"[Not] Talking 'Bout My Generation":
Historicizing Feminisms in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

The impulse to construct history in generational terms, to identify oneself and one's politics with a particular generation, is evident in the recent debates taking place in feminism concerning the relation between second- and third-wave feminisms. Constructing a third wave sets up a particular kind of historical narrative for feminism that implies both the end of the second wave (and the completion of its project) and the beginning of a third wave that is distinctly different to its predecessor. While third-wave feminism signals its indebtedness to second-wave feminism (there could not be a third without a second), at the same time it often constructs itself in generational terms as the more progressive daughter of its second-wave mother. The introduction to Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford's Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration usefully maps out the competing definitions of the third wave as it has been constructed in the past decade. For instance, in Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards define the third wave as "women who were reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement" (15). Barbara Findlen's Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation makes explicit in its title the notion that a new generation of feminists are replacing an old one, and Rene Denfeld's The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order is a more populist and overt dismissal of the second wave as no longer relevant to contemporary politics. The assumption being made here is that third wavers have enjoyed the benefits of their metaphorical mothers' heroic efforts and come to feminism as more knowing subjects, as subjects acutely aware of the dangers of the cruder versions of liberal and radical feminism. The critical discourse that has developed as a way of explaining feminism's history often describes it in generational terms as being a family affair. Tensions and conflicts within feminism are understood as those that occur between mothers and daughters; they are the "natural" consequences of generational change. Naturally bound to each other, these feminisms are related and thus the daughter bears a resemblance to the mother, but, at
the same time, she offers a new and implicitly more progressive-alternative to her second-wave predecessor.

A number of feminists have raised questions about third-wave terminology and the generational model of feminist history embedded within it. In *Third Wave Feminism*, the editors set out to “revise the wave metaphor, whilst ensuring that the voices, ideas, arguments and hopes of ‘third wavers’ are heard” (4). In “Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Literature,” Kathleen Woodward critically examines the Freudian psychoanalytical model of subject formation that rests on generational division and conflict. She points to the ways in which that model effaces the postmenopausal woman, dismissing her as “posthistorical” because she no longer fulfils a reproductive function. In the same essay Woodward also points to Judith Roof’s “Generational Difficulties, or the Fear of a Barren History,” which describes how the generational model imposes what Roof calls a “reproductive narrative” upon the history of feminism. That narrative “superimposes assumptions about property, propriety and precedence” that function to reinforce and reproduce the power structures dividing women from each other (154). It is the word “precedence” that is most relevant to the present discussion, for with it Roof implies that the generational model constructs the past as the authentic source or origin of the present, as the essential and unchanging bedrock upon which knowledge of the present is founded. The mediated nature of history remains unacknowledged by this model, thereby continuing the myth that the past is fully recoverable, knowable, and fixed.

The reliance upon the familial structures inherent in the idea of generational difference locates feminist history firmly within a network of family relationships. Rather than opening it up to the multiple other histories that constitute and have appeared in the wake of the second wave, this closes off the possibilities of understanding the past outside the normative structures that feminism itself has resisted. In other words, this approach to feminist historiography reinforces the social roles enshrined in the traditional nuclear family by reproducing the fiction of the generational divide. While feminism has always understood that the “personal is political,” the generational model threatens to empty feminism of its political content by transforming its conflicts into personal interfamilial struggles that have little impact on wider social relations. Indeed, popular media representations of feminism construct it in these terms. Perhaps more importantly, the generational model carries within it an assumption that the history of feminism is progressive and somehow natural. The daughter’s revisions of the mother’s political agenda are the inevitable
and necessary consequences of historical progress. Feminism improves itself through generational change, evolving into a more sophisticated and effective political instrument capable of responding to modernity as it too marches forward into the new millennium. Moreover, the notion of a new generation and/or a third wave suggests that the second-wave agenda of social and political equality has been achieved in the West. It is a model that is blind to the everyday struggles of women still mired in poverty and fighting social injustice. As Nicole Ward Jouve points out in Third Wave Feminism, while some gains have been made,

Women still head the list of the world's poor, still suffer from discrimination and oppression (political, economic, religious) and from slavery (as in the Sudan). Everywhere women continue to be the victims of rape in war (as in Bosnia, Chechnya or the various African wars). (200)

Feminists of color point to the colonial and racist assumptions embedded in the idea of waves of feminism. As Mridula Nath Chakraborty writes in her contribution to Third Wave Feminism, "Wa(i)ving it All Away: Producing Subject and Knowledge in Feminisms of Colour," what she describes as "hegemonic feminism" needs to critically interrogate its "Eurocentric agenda." "Instead of perpetuating the wave metaphor, in which each successive wave signifies a further 'evolution' in the progressive narrative of feminist history" (205), a narrative which seeks to subsume the different agendas of women of color, hegemonic feminism needs to resist the impulse to colonize feminism.

Third-wave feminism plays into the hands of anti-feminist agendas by reinforcing generational difference at the expense of more complex and nuanced understandings of feminism's relation to modernity. As Gillis and Munford argue in "Genealogies and Generations: The Politics and Praxis of Third Wave Feminism," "the generational account of feminism—which third-wave feminism is perpetuating—should be understood as merely another tool of the backlash" (177–78). The question remains, however, as to how to resist reproducing this generational model of feminism's history. While Gillis and Munford offer a convincing critique of the third wave and post-feminism, they are unable to offer alternatives to the third-wave paradigm.

The refusal of the generational model, I argue, is essentially a matter of how feminism understands its relation to modernity, how it sees itself materially embedded in the historical moment, how it identifies itself as
historically contingent. This historical awareness is missing from crude conceptions of second- and third-wave generations of feminism. What is needed is an understanding of what Anne Oakley and Juliet Mitchell describe as "feminism's essential contradictions" or rather "the dialectic of gender relations" (9). Rather than constructing narratives that simplify feminism and its histories, accounts of the past need to accept and engage with its complexities. The tensions within feminism at certain historical moments are not signs of weakness or uncertain political agendas but rather evidence of feminism's continued and profound engagement with modernity.

One way of disrupting the generational model might be to return to the second wave's attempts to understand feminist politics in relation to a materialist history. By doing so, the "dialectic of gender relations" might be explored allowing for a critical understanding of feminism's place in history. Locating feminism in this way becomes not simply a matter of contextualizing but rather a matter of identifying feminism's histories as conflicted, contradictory, and complex. This is a feminism that is fractured, divided against itself, troubled yet at the same time troubling; it is a feminism that is not unified but rather diverse and multiple. Most importantly, it is a feminism that pushes against the constraints of gender as they are reinforced by modernity while also benefiting in some ways from modernity's economic expansion in the latter half of the twentieth century.

British feminism's engagement with its own histories became important in the period between the mid-70s and the early 1980s. A number of writers with an explicitly feminist agenda were attempting to construct and dramatize its history. Particularly significant during this period was the feminist involvement in subsidized fringe theatre. For a brief moment in Britain, fringe theatre became a site in which feminism informed not only political content but also performance practice. Increasingly frustrated with the persistence of patriarchal structures within the theatre itself, a small number of feminist theatre groups emerged specifically formed to provide opportunities for women as actors, writers, directors, and technicians. One of these groups, Monstrous Regiment, performed Vinegar Tom in 1976, a play written by an emerging playwright called Caryl Churchill. It was Churchill's relationship with the Joint Stock Theatre Company, however, that proved to be the most lasting and the most productive. Employing a collaborative creative process that involved the actors and the director in the development of the play, Churchill became one of the most important playwrights of the '80s. Steeped in left politics, committed to
agit-prop fringe theatre and the collaborative approaches that informed it, Churchill is a writer who uses drama to explore histories in nonlinear, non-generational terms. The play that most explicitly deals with the relation between feminism and history is *Top Girls*, first performed at the Royal Court in 1982.

*Top Girls* dramatizes the conflict between two sisters: Marlene, the competitive, gutsy, ambitious Thatcherite and Joyce, her exploited socialist sister who raises the child Marlene abandons. While Churchill takes a swipe at the selfish and shallow values of the new free enterprise culture, Joyce's arguments are no match for her sister's drive, energy, and ambition. The person who forces Marlene to hesitate is her daughter, Angie. It is Angie who represents the revolutionary force within the play, and it is Angie'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.

Churchill portrays sisterhood as a site of conflict and tension rather than unity and solidarity. D. Keith Peacock in *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties* suggests that Churchill identifies this lack of political unity as second-wave feminism's peculiar failure:

Churchill's socialist-feminist interrogation of women's status in Britain under Thatcher therefore 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." (95)

While undoubtedly Churchill would have recognized, along with other feminists, that Thatcher's top girl status did little to further the social and economic interests of women, it seems unlikely that she would have interpreted this as a failing of feminism. The conflicted nature of sisterhood in Churchill’s play offers an image of feminism in dialectical terms. Rather than dramatizing feminism in terms of progression, measuring its "success" in relation to individual women's achievements, Churchill
"[Not] Talking 'bout my Generation"

examines the feminism of her own historical moment as a constellation of what Walter Benjamin would describe as a "configuration pregnant with tensions" (254). This is not a critique of feminism, but rather it is an attempt to understand the place of feminism in relation to wider social and economic changes taking place at the time. For Churchill, a writer deeply indebted to Marxist cultural theory as well as to feminism, it is necessary not only to historicize feminism but, at the same time, to "blast open the continuum of history," to challenge the hegemony of a historicism intent on constructing the past as a movement toward "the infinite perfectibility of mankind" (254, 252).

The key to understanding Churchill's complex play and its dramatization of the dialectics of feminism is via the work of Bertolt Brecht. Churchill acknowledges her debt to Brecht with the character of Dull Gret who appears in the restaurant scene in the first act of the play. As she informs us in the notes on these characters, Dull Gret is taken from the painting by Brueghel "in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils" (52). This painting is the subject of a brief essay on alienation and dialectics by Brecht that I will discuss later. While the conflict between the sisters, Marlene and Joyce, as well as the scenes showing Marlene at work suggest the ways in which women labor in the interests of capital, the barely articulate and doubled figure of Angie/Dull Gret serves as a powerful reminder of the revolutionary potential of self-interest. A dialectical reading of the ideology underpinning Thatcher's vision of a free enterprise culture reveals the ways in which that ideology produces a social "under" class so disinheritied that it is capable of revolutionary action. Through the characters of Angie and Dull Gret the play dramatizes how extreme oppression and hopelessness is capable of being transformed into revolutionary action when accompanied by the motivating though ugly "sin" of material greed. This is evident in Dull Gret's speech at the end of act one and it is also, in more subtle ways, rearticulated in the image of Angie as an "angel of history" at the end of the play, an image drawn from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (245–55).

While Benjamin operates as the Marxist subtext of the play, Brecht is clearly a much more obvious influence. Brechtian alienation devices are employed in order to "make strange" the contemporary character of Marlene and her top girl ideology, an ideology that owes much to Margaret Thatcher, the country's top girl at the time the play was performed. The ahistorical presentation of characters from different cultures and different historical moments, the fusion of the mythic, fictional, and historical, as
well as the nonlinear time frame of the play are all strategies which disrupt the unities of time and place making it impossible for the audience to settle into habitual ways of perceiving the unfolding events. As Brecht makes clear, it is this defamiliarizing strategy which disrupts the viewers' ideology:

The spectator [is] no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in the play. The production [takes] the subject matter and the incidents shown and put[s] them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems "the most obvious thing in the world" it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. (71)

The refusal to portray fully rounded, integrated characters is evident in the staging of the first production of the play at the Royal Court theatre in 1982. The cast consisted of seven actors most of whom played more than one part. The effect of this was to force the audience to recognize a distinction between actor and character. In this first production Lindsay Duncan played Lady Nijo and Win from the Top Girls agency. The casting of this fair-skinned, blond actor to play a Japanese courtesan underlines the difference between actor and character thereby exposing the mechanics of performance that naturalistic dramaturgy conceals. Lindsay Duncan does not become the character of Lady Nijo but rather, in a Brechtian manner, she presents this character to the audience. Thus Churchill blocks the audience's empathy and instead presents each character not as a coherent subject but as an alienated and "strange" sign of historical subjectivity. This tactic is not, however, deployed throughout the play as the contemporary characters are more fully drawn, given psychological depth and personal histories. The impact of the first scene, however, makes it difficult for the audience to fully settle into the realist conventions established in subsequent scenes.

In the opening scene of the play Brecht's concept of alienation is applied to bourgeois feminism. A cast of famous top girls is gathered together to celebrate Marlene's promotion. Marlene and the silent waitress are the only contemporary characters in this scene; the others are historical figures or fictive representations. Each woman has an extraordinary story to tell, a story that at first seems to confirm her status as a top girl. The first to arrive is Isabella Bird, the Victorian traveler who, despite the limitations of
her “sphere,” manages to travel around the world. Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan arrives next, followed by Dull Gret (the subject of the Brueghel painting). Pope Joan, thought to have been Pope from 854–856, follows shortly afterwards, and the last woman to join the party is Patient Griselda, the character immortalized by several writers including Boccaccio and Chaucer. Marlene has clearly gathered these women together because she sees herself as part of a historical continuum that culminates in her own material success. “We’ve all come a long way,” she says to the women around the table and raises her glass to toast them all: “To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (67).

However, as the scene develops, it becomes clear that each woman has suffered a great deal and, more disturbingly, each woman accepts and defends her punishment as a natural and fitting consequence of her transgressive acts. As Joseph Marohl points out in “De-Realised Women: Performance and Identity in Top Girls,” these women “have made obvious and often extreme concessions to their various patriarchies, against which they utter no word of condemnation or complaint” (384). On the contrary, they defend the social orders to which they belong, frequently pointing out to a disbelieving Marlene that they deserved to suffer at the hands of an unforgiving patriarchy. Pope Joan declares, “I’m a heresy myself” (60), and “I shouldn’t have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope” (69). Lady Nijo sees that it is only fitting that the Emperor raped her when she was fourteen because, as she explains, “I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby” (57). Patient Griselda’s psychological and emotional torture at the hands of Walter, the Marquis, is questioned by Marlene who sees his behavior as sadistic. Yet in their exchange, Griselda defends Walter:

Marlene: And at first he seemed perfectly normal?
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. (76)

As Harry Lane notes, Marlene’s “celebration is based on mystification of the facts: that Marlene’s promotion is in some way the end result of a uni-
fied historical process of which all women have been part" (63). Marlene's liberal feminist impulse is to construct women's history in progressive terms, as a linear narrative describing women's increasing independence in political, social, and economic terms. Yet rather than presenting the audience with an impression of female solidarity, a sense of women's shared oppression under patriarchy and their progress toward freedom and equality, the scene dramatizes historical and cultural discontinuity and disjunction. The women constantly talk over each other—this is indicated in the text by the use of slashes. They rarely speak directly to each other—Marlene acts as an intermediary, but it is clear that as the scene progresses she is increasingly appalled by the stories she hears from her sisters. Marlene represents the audience's reaction in her inability to comprehend why Griselda tolerates such cruelty from her husband. We are encouraged to think of Griselda's fate as some perverse patriarchal fiction unrelated to the experiences of women in the late twentieth century. Yet after this scene Marlene's success is "made strange"; the audience has been alerted to the sacrifices women make in order to succeed; it has also witnessed the extent to which each woman has internalized and normalized her ideology. As Churchill herself explains in an interview with Lizbeth Goodman: "I thought we could look at [Marlene] as a sort of feminist heroine who had done things against extraordinary odds so that we could then have a different attitude to her as the play went on and we begin to question what her values actually are" (237). The audience is reminded of this through each character's language and the social codes they adhere to. For instance, Lady Nijo is so imbued with the traditions of a thirteenth-century Japanese court that she repeatedly punctuates her narrative with detailed descriptions of the gowns she wore for certain ceremonies. The semiotics of dress clearly plays an important part in all cultures but Nijo's insistence upon these details makes little sense to her audience which is unfamiliar with the symbolic meanings attached to each item of clothing. In a Brechtian manner, Churchill emphasizes the "social gest," the learned patterns of behavior, the social codes and structures underpinning gender and reproducing gendered differences. Thus Nijo knows her place as a woman within the hierarchy of the Emperor's court via a series of elaborate rituals, dress codes, and learned customs. These appear "strange" to the audience as they are being presented out of context, as if quoted from an unfamiliar text. The opening scene functions like a textual patchwork uncertainly joined together, a montage that offers an account of a fractured and multiple history that denies a singular and authenticating narrative. Thus Marlene's own achievement, presented as it is amongst these stories
of persecution, loss, and revenge must be re-examined in the light of these multiple histories.

It is not only Brecht's epic theatre that informs Churchill's dramaturgy, it is his theoretical writing as well. The Brueghel painting depicting Dull Gret is the subject of a brief essay on alienation and dialectics by Brecht, "Alienation effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Brueghel," in which he explains how the painter manages to represent the dialectical process of history through the use of contrast and contradiction:

In the Great War painting Dulle Griet it isn't war's atmosphere of terror that inspires the artist to paint the instigator, the Fury of War, as the helpless and handicapped, and to give her the features of a servant. The terror that he creates is something deeper. Whenever an Alpine peak is set down in a Flemish landscape or old Asiatic costumes confront modern European ones, then the one denounces the other and sets off its oddness, while at the same time we get landscape as such, people all over the place. Such pictures don't just give off an atmosphere but a variety of atmospheres. Even though Brueghel manages to balance his contrasts he never merges them into one another, nor does he practice the separation of comic and tragic; his tragedy contains a comic element and his comedy a tragic one. (157)

Brecht explains the ways in which Brueghel's painting produces an effect on the viewer defamiliarizing the scene before her. Thus incongruities relating to history, genre, and setting combine to produce a spectacle that is both familiar and strange. Churchill's inclusion of Gret in her cast of characters alerts the reader to the Brechtian influences in the play. Of all the women at the dinner party, Gret is the least articulate and the least sympathetic. She listens to the other women but offers little more than a grunt throughout much of the scene. However, her story is exceptional in that it shows a woman actively resisting her oppression. Gret's image of Hell is one that reminds her of her everyday life: "Hell's black and red. / It's like the village I come from" (81). Hell is a home away from home for Gret, no more horrific than the experience of being a poor peasant woman trying to keep herself and her family alive. She describes a "big devil" sitting on a roof scooping out his own excrement and dropping it on the heads of the women; as it falls it turns to soiled money. While this distracts some of the women, most of them, as Gret points out, are "fighting the devils" (82). The array of deformed and misshapen creatures at her feet do
not bother her as she has “had worse”: “We’d all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword” (82). But on this particular morning Gret has had enough, she is not prepared to take any more beatings but instead rouses her neighbors to join her in dishing it out: “I come out my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, ‘Come on, we’re going where the evil comes from and pay the bastards out’” (82).

Joseph Marohl interprets Gret’s action as a parody of “radical and bourgeois forms of feminism, which either reverse or capitalize on existing inequalities rather than remove them” (388). Yet I would argue, along with Stuart Marlow, that “Gret shows no reverence for the forces which are out to destroy her community, and has nothing to lose by turning to violence in self-defense” (71). Read in the light of Brecht’s essay on Brueghel, Dull Gret’s avarice and anger become a potentially revolutionary force. Churchill imagines Gret as a character who has become so disempowered that she no longer has anything to lose. Unlike Patient Griselda or Pope Joan, Gret has no vested interest in maintaining the status quo and for this reason she is liberated. Her motives may not be pure, she is greedy, and she is faithless, yet she has a vitality and a revolutionary zeal that none of the other women share. It is no accident then that the first production of the play had the actor Carole Hayman play both Gret and Angie linking these two figures in significant ways.

After the restaurant scene, Marlene and her success are critically assessed. The audience has been alerted to the sacrifices women are forced to make in order to succeed in a “man’s world.” It has also witnessed the extent to which each woman is subject to ideological pressures blinding her to the fact of her oppression. Thus Marlene’s position as a top girl with choices, freedoms, and opportunities is radically undermined. In the subsequent scenes it becomes evident that Marlene has paid a price for her success, and so too have the women around her.

In the next scene we see Marlene in action, interviewing a client and assessing her suitability for the job market. It becomes clear that for Marlene there are only two kinds of women: those who are career minded, ambitious, childless, and single and those who marry and have children. She transmits this to Jeanine, the young woman who is bored with her job as a secretary and is looking for prospects. In her interview with Jeanine, she adopts a number of strategies to dent her client’s confidence. She pretends not to be sure of Jeanine’s name, she remarks on the absence of A levels, she makes it sound like her numerous O levels are evidence of a lack of ambition, and describes Jeanine’s typing speed as “not brilliant,”
though she concedes grudgingly that it is "not bad" (84). She then goes on to interpret Jeanine's desire to marry as a sign that she is not serious about pursuing a career:

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, not kids yet.
Marlene: So you won't tell them you're getting married?
Jeanine: Had I better not?
Marlene: It would probably help. (85)

Like Isabella Bird, Jeanine would "like to travel," but Marlene sees this as unrealistic for Jeanine who is, in her eyes, a conventional "girl" who will give up her career or any "prospects" for the sake of having a family. When Marlene gives Jeanine a pep talk at the end of the scene she encourages her to be confident: "Go in there convinced that this is the best job for you and you're the best person for the job. If you don't believe it they won't believe it" (87). When Jeanine seeks reassurance from Marlene herself, asking if Marlene believes she is the best person for the job, Marlene replies: "I think you could make me believe it if you put your mind to it" (87). In other words, Marlene does not believe Jeanine is the best person for the job and makes this clear to her client. Marlene is successful because she does not offer women like Jeanine opportunities or prospects. It is important at the Top Girls agency that only women like Marlene herself, women willing to make huge personal sacrifices, are given positions of power and authority.

The consequences of these sacrifices, not only for Marlene but also for her sister and her daughter, are revealed in the next scene where we are introduced to Angie, the daughter Marlene abandoned. Angie has been raised by Joyce, Marlene's sister, but has realized that Joyce is not her biological mother. She has left school early without any qualifications and is unemployed. Not being academically gifted or having the social skills to make friends easily, Angie has no place amongst her peers. She plays with the much younger Kit who realizes that there is something "funny" about Angie. It is to Kit that Angie reveals her matricidal fantasies fuelled by her anger at her mother. While this anger seems to be aimed at Joyce, at the same time, there is a sense in which Angie's violence could and might
be directed at Marlene, the mother who abandoned her. This rage, this expression of a desire to kill links Angie with her double, Dull Gret. While she is unaware of why she should be angry, while her anger is misdirected at Joyce her adoptive mother, at the same time, her inarticulacy and her powerlessness resemble Gret's.

When the next scene returns to the Top Girls agency, there is further evidence of the high price Marlene's colleagues, Nell and Win, pay for being "tough birds." In order to succeed these women must adopt the values associated with free-market capitalism. As Nell tells Shona, a client looking for work in the male-dominated computer industry, employers assume women are incapable of closing a deal, incapable of being as tough, ruthless, and competitive as their male rivals:

> 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. (115)

Shona manages to convince Nell that she is a pushy lady, assuring her that she "never considers people's feelings" and that she is "not very nice"; she is single, independent, a "loner" with no family ties or personal commitments. Nell is so impressed with Shona that she considers offering her a position at the agency and it is only when Shona is incapable of describing her present job in detail that Nell realizes she is lying. Shona's account of her imaginary life as a saleswoman, burning up the M1, in "the fast lane," selling dish washers, washing machines, and fridges, staying in hotels on her expense account, drinking gin and tonics in the bar, and eating fillet steak is a clichéd image of success. It is an image that is gendered as masculine with its emphasis on speed, independence, and sexual freedom. These "tough ladies" imitate a hyper-masculinity in order to beat men at their own game, to "push through to a closing situation." What they are selling, above all else, is the notion that a woman is as capable as a man of disregarding "feelings" and "needs."

Nell's personal life makes this all too evident. Amongst her numerous lovers is Derek who, she reveals to Win, has asked her to marry him yet again. What is revealing is that, rather than simply ending the relationship with Derek, Nell continues to see Derek and thus continues to encourage him to think she might one day relent and give in to domesticity. As Win notes, Derek "doesn't know when he's beaten," a line that suggests the
masochistic nature of his relationship with Nell. Nell turns everything into a competition, seeing the idea of playing house as a competition not worth playing. Win, on the other hand, spends the occasional weekend with her married lover but, humiliatingly, is forced to duck down when driven to his house for fear the neighbors will see her. She has one failed marriage behind her, has suffered a breakdown, and admits to drinking to help her cope with her unhappiness. As she explains to a bewildered Angie, she has come to the Top Girls agency because she feels she will be liked by those she places in jobs. However, Win desires to be “well-liked,” to borrow a phrase from Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, because, as a high-achieving, high-earning career woman she feels isolated and lonely, unsupported by friends and family. Both Win and Nell, in different ways, have sacrificed and suffered in their personal lives in order to succeed in the business world.

At the end of the third scene of act two, Marlene, Win, and Nell discuss Angie as she sleeps in Marlene's office:

Marlene: Is she asleep?
Win: She wants to work here.
Marlene: Packer in Tesco more like.
Win: She's a nice kid. Isn't she?
Marlene: She's a bit thick. She's a bit funny.
Win: She thinks you're wonderful.
Marlene: She's not going to make it. (120)

Measuring her daughter against the criteria she sets for herself and for other women, Marlene thinks of Angie only in terms of her potential “to make it.” Unlike Win, she cannot see that her own daughter is a “nice kid,” and more tellingly, she cannot see that Angie worships her. Angie's love for Marlene is blocked by Marlene’s own blindness to her daughter's humanity. Her assessment of Angie's prospects reveals more about her own emotional limitations, more about what she has lost, than about Angie's ability to survive in the new economy. Unable to see beyond the values of the competitive, free enterprise culture she herself has invested in, Marlene's judgment of her own daughter as “a bit thick ... a bit funny” is evidence that she too, like her historical and fictional sisters in the first scene, internalizes, reproduces, and reinforces the ideology underpinning the oppression of women. In doing so, she condemns Angie to a life of poverty and exploitation, incapable as she is of any compassion or sympathy even for her own daughter.
In the final act of the play, the Thatcherite figure of Marlene returns to her childhood home to see both her daughter and her sister. Taking place a year earlier than the previous act, this is the dramatic and emotional climax of the play as Marlene confronts her angry sister and attempts to establish a relationship with the daughter she abandoned. The confrontation between the sisters is both emotionally and politically charged as Marlene's defense of her actions is closely bound up with her belief in the new Conservatism. Marlene employs the rhetoric of Thatcher's free-enterprise culture and insists to her exploited, underpaid, overworked sister that "Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (140). Her admiration for Margaret Thatcher as a "tough lady" is accompanied by her loathing of class-based politics: "I hate the working class," she tells Joyce, "it doesn't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid" (138-39). Addressing the most pressing political issue of the early '80s, that of unemployment, Marlene declares that, "I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?" only to be met by Joyce's fierce response: "What about Angie? ... She's stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?" (140). As Joyce points out, little has changed in terms of the social structure and little will change "with them in." The final word of the play confirms that this Thatcherite vision of a lean, pared down, competitive economy in which only the fittest survive is a "frightening" prospect (141).

The Thatcherite feminism of Marlene, a kind of "girl power," repeats and reproduces social inequalities. Ironically, 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. Caring for Marlene's baby, Joyce suffered a miscarriage due to exhaustion and was unable to have any children of her own. Tied to Marlene's baby, Joyce was unable to acquire the skills, education, or work experience to secure a well-paid job and is now employed as a domestic cleaner. She is trapped in a cycle of poverty that is the direct result of Marlene's exploitation of her labor. As a result, Marlene climbs the corporate ladder and becomes one of the top girls, with a well-paid job and a certain degree of power and respect from her colleagues while her sister is mired in poverty.

Yet the top girl ideology not only oppresses women like Joyce but also oppresses women like Marlene. Marlene clearly regrets giving up her child but, when she was 17 and pregnant, living in rural poverty, there were few choices available to her. She was desperate to leave home, desperate to avoid repeating her mother's life. "Of course, I couldn't get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed?" (133). Marlene realizes that to keep the baby would mean
"[Not] Talking 'bout my Generation"

having to stay where she is. She opts for escape. However, what the play dramatizes is that Marlene's success rests on the reproduction of the social structures that imprisoned her in the first place.

In these terms, Top Girls is a play that, on some level, addresses a phenomenon most feminists would be reluctant to examine too closely: that is the relation between feminism and the figure of Margaret Thatcher. For while Marlene operates purely in terms of self-interest, embracing the themes of self-reliance and personal responsibility so dear to Mrs. Thatcher's heart, that self-interest was undoubtedly one very powerful component of the women's movement in the '70s. It might also be argued, more generally, that self-interest, be that for political power or economic gain, is the motivating factor behind any social movement and behind any social change. Undoubtedly, Marlene's politics springs partly from a liberal feminism arguing that women should simply be allowed to compete on equal terms with men. When this happens, "girls" like Marlene and Margaret rise to the "top" because they are capable of beating men at their own game.

Yet while Churchill undoubtedly takes the opportunity to provide a scathing critique of Margaret Thatcher's vision of a free-enterprise culture, the Brechtian nature of the opening act signals a larger ambition. The allusions to a Marxist dialectic reappear with the doubled figure of Angie/Dull Gret in the closing moments of the play. Marlene is left alone in the living room of Joyce's house having just fought viciously with her sister. Angie wakes and calls out for her mother:

Angie: Mum?
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. (141)

This ethereal, ghost-like vision of Angie in her nightdress, stumbling blindly, calling for her mother, is the last image of the play. The haunting figure of Angie reminds Marlene of the consequences of her own success and also alerts the audience to the nightmarish consequences of Britain's political and economic turn to the right. It is Angie as the figure of an angel, blind to her future yet thrust forward by the forces of progress, who
signals the play’s debt to Walter Benjamin. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin refers to Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* in order to describe an approach that disrupts the progressive, generational model of “monumental” history. The picture provides Benjamin with an image of “the angel of history,” a dialectical figure that is being pushed forwards by a storm (“what we call history”) but is facing backwards. The angel sees the debris of modernity’s destructiveness accumulate at his feet as he is propelled into the future. Angie is quite literally her mother’s daughter in the sense that she represents the fruits of Marlene’s competitive labor, the waste or detritus left in the wake of modernity’s progress.

Benjamin’s “angel of history” signals the play’s resistance to progressive models of history. For Benjamin there is no outside time, no site from which one can view historical events from a safe and unsullied position. All that can be seen is what is left after the storm of progress has passed through, the human wreckage left behind as modernity expands. Thus the materialist historian becomes an archaeologist of the archive, a “rag-picker,” a collector looking for scraps or fragments capable of revealing what Benjamin refers to as the “secret history” of modernity. Rather than constructing an overarching framework as a means of understanding the past, the historical materialist collects lost or forgotten objects and images, textual extracts that speak of a past hidden from history.

Thus the use of quotation becomes one way of resisting the notion of a progressive, continuous account of history. Benjamin makes the link between epic theatre and quotation in his essay, “What is Epic Theatre?” suggesting that the use of certain alienation devices in the theatre have the same effect as the use of quotation in a text:

To quote a text involves the interruption of its context. It is therefore understandable that the epic theatre, being based on interruption, is, in a specific sense, a quotable one. There is nothing special about the quotability of its texts. It is different with the gestures which fit into the course of the play. (148)

Churchill’s Brechtian techniques might be understood as a form of quotation embodied through dramatic action. The idea of the quotation as interrupting the context into which it is inserted explains the disruptive impact of the opening scene of Churchill’s play where women from different historical periods are gathered together. Once this scene has been played out, its impact on subsequent contemporary scenes has the effect of laying bare “the conditions of life” in Britain in the early ’80s (147). Thus
Churchill extracts these women and treats them just as Benjamin treats the quoted fragment. Their stories intersect and collide, and rather than producing one unified account of women's oppression under patriarchy, the audience is treated to a rather disjointed and conflicted narrative which undermines the notion that Marlene's success rests on the achievements of previous generations of women. Each woman, wrenched as she is from her historical context, exposes the ideology of her generation.

If interruption is the key to understanding the Brechtian technique, then Churchill's method of doubling up characters can be seen as a way of interrupting the coherence and unity of the character as she is performed or acted out. This presents almost all the characters as split, doubled, or fractured subjects, haunted by an "other" woman with a history. The impact of this dramatic method is particularly evident in the last image of the play as Angie recalls not only Benjamin's "angel of history" but also the figure of Dull Gret. As already mentioned, in the first production of the play at the Royal Court and in the revival, one actor plays both Gret and Angie. Gret's speech at the end of act one with its revolutionary call to arms is associated with Angie encouraging the audience to look upon her less as a downtrodden victim deserving sympathy and more as a potentially disruptive and revolutionary agent of change. Thus while Marlene is often seen as the central character of the play, who has prospects and therefore a future, Angie might represent an alternative future if women like herself recognize their oppression and fight against it. If Angie listens to her mother, Marlene, and adopts her value system, then greed may well be the motivating and potentially revolutionary force capable of destabilizing the power structure. Thus rather than the audience being left with "a sense of despair" as Helene Keyssar suggests in Feminist Theatre, the doubled nature of Angie/Gret suggests that a dialectical reading is more appropriate. Angie's oppression may well lead to a life of misery and hardship though it might also lead to some form of revolutionary action if she feels she has so little to lose in the new free enterprise culture.

Churchill's covert reference to Benjamin's historical method together with her adoption of Brechtian alienation devices signal her own desire to dismantle the progressive myth of history particularly as it has informed accounts of women's lives. Thus she is not only concerned with her own historical moment and the ideological struggles within the sisterhood, she is also concerned with the ways in which that history of struggle is recorded. A feminist historiography based on a dialectical materialism provides Churchill with a model of discontinuity and rupture, a model that recognizes the doubled and uncanny nature of progress. The dialec-
tical image of Angie at the end of the play, an angel capable of fighting the devils, leaves the audience with a powerful sense of modernity's contradictions and feminism's fraught and conflicted relation to modernity. While the play sets up feminist issues via the dramatization of the mother-daughter and sister relationship, it resists reproducing a generational model of history by de-naturalizing or defamiliarizing the bonds and connections between women. In doing so, it challenges mothers, daughters, and sisters to find alternatives to the critical paradigms within which feminist genealogies have been understood.

Northumbria University

NOTES

1 For an insight into Churchill's collaboration with the Joint Stock Company and the workshop process informing productions, see Cousin.

2 A number of critics have noted Churchill's debt to Brecht. See Reinelt, "Beyond Brecht" and After Brecht, 81–107; Blair.

WORKS CITED


