them strong enough to have been fought for their position. It is through this perspective that Marlene evaluates her contemporary model of success. She uses her guests for the justification of her liberal point of view.

This interpretation of success meaning raises another question: actually, can be

right-wing feminism considered as feminism? Marlene's individualism, likewise Thatcher's is centred in one's own advancement and, as Joseph Marohl points out, "Marlene's advancement helps no one but herself, however much she would like to believe in a right-wing feminism ... She endorses a hierarchical system oppressive to the less fortunate women and men in society" (Westmaas Jones 13).

Marlene has misinterpreted sisterhood. She expects everybody sees her promotion as a collective accomplishment, but this is not the way the others see her. In Scene One, when Isabella proposes a toast for the party's host, Marlene corrects her, but the rest of the guests lift their drinks just for the host.

ISABELLA. To Marlene.\*1

MARLENE. And all of us.

JOAN. \*Marlene.

NIJO. Marlene.

GRET. Marlene.

MARLENE. We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements. (13)

In Act Three we have the clearest occasion of listening to Marlene defending her false idea of sisterhood when she is recognising she has voted for Margaret Thatcher:

MARLENE. ... First woman prime Minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

JOYCE. What good's first woman if it's her? I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures. (84)

Against the idea of sisterhood is the concept of intra-sexual oppression, coined by Elaine Aston, who enhances the term oppression: "*Top Girls* explores both inter- and intra-sexual oppression" (Caryl Churchill 39). There are a number of scholars who deal with the concept although not all of them use the same expression. Pilar Zozaya highlights what is the final result in the words of Carol Rumens for *The Times Literary Supplement*: "una versión hobbesiana de la teoría feminista según la cual los éxitos de los hombres se basan en explotar a la mujer, y los éxitos de las mujeres en explotar a otras mujeres" (161). Marlene supports the idea that all women can become a "top girl" and confirms it

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<sup>1</sup> Asterisks and slashes are used by the author to transcribe the overlapping dialogue. The slash marks "when one character starts speaking before the other has finished." The asterisk is used to note that "a speech follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it" (Caryl Churchill, *Plays 2*).

with an example that betrays her: “I know a managing director who’s got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays 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” (80). What Marlene does not wonder is who takes care of that woman’s children, the woman who does the domestic tasks in the “extremely high-powered lady” house.

Victoria Bazin remarks the irony in how “in the name of feminism, the “top girls”, the women who succeed in the new free-enterprise culture, do so at the expense of their sisters” (129). Joyce suffers a miscarriage due to exhaustion for having to care for Angie. For the same reason, she is not able to continue her studies and get education or skills to secure a well-paid job. She is “trapped in a cycle of poverty” while her sister Marlene “climbs the corporate ladder” with a good job and the “respect from her colleagues”. But, following Bazin, Joyce is not the only harmed. Angie is Marlene’s daughter in a double sense. She “is quite literally her mother’s daughter in the sense that she represents the fruits of Marlene’s competitive labour, the waste or detritus left in the wake of modernity’s progress” (131).

Another aspect that has been analysed by different critics is the all-women cast. Monforte interprets it as a way of underlining the effects of capitalism. “Since the play deals with the oppression of women by men in a capitalist regime, but at the same time with the oppression of women by women as an inevitable consequence of being part of that very regime, having a female cast emphasises the workings of capitalism” (147). The play does not need men in its cast “as patriarchy enforcers, since women have interiorised male behaviour and applied it to their everyday lives.” And Victoria Guillén Nieto agrees in the purpose of this all-female cast that “sirve para resaltar el hecho de que en el presente, la explotación de la mujer la lleguen a ejercer, paradójicamente, muchas de las féminas que han triunfado en el sistema social” (57).

Lizbeth Goodman contributes with another nuance pointing out that a male character would have diminished the load of intra-sexual oppression. In her words: “The introduction of one male character would set Marlene up in competition with him, whereas the scene [of the dinner party] stresses her internalized sense of competition, which manifests itself in her relationship with other women” (*Literature and Gender* 239).

In the version that Marc Chornet staged in Barcelona in 2015, there is a male character, the waiter (in the original, a waitress) that serves all the guests at the dinner party. This character has been understood by Monforte as the embodiment of “the exertion



of power by women over women” (153). It is not only a case of gender but of class as well.

By being a character without a name, by being unnamed, she may be seen to represent the anonymity and consequent lack of identity of the working class. At the same time, she may also represent the oppression of women as a class, and particularly the internalisation and repetition by women of models of oppression inherited from the patriarchal and capitalist establishments – what Aston calls “intra-sexual oppression” (Aston 1997a, 39) – since all the women in Act One can be said to exert some power over her. (156)

Following the issue of class, Victoria Guillén Nieto considers Churchill writes from a Socialist-Marxist point of view and tackles women’s success with irony. This irony can be clearly perceived in the relationship “de superior a inferior” the heroines establish with the waitress. Eventually, they drink a toast to the contemporary women’s liberation and success while the waitress, which is a symbol of the anonymous woman, is serving them. (284)

Having said that, at the end of his Doctoral Thesis, Monforte includes an interview with the first director in staging the play and responsible for the TV version of 1991, Max Stafford-Clark. In the latter, the waitress joints at the end of the scene and drinks with the other women. When asked for this detail, Stafford-Clark answers:

... The role of the waitress in *Top Girls* is used as a demonstration of impotence, but actually by the end she has a good time with the other women and is able to forget her place. So I think that to say “Oh, she’s there because she’s a symbol of the oppression women are doing to her, the same as they...” is probably true, but it’s a bit heavy-handed as an analysis because, after all, many of the actresses who would have been in the play would have worked as waitresses when they were drama students. It’s a perfectly honourable profession, to be a waitress you don’t have to be oppressed. (Laughs) (319)

Probably, this character can be analysed from different perspectives and whether the waitress is the embodiment of intra-sexual oppression and at the same time class oppression or not is a debatable issue. The discussion changes completely when the character is performed by a *male* actor<sup>2</sup>, like in the version by Marc Chornet. In this

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<sup>2</sup> The term *male* has been added to avoid misunderstandings and following the advice of the Guardian and Observer style guide. As we can read on The Guardian (25 September 2011) and later on [www.thestage.co.uk](http://www.thestage.co.uk) (20 February 2014), there is a controversy about the use of the term *actress* among the profession. Some female actors consider offensive to be describe as an actress. In fact,



adaptation, the waiter loses all the connotations the character might have for being a woman and he undoubtedly gains new ones that, in any case, had been planned by Churchill. The only man who appears on stage does not have any name and he is there just for serving the women achievers without pronouncing any word.

Although the original play is formed by an all-female cast, the presence of other men is made through the dialogue. One man stands out above the rest because he is the origin of a tough confrontation: Howard Kidd, the man who thought were going to be promoted to managing director instead of Marlene. Her wife visits Marlene to ask her to leave the position for her husband. She has assumed the patriarchal morals and after the refusal of Marlene to her proposal, she exclaims: "You'll end up... miserable and lonely. You're not natural" (59). For Mrs Kidd, the natural position of woman is situated in the domestic sphere, like the Victorian "angel in the house". She is the only character who is identified by her surname, the surname of her husband, the *natural* name of the family. Moreover, her language is acquired from men too: "You're one of these *ballbreakers* / that's what you are" (my emphasis) (59).

Obviously, Mrs Kidd is not the only woman who has internalised the patriarchal morals. There are a lot of examples throughout the play. One of them could be found in Louise, the 46-year-old woman who resorts to the agency because she needs a change. In her line "I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work" (52), it can be seen how she has interiorised that to act as a man at work is to act in the right way, because women do not belong to this sphere. On the other hand, as Monforte contends, "she exemplifies the number of women who occupy positions of responsibility, but who do not reach higher management" (200). Unexpectedly, she does not blame the system or even male mates for her situation. She sees women as competitors, in particular, the younger women of a new generation that have "a different style", "a new kind of attractive well-dressed [women]" (52).

The isolation Louise feels of not being among men and in opposition to other women is a key message of the play, in Monforte words: "how patriarchy purports to travesty women, to isolate them, to make women enemies among themselves and, thus, to prevent any kind of female collectivity from being created" (201). Probably, the first example of bonding among people is the one created by friendship and in this sense it is significant

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this style guide recommends the use of both *male* and *female actors* because *actress* comes into the category of *authoress*, *lady doctor* or *male nurse* that date "from a time when professions were largely the preserve of one sex (usually men)."

“the fact that none of the professional women – Marlene, Win and Nell – seem to have any women friends.” In the case of Marlene, she has not anybody (neither friends, nor close family) she could celebrate her promotion with. The protagonist has to recur to a sort of imaginary friends sketched in a surrealistic scene. The individuality pursued by Thatcher is clearly portrayed through the solitude of these characters. The prime Minister suspected of the unity of individuals since it gives them strength and this strength puts the established power in danger.

In fact, the word enemy appears in the play when Nijo refers to a woman, the Emperor’s wife: “The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns” (12). The Empress considers Nijo her enemy because she threatens her social position that depends on his husband favour. In a similar way, Mrs Kidd attacks Marlene as a way of defending her own position that depends on her husband’s income: “But he’s got a family to support. He’s got three children. It’s only fair” (59). Hence, class is interwoven with intra-sexual oppression as well.

The beginning of Scene One shows a group of women explaining their extraordinary lives but as the stories follow one another, the audience notice how everyone of them has suffered from rough experiences “and, more disturbingly”, as Bazin points out, “each woman accepts and defend her punishment as natural and fitting consequence of her transgressive acts” (122). Thus, the internalisation of male standards is felt as natural morals from the beginning of history. This internalisation has been reinforced by literature (Patient Griselda) and other arts (Gret Dull) until it has been assumed by contemporary women (Marlene and the other “top girls”, Mrs Kidd, Louise...).

Among the historical characters, Nijo, for instance demonstrates her internalisation when Marlene asks her if she was raped.

NIJO. ... No, of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby. I soon found I was sad if he stayed away. It was depressing day after day not knowing when he would come. I never enjoyed taking other women to him. (3)

She has interiorised the patriarchal discourse according to which women are subordinated and transformed into sexual objects. Besides, in these lines the confrontation of women appears again. It was her who after falling in love with the Emperor is the responsible for taking him other women, that is her enemies. Later on, she explains how bad she feels because she is the responsible of her father did not go directly to heaven, because she woke him up while he was praying. And again she will blame herself because

a priest became her lover. Although “He knew that when he died he would fall into one of the three lower realms” (10), she considers herself the only one guilty: “Misery in this life and worse in the next, all because of me” (11).

Pope Joan’s internalisation is flagrant as soon as she recognizes that she herself is a heresy and accepting the Church law that proclaims “Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope” (15). A norm that equalised adult women’s capabilities with children’s and lunatics. She just wanted to devote her life to learning, a plan that could not be accomplished being a woman. Due to her wisdom and hard study she climbs the Church scale until the Pope died and then she is the new appointee Pope. Then, she feels happy because she will be able to know everything, even God, but she resigns herself to the situation: “I had thought the Pope would know everything. I thought God would speak to me directly. But of course he knew I was a woman” (14).

The character that most clearly resigns herself to accepting her tough times and whose feature gives her name is Patient Griselda. She was a peasant chosen by a marquis to be his wife on the condition she must always obey him in everything. A condition she did find absolutely normal because “of course a wife must obey her husband” (21). Again the social position of a woman depends on her marriage: “I’d rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village” (21). But the tough times would arrive when she gives birth her two children, firstly a girl and, some years later, a boy. In both cases the Marquis takes her the children away and twice she justifies his actions: “Walter found it hard to believe I loved him. He couldn’t believe I would always obey him. He *had to* prove it” (my emphasis) (22). After expelling her from home he proves her again:

GRISELDA. But he told me to come. I had to obey him. He wanted me to help prepare his wedding. He was getting married to a young girl from France / and nobody except me knew how to arrange things the way he liked them.  
(24)

Thus, he tries to prove her loyalty with the creation of an enemy by putting forward another woman to occupy her position, a tactic that has been seen yet with other stories. But she is the most resigned character in the play and she uses every occasion to justify him: “He suffered so much all those years” (25). Even her last intervention is used to excuse his actions: “I do think – I wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter *hadn’t had to*” (my emphasis) (27).

But the internalisation of the patriarchal standards in the play, as has been already pointed out, is not just a matter of the past. For instance, Nell and Win’s use of language is

paradigmatic, as Monforte has highlighted (202). They consider that for women to be successful they need to do exactly the same things and in the same way men do and they adopt not only attitude and behaviour but even masculine language:

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

WIN. Poor *little bugger*. (My emphasis) (46)

Later on, Win will refer to the competitive women like themselves as "tough birds" (48) and Nell with the expression "pretty bastards" (50). And in Act Two, Scene Three, Nell exchanges impressions with the young candidate Shona in a very significant way:

NELL. Because that's what an employer is going to have doubts about with a lady as I needn't tell you, whether she's got the guts to push through to a closing situation. They think we're too nice. They think we listen to the buyer's doubts. They think we consider his needs and feelings.

SHONA. I never consider people's feelings. (61)

Nell evaluates all the features traditionally attributed to women as negative for working. If we take into account that the public sphere of work is reserved just for men, the women that want to enter in it should avoid being nice, listening to the other and considering the other's needs and feelings. Nell transforms positive human features in negative ones and contributes to maintain the patriarchal system. She will think Shona hits the target with her answer, hence she asks Shona if she would like to work in the future in Top Girls agency.

In short, there are many examples of one of the main questions the play lays out and that Max Stafford-Clark expresses in the following words: "[The play] questions whether or not women should do exactly the same things as men" (Monforte 314).

Another aspect treated by the play is the interrelation of class and gender. Churchill is part of the second wave feminism that made popular the motto "The personal is political". That is, the personal decisions taken by any person not only show his or her position before social situations but also intervene in the conformation of this situation. When the tough conditions caused by gender intertwine with class, the disadvantaged becomes the most damaged. The playwright has admitted in several occasions her socialist feminist point of view that, according to Tess Lanning, "emphasised the interaction of capitalism with patriarchy to its own benefit" (12). When Marlene decides to abandon her daughter and, at the same time, worsening the chances for her sister Joyce, her personal decision contributes to strengthen capitalist machinery.

From a socialist stance, capitalism looks for the material benefit above any consideration of non-materialistic one. Take care of persons like her daughter enters in this second category, the category she is not interested in. Angie is poor and her biological mother sees her “a bit thick” and “a bit funny” and recognise “She’s not going to make it” (66). This line foresees the last word of the play. In the last scene, Angie is awakened by a nightmare and enters in the dining room where Marlene is having a drink.

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

ANGIE. Frightening. (87)

Marlene has accepted the insufficient reforms that enable some women to success in a materialistic way but the play shows the audience how the system, and the people who support it, leave the helpless out of the way. In Janet Brown words:

The play is expressive of the next wave of feminism, a feminism that focuses not on the individual woman’s struggle for autonomy, but on the need for a radical transformation in society. [Scene One] reminds us not only of the historical weight of women’s oppression but also of the futility of individual solutions. The child’s dream of the future reminds us of what is at stake in the feminist struggle for societal transformation. (Westmaas Jones 13)

The class issue appears here and there. Bill Naismith pays attention to the names as a feature use by Churchill to associate the character with her social class (xli). According to him, Marlene can be considered a working-class name in Britain. The same can be attributed to Jeanine, Shona, Joyce and the diminutives: Angie and Marley – the affectionate nickname Joyce uses to comfort Marlene –. On the other hand, the Kidds have names (Rosemary and Howard) more associated with their middle class. Naismith claims that “Win and Nell are more difficult to place; their names are socially ambiguous.” Apparently, what gives consistency to his statement of names associated with class is corroborated by other signals in the text. When these pieces of evidence are not clear, then the relationship between names and class fades away.

Following Naismith, deployment of spaces denotes a fragmented society. Juxtaposition is made to provoke contrast between characters and between spaces as well. The office – and I would add the restaurant – contrasts with Joyce’s house. Britain is presented as a country of extremes “the one urban, smart, affluent and optimistic, the other rural, static, poor and pessimistic” (li). The dialogue maintained in Act Three between the two sisters confirms these two Britains. They begin talking about their mother but soon

the argument begins. Joyce reproaches her sister for having abandoned her daughter and forget all about her own family. And the discussion finishes bitterly confronting the two marked positions. In the following lines the discussion is going to be analysed part by part. All the italics are mine.

MARLENE. *I don't mean anything personal.* I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes. (86)

The sentence in italics can be taken as a clear reference to the aforementioned motto of the second wave feminists: "The personal is political". Marlene thinks political can be separated from personal and when she speaks about politics with her sister, she does not consider she is referring to someone in particular, even though she is speaking directly to Joyce. The dialogue continues:

JOYCE. And if they haven't?

MARLENE. If they're *stupid* or *lazy* or *frightened*, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?

JOYCE. What about Angie?

MARLENE. What about Angie?

JOYCE. She's *stupid*, *lazy* and *frightened*, so what about her?

MARLENE. You run her down too much. She'll be all right.

Marlene forgets in her assertion that there are people who do not choose to be the way they are and puts in the same group stupid people with lazy or frightened. Not for nothing "frightening" will be the word which closes the play, because frightening is the future for that stupid people Marlene refers to.

Regarding *lazy*, this word which is often related with *scrounger* by conservative media. In "After Thatcher: Still Trying to Piece it all Together", Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright assert they have been hearing a lot about scroungers since the recession set in. "In the media, it really has been scroungers, scroungers, scroungers. It is funny how scroungers are always poor people, whereas the rich get classified as 'deserving', present day." The text is a revision of "Beyond the Fragments", that was written inspired by the feminist activism of the 1970s and the arrival of Thatcher. Marlene claims she is not going to help "this kind of people" and under her discourse is this conception of the scroungers.

The dialogue finishes with Marlene adopting a sort of postmodern stance and denying the construction of identity with the distinction between us and them, the otherness. Joyce does not reject the Marxist metanarrative and considers that the others (the part of society with money and power) place them (the poor, the lower classes) at the

margin of the society.

JOYCE. I don't expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. Because nothing's changed and it won't with them in.

MARLENE. Them, them. / Us and them?

JOYCE. And you're one of them.

MARLENE. And you're one of them. And you're us, wonderful us, and Angie's us / and Mum and Dad's us.

JOYCE. Yes, that's right, and you're them. (86)

In her thesis, Victoria Guillén Nieto gives another meaning to the deployment of spaces in the play. She connects the different spheres (public / private) with the different settings. The restaurant and the agency constitute the public sphere, whereas Joyce's backyard and kitchen are the private one. The latter spaces "simbolizan, en definitiva, la opresión de la mujer que carece de recursos económicos, y el poco significado que para ésta tiene el hecho de que unas pocas mujeres con estudios universitarios lleguen al poder en los años setenta y ochenta de nuestro siglo" (56). For them, the Victorian distinction between the private and the public sphere continues still current. The public sphere is for the successful women while the private is the space for the oppressed. In fact, although Joyce is a working woman, she has not any chance to work in the public sphere: "I've got four different cleaning jobs. Adds up. There's not a lot round here" (82).

Another issue of social class intertwined with gender is illustrated through appearance. The most noticeable character in this aspect is Nijo. She continuously expresses in some way or another how important is clothing for her. Sometimes she describes down to the last detail her clothes. In other occasions, she directly conveys the importance clothing has as a status sign: "What I enjoyed most was being the Emperor's favourite / and wearing thin silk" (4), "I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk" (12). When Griselda tells her sad story, Nijo is worried about being well-dressed to the point of feeling ashamed if she is not: "And what did you wear? He didn't make you get married in your own clothes? That would be perverse" (22).

Shame is what the applicant Jeanine feels in her interview with Marlene when she thinks the interviewer is criticising her appearance because again dress code is considered a sign of class:

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



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

MARLENE. I mean experience. (30)

In the last scene, when Marlene visits her sister and “niece”, Joyce offers her a cup of tea:

JOYCE. I don't expect you take sugar.

MARLENE. Why not?

JOYCE. You take care of yourself. (68)

Joyce assumes successful women are concerned about their appearance. Apparently, this concern is reserved for upper-class women. From her words, which will be more bitter as the scene goes by, can be deduced what she might be thinking, that is, lower class women do not take care of themselves but of their families and the people they love.

According to Goodman, although Joyce is not impressed by success, “Angie reveals that she admires Marlene partly because of her fancy clothes and polished appearance” (*Literature and Gender* 240). Marlene brings the gift of clothes forgetting that Angie must be grown and gives her a dress for a younger girl. Even so, Angie loves the dress because she trusts in the good taste of aunty Marlene because she is a successful upper-class woman.

Another theatrical device Caryl Churchill employs to convey her message and one of the most noticeable is the structure.<sup>3</sup> Act One is situated in a London restaurant, on a Saturday night of 1980. Act Two is divided into three scenes. With the first one, the audience/reader enters next Monday morning in the eponymous employment agency, Top Girls. In Scene Two, action moves to the previous Sunday afternoon in Joyce's backyard. Scene three is again placed in the agency on Monday morning. Finally, Act Three is situated in Joyce's kitchen one year earlier, on a Sunday evening of 1979 – the year Thatcher won the general election –.

Hence, the structure might be described as episodic with a chronological disruption and circular. In any case, this is another of the features of Churchill's experimental writing. In 1982, the same year the play was staged, when Churchill was asked in an interview if by challenging the established models she was involved in creating a female aesthetic, she declared: “I remember long before that thinking of the ‘maleness’ of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax. But it's not

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<sup>3</sup> I will follow the original drama although the version for television and other staging versions change some details of the scene's order.



something I think about very often” (Naismith xxii). Nevertheless, several interpretations have been construed about her “feminine writing”. Following Lizbeth Goodman (*Literature and Gender* 233), a number of scholars argue there is a “‘female’ way of speaking, writing and reading” determined by culture and learned gender roles. From a more Freudian point of view, “Hélène Cixous ... argues that women’s writing is different from men’s because women write with their bodies, so their writing has a rhythm closer to that of female sexual pleasure.”

More distant from the Freudian theories that influenced Cixous, there is another interpretation of this “non-linear pattern” which is related to “the typical structure of women’s lives: often interrupted by child-rearing and housekeeping” (Lizbeth Goodman, *Literature and Gender* 233). This is an interpretation rooted in Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. When she is revising the history of literature written by women, she verifies that towards the end of the eighteenth century “the middle-class woman began to write” (80). And she concludes that these women wrote novels and no other genres. One of the causes is that they “ha[d] to write in the common sitting-room” (82), and then, they were always interrupted. That is, the structure of daily life, the writer’s routine, determines the genre (in this case, the structure) of the writing. In this line, we must remember how Churchill herself at the beginning of her career wrote short radio dramas because she combined her writing with child-rearing.

For Victoria Guillén Nieto, *Top Girls’* episodic structure seems more related to the representation of the women’s essence and the search of a feminine voice in the dramatic space. This structure catches the spectator’s eye upon a reality which is diverse, heterogeneous and cyclic, words that have been used to define the feminine essence in the most recent literary theories (289).

More in the line of Churchill’s aforementioned words is her will to distance from the Aristotelian ideal that has been predominant on the stages until today. The classical narrative plot presents an instructive example of a character and his story through a progressive construction which is carried to the climax and ends in the resolution. Challenges to it – in Kritzer words – “have invariably carried the implication of protest against authoritarian power and assertion of a need for social change” (Monforte 17).

The paradigmatic example of this sort of protest is epic theatre. Probably, what Churchill does, influenced by Brecht, is to use the structure as a defamiliarising device to raise the conscience in the audience. Breaking the linearity of the story, she breaks the relation cause-effect and compels the audience to be active and to search this relationship

out of the stage. The play is a construction and a mirror for reality. Thus, if the play is not linear but diverse, in the same way, reality is diverse and constructed. Consequently, it can be rearranged.

Regarding the circularity, it could be analysed as a repetition of the women's history. The tragedy lived by the heroines in Scene One is repeated in Marlene's life and the other contemporary characters. Both in the past and in the present, the acquisition of protagonism in the public sphere implies, many times, the sacrifice of the woman's identity and solitude (Victoria Guillén Nieto 45). This accurate picture of the repetition of history has led Michael Evenden to refer to the playwright as "a theatre poet of temporal stasis, the pioneer dramaturge of a fearful historical deadlock" (Westmaas Jones 12).

Another device that has attracted the attention of a number of critics is the doubling roles. As it has been already said, *Top Girls* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre, London on 28 August 1982. That first time, the 16 characters were performed by seven actors. This doubling and trebling of the roles was not the original intention of the author: "I wasn't thinking in terms of doubling at all" (Naismith liii). Eventually, partly financial consideration and partly because for the actors the play would be more enjoyable, *Top Girls* has been staged in this way for more than thirty years in theatres all over the world. Thus, although it was not the original intention, it can contribute to the meaning conveyed from the stage.

This multiplicity of different characters (very different indeed in some cases) played with doubling and trebling technique, creates visual links that imply they "might share common features" (De la Concha, Dobrott and Ballesteros 183). In an indirect manner this way of representation advocates for sisterhood, it underlines the points which tie bonds between women.

Each actor performs multiple roles, except the one playing Marlene. While the rest of the actors subtly suggests a continuity in history, Marlene's lack of transformation, for Helene Keyssar, "is not simply a pragmatic decision but a choice that suggests the limits to Marlene's goals" (97). Her goals are individual goals that do not count for women as a group. Elaine Aston goes further when claims that Marlene is "a woman who ... is constructed as the 'conventional man'. Her identification with dominant, masculine values is reflected in the way in which actress and role are constant, unlike the 'unfixing' strategies encoded in the doubling of other characters" (*Caryl Churchill* 40). Marlene stands for fixedness of patriarchy. Her behaviour supports the popular quote from *Il Gattopardo*: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Successful

women acting as men would do are the things that change in order to maintain the social status quo.

The doubling most worth commenting on is that of Gret and Angie. Both characters share inarticulateness and origins in the working class. Besides, both are characters who fight for what they want. Gret leads a host of warrior women to force the devils out. Angie travels alone to London to become a “top girl” like her admired aunt/mother. Gret is the one who unites strength gathering women to fight against a common misfortune. Angie is who needs that union because she is devoid of any ability to liberate herself without helping. The working class condition of this doubling character is especially relevant if we have into account the socialist view of the author. As Monforte has been interpreted: “The change of the structures of society should be made by the dispossessed” (152).

The play questions the roles patriarchy has imposed on women through history until today. The doubling roles undermines the fixedness of those roles. Mrs Kidd and Joyce have very different status but when they are played by the same actor the situation where they seem to be stuck loses their fixation. Nothing is permanent, everything can be changed is the positive message the audience can collect.

An original Churchillian technique is the overlapping dialogue. In theatre, usually, one speech begins when the last one has finished, but it does not occur in real life. People comment over other speech and sometimes two persons speak at the same time and not necessarily in an argument. The overlapping dialogue is defined by Goodman in the following terms: “a technique for layering language in the manner of a musical score, with some strains sounding out over others. While the technique is highly artful and immensely difficult to learn and perform, it captures the essence of realistic speech, with the effect of seeming less artful than naturalistic” (*Mythic Women/Real Women* xx).

This technique is used especially in two acts: One and Three, that is, the dinner party and Marlene’s visit to Joyce. There are two main trends in the interpretation of overlapping dialogue’s use and effect by critics. One group interprets the technique as a reflection of the inability to listen to others; the other group of critics considers it is a demonstration of enthusiasm and support among women. Among the first group, Elaine Aston sees in the first scene a group of women incapable of listening to and to share other women’s experiences (*Caryl Churchill* 39). For her, the overlapping dialogue underscores the intra-sexual oppression.

For Victoria Bazin, Marlene invites the other successful women to a celebration of the historical process toward freedom all they are part of. By contrast, what the scene

dramatizes is “a historical and cultural discontinuity and disjunction” as the women constantly talk over each other (123). All these critics agree about the characters in Scene One prefer to relate their own stories more than to listen to and try to understand one another’s woe. In this vein, Janet Brown does not see them as a community of women that share experiences, but as a group of competitors, egoist enough to interrupt one another continually (Vasile 249). In fact, Juli Thompson Burk, who directed the play at the University of Hawaii in 1987, specifies she portrayed the historical characters “as contradictions, not successes” because they do not make an effort to listen to and understand one another’s experiences (Lizbeth Goodman, *Literature and Gender* 246).

But, from the point of view of these critics, why all these women who have suffered as mothers, sisters, lovers, wives... demonstrate this self-centred behaviour? Margaret Rubik attributes it “to the women’s inability to escape the male standards and values” – as has been extensively analysed –. Monforte goes further being of the opinion that “this reinforces the gloomy fact that they will not be able to learn from each other’s experiences in life, and therefore no hopeful alternative can be envisaged” (165). In his opinion, all the same can be applied to the conversation between the two sisters in Act Three, which is constructed by means of the overlapping dialogue technique as well.

While scholars like Aston, Bazin, Brown, Thompson Burk, Rubik and Monforte have understood the overlapping dialogue as a representation of self-centredness, others have considered it as a sign of enthusiasm and support. Actually, these interpretations seem closer to Churchill’s explanation for the choice of setting Scene One around a table:

I suppose I set them around a dinner table because it’s a place where you can celebrate and I wanted it to be a festive scene where they were celebrating what they’d done as well as talking about the hard times. It was to be at a level of amusing anecdotes, *sharing something, entertaining each other* (my emphasis) (Lizbeth Goodman, *Literature and Gender* 238).

Indeed, they are sharing similar experiences because their woes are caused by the fact of having born woman and, at the same time, they are celebrating their struggles against those conditions. And as they are in a celebration they are entertaining each other.

According to Jennifer Coates and her definition of *collaborative talk*, women “tend to organize their talk cooperatively, while men tend to organize their talk competitively” (Vasile 249). In this sense, Churchill might want to be naturalistic and show what Melody Schneider describes as “‘authentic’ female voices” (Vasile 249). Thus, following Coates, in all women groups, it is common one speaker comments over another speaking, or asks

questions while another person is speaking, or complete another speaker's sentences, or rephrase them or even open separated sub-topics and it is not considered by the other as a negative or self-centred behaviour. It might be added, that this way of communicating does not depend on gender, but on context. That is, in a relaxed and familiar situation, both men and women normally talk like the characters in Scene One. And this context, a celebration in a restaurant, clearly point out to a relaxed situation where conversation and feelings flow as freely as eating and drinking do.

Schneider, following Suzanne Romaine, argues that this way of talking is not only a sign of enthusiasm and support but also a sign of "active listenership". In fact, in Scene One, when a guest interrupts another is because something the speaker has said recalls the listener something related to her own experiences. Romaine argues that what is much more important to consider is "how those whose talk is overlapped perceive the overlap" (Vasile 250). And the guests do not react negatively to the interruptions and the parallel speaking. In this light, Scene Three presents a different context. Here the interlocutors are sisters and the decisions made by every one of them affect one another. Therefore, as the conversation continues and the dirty linen appears the interpolations grow in bitterness and they are received negatively.

All things considered, the different voices of trans-historical and trans-cultural female experiences that appear under the overlapping dialogue can be read as an evidence of the different voices among women. Taking into account they practice an active listenership it demonstrates that they can learn from other experiences and points of view. All of them claim their respect of being different because a community based on gender do not need to be uniform. Diversity does not mean disjunction. Variety can be understood as enriching for the community.

## **5.- Conclusions**

The title of the final project, *Feminism and future in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls: a chance for hope*, determines from the very beginning the point of view defended throughout the work. Thus, as was established in the introduction, socialism feminism is the main theory where my critical approach is based on. In front of the question, if the message conveyed by the play is that feminism is still able to give answers for social change after the 1980s backlash, my answer is positive. After evaluating all the arguments

in favour of pessimism in the future, as well as some arguments in favour of my thesis, the conclusions that have been drawn are summed up in the following lines.

First of all, it has been demonstrated Caryl Churchill is a committed dramaturge, a statement supported by the play and by her own words. An actual commitment cannot be aimed to paralysis. As Belén Gopegui defended in a lecture given at the Universitat de València (4 March 2016), works that leave a mark of impotence and fatalism stop readers/audience from action. This kind of works do not provoke actual consequences but stagnation. Conversely, the line “You just keep running on and fighting / you didn’t stop for nothing” pronounced by Gret (28) in the last part of the dinner, might be an unambiguous example of how language and images are put in front of the spectators to empower them and push them to take action outside the theatre. The situation is complex and the struggle will be arduous, but it will be worthy.

Although Thatcher did not encourage personally other women to become a “top girl”, her presence as Prime Minister was supposed to elevate general women self-confidence. On the contrary, the outcome of her government – increment of poverty, unemployment, inequality and the decline of social mobility – made pessimism grow. In this context, Churchill contends: “She may be a woman but she isn’t a sister, she may be a sister but she isn’t a comrade. And, in fact, things have got much worse for women under Thatcher” (Monforte 139).

Polarisation of society was promoted by the government and allied media. The same was applied to feminist movement with a consequence: the weakening of the vigour and enthusiasm achieved in the past. Indeed, feminists were divided and the play certainly calls attention to that fact, but Churchill avoids Manichaeism, she presents the conflict as it is. The playwright does not want to portray the characters as utterly bad or good. Marlene appears in the first scene as a successful woman, but as the play moves forward the reader/audience discovers she is not the feminist she claims to be. The working-class Joyce is not a heroine either. Her father used to hit her mother, but Joyce avoids condemning him and puts both parents in the same group because she is a materialist feminist and for her the struggle is based just on class.

The final scene confronts two viewpoints, liberal and socialist, to face present and future challenges. It ends with the fear in future expressed by the most defenceless character, Angie. The open-ending is particularly lugubrious after seeing Act Two, because the audience already knows how dark is that future for Angie and people like her. The episodic and disarranged structure which shows firstly the consequences (Act Two) of

society behaviour (Act Three) offers the spectator a second opportunity. The positive idea is that things can be changed to avoid such a woeful future. The accent in this structure is placed on the causes which are what should be modified.

In this sense, the play is a conscious-raiser, more than a simple presentation of facts. Society must be changed. The author suggests that women have to look for an alternative to male system of power but, at the same time, she recognises it is a hard work limited by many obstacles. The great celebration of Marlene's success will be when her way up does not depend on trampling Angie's chances. The real context of Churchill's writing and the play's backdrop interweave to show the urgent necessity of equality not just between sexes but among women as well. Angie and Gret are two stages of the same process, the answer of the disinherited. Angie stands for the dispossessed class in a capitalist society. When this class takes conscience of its unfair ordeal, they will transform this awareness into energy for a revolutionary action. The second stage, the action, is represented by Dull Gret.

If the status quo is not re-evaluated, "frightening", Angie's last line will continue defining future, not just hers, but Marlene's too, because frightening is the future of solitude and renunciation that waits for the "top girl". Marlene is undoubtedly a victimiser, but also a victim of the same system she is supporting, although she does not realise it. Even Howard Kidd is another victim if we notice that what causes him a heart attack is the fact of having been substituted in his expectations by a woman. Patriarchy sustains the capitalist system and that system oppresses both sexes. All the characters in the play are affected by the oppression in one way or another. In this light, the oppression system affects the individual, but the effective struggle should be made by the collectivity (Gret and her host) because it affects every single person.

To conclude, Caryl Churchill, with her deployment of dramatic devices, looks into the diversity of female voices which populate feminism to distinguish diversity from division. Although the playwright does not give answers for all the questions following the tradition of the postmodern and epic theatre, she gives some hints. In the play, the division is exhibited as a flaw that must be repaired and diversity is celebrated. In Marlene's words: "We don't all have to believe the same" (6). *Top Girls* shows how individuality is neither the weapon against capitalism, nor against patriarchy. In order to empower collectivity, a multiplicity of voices has to be integrated and respected. If the diverse collection of feminist voices unites, there will be hope for a better future.



## 6.- Annex



Pictures from the Royal Court Theatre staging in 1982, by Sue Adler.





Caryl Churchill, by Stephen Cummiskey.



Picture from the BBC production, by Alastair Muir/Rex Features.

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