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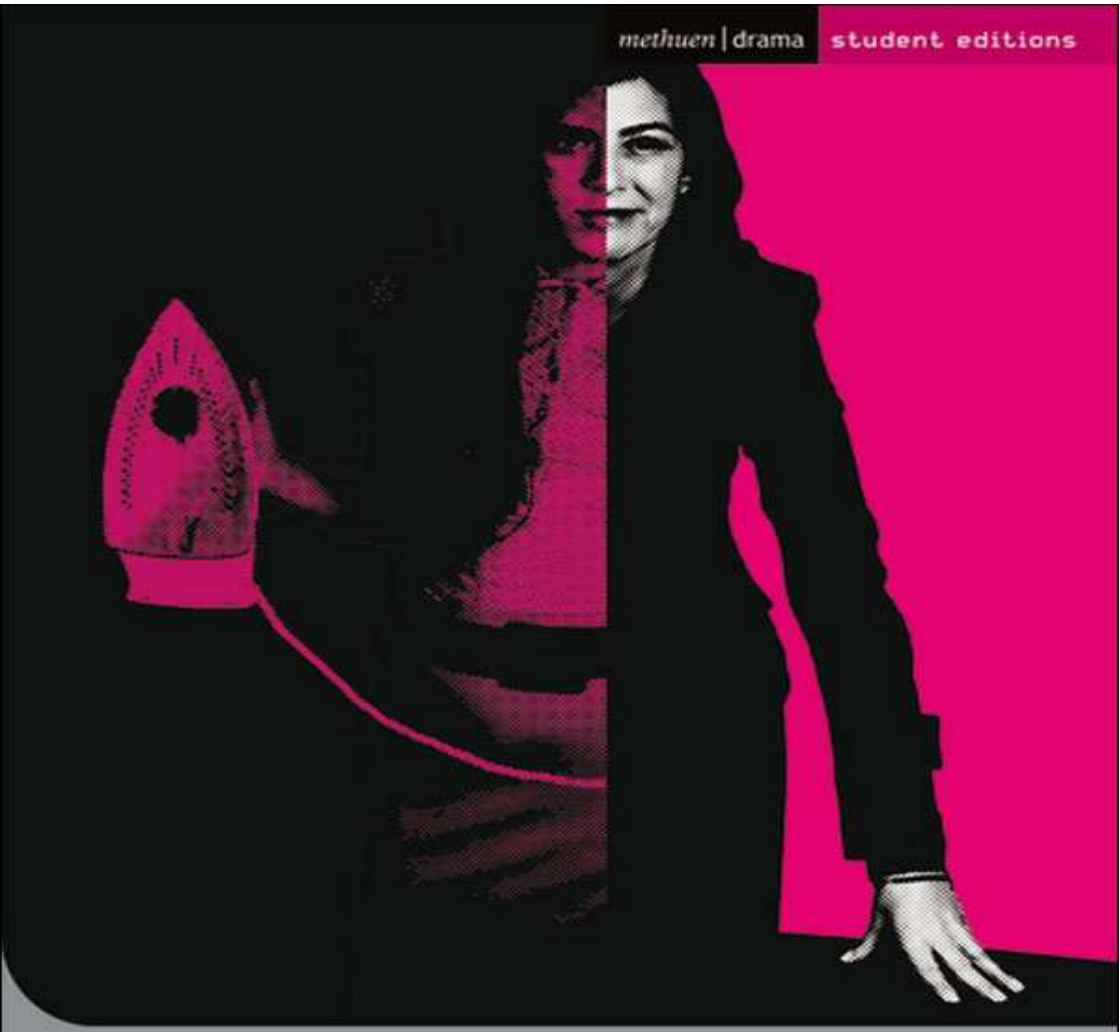

CARYL CHURCHILL
TOP GIRLS

EDITED BY BILL NAISMITH AND NICK WORRALL

BLOOMSBURY

Caryl Churchill

Top Girls

with commentary by
BILL NAISMITH
and notes by
NICK WORRALL

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Contents

Caryl Churchill

1938 Born in London, 3 September.

1948–55 Lived in Montreal, Canada.

1957–60 Read English Language and Literature at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. Obtained BA in English.

1958 Student production at Oxford of *Downstairs* (one-act play), also at the *Sunday* Times/National Union of Students Drama Festival in 1959.

1960 Student production of *Having a Wonderful Time* at the Questors Theatre, Ealing.

1961 Student production of *Easy Death* at the Oxford Playhouse. Student sound production of *You've No Need to be Frightened.*

1962 *The Ants* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme.

1967 *Lovesick* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme.

1968 *Identical Twins* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme.

1971 *Abortive* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme. *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme.

1972 *Schreber's Nervous Illness* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme; lunchtime stage production, King's Head Theatre, London. *The Judge's Wife* televised on BBC TV, directed by James Fermin. *Henry's Past* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme. *Owners,* Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, directed by Nicholas Wright.

1973 *Perfect Happiness* broadcast on the BBC Third Programme; lunchtime stage production, Soho Poly, London, directed by Susanna Capon.

1974–75 Resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre, London.

1974 *Turkish Delight* televised on BBC TV, directed by Herbert Wise.

1975 *Objections to Sex and Violence,* Royal Court Theatre, directed by John Tydeman. Sunday night Theatre Upstairs production of *Moving Clocks Go Slow,* directed by John Ashford.

1976 *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* with Joint Stock Theatre Group, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, and at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. *Vinegar Tom* with Monstrous Regiment, directed by Pam Brighton, at the Humberside Theatre, Hull, and at the ICA, London.

1977 *Traps,* Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, directed by John Ashford.

1978 Contributed with Michelene Wandor and Bryony Lavery to Monstrous Regiment's cabaret, *Floorshow,* at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. *The After Dinner Joke* televised on BBC TV, directed by Colin Bucksey. *The Legion Hall Bombing* televised on BBC TV, directed by Roland Joffe. (At their request, Caryl Churchill's and Roland Joffe's names were removed from the credits.)

1979 *Cloud Nine* with Joint Stock Theatre Group, directed by Max Stafford-Clark at Dartington College of Arts, Devon, and at the Royal Court Theatre. Revival: Royal Court, September 1980, directed by Max Stafford-Clark and Les Waters. American production: Theatre de Lys, New York, May 1981, directed by Tommy Tune.

1980 *Three More Sleepless Nights,* Soho Poly, London, directed by Les Waters; then at the Theatre Upstairs.

1982 *Crimes* televised on BBC TV, directed by Stuart Burge. *Top Girls,* Royal Court Theatre, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Transferred to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre, New York. Returned to the Royal Court, February 1983.

1983 *Fen* with Joint Stock Theatre Group, directed by Les Waters, at the University of Essex Theatre, Colchester, and at the Almeida Theatre, London. Transferred to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre, New York, and to the Royal Court Theatre, London.

1984 *Softcops,* Barbican Pit, London, directed by Howard Davies. Contributed with Geraldine Pilgrim, Pete Brooks and John Ashford to *Midday Sun,* at the ICA, London.

1986 *A Mouthful of Birds* with Joint Stock Theatre Group, written by Caryl Churchill and David Lan, choreographed by Ian Spink, directed by Ian Spink and Les Waters, at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, and at the Royal Court Theatre.

1987 *Serious Money,* Royal Court Theatre, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Transferred to Wyndham's

Theatre, London, and to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre, New York.

1988 Contributed to *Fugue, Dance on 4,* choreographed and directed by Ian Spink, televised on Channel 4.

1989 *Ice Cream,* Royal Court Theatre, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Rehearsed reading of *Hot Fudge,* Royal Court Theatre.

1990 *Mad Forest,* Central School of Speech and Drama, London, directed by Mark Wing-Davey. Transferred to the National Theatre of Romania, Bucharest, before opening at the Royal Court, London.

1991 *Lives of the Great Poisoners,* written for Second Stride Dance Company, choreographed and directed by Ian Spink, performed at the Riverside Studios.

1994 *The Skriker,* Royal National Theatre, directed by Les Waters. *Thyestes* at Manchester and at the Royal Court, Theatre Upstairs, directed by James Macdonald.

1997 *Hotel,* with music by Orlando Gough, choreographed and directed by Ian Spink, Second Stride at the Place, London. *This is a Chair* at the Royal Court, directed by Stephen Daldry. *Blue Heart,* with Out of

Joint, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh Festival, and Royal Court Theatre.

1999 *Blue Heart,* New York and international tour.

2000 *Far Away,* directed by Stephen Daldry, at the Royal Court Theatre and Albery Theatre.

2002 *A Number,* directed by Stephen Daldry, at the Royal Court Theatre (winner of the *Evening Standard* Award for Best New Play).

2004 *A Number,* with New York Theatre Workshop, directed by James Macdonald.

Synopsis

Act One: Restaurant. Saturday night

Marlene hosts a dinner party in a London restaurant to celebrate her promotion to managing director of 'Top Girls' employment agency. Her five guests are women from the past. In order of arrival they are Isabella Bird (1831–1904), who lived in Edinburgh and travelled abroad extensively between the ages of forty and seventy; Lady Nijo (b. 1258), Japanese, who was an Emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan; Dull Gret, who is the subject of the Brueghel painting *Dulle Griet*, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils; Pope Joan, who, disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854–856; and, arriving late, Patient Griselda, the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in 'The Clerk's Tale' of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Marlene orders a bottle of wine from the waitress who proceeds to serve the dinner during the scene without speaking at all. On their arrival and throughout the meal the guests recount their individual histories, picking up on each other, interrupting and overlapping. Marlene acts as hostess, ordering courses, drawing out her guests and adding her own comments to the individual stories. This long opening scene, lasting some forty minutes in performance, is one of continuous excited conversation. The orchestration of the dialogue provides climaxes of horror and dismay, humour and celebration. For convenience the lives and stories may be

recounted separately, but it is essential to appreciate how the force and energy of the scene is derived from the interconnected structure of the dialogue. It is an extremely challenging scene for practitioners – actors and director – who must find the rhythm in performance to ensure not only that the meal is served and eaten without distracting from the dialogue, but that the guests, however distinctively different, become a chorus communicating more than their individual stories.

Isabella Bird

The daughter of a Church of England clergyman, she moved to live in Scotland. She tried to please her father by conforming to the 'role' of clergyman's daughter, engaging in needlework, music and charitable schemes. She suffered a tumour of the spine and studied poetry, Latin and hymnology. However, she grew to prefer practical things – manual work, cooking, washing, mending, riding horses and a rough open-air life. At forty she was sent to Australia for the good of her health. She found the country hideous, but then she loathed the constant murk and dismal houses of home. She thought her life was over. However, she was greatly cheered and excited travelling from Australia to the Sandwich Islands. She fell in love with the sea. Conditions were awful on board but she felt completely liberated, discovering 'a new world'. She grieved at her father's death, but soon forgot her Latin, and theology made her head ache. She always travelled as a lady and repudiated any suggestion that she was other than feminine. She was admired by a Mr Nugent – Rocky Mountain Jim – who proposed to her because she could both make scones and lasso cattle. He was, unfortunately,

unacceptable as a husband. On her return to England she had a vision of him in his trapper's clothes; it was on the day he died with a bullet in his brain. She had felt a yearning to 'save' Jim Nugent, but the real loves of her life were her sister Hennie and the husband she did marry, Dr John Bishop, who had cared for Hennie during her last fatal illness. She married at fifty, and although Dr Bishop had a 'sweet character' she found married life a drudgery and she fell ill again. When her husband died she determined to leave grief behind and set off for Tibet where, despite suffering from an agonising spine and in face of harsh difficulties, she had great adventures. She always felt dull when stationary. Her memories include being nearly murdered by a howling mob in China, and the little Indian bay mare she rode in the Rocky Mountains. She always suffered guilt on returning to England because she felt her life abroad to be one of self-gratification, so she hurled herself into committee work and wore herself out with good causes. She never left her husband while married but she resented all she had to do in domestic and social work. She declares, 'I cannot and will not live the life of a lady … Why should I? Why should I?' At seventy she visited Morocco, although very ill, and she was the first European woman ever to see the Emperor. It was only a temporary return of vigour 'but how marvellous while it lasted'.

Lady Nijo

Nijo tells a story of a life of two halves, first at Court and later, in obedience to her father's wish, as a vagrant Buddhist nun. 'The first half of my life was all sin and the second all repentance.' At fourteen she was one of the maidens passing

the sake at Court when the Emperor (aged twenty-nine) told her father to send Nijo to him. He sent her an eight-layered gown which she sent back, not understanding its meaning. She was distressed when the time came, but soon became reconciled to her role – it was what she had been brought up for – and was sad if the Emperor stayed away. She never enjoyed taking other women to him, which was also part of her role. Nijo came from a line of eight generations of poets; her father was a religious man and a poet. He instructed her to 'serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders'. When her father died she had only His Majesty and when she fell from favour she had nothing. She adopted religion as a kind of nothing, as if she were dead already. As a nun she travelled the country on foot – she walked every day for twenty years – following the tradition of priests, who were often vagrants. Her travels revealed a determined spirit, full of hope and relishing new sights. One of her lovers was a priest, Ariake. He 'dedicated his life to her' when he came to her and knew he would fall into 'one of three lower realms' when he died. 'Misery in this life and worse in the next, all because of me.' Nijo believed at first that the Emperor was of sweet character because he did not mind about Ariake, but really this was because he no longer cared for her. One night he even sent her to a man who had been pursuing her and listened to their lovemaking from behind the screens. She depended on the Emperor's favour. When she incurred the Empress's displeasure, who claimed that Nijo had no right to wear three-layered gowns, it was explained that she was the adopted daughter of her grandfather, the Prime Minister, and had been granted permission to wear thin silk. She remembers having some babies, often in embarrassing situations, but she always avoided scandal. Her first child was His Majesty's, which died, and her second was Akebono's. She was

seventeen and he had loved her since she was thirteen. He was upset when she had to go to the Emperor, and wrote a lot of poems to her. It was very romantic. When she became pregnant by Akebono she hid the fact from the Emperor. Akebono helped at the birth and took the baby away. It was 'only a girl but I was sorry to lose it'. She saw her daughter once, three years later; Akebono's wife had adopted the child who was being brought up to be sent to the
palace, as Nijo had been. Her third child was the son of Ariake the priest, and she never saw the baby after it was born. Her fourth was also the priest's child, but Ariake died before the birth and she stayed alone in the hills not wanting to see anyone. She felt nothing for the child.

Nijo shows considerable interest in Griselda's story, which has many parallels, and cries at the memory that she did not get her children back, unlike Griselda. Other painful events in her life were the deaths of her father and the Emperor. She was not allowed to see the Emperor when he was dying so she hid in the room with his coffin. Then she couldn't find her shoes and had to chase the funeral in bare feet, arriving late, when all that was left was a few wisps of smoke in the sky. She is deeply anxious and concerned to know whether, if she had still been allowed at Court, she would have been permitted 'to wear full mourning'.

Nijo remembers an incident that made her particularly angry. She was eighteen. At the Full Moon Ceremony the men make a special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks. They then beat their women across the loins so that they will bear sons, not daughters. The Emperor beat them hard, which was not exceptional, but on this occasion he allowed the attendants to beat them too. In response the ladies devised a plan to attack

the Emperor and beat him in return. Nijo beat him with a stick until he promised he would not order anybody to hit them again. There was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. That she had beaten the Emperor with a stick is Nijo's last, exultant, memory.

Dull Gret

Gret makes an early entrance and remains a powerful physical presence throughout the scene but says little until the end. She is more preoccupied with the table and the meal than any of the other guests, being a stranger to sophisticated surroundings. She eats crudely and steals bottles and plates when no one is looking, putting these in her large apron. Her rare monosyllabic interjections are coarse, reductive and amusing and her relative silence adds an element of suspense up to the point when she delivers her climactic, inspirational story derived from the surrealistic painting by Brueghel.

She describes coming to hell through a big mouth and finding it – all black and red – very similar to her own village after it had been fired and looted by soldiers. Surrounded by devils, including one who showered her and her neighbours with money scooped from his
arse, and strange and horrible creatures, she set about beating and fighting these devils. The women were unstoppable. They had known worse than these devils in the form of the Spanish invaders who had slaughtered their families. Gret had lost her eldest son and her baby, killed by soldiers. Finally she could stand no more and shouted to her neighbours, 'Come on, we're going where the evil comes from and pay the bastards out.' They followed her, in aprons and ordinary clothes, and

as they pushed down the street the ground opened up to reveal a big mouth. Gret, waving a sword, led her women, running and fighting, through the mouth into 'a street just like ours but in hell', and gave the devils a beating.

Pope Joan

Joan was an infant prodigy, excited from the age of ten by theology, metaphysics and the teachings of John the Scot. She was always more concerned with knowledge than with active Christianity; she was not a missionary, not concerned to convert. She left home at the age of twelve, dressed as a boy, with a sixteen-year-old friend. She left because, being female, she was denied access to the library. The two wanted to study in Athens. She went undiscovered and was recognised as very clever. She slept with her friend in a lodging house and nursed him when he fell ill until he died – arguing all the time over the beliefs of famous theologians. She decided to stay a man and devote her life to learning. She went to Rome because Italian men didn't have beards. She studied, obsessed with the pursuit of truth, and taught at the Greek School in Rome. She worked hard and became famous as a speaker when still young. When she was made a Cardinal she fell ill – 'full of terror and regret' – but she recovered and studied in pursuit of the absolute. When Pope Leo died she was elected. She believed she would know God because he would speak to her directly. But He didn't, knowing she was a woman. She eventually took another lover – a chamberlain who was very discreet. She enjoyed being Pope, consecrating bishops and receiving royalty. When there were natural disasters, however, such as earthquakes or plagues, she felt personally responsible. She might have survived happily and

successfully were it not for her baby. Here she was finally exposed as a woman and 'Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope'. She hardly knew what was happening during her pregnancy, not being fully conscious of a woman's body, but the chamberlain knew the truth. There was, of course, no question of an abortion and she didn't realise when the baby was due. Her baby was eventually born
during the procession of all the Roman clergy on Rogation Day. She experienced labour pains, spasms, contractions and loss of breath. She realised what was happening but couldn't do anything about it. The people thought that she, the Pope, was ill but the baby just slid out on to the road. One Cardinal cried 'The Antichrist!' and fainted. Joan was taken by the feet, dragged out of town, and stoned to death. The baby was also killed. Later the procession always avoided the street journeyed through on the fateful day. The clergy introduced a pierced marble chair in the Chapel of the Saviour to confirm the sex of the Pope. Two clergymen made sure he was a man while the Pope retained his public dignity.

Joan drinks steadily throughout the meal and is quite drunk by the end when she begins to recite Lucretius in Latin before being thoroughly sick.

Griselda

Griselda arrives late and at the most embarrassing possible moment for her. All the guests are drunk and laughing, hugely enjoying the ludicrous idea of the Pope's 'pierced chair', and Gret shouting 'Balls!'. She is diffident, apologetic and orders only cheese and biscuits to eat. Marlene introduces her as

famed for an extraordinary marriage recorded by Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer. Her story begins with her marriage.

The daughter of a peasant, Griselda had been spotted for her beauty by the ruling marquis, Walter, when she was fifteen. On the day of his wedding no one knew whom he was to marry, but the procession stopped at her home and he spoke to her father. He had selected Griselda to be his bride. She could refuse, but if she accepted the one condition was that she would always obey him in everything. Ladies dressed her in a white silk dress and put jewels in her hair. At first Walter was kind, but when her first child, a daughter, was six weeks old Walter explained that the people were becoming restless because of her privileged marriage and so he had to remove the child to keep them quiet. She obediently gave up the child, asking only that she be buried where no animals could dig her up. It was Walter's child, to do with as he liked. She never spoke about what had happened and continued to live happily with Walter. After four years she had a son, and two years later Walter again said that the people were angry that their heir was a peasant's grandson. Griselda believed that when he took her children it was to test her love for him, but 'it was always easy because I always knew I would do what he said'.

Twelve years later she was tested again. Walter decided he must marry someone who could give him an acceptable heir. Griselda was sent home, barefoot and dressed only in a slip. Her father and everyone else were crying but she was perfectly content. Quite soon afterwards she was sent for again, to prepare his wedding to a young girl from France – a beautiful girl of sixteen who had her younger brother with her as a page. The guests entered for the feast but Walter stayed behind and put his arms around Griselda and kissed her. She

felt half asleep with shock, and he said, 'This is your daughter and your son.' Griselda fainted, then cried and kissed her children. She was dressed in a cloth of gold and lived happily with Walter who had 'suffered so much all those years'.

The guests react with amazement at Griselda's remarkable story but Marlene follows it with a particularly scathing commentary on Walter. Eventually, following Nijo's story of the attack on the Emperor, even Griselda begins to rethink – 'I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to.'

Act Two, Scene One: Joyce's back yard – Sunday afternoon

The scene is Joyce's back yard. Squashed together in a shelter made of junk are Angie, who is sixteen, and Kit, who is twelve. The girls are hiding from Joyce (who appears to be Angie's mother) and ignore her calls from the house. Angie's disturbed animosity towards Joyce ('Wish she was dead') is reflected in her bullying of the younger Kit. She frightens Kit with stories of making pictures fall from the wall and hearing a dead kitten they know about; she accuses her of being timid, of being sexually ignorant, and her mother of being a slag. This clearly spills over from her unsatisfactory life with Joyce ('I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch' … 'If I don't get away from here I'm going to die'). They continue to ignore Joyce when she offers them a cup of tea and a biscuit. Kit, obviously fond of Angie, confides her fears of a possible war. Angie wants to go to London to see her aunt who is 'special' and 'gets people jobs' – thus establishing a possible connection with Marlene. She says

that Joyce hates her aunt and, intriguingly, 'I think I'm my aunt's child. I think my mother's really my aunt.' The girls cuddle each other for comfort. Joyce comes down to the shelter where she knows the girls are hiding. Kit wants to go to the cinema but Joyce insists that Angie tidies her room first. Angie leaves reluctantly to do so, and Joyce
talks about her concern for Angie to Kit. She sees little chance of her getting work when jobs are hard to get. 'She's one of those girls who might never leave home.' It worries Joyce that Angie plays with children much younger than herself, but she resents the suggestion that she is 'simple'. She is 'clever in her own way' and 'always kind to little children'. Kit is a confident young girl, conscious that she is clever. She mentions the possibility of becoming a nuclear physicist. Angie returns wearing an old best dress, slightly small for her. This inexplicable change of clothes irritates Joyce even more and she is yet more insistent that Angie cleans her room before anything else. Angie picks up a brick. When it begins to rain Joyce's harassment is compounded. She and Kit run into the house; Angie stays out in the rain. When Kit returns to fetch her in Angie says, 'I put on this dress to kill my mother.'

Act Two, Scene Two: 'Top Girls' Employment Agency – Monday morning

The scene moves from a main office area to a small interviewing area and back again – the changes defined in the theatre by lighting. Win and Nell have arrived at the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency on Monday morning. They drink coffee and discuss the weekend. Win has spent the weekend with a man at his home in West Sussex while his wife was

away. Nell has been with two different men but won't be drawn to discuss her private life in detail. One of the men, Derek, has asked her again to marry him but she doesn't want to be tied down, 'to play house'. She prefers to work. They consider the position in the office now that Marlene has been promoted to Managing Director. Howard Kidd is upset because a woman has got the job he considered was his by right, because he is a man. The likelihood is that he will change his job. Nell would also like a change. She has had plenty of offers but 'most of them can't afford me. Or you' she says to Win. The two discuss their day's clients and are contemptuous of most of the men whose careers they are concerned with. One prospective client impresses them because her experience suggests she is a 'tough bird like us'.

Marlene arrives and Win and Nell applaud her promotion. Howard Kidd's resentment is again mentioned. Nell is dismissive of Win's secretive affair mentioned earlier ('Don't know why you bother'), and she is displeased that Marlene has been promoted rather than her ('I don't like coming second').

Interview: Jeanine and Marlene

Marlene interviews Jeanine and quickly establishes the relevant details concerning her career. She has six 'O' level passes and moderate secretarial skills. She could have continued her formal education but preferred to go to work. She started as a typist in a small friendly office where she has progressed to being a secretary, shared by three executives. She earns £100 a week, which Marlene considers 'not bad', but she feels that there are limited prospects of advancement.

She wants a change of job basically because she needs more money. She is saving to get married. She isn't wearing an engagement ring because she and her fiancé wanted to save the money. Marlene favours not wearing a ring ('saves taking it off'). A single woman is a safer prospect to an employer, being less likely to leave to have children, and a ring could signal this possibility. Jeanine mentions advertising as a desirable line of work and is not very impressed when Marlene offers one job in a 'knitwear' marketing department and another at a promising concern selling 'lampshades'. Both are advances on her present position but they are evidently too mundane for Jeanine. She has a hazy notion of a job involving travelling, but no sense of a career structure ('I can't think about ten years'). Marlene strongly encourages her to go for one of the recommended jobs.

The scene shows Marlene at work. She wastes no time. She very quickly establishes what she needs to know about Jeanine in a professional context and smoothly moves her on. Jeanine has no focused ambition and Marlene, sensing her limitations, forcefully convinces her that the jobs she recommends are very worthwhile.

Interview: Louise and Win

Win's questions elicit the essential facts about Louise who, in two long speeches, succinctly defines the changing attitude of women to work. She is embarrassed about her age. She is forty-six but claims at first to be in her 'early forties'. Win acknowledges this is a handicap for women in business but is hopeful that Louise's experience will count in her favour. She explains that she has worked for the same company for

twenty-one years and now wants to make a change. She deeply resents how she is taken for granted. Her mother has died, she has no social life, and she has come to the awful realisation that she is 'stuck there', having given her life to the company. She has been in middle management for twenty years and has built up an extremely efficient department. She has trained younger men who have gone on
to higher things. Her work is always perfect and consequently nobody notices her. Now she wants to make them sorry to lose her. She would refuse any offer of more money that the company might make. She has doubts about working with other women and believes that she passes as a man at work. She did take on one younger woman who had excellent qualifications and who progressed to being on the board of a competitor. Louise doesn't wholly approve of the new style she displayed. The new kind of attractive, well-dressed woman is not as careful as she had always been. They take themselves for granted whereas Louise has 'had to justify [her] existence every minute'. Win explains that any vacancies would be ones where Louise would be in competition with younger men. She offers one in a cosmetic company – a field easier for a woman – at a salary of £8,500 (less than Louise is currently earning). Louise is not so much concerned about money as about making a change. For her 'it's more important to get away'.

The Office

Marlene is working at her desk when Angie enters. Taken by surprise, Marlene does not recognise her at first. We soon make the connection that Angie is Marlene's niece and Joyce is her sister. Angie has come to London to visit her aunt and,

hopefully, to stay with her. Marlene is not enthusiastic about this inconvenience, 'Unfortunately you've picked a day when I'm rather busy, if there's ever a day when I'm not.' Angie is overawed by the office and Marlene's status in it. Marlene explains that she is going to be in charge, and have a new office where 'there's just the one big desk in it for me'. Angie is thrilled ('I knew you'd be in charge of everything'). Marlene is anxious to know how long Angie intends to stay but Angie avoids giving a direct answer. She reminds Marlene of when she came to visit her and Joyce the year before. 'That was the best day of my whole life,' she says.

Howard Kidd's wife enters the office unannounced and is not at first recognised by Marlene. She assumes that Mrs Kidd wants to see her husband, Howard, but in fact she wants to talk to Marlene on a matter of some urgency. She notices Angie, who is introduced and who then retires to an inconspicuous part of the office where she overhears the conversation that ensues but takes no part in it. Mrs Kidd explains that Howard is in a state of shock about not getting the job of Managing Director. He is very upset and hasn't been able to sleep. The idea of working for a woman has appalled him and he has begun to denounce women in general, including his wife. She has had to take the blame. She has 'put him first every inch of the way' and
now she warns Marlene that she will have to be very careful in her handling of him. Marlene listens to all this without much sympathy and, feeling that she is being reproached, she tries to cut the meeting short. She says she will treat Howard fairly and properly, and blames him for 'taking it out' on his wife. Mrs Kidd expresses her own, deeply felt opinion that what has happened is wrong. Howard Kidd has a family – a wife and three children – to support and it is only fair that he

should have the job. Marlene begins to appreciate the real reason for Mrs Kidd's visit: that she might be persuaded to give up the job to Howard. She responds briskly and aggressively. She says that Howard has the choice of leaving if he isn't satisfied, and invites Mrs Kidd to leave. Mrs Kidd loses her self-control and, agreeing with her husband, she accuses Marlene of being 'one of these ballbreakers … You'll end up miserable and lonely. You're not natural.' Marlene tells her to 'please piss off', a crude, uncompromising dismissal which leaves Mrs Kidd with no alternative but to go.

Angie has heard this exchange and is immensely impressed by Marlene ('I think you were wonderful'). Marlene has to do some work and leaves Angie in the office which is 'where I most want to be in the world'.

Interview: Shona and Nell

Shona appears confident and successful. Nell's questions elicit that she is twenty-nine (though young-looking), earning a healthy £9,000 annually selling for a company, but would like a change. Nell questions Shona on her attitude to selling and is assured that she has no qualms, no womanly hesitancy about concern for 'the customer's needs and his feelings'. Shona is uncompromising: she says 'I never consider people's feelings' and 'I'm not very nice'. She is interested in selling computers ('a top field') or video systems ('a high-flying situation') and to the suggested salary of £10,000 to £15,000 and upwards she replies blandly 'Sounds OK'. The brash confidence of Shona's replies so impresses Nell, who recognises an equally ambitious career-woman, that she

suggests the possibility of working for the 'Top Girls' agency sometime in the future ('We could keep in touch'). Shona is asked to describe her present job and she proceeds to recount a typical day – selling electrical goods in the North of England. Her exotic account of expense-account living – driving a Porsche and staying in sophisticated hotels – gradually exposes her as a fraud. The picture is an unconvincing concoction of advertising clichés and fantasies. Nell says, 'Not a word of this is true, is it?'.
Shona turns out to be twenty-one and inexperienced – but unabashed when exposed by Nell.

The Office

Returning to the office, Win discovers Angie. Angie would like to work in the office but she has no formal qualifications at all. Asked what she can do she replies, 'I don't know. Nothing.' In response to Angie's questions we hear Win's story. She had been headhunted by the 'Top Girls' agency who offered her more money than the firm she was working for, so she broke her contract. Her career began with a science degree and working in medical research, but she left to earn more money. She went abroad. She was always successful but, being a woman, her success made her unpopular. She would drink to cheer herself up. She soon discovered that she could do better than any of the men she worked with, who always made their work sound harder than it was. She lived with a man for four years and supported him as he couldn't get work. She went to California and enjoyed the sunshine and the lifestyle. Then to Mexico, still in 'sales', but it wasn't a suitable country for a single woman, so she came home. She went 'bonkers' for a time, thinking she was five different

people, but recovered. The psychiatrist told her she was sane and very intelligent. She got married 'in a moment of weakness' but her husband has been in prison for the last four years and she doesn't visit him much any more. Win explains that she prefers working in the employment agency to selling because you can help people. Selling requires aggression and the customers don't usually want to meet you: 'It's no good if you like being liked.'

Nell and then Marlene re-enter the office. Nell reports that Howard Kidd has had a heart attack, but she is unaffected by the news: 'Lucky he didn't get the job if that's what his health's like,' she says. Win points to Angie and remarks on her wish to work in the office. Marlene dismisses any chance of future success for Angie: 'She's a bit thick. She's a bit funny … she's not going to make it.'

Act Three: Joyce's kitchen – Sunday evening, a year earlier

Marlene has come to visit Joyce and Angie. She has brought some presents. Angie, who is very excited, has opened a box of chocolates and unwraps the dress which she had put on in Act Two, Scene One. Joyce has a present of perfume. Angie goes to her room to try on the
new dress. Joyce is unprepared for Marlene's visit and both sisters are irritated by the discovery that Angie had invited Marlene without letting Joyce know. There is a definite prickliness between the two. When Angie reappears, thrilled about the new dress she is wearing, she justifies her invitation on the grounds that she hasn't seen her aunt for six years.

Kit enters to play with Angie but Angie, enchanted by the presence of Marlene, won't go out and Kit leaves alone. Joyce explains that Kit is like a little sister to Angie. She is the only girl who lives close to them and Angie is 'good with little children'. Marlene wonders if Angie might work with little children but Joyce dismisses the suggestion ('She hasn't an idea in her head what she wants to do'). Marlene produces a bottle of whisky and, offering Joyce a drink, remembers the last time they drank together – the night their father died. Joyce still tends his grave and visits their mother every week. They discuss local news and Marlene learns that Joyce's husband 'moved out' three years previously. These details add to the sense of Marlene's estrangement from her family. Joyce remembers that Marlene was in America at the time. Angie produces a postcard which Marlene had sent them. The message gives an image of Marlene's life that is far removed from the present situation of drab domesticity: 'Driving across the States for a new job in L.A. It's a long way but the car goes very fast. It's very hot.'

Angie's excitement at Marlene's visit irritates Joyce who sends Angie to bed. Marlene is conscious of a deep resentment in Joyce and this erupts when Marlene says that she has visited their aged mother that day. Joyce visits their mother every week. Her bitterness focuses on Marlene's leaving home: 'Look, you've left, you've gone away,/ we can do without you.' The fraught situation develops into a furious argument during which the facts of the past come tumbling out. Marlene left home to escape the awfulness of her parents' working-class existence. She got pregnant when seventeen and let Joyce adopt the child. It seemed at the time that Joyce couldn't have children of her own. Angie is now confirmed as Marlene's daughter. Joyce later had a miscarriage because she

was so exhausted looking after Marlene's baby. She hasn't been able to have any other children. Marlene has subsequently had two abortions. Eventually Marlene breaks down in tears and is comforted by Joyce ('Everyone's always crying in his house. Nobody takes any notice').

They talk about their men. Joyce's husband, Frank, was thrown out when he started having an affair with a younger woman ('He
was always carrying on'). Joyce now has four different cleaning jobs in order to survive. She won't, however, accept financial help from Marlene. Marlene has always attracted men friends who like to be seen with a 'high-flying lady' but she won't conform to the required role of 'the little woman' at home. She prefers adventures and looks forward to the 1980s which she thinks will be stupendous.

The sisters quarrel passionately about the immediate political situation in Britain, holding opposite views about the recent victory of Margaret Thatcher, the new Conservative Prime Minister. For Marlene this signals a new era of opportunity, when monetarist economic policy heralds revival and the individual with drive and initiative can prosper as never before. For Joyce, nothing has significantly changed. She reminds Marlene of the rotten life of their parents who were 'treated like rubbish': the mother went hungry and the father worked in the fields like an animal. She defends his domestic violence and his drinking as the inevitable consequence of his oppression. For Joyce 'nothing's changed and it won't with them in'. Marlene despises the working class and Joyce loathes the wealthy people she has to work for. Marlene believes simply that 'Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes', and Joyce points to Angie who is 'stupid, lazy

and frightened' and asks what might be done for people like her. Joyce believes Angie's life is doomed to waste but Marlene thinks 'she'll be all right'. Joyce won't be reconciled and goes to bed, leaving Marlene alone. She sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink. Angie comes in, calling for her mother. Marlene says, 'No, she's gone to bed. It's Aunty Marlene.' Angie speaks only one word, 'Frightening'.

Commentary

What Kind of Play?

A piece in the great Royal Court tradition: an angry, witty, front-line report on Britain, introducing characters and environments new to the theatre that affect all our lives. (Irving Wardle on Churchill's *Serious Money*, 1988)

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. (Caryl Churchill)

Max Stafford-Clark has directed an inchoate play, seemingly written on the principle 'I don't know what I think until I get it on paper.' (Francis King, 1982)

I don't set out to be a social writer, I just set out to write good plays, but I say that with the confidence that comes from knowing that they will have a social function. (Edward Bond)

Like Pope Joan, Caryl Churchill is something of a heresy. She is a major contemporary British dramatist and a woman. No woman playwright is included in Benedict Nightingale's *An Introduction to 50 Modern British Plays* (1982) which covers the twentieth century up to 1975. Only one appears among the fourteen dramatists in Methuen's two volumes of *Landmarks of Contemporary British Drama* (1986). Caryl Churchill is the one, and *Top Girls* is the play. Churchill features prominently in the numerous books on modern 'Feminist' or

'Political' theatre, but in interviews she is careful to avoid being pinned down to any limiting definition. The variety of her subject matter, the constant experiment with form and her challenge to conventional role models should serve as a warning to those who are keen to appropriate her for a cause or restrict in any way the scope of her drama.

The fact that it is a woman playwright who is experimenting in dramatic form enlivens critical analysis. Could it be that by challenging established models she is involved in creating a 'female' aesthetic? She is conscious of the possibility, but not driven by it:

I remember before I wrote *Top Girls* thinking about women barristers – and how they were in a minority and had to imitate men to succeed – and I was thinking of them as different from me. And then I thought, 'wait a minute, my whole concept of what plays might be is from plays written by men …' And 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 something I think about very often.

As Simon Trussler has concluded, the 'feminine' quality of her writing may simply have to do with dialectic replacing conflict, and open-endedness being preferred to climax.

The dialectic of *Top Girls* is wide-ranging, covering universal dilemmas affecting women, but focuses on a major theme concerning contemporary life in Britain. Caryl Churchill has described the genesis of the play:

The ideas for *Top Girls* came from all kinds of things. A lot of it went back a really long way. The idea of Dull Gret as a character I found in some old notebook from 1977 or 78. There'd been the idea of a play about a lot of dead women having coffee with someone from the present. And an idea about women doing all kinds of jobs. It was also that Thatcher had just become P.M.; and also I had been to America … and 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 met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. All those ideas fed into *Top Girls*. I wanted it to set off, with all those historical women celebrating Marlene's achievement, to look as if it were going to be a celebration of women achieving things, and then to put the other perspectives on it, to show that just to achieve the same things that men had achieved in capitalist society wouldn't be a good object.

The critique of feminist ambitions is a clear central theme, but it is 'the other perspectives' which provide the richness of the play's treatment of the predicament of modern women. Churchill's selection of women characters from the past and the modern world shows
sympathy for the feminist cause, disdaining the male oppressor, but there is no sentimentality or romanticism applied to any of them, and no comfortable solution offered for their problems. *Top Girls* confronts the audience with many questions, placing it firmly in that area of modern British theatre which believes the function of drama is to engage with immediate social issues.

There has been a shift in the theatre from plays where 'character' is fully explained; where psychological development of character is the main centre of interest and we are expected to know exactly why people do things. Modern British dramatists tend to give character and action a heightened social significance. This is particularly true of those playwrights who have been closely associated with the radical Royal Court Theatre in London, or the variously 'committed' fringe and touring companies that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. Caryl Churchill is pre-eminent among these writers. Chris Bigsby claims, 'It is true to say that the single most significant development in British theatre in the decade 1968–1978 was the rise of socialist theatre.' This socialist theatre, a non-didactic political theatre, 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.

Many modern plays have consciously challenged the audience to question how they are reacting to what is being shown on stage. Edward Bond names his theatre 'a rational theatre' not because of any spoken dialectic or political argument but because his scenes and violent images demand of a rational audience the ability to find meaning and to make relevant connections. David Hare has explained that in *Plenty* (1978) the audience has to be actively engaged:

I planned a play in twelve scenes, in which there would be twelve dramatic actions. Each of these actions is intended to be ambiguous, and it is up to the audience to decide what they feel about each event … This ambiguity is central to the idea of the play. The audience is asked to make its own mind up about each of the actions. In the act of judging the audience

learns something about its own values. (A Note on Performance, *Plenty*, 1978)

Sympathy is not directed towards one character; sympathy shifts all the time. In Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* (1975) a group of apprentice comedians try out their acts in a Northern club throughout Act Two. These acts are then adjudicated by a London agent in Act Three. However, the audience of the comedians in Act Two has,
in reality, been the theatre audience, and, although the 'agent' is a dubious individual, it is the play's audience who are as much on trial as the would-be comedians. Their own reaction to the jokes of Act Two becomes inevitably integrated with the play's whole dialectic on the subject of comedy.

Similarly the varied images of women presented in *Top Girls* are bound to provoke strong reactions among a contemporary audience who cannot fail to recognise 'the very age and body of the time' and their place in it. In performance the play is disturbing, provocative and exuberant. Reacting to its first production the critic, John Elsom, wrote:

It is splendid to see the Royal Court back in its old form, presenting virile plays on topical subjects, seizing our times by the scruff of the neck and shaking out the cant.

The Play World – A World of Women

I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more of a poet and less a social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I … must disclaim the honour of having consciously

worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humanity in general. (Henrik Ibsen, 1898)

We can now understand why there should be so many common features in the indictments drawn up against women, from the Greeks to our times. Her condition has remained the same through superficial changes, and it is this condition that determines what is called the 'character' of woman. (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*)

The play world of *Top Girls* is a world of women's experience shown from a modern point of view. The settings are a restaurant, the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency and Joyce's back yard and kitchen. These are all specific locations set in England in the 1980s requiring careful physical representation on stage. But the 'play world' extends imaginatively to embrace the world of modern woman in all its variety, complexity and contrariness. Women dominate the locations of the play. They take over the restaurant of Act One; they have
taken over the office (the traditional domain of the male) in Act Two; and they live in the kitchen (the traditional domain of the female) in Act Three. The locations become spaces where women can express themselves. The immediately striking feature of the play is that all the characters in it are women and no men appear on stage at all. Women are shown exclusively in relation to other women. Women are seen at work, discussing work. Unlikely women from the modern world are given a voice, as are women of different ages and different backgrounds, and a wider perspective is given by the

younger generation of Angie and Kit. They all speak the language of women of today.

The Act One dinner guests from the past – 'a dramatic genealogy of Marlene's historical community' (Michelene Wandor) – are also, necessarily, a part of a *modern* scene. The actors will be recognised as modern women, their voices and movements modern; they speak modern English and they are the product of a modern imagination. When Lindsay Duncan acted Lady Nijo in the 1982 Royal Court production, she appeared as an English actress 'representing' a Japanese lady: no attempt was made to change the colour of her blonde hair. The women speak of experiences from the past, but they relate to Marlene and to each other as a sisterhood in the present. All the other women in the play are contemporary figures supposedly alive in the England of the early 1980s.

The depiction of these women is in sharp contrast with the traditional, or 'classical', representation of women in plays. In the past women characters have been presented almost exclusively as adjuncts to men, dependent on men and limited by the rules and conventions of a male-dominated world. Their dramatic 'roles' have been severely restricted – as wives, daughters, lovers, harlots – always contingent on men, rarely permitted to act or think independently. Even in the nineteenth century, when Ibsen and Strindberg wrote about strong-minded women, their characters were always inseparable from men. The modern woman is shown in *Top Girls* to be living at a time of shifting priorities and expectations as far as women are concerned. Female 'roles' can be challenged. The play is original in presenting so many different kinds of women, and letting them speak for themselves. The characters are 'types' to a certain extent,

representational, but they are always individualised, dramatically interesting, and they open up a world of experience new to the British stage.

Themes and Context

The New Woman

The many ideas, themes and motifs that run throughout *Top Girls* relate to the time when the play was written. All plays deal with shared assumptions and a shared experience drawn from the social context. The dramatist organises meaning in the structure of the play and the audience uses its own experience to find the play's significance. Not everything has to be explained in the narrative because the dramatist can assume that the audience will fill in the gaps. For this reason it is useful to know something of the shared context if a play is to be understood. A simple example is that of the name 'Maggie', referred to by Marlene in Act Three. Caryl Churchill can assume with confidence that her audience will know that Maggie refers to Margaret Thatcher, and she need not use the full name in the play. Similarly, a much wider range of assumptions about life in Britain in the 1970s underlies *Top Girls* and should be considered.

Britain in the 1970s witnessed a profound change in the consciousness of women as a group. Perhaps for the first time changes in law, in publishing and the media, in the arts, in attitudes to public morality and in social habits combined in a relatively short period to alter radically the base from which women viewed their lives. *Top Girls*, which carries a sense and a mood of driving fast into the 1980s, assumes this

change of consciousness. Marlene, Win and Nell – the young women executives of the 'Top Girls' Agency – do not discuss radical feminism; for them, apparently, there is no need. They are not intimidated by men. Far from it. They expect to do everything that men do, and to do it better. Louise, however, recognises that a change has taken place and that there is a woman now who is different from her generation. 'She has a different style, she's a new kind … a kind of woman who is thirty now who grew up in a different climate.' How did this climate come about? What produced the new woman?

Publishing was important. Seminal polemical writings such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes*, all published in 1970, were best-sellers and widely influenced the feminist consciousness. Mary Stott began to edit a serious Woman's Page in the *Guardian* newspaper. Two new publishing houses began to raise the profile of women's writing. In 1973 the Virago Press began to reclaim and promote significant woman writers of the past as well as the present. In 1975 the Women's Press began with a more radical and more international list of feminist writers. Both companies used easily identifiable
book covers which became a prominent feature on the shelves of bookshops throughout Britain. For the first time women were able to make editorial decisions at the highest level. Four feminist journals were established in 1972.

Legislation specifically affecting women is not a recent phenomenon but it mushroomed in the 1970s. Several Acts of Parliament had a sudden and major influence on women's changing sense of personal independence and their relationship with employment. In 1967 the Abortion Act

made abortion far easier to obtain; in 1969 the Divorce Reform Act broadened grounds for divorce; in 1970 the Equal Pay Act stipulated that equal pay for men and women doing the same job was to become law; in 1974 contraceptives were made freely available on the National Health Service; and in 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act banned sex discrimination in employment, education and advertising and set up the Equal Opportunities Commission to see that the new Act was observed. Also the Employment Protection Act guaranteed pregnant women their jobs after maternity leave.

The Women's Liberation Movement was formally active in Britain throughout the 1970s and did much to focus attention on women's issues and to raise women's consciousness of themselves as a group with identifiable demands and needs. Feminism was not so concerned with gaining equality with men – the law was moving in that direction – but with the right to self-determination. Feminism questions any assumption that women are secondary and dependent on men and that the social and sexual division of labour is natural and unchanging. During the 1970s feminists were very successful in the encouragement of pressure groups formed to support the interests of women in their own areas of employment – in the Civil Service, in Industry, in Medicine. For the general public perhaps the most evident change was the raising of the profile of women in broadcasting – as newsreaders, presenters, and interviewers on serious programmes.

Arguing that 'the personal is political' feminism challenges both male dominance and female passivity. 'Patriarchy' has, nevertheless, proved a formidable obstacle to women. This is not surprising, given its deeply entrenched history. Patriarchy involves more than a chauvinistic 'attitude'. Hartman defines

patriarchy as 'a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women'. Patriarchy might explain why 98 per cent of the top salary earners in Britain are men. It has a profound relevance to *Top Girls*, both regarding the play's sexual politics and its treatment of the subject of employment.

The first audiences for *Top Girls* would have absorbed the changes in law and in thinking that occurred during the 1970s in relation to women and would react to the play in the light of this knowledge. The play, begun in 1979, and performed in 1982, is an incisive and reflective response to the immediate times; and, being closely related to the present, it is fully conscious of the immediate future.

Act One

The long spectacular dinner scene of Act One introduces feminist themes which are to echo throughout the play and, as the play is constantly offering shifting perspectives, so the first scene is full of contradictions. The occasion is the formal celebration of Marlene's promotion to the position of Managing Director of the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency ('Over all the women you work with. And all the men') and the celebration expands to include all the guests:

Marlene We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements. (*They laugh and drink a toast*.) (p. 14)

There is much good humour, mutual congratulation and enjoyment among the group, as might be expected. However the celebratory mood is regularly undercut by details of individual suffering, and the scene moves gradually towards chaos. By the end the guests, mostly drunk, are lost in personal reminiscence, and while Isabella remembers her last triumph ('How marvellous while it lasted') Joan is actually being sick. The disintegration of the party is extremely ironic. Dull Gret's final, apocalyptic vision of collective female action ('We're going to where the evil comes from and pay the bastards out') is set against the stage picture of a group of women no longer listening to each other. The visual statement anticipates the play's final recognition that the condition of women has changed only superficially and that individual triumphs are relative and marginal. Not least of the scene's ironies is the regular appearance of the nameless waitress who serves the dinner: a modern working woman completely ignored as an individual by the party of women achievers.

There is no difficulty in accepting the presence of the five women from the past in a modern restaurant. Theatre invites us to suspend disbelief, and few of us, even now, have trouble accepting ghosts or
witches in Shakespeare. The arrival of the guests on stage is both surprising and vastly entertaining. There is an element of cabaret and fancy dress which is good fun. The five guests are, nevertheless, a carefully selected group. Nijo and Isabella Bird are known because of their autobiographical writing and Joan, Griselda and Gret each achieved mythical status in their own right. The women are clearly distinguished on stage by their costume, but it soon emerges that they are also temperamentally very different. Their dramatic function is partly to represent different aspects of the female psyche and

partly to suggest a universal female experience. Collectively they provide a historical context for the new woman who is represented in this scene by Marlene. History, which has traditionally dealt predominantly with men and been written by men, is here given a feminist perspective.

As the play progresses and Marlene's history is revealed, she emerges as a particular kind of new woman – career-minded, determined and ambitious. Other modern characters differ in their values. The five remarkable women from the past also reveal contrasting female values. Isabella is adventurous, keen on the outdoors and actually made ill by domesticity; Nijo is concerned with social convention and her place at Court (symbolised by her preoccupation with clothes); Joan is intellectual – fascinated by ideas and philosophical debate; Gret is the least sophisticated – a grotesque creature of appetite, almost a parody of the peasant woman; and Griselda epitomises the submissive and dutiful wife and mother, happy in her obedience. There is much witty entertainment in performance from the interplay of these contrasting personalities. From Nijo's snobbery, for example:

Isabella There are some barbaric practices in the east.

Nijo Barbaric?

Isabella Among the lower classes.

Nijo I wouldn't know. (p. 7)

And from Isabella's discretion ('I knew coming to dinner with a Pope we should keep off religion' and 'I did think it was remarkably barbaric to kill them but you learn not to say

anything'). Altogether the marked differences of personality militate against any simple 'definition' of what constitutes a woman.

However, the stories of Act One, drawn from different times and different social backgrounds, point to a universal female experience
of oppression. It would appear that women have always been expected to fulfil certain roles, regardless of individual temperament, and have been excluded from other experiences and possibilities in life. The roles have been determined for the convenience of men. Nijo and Griselda were essentially slaves in their time, albeit willing in their service. Joan was forced to adopt a disguise in order to satisfy her aspiration for knowledge. She says, 'I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope.' The irony is that she was perfectly acceptable as Pope before the truth was found out. Then she was killed for being a woman. Isabella was expected to lead the life of a clergyman's daughter and always felt guilty when she attempted to break free. Her frustration is all too clear:

Isabella How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady … Why should I? Why should I? (pp. 29–30)

Throughout the dinner Marlene provides a modern, liberated commentary on the stories from the past, and she is particularly scathing about Griselda's experience of the dreadful Walter ('I can't stand this,' she says). By the end the guests form a chorus of disapproval. Nijo repeats her one gesture of defiance – 'I hit him with a stick' – and even Griselda begins to have second thoughts – 'I do think – I do

wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to.' The feeling of resentment is given most powerful expression in Gret's description of her own feminist revolution. All the details of persecution – rape, loss of children, eviction – build to a climax in her story:

Gret … I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. l come out of my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, 'Come on, we're going … (p. 31)

By now none of the guests is in any state to join in organised opposition to anything, and Joan least of all. Her drunken state and the group picking up on certain Latin phrases ('O miseras!') is invariably the source of laughter in the theatre. But how significant is Joan's Latin, given that it is rarely understood in the theatre? Taken from Lucretius, it advocates withdrawal from worldly involvement – 'nothing is more delightful than to occupy the calm of an ivory tower built on the teachings of wise men'. (See the full translation on p. 103.) Greg Giesekam has suggested the intriguing possibility that:

Far from being irrelevant, these Latin verses provide an ironic counterpoise to the socialist-feminist dynamic of the play, with their stance of individual satisfaction based on inaction contrasted with Gret's participation in collective action. The irony of the contrast is heavily underscored by Joan's drunken state as she delivers the lines – her 'templa' of wisdom have hardly proved 'serena'. (*Studies in Theatre Production*, January 1990)

However, this is surely making excessive demands on a modern audience and it is unlikely that Caryl Churchill intended quite that level of dramatic irony. The implicit question behind all the stories of iniquities that women have had to put up with in the past focuses on the possibility of change. The presence of the modern 'successful' Marlene suggests that the problems of the past are confined to the past, but this is not entirely true. Marlene asks, 'Don't you get angry? I get angry.' The modern women of the play also have to cope with the endemic enigma of being women in a society where so many standards have been set by men. Act Three, through the character of Joyce, suggests that the only fundamental change for the better – for both women and men – must come through a change in political thinking. Act One gives expression to a universal female resentment which continues on various levels throughout the play.

Resentment about one's lot in life is most obviously expressed in anger, and many women in *Top Girls* are angry, but alternatives to the characters' present circumstances are unclear and the general frustration, introduced in Act One, becomes a motif of wanting to 'get away'. Nijo travelled for twenty years; Jeanine would like to travel and Shona wants to be on the road; Isabella couldn't stay in Scotland and always felt dull when stationary; Win has travelled widely; Louise feels the most important thing for her is to 'get away'. Angie says, 'If I don't get away from here I'm going to die.' Nobody, however, expresses a stronger need to get away than Marlene does – from what was her family and their background – 'I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them …' At one extreme this is a reaction to an intolerable situation, but it can also express a need for something new, for adventure. The instinct is complex and

unresolved. Marlene's opening words to Isabella introduce the dilemma. She has just achieved a desired promotion and now 'I haven't time for a holiday. I'd like to go somewhere exotic like you but I can't get away … I'd like to lie in the sun forever, except of course I can't bear sitting still.'

Women and Work

Top Girls is the name of the employment agency where most of Act Two takes place. Employees and clients reflect different attitudes towards careers and the subject of women at work becomes a major concern of the play. Work is an essential fact of life for the modern women who appear in Act Two. Again, the social context provides a useful background to these characters.

In the 1970s and early 1980s social changes in Britain did affect women in relation to employment but the national pattern was, in fact, relatively unshifting. The play recognises this. If salary were taken as the measuring point there were very few 'top girls'. The Policy Studies Institute (1981), examining women in top jobs, found that:

If 'high earners' among employees are defined as the top 2½–3% of all who are employed full time, women accounted for just under 2% in 1979. At the highest earnings levels they are scarcely represented at all.

Furthermore, despite equal opportunities legislation, women remain concentrated at the bottom of the hierarchies of pay and promotion opportunities. This is partly because women often choose employment in professions that do not offer high

salaries (for example in education, health and welfare, and mostly in clerical occupations) and partly because so many women work part-time.

Against this stark reality, however, changes were taking place which are reflected in the play and are relevant to it. At a time of sharp decline in male employment, notably in manufacturing industries, women's employment was increasing nationally. This was especially so in 'service' industries – of which the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency is an excellent example. More women became available for work in the 1970s, and with girls and women gaining more academic and vocational qualifications all the time, they became more competitive in the labour market ('There's not a lot of room upward,' says Nell). Forty-five per cent of all waged workers in Britain are women, and the play offers a challenging social perspective – from Marlene's admired new woman:

Marlene I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because she's an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money. (p. 89)

to the other extreme of Joyce, who has four cleaning jobs – which she hates – and Angie who might become a 'packer in Tesco' but certainly is 'not going to make it'.

Economic independence is a *sine qua non* of women's liberation. As Virginia Woolf recognised in 1928 – 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.' During the 1970s changes in social lifestyle affected the labour market. Women had fewer children. For the first

time the birth rate fell below the death rate in Britain. Women had their first child later and their last child sooner, and so the time spent bearing and raising children declined. A shift in the moral climate made single mothers acceptable, and reduced the pressure on young people to marry and have children. Together with an increase in the divorce rate these changes placed more women in need of economic independence and available for work.

The victim mentality of the isolated and housebound wife and mother was challenged during the 1970s. While it remains true that most housework is still carried out by women, the basic drudgery has been relieved by mechanical aids, freeing women for other things. The proliferation nationally of social activities organised for women helped take women out of the house. Health clubs, fitness classes, dancing, aerobics and such like activities brought women together and developed women's consciousness of possible alternatives. The traditional domestic role has no appeal whatsoever for Nell in *Top Girls*:

Nell Derek asked me to marry him again.

Win He doesn't know when he's beaten.

Nell I told him I'm not going to play house, not even in Ascot.

Win Mind you, you could play house.

Nell If I chose to play house I would play house ace.

Win You could marry him and go on working.

Nell I could go on working and not marry him. (p. 50)

The key problem for professional women in Britain has always been the difficulty of reconciling a career with a family. Access to top jobs is easier for those women who have few or no family responsibilities. This, of course, is a major issue in *Top Girls*.

Act Two

The scenes in the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency and the varied cross-section of women who appear in them develop the subject of women and work. Although originally written in three acts, for practical reasons the play was first performed with just one interval, with one interview scene being moved to allow for doubling (see author's note); the play was published in that form at the time. Churchill later asked for it to be published in three acts, and has now restored the Marlene/Jeanine interview to its original place in the office scene. The character of Angie has the function of extending the significance of the office scenes to the world outside, posing awkward questions about the nature of 'success' and the aspirations of the women who work in the office.

Many modern plays invite the audience to judge an action which might not be fully explained on stage. The structure of the plays provides coherence and meaning, but the perceptiveness of the audience is required to draw relevant conclusions. Where more is involved than the literal words and actions the dominating method is irony. Irony often begins with the title of the play, as in Edward Bond's *Saved*,

which disputes the notion of 'Christian' salvation, or David Hare's *Plenty*, where the post-war optimism of the ending is placed in ironic juxtaposition with the play's earlier picture of a declining England. Similarly the title *Top Girls* is ironic. The play is less concerned with the celebration of successful women than with questioning the kind of success that is shown. Benedict Nightingale recognised the central questions of the play:

What use is female emancipation, Churchill asks, 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 very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex? (*New Statesman*, 1982)

These questions are not debated in the form of dialogue but are posed by the action on stage. In particular, the office scenes are equivocal in performance. There is a definite glamour to be found in the physical surroundings, in the appearance of the smart young women executives, and in the reversal of normal proceedings – with the office being run entirely by women who are able to shape the careers of men as well as women. However, the attitude of these successful women – Marlene, Win and Nell – is open to question. A similar ambiguity occurs in Churchill's later *Serious Money* (1987) where the energy
and buzz projected by the City financial dealers at work generates excitement, but what we see is pure greed and egotism.

The dialogue in the 'Top Girls' office reflects a dismissive attitude to clients and even colleagues. Win and Nell cherish

those who might be ‘tough birds’, like them, but otherwise their tone is harsh and unfeeling. One client is ‘Pushy. Bit of a cowboy … not overbright’, another is rejected as ‘that poor little nerd’; ambitious young men are ‘really pretty bastards’; potential female employees are relegated to ‘half a dozen little girls’; their colleague, Howard Kidd, (‘Poor little bugger’): suffers a heart attack and Nell’s response is simply, ‘Lucky he didn’t get the job if that’s what his health’s like.’ Nell, in her interview with Shona, admits to her own aggressiveness:

Nell And what about closing?

Shona I close, don’t I?

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 his feelings.

Shona I never consider people’s feelings.

Nell I was selling for six years, I can sell anything, I’ve sold in three continents, and I’m jolly as they come but I’m not very nice. (pp. 67–8)

In her interview with Jeanine, Marlene displays her professionalism – her experience, her astuteness and her pragmatism. She is able to sum up Jeanine from an employer’s point of view in half a minute, finds her limited, and then moves her on forcefully and efficiently. She has no personal interest in Jeanine, and finding her naive she wastes no more time than is necessary on her; she encourages

Jeanine to get one of the proffered jobs, but her claim 'I'm putting myself on the line for you' is not true.

The office women have achieved relative success and independence but within a system created essentially by men. The system is hierarchical (hence *Top Girls*), and within a capitalist economy it is the fittest who survive. Marlene, Win and Nell may be dismissive of men ('Men are awful bullshitters'), and they are certainly clever and able, but they have done nothing to challenge patriarchal authority. By achieving positions of power and responsibility they have appropriated it within the system. The determination and ruthlessness shown in the office indicate that they have had to adopt the kind of behaviour that women have traditionally resented in men.

Furthermore, the office scenes give a clear picture that women's professional horizons are limited, even today. Win reflects that 'there's not many top ladies about' and 'there's nothing going here' in the office. Jeanine and Louise add further perspective to the problem of women and employment when they are interviewed for jobs. Neither is offered much that is encouraging. Jeanine is offered two positions: marketing knitwear at an increased salary of £110 per week (a minimal improvement on her present post), or secretarial and reception duties in a small firm producing lampshades, with some prospects but no increase in salary at all. Louise is forty-six and more mature, experienced and commanding than Jeanine. She is advised to look towards 'fields that are easier for a woman', and she might have to accept a drop in salary in order to change her life. Win is realistic and frank with her. 'Let's face it, vacancies are going to be ones where you'll be in competition with younger men.'

The chances, therefore, of becoming a 'top' girl under the existing competitive economic system are shown to be difficult, and the achievement questionable. For the less forceful (Jeanine and Louise) the opportunities appear to be clearly limited. However, with the character of Angie in Act Two, the play exposes how divisive the system is by taking into account the situation of the helpless: of those who are quite incapable of entering the scramble for worthwhile employment – those from poor social backgrounds. Joyce knows that 'She's not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get'. Hopeless at school, without any formal qualifications, lazy and disturbed, Angie can also be described as a victim. While the successful look after themselves, who is there in society to look after Angie? Joyce struggles to survive and can barely cope with her. There is no sentimentality attached to the presentation of Angie, yet she is shown to be affectionate and possessed of a vivid emotional life. Her frustration and longing are eloquent testimony to the cost of others' 'success', and her presence in the office poignantly undermines the image of individualistic achievement.

Angie may be the ultimate victim of a competitive society, but the range of women who are shown in the office suggests that employment is a real cause of concern for women in general. The play doesn't say that women should not go to work – clearly they need to and want to – but work inevitably affects the whole of their lives, and
frequently for the worse. Those who appear to have succeeded are all 'travelling light', having rejected family responsibilities. They are not entirely happy. Nell resents Marlene's success, Win is lonely, and Marlene – who thinks it is 'very good' to have her own office – has abandoned her daughter. The entry of Mrs Kidd highlights another dilemma

of employment. In some respects she is an anachronism, quite out of place and uncomfortable in this office, and her request for Marlene to give up her new job is unreasonable ('He's got a family to support. He's got three children. It's only fair'), but she does represent another point of view. Marlene treats her harshly, but Mrs Kidd's accusation that she is 'not natural' carries the weight of traditional opinion that the woman's place is in the home. This prejudice is one more difficulty that professional women have to face, even from other women.

Women and Politics

Our policies are perfectly right. There will be no change. (13.8.1980 Margaret Thatcher)

There are good times very much in prospect. (25.1.1987 Margaret Thatcher)

There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. (1.11.1987 Margaret Thatcher) Women are soft, mild, pitiful and flexible;

Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless.

(William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, *Part Three*, Act I, scene 4, ll. 141–2)

Top Girls was written and performed during the early years of Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister of Great Britain. The policies and principles of her Conservative government are the immediate political context of the play and emerge in Act Three as the focus of the impassioned

quarrel between Marlene and Joyce. Thatcher is Marlene's heroine and very much the 'top girl'.

Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party – the first woman to be so – in 1975, having challenged Edward Heath for the job. She became Prime Minister in 1979 – the first woman in British history to hold this position – and won another two elections during the 1980s. From the beginning her government was associated with radical right-wing economic policies which were to have profound social consequences. Thatcher's government pursued monetarist policies to control inflation. To this end the money supply was to be reduced and public spending reined in. State socialism would be
rolled back by the privatisation of major nationalised industries, and the power of the unions would be broken by new legislation. Individual initiative would be stimulated by lower direct taxation and the injection of competitive market forces in many areas of public life.

In *Top Girls* Marlene embraces the 'enterprise culture' encouraged by Thatcher and supports monetarism regardless of the social consequences. Joyce and Angie represent that section of society most in need of social support. Their future does not appear hopeful.

Perhaps the greatest irony operating in the play is the phenomenon of Margaret Thatcher. Few women in history have broken more taboos than she has, by becoming leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister of Great Britain. The socialist bias of the play, however, cannot allow this achievement to go unchallenged.

Act Three

Act Three fills out Marlene's story and in so doing moves the feminist themes of the play into the arena of contemporary politics. As Joyce says angrily to Marlene – 'you've got on, nothing's changed for most people, has it?' While Marlene is confirmed as an advocate for 'Thatcherism' Joyce argues that fundamental change can only be achieved by socialism. The argument is more implied than stated.

Joyce has had a bad experience of men and is quite disenchanted by them ('I'd sooner do without') but her argument shifts the history of sexual oppression into a wider social context:

Joyce You say Mother had a wasted life.

Marlene Yes I do. Married to that bastard.

Joyce What sort of life did he have? / Working in the fields like

Marlene Violent life?

Joyce an animal. / Why wouldn't he want a drink?

Marlene Come off it.

Joyce You want a drink. He couldn't afford whisky.

Marlene I don't want to talk about him.

Joyce You started, I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.

Marlene She was hungry because he drank the money. / He used to hit her.

Joyce It's not all down to him. / Their lives were rubbish. They

Marlene She didn't hit him.

Joyce were treated like rubbish. He's dead and she'll die soon and what sort of life / did they have? (p. 94)

Joyce, by referring to 'people' rather than 'women' in her argument, focuses on her experience of vertical class distinctions – the traditional demarcation between rich and poor. Class structure is seen by her as the cause of oppression. The political row between the fraught sisters is exaggerated and simplified ('**Marlene** I hate the working class …' '**Joyce** I spit when I see a Rolls Royce …') but as it encompasses much of the 'State of England' drama of the 1960s and 1970s it can afford to be. A contemporary 1982 audience would have been well versed in the political debate. Nevertheless, the weight of the play's argument reaches a climax where political realities cannot be avoided, and Joyce is finally alienated from Marlene by her political sympathies:

Marlene… I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.

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.

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. (p. 96)

Marlene has managed by her own determination and effort to lift herself out of working-class deprivation, and while her achievement as an individual can be admired (as it is in Act One) the facts pertaining to Angie and Joyce place her success in another light.

Marlene expresses wholehearted support for Thatcher – 'She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job … Monetarism is not stupid
… Certainly gets my vote' – and her own success could be seen to vindicate the encouragement of individual initiative. However, Act Three reveals aspects of her life which we must question. She left home without a backward glance. By handing Angie to Joyce she made the symbolic gesture of

cutting herself off from family and family responsibility. She hasn't visited 'home' for six years. Angie's arrival in the office (Act Two) is clearly an inconvenience to her, and Marlene wishes she was out of the way. Nevertheless, sympathy is carefully balanced in the play. Joyce is not presented as a heroic working-class survivor, fighting for socialism. In many respects she is a failure, worn down by the sheer drudgery of her existence, let down by her husband, and struggling with mixed success to look after Angie. The history of the sisters' social and family background is as grim as anything recounted in Act One. Marlene determined to 'get out', Joyce decided to stay. The play questions that these choices have to be made at all in the modern world, given the cost to all concerned.

Language

Top Girls is a language-oriented play. Characters engage above all in talk. Language patterns vary: the play offers excited or furious overlapping dialogue; incisive questioning giving way to the set speech; different codes and registers defining contrasting social groups. The retroactive last scene and the fact that ten characters appear only once indicate that psychological development through the play is not a priority. More important is what the characters represent and what they have to say. The distinctive quality of the language of *Top Girls* is its clarity and incisiveness and how sensitive the text is to live performance.

In performance an actor uses more than words to present a character but the words come first. An actor employs body language; she wears costume appropriately defining her

professional or social situation; and also, very importantly, she will speak with an accent, a tone of voice and quality and texture of sound that defines her social background as well as her mood. Caryl Churchill provides for this very precisely in the written text, which becomes the spoken language of the play.

Top Girls includes different social groups in contemporary Britain and recognises changes that are occurring within the traditional parameters. The social background of the modern characters is always significant and their speech shows what this is. Initially the
names of the characters help to place them. Marlene's appearance and voice would signal instant impressions as the play opens, but a vital clue – absorbed almost unconsciously by an English audience – is given when Nijo calls her by name. Marlene is mostly a working-class name in Britain. Similarly Jeanine, Shona, Joyce and the diminutive 'Angie' (Joyce uses 'Marley' to comfort Marlene) fit comfortably in a 'lower'-class background. Rosemary and Howard Kidd have first names associated more often with the middle class. Mrs Kidd is the only modern character in the play who has a surname. She is identified absolutely in relation to her husband, whose name she has taken. In her brief scene she speaks for a substantial social group – the stay-at-home wife, comfortably off, who services her husband and children. Win and Nell are more difficult to place; their names are socially ambiguous. They represent the new class, based on capitalist enterprise, which is accessible to the aspiring Marlene.

As in all plays that are set in modern Britain, the class or social group of a character is important. Conventionally in the theatre different social groups have been defined most

obviously by their manner of speech. Since the late 1950s British playwrights have focused a great deal on the working class, providing stage space and a voice for that lower social group which has traditionally in 'middle-class' plays been relegated to stereotypes, often of a comic variety. A patronising element, evident in the opening of Noël Coward's 1941 *Blithe Spirit*, for example, has been banished from the modern stage. Here the sophisticated Ruth is giving instructions to the maid Edith:

Ruth And when you're serving dinner, Edith, try to remember to do it calmly and methodically.

Edith Yes'm.

Ruth As you are not in the Navy it is unnecessary to do everything at the double.

Edith Very good, 'm.

Ruth Now go and get the ice.

Edith (*straining at the leash*) Yes'm.

She starts off at full speed.

Ruth Not at a run, Edith.

Edith (*slowing down*) Yes'm.

Edith goes.

The ‘off-stage’ existence of an Edith character is of no consequence at all, while the audience is invited to take vicarious pleasure in the social ease, wit, and superiority of the Ruth character. The British theatre of the 1960s and 1970s went a long way towards reversing this social sympathy, making the working class a serious subject of concern. Television drama has sustained a sense of unchanging class divisions through classic serials, period plays and soap operas, but modern theatre has challenged the fixedness of class by making the representatives of the working-class articulate.

The working class has consistently been represented by the use of vernacular speech which, in English, can be remarkably varied. Arnold Wesker, for example, uses a Norfolk dialect in *Roots* (1959):

Mrs Bryant I shall never forget when I furse hear on it. I was in the village and I was talking to Reggie Fowler. I say to him, there’ve bin a lot o’ talk about Jimmy ent there? Disgustin’, I say.

Harold Pinter, in *The Caretaker* (1961), employs a more stylised vernacular which, in performance, again requires the actors to consider the appropriate accent:

Aston You Welsh?

Pause.

Davies Well, I been around, you know … what I mean … I been about …

Aston Where were you born then?

Davies (*darkly*) What do you mean?

Aston Where were you born?

Davies I was … uh … oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back … see what I mean … going back … a good way … lose a bit of track, like … you know …

An extreme example of local speech, again stylised, is found in Nigel Williams's classroom drama *Class Enemy* (1978), where phonetic spelling is used to denote the sound:

Sky-light Woss in store eh? I wonder. Woss in store?

Iron Fuck all's in store.

Racks Why we stay Sky-light?

Sky-light Sunning ter do innit.

All these plays have a strong basis in a specific place and the characters reflect that in their speech. The scenes in *Top Girls* are brought vividly to life by an accurate and varied re-creation of codes of speech equally rooted in time and place. The close relationship between Angie and Kit is made convincing by a recognition of children's insecurities, their range of reference, and – mostly usefully for the actors involved – by the continuous reference to themselves in the immediate present through the repetition of personal pronouns:

Kit My mum don't like you anyway.

Angie I don't want her to like me. She's a slag.

Kit She is not.

Angie She does it with everyone.

Kit She does not.

Angie You don't even know what it is.

Kit Yes I do.

Angie Tell me then.

Kit We get it all at school, cleverclogs. It's on television. You haven't done it.

Angie How do you know?

Kit Because I know you haven't

Angie You know wrong then because I have. (p. 37)

A similar domestic intimacy is conveyed between Marlene and Joyce, again by the use of 'I', 'you' and 'we' to emphasise the personal nature of the dialogue:

Marlene How do you mean you didn't know I was coming?

Joyce You could have written. I know we're not on the phone but we're not completely in the dark ages, / we do have a postman.

Marlene But you asked me to come.

Joyce How did I ask you to come?

Marlene Angie said when she phoned up. (p. 76)

In contrast the 'Top Girls' office executives engage in a sharp-edged knowing banter which manages to show how they are closely linked and yet, at the same time, keeping themselves at a personal distance from each other:

Nell… I've got that poor little nerd I should never have said I could help. Tender heart me.

Win Tender like old boots. How old?

Nell Yes well forty-five.

Win Say no more.

Nell He knows his place, he's not after calling himself a manager, he's just a poor little bod wants a better commission and a bit of sunshine.

Win Don't we all.

Nell He's just got to relocate. He's got a bungalow in Dymchurch.

Win And his wife says.

Nell The lady wife wouldn't care to relocate. She's going through the change.

Win It's his funeral, don't waste your time.

Nell I don't waste a lot.

Win Good weekend you?

Nell You could say.

Win Which one?

Nell One Friday, one Saturday.

Win Aye-aye. (p. 48–9)

Marlene is able to move between these codes, which is the mark of her advancement. Mastering the language is a requirement for entry into any social group. If, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, you must 'prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet' you must also have command of the appropriate language. So Shona very quickly finds herself accepted when she is interviewed by Nell. She mirrors the new woman in confidence, attractiveness and ambition. She looks the part and echoes the speech and the sentiments.

Nell You find it easy to get the initial interest do you?

Shona Oh yeh, I get plenty of initial interest.

Nell And what about closing?

Shona I close, don't I?

Nell Because that's what an employer is going to have doubts about … They think we listen to the buyer's doubts. They think we consider his needs and his feelings.

Shona I never consider people's feelings.

Nell I was selling for six years, I can sell anything, I've sold in three continents, and I'm jolly as they come but I'm not very nice.

Shona I'm not very nice. (pp. 67–8)

It follows that Nell can see Shona working in the office – 'there's nothing officially going just now, but we're always on the lookout. There's not that many of us. We could keep in touch.' Shona evidently possesses, at least superficially, the characteristics of 'us'. Win has sensed the same qualities in a client – 'Tough bird like us' – and Nell says, 'I always want the tough ones when I see them.' Shona's language, however, lets her down eventually. Her description of a day's selling in the North of England is a fantasy. It is a half-digested consumer's guide to good living, full of clichés and unbelievable. Nell's response is the more bitter because she has been deceived for so long. Shona's education and experience have only partially equipped her for the new materialist culture that she is anxious to enjoy. She cannot sustain the image that her brazen confidence projects in her early, curt replies to Nell. Likewise Jeanine's education has left her floundering. Her limitations are exposed in the

contrast between her linguistic ramblings and Marlene's incisive questioning.

The questioning technique is frequently used as a method of character definition. The three office interviews are each beautifully shaped. Everything that we need to know about Jeanine, Louise and Shona emerges clearly and each actor has plenty to work on to fill out the character in performance. Marlene asks Jeanine sixteen questions in as many lines and learns all she needs to know. Win asks Louise ten penetrating questions which introduce her completely, and Nell asks Shona twenty questions which do the same. When Angie visits the office in Act Two both Marlene and Win ask her a lot of questions which reveal as much about them as about Angie.

In *Top Girls* Churchill employs the original device of overlapping dialogue. How this works is explained in the note to the layout of the text on p. lviii. A speech usually follows the one immediately before it but sometimes a speaker interrupts another, or continues speaking right through another's speech, or follows on from a speech earlier than the one preceding it. This occurs a lot in Act One and culminates in Act Three during the passionate argument between Marlene and Joyce when they are sometimes speaking at the same time. What is the purpose of this technique? It produced mixed reactions at first ('Overlapping dialogue is a brilliant technical feature' – Michael Coveney, 'an irritating conceit … which serves no purpose, real or symbolic' – Bryan Robertson). If an actor's words can't be heard it is easy to understand the frustration of an audience. However, the audience should be involved, not alienated. The 'speaking right through' or 'interruption' that occurs during the Act One

dinner is the consequence of exuberance. The effect is partly one of surface naturalism. People excited at a party do speak at the same time. However, the dialogue is coherent and logical. The speakers hear what is said and respond to it. The audience is made to listen more acutely and is the more involved. They can also find the effect of the competing egos very funny. The language of Act One has a predominantly narrative purpose. Actors will find a distinctive 'voice' as they will a 'character' for the women of Act One, but the structure of their language is standard prose and although the dialogue is brilliantly orchestrated and witty the speech patterns are similar. Only Gret, with her monosyllabic interjections, is markedly different.

The overlapping in Act Three has a different purpose. The dramatist is able to simplify the argument, assuming the already informed make-up of the audience (a contemporary audience would bring their knowledge of the political argument to the play). What is shown in the row between the two sisters, now affected by the whisky they have drunk, is real personal distress. The overlapping dialogue helps to show the personal pain and damage that occurs to individuals as a direct consequence of political decisions that are made by others.

Language points to the fragmentation of British society and the survival of class distinctions when two 'groups' collide, which occurs with the intervention of Mrs Kidd in the office. Marlene introduces her to Angie:

Mrs Kidd… I'm sorry if I'm interrupting your work. I know office work isn't housework / which is all interruptions.

Marlene No no, this is my niece, Angie. Mrs Kidd.

Mrs Kidd Very pleased to meet you.

Angie Very well thank you. (p. 64)

Mrs Kidd replies with the conventional 'polite' response of her social group – 'Very pleased to meet you'. Angie, however, who might never have spoken before to a woman of Mrs Kidd's social background, responds disconcertedly to a question that hasn't been asked. Her 'Very well thank you' is the conditioned response to 'How are you?' But Angie is out of her depth, and it shows. Joyce is aware that Marlene mixes in a different social group. In a phrase of revealing awkwardness she is to admit 'You're ashamed of me if I came to your office, your smart friends, wouldn't you …' (p. 95)

The meeting between Marlene and Mrs Kidd is a confrontation of women from different backgrounds holding incompatible views about the role of women. There is an unconscious irony in Mrs Kidd's words 'you don't recognise me but we did meet, I remember you of course …' (p. 63). Marlene doesn't recognise her at first, but then she literally cannot understand why Mrs Kidd has come to the office, or what she is trying to say. As the truth dawns on her and she realises that Mrs Kidd has come to support her husband Marlene's response is forceful:

Mrs Kidd I had to do something.

Marlene Well you've done it, you've seen me. I think that's probably all we've time for. I'm sorry he's been taking it out on you. He really is a shit, Howard. (p. 65)

The effect is shocking because of the word 'shit'. An English audience would know 'a shit' to be a vulgar term of contempt for somebody. But it is offensive. It is one of the words omitted from Partridge's *Smaller Slang Dictionary* (1976), because it is likely to offend 'against propriety or delicacy'. When Mrs Kidd loses control and echoes the distraught Howard –'you're not natural' – Marlene tells her to 'piss off'. The phrase 'Could you please piss off' is controlled, but calculated to insult and to be effective. Angie thinks the use of this language by Marlene is 'wonderful' because she knows it is not acceptable in Mrs Kidd's social world. For Angie it implies a kind of triumph. In the theatre the response is likely to be complex. Mrs Kidd's request is unreasonable, but she is deeply upset and Marlene's response is impatient and even cruel. It reveals the extent
of her hardness. Just as the actor is responsible for finding the right voice and accent for her character, so the text of *Top Girls* makes interpretative demands on the actor to find the right meaning of a line. Meaning is conveyed by stress and intonation. Many of the dialogues in the play are made up of concise, very short sentences. This produces the sound of natural speech in performance, but the emotional drive and motivation has to be found by the actor. The text provides all the evidence that is necessary.

Two examples should clarify how far the text has been constructed for performance, and requires the actor to deliver the words meaningfully. Towards the end of her interview

Louise becomes agitated and is advised by Win not to 'talk too much at an interview'.

Louise… I only talk to you because it seems to me this is different, it's your job to understand me, surely. You asked the questions.

Win I think I understand you sufficiently.

Louise Well good, that's good.

Win Do you drink?

Louise Certainly not. I'm not a teetotaller, I think's that very suspect, it's seen as being an alcoholic if you're teetotal … (pp. 58–9)

The question is how should Win say 'Do you drink?' This depends on how Win appears elsewhere in the play. 'Do you drink?' could be a bitchy response. Win could have been upset during the interview by the older woman defining the younger generation of executive, possibly Win herself, as 'not so careful. They take themselves for granted.' A further implied criticism could be seen in Louise's reply 'it's your job to understand me, surely'. Win might respond unsympathetically with a question that puts down Louise. It is obvious that Louise doesn't have any fun in life, that she has no social pleasures. Why should Win take criticism from her? However, in other scenes Win is shown to be sensitive – much more so than Nell – and it is unlikely that she would be unpleasant in this way. She treats Angie very sympathetically when she finds her in the office, and in telling her own story she reveals both strengths and weaknesses, intelligence and

sensitivity: 'I like this better than sales, I'm not really that aggressive. I started thinking sales was a good job if you want to meet people, but you're meeting people that don't want to meet you. It's no good if you
like being liked. Here your clients want to meet you because you're the one doing them some good. They hope (p. 72).

It is more likely that Win would be sympathetic to Louise, who is a very sad figure. She might sense that Louise drinks alcohol secretly and guiltily at home to cheer herself up. Win has done this – without the guilt – in her own past. She might want to encourage Louise towards a happier future, by erasing the guilt. The question 'Do you drink?' would then be asked with sympathetic understanding. The actor has to decide, and will do so in relation to the play as a whole. As it happens, Louise does not respond and Win doesn't pursue the point:

Win I drink.

Louise I don't.

Win Good for you. (p. 59)

It is significant that Win should interview Louise and that Nell should interview Shona, given how they are presented and how they speak in the office at other times. Win, unlike Nell, is not jealous of Marlene's promotion.

Secondly, the ending shows how a deceptively simple vocabulary carries the potential for a very powerful emotional impact. When Marlene has been left alone by Joyce she '*sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink.* **Angie** *comes in*':

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? … (p. 97)

A climax of emotional tension has been reached in the furious argument between Joyce and Marlene and this leaves a stillness and quietness in the theatre when Marlene is left alone on stage. Angie's entrance is poignant in the extreme. Angie, in distress, calls for her mother and Marlene – who is her mother – replies 'No, she's gone to bed. It's Aunty Marlene.' How is this to be spoken? An actor could project wretchedness and maternal guilt and draw audience sympathy towards her character. Marlene would be seen to be paying the cost of denying her own motherhood. Alternatively an actress could show that Marlene has steeled herself to this rejection of Angie and consequently place the entire weight of audience sympathy on to Angie. However, the text allows for the weight of sympathy to be directed towards both characters. Marlene can show the cost of the rejection as it affects her, but still show that the rejection has been made, and that Angie has been left distraught. The playwright doesn't say how the words should be spoken. There is no adverbial advice. But the text is sufficiently complete for the actors to find the appropriate reading. Act Three is retrospective ('*a year earlier*') and the actress playing

Marlene should see that without a conscious and deliberate choice concerning Angie, Marlene would not have progressed to being Managing Director of the 'Top Girls' agency – as we see her in Acts One and Two.

Structure

There is no precedent for the structure of *Top Girls*. As Caryl Churchill explained in an interview, she begins with 'content' and then finds the 'form'. 'You invent the rules, experiment all the time' (*Third Ear*, BBC Radio 3, 17.4.89). In the case of *Top Girls* the two predominant ideas were those of dead women coming back and women working. The settings of a restaurant and an employment agency are ideal for dramatising these subjects. However, inevitably, the originality of the concept proved disturbing to some. Rosalind Carne argued 'From a strictly mechanical point of view scene one is superfluous' (*Financial Times*) and Nicholas de Jong was also concerned about the first scene in relation to the rest – 'Churchill never really convinces that this dramatic backcloth to the play has any developed relationship or ironic contrast with what follows' (*Guardian*). The last Act being retroactive (a fact which 'emerges' during performance) also works against the convention of a forward-moving plot where characters are affected by the action as it progresses.

Nevertheless the play does have a linear narrative, moving through Marlene's story and increasingly opening up the themes to a point where Marlene's decisions are fully revealed in relation to the present. There is a progressive and cumulative exposure of the female predicament which is explored around the character of Marlene, who invariably is

the one character not doubled. The consequence of including a large number of characters in a play is to shift the focus from any one point of view, but Marlene's narrative, and her relationship with Joyce and Angie, have a coherence by the end that has not been reduced by the sharp juxtaposition of earlier scenes.

Juxtaposition is a major structural device of *Top Girls*. Contrasting scenes and characters are set against each other and we in the audience are invited to make connections and distinctions. In the 'modern' scenes of the office and Joyce's house we are presented with contrasting images of modern Britain: the one urban, smart, affluent and optimistic, the other rural, static, poor and pessimistic. The combined effect is to suggest a fragmented society. The final image of the estranged Angie and Marlene, brought together from these two worlds, is inconclusive. A climactic ending would be inappropriate for a play which emphasises problems of modern living. Angie and Joyce, as the play shows in Act Two, will continue to live in the real world. Max Stafford-Clark, writing to the dead author George Farquhar, suggests:

We're a bit unused to happy endings in modern drama, George, they went out in the sixties. Nowadays we usually end plays on a melancholic note of elegant despair. It suits the political climate. (*Letters to George*, 1989)

The Play in Performance – How Many Actors?

To a feminist or socialist, indeed to anyone concerned about the quality of modern life, the implications of *Top Girls* could be gloomy. 'Oh God, why are we all so miserable?' asks

Marlene; 'Everyone's always crying in this house. Nobody takes any notice, says Joyce. However, in performance the play can be wonderfully exhilarating and positive in its effect. This is an apparent contradiction worth investigating.

Critical reaction was extremely enthusiastic about the first production of *Top Girls* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1982, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. The play was described as 'hugely entertaining' (*Sunday Express*) and the high quality of acting was particularly admired. The *Guardian* claimed 'There is no finer female playing in London than that achieved by these actresses' and that the play produced 'the most dynamic performances imaginable'. More specifically, for the *Spectator* the dramatist was magnificently served by 'the sharpest and most intelligent display of acting to be seen in London'. Very good acting is always compulsive and clearly
the dramatic text offered a challenge that was relished by the original performers.

The actress Harriet Walter has written that the demands on actresses have traditionally been much less than on actors in the theatre. Women in plays have been regarded as simpler than men. In *Top Girls* actresses were offered, quite out of the norm, a variety of parts for women which were eloquent, witty, intelligent and unusual. Beyond this, most of the actors were able to play several roles, although this was not Churchill's original intention:

For *Top Girls* at the Royal Court I wasn't thinking in terms of doubling at all. My original idea was to write a play for an enormous number of women, and I just wrote a play that had 16 women's parts in it. When it came to doing it, partly

because it was being directed by Max Stafford-Clark who … is used to working and likes working in that way, partly financial considerations (I mean, no one's going to want to do a play with 16 actors when they can economise and do it with seven) and partly because it is obviously much more enjoyable for the actors and just for the whole *feel* of a play for it to be done by a company – it did seem to make a lot of sense to do it in that way. (Churchill, interviewed by Lynne Truss, in 'A Fair Cop', *Plays and Players* January 1984)

The sixteen characters were performed by seven actors in the original production and subsequent productions have tended to follow suit. Only the actor playing Marlene was not involved in doubling. The doubling of characters isn't likely to be thematic in *Top Girls*. A direct link between characters would not be the intention. This can happen in the theatre – in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example, where Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania are sometimes doubled. In *Top Girls* doubling is more likely to be logical and functional. It could be based on appropriateness of physical appearance, or on the ability of an actor to make a costume change between scenes. It might even be based on a deliberate challenge to the audience's expectation of 'types'. The doubling and trebling of parts in the original production is not the only possible variation. The opportunity for women performers is stimulating and must be one of the reasons, along with the originality of the play, why it has been so popular abroad. *Top Girls* has been performed in over twenty countries. Good plays for women have been in high demand in the 1980s.

Doubling and trebling of parts can be exciting in the theatre as an exhibition of technique. It can also ensure that smaller

parts are well played. It can, furthermore, contribute in performance to the meaning of a play. *Top Girls* questions the 'roles' that have been imposed on women, past and present. The doubling of parts by an actor can positively undermine the fixedness of roles. For example, Mrs Kidd and Joyce are from very different social backgrounds. As individuals they appear stuck in their social niche, limited and defined by it. When played by the same actress, as they were in the first production, the certainty of their predicament is open to question. As Act One shows that the past was different in many respects from the present, so the play implies the present might also be changed.

Further Reading

Plays by Caryl Churchill

Plays: One, London: Methuen, 1985 (*Owners*, *Traps*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud Nine*)

Plays: Two, London: Methuen, 1990 (*Softcops*, *Top Girls*, *Fen*, *Serious Money*)

Plays: Three, London: Nick Hern Books, 1998 (*Ice Cream*, *Mad Forest*, *The Skriker*, *Thyestes*, *Lives of the Great Poisoners*, *A Mouthful of Birds*)

Churchill Shorts, London: Nick Hern Books, 1990 (*Abortive*, *The After-Dinner Joke*, *The Hospital at the Time of the Hot Fudge*, *Revealing the Judge's Wife*, *Lovesick*, *Three More Sleepless Nights*, *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*)

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This is a Chair, London: Nick Hern Books, 1999

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Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, Plymouth: Northcote House, 2nd edition, 2001

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Phyllis R. Randall (ed.), *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, London and New York: Garland, 1988

Victoria D. Sullivan, *Caryl Churchill*, New York: Scribner's, 1997

Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama*, London: Methuen, 1987

Top Girls

Note on characters

ISABELLA BIRD (1831–1904) lived in Edinburgh, travelled extensively between the ages of forty and seventy.

LADY NIJO (b. 1258) Japanese, was an Emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan.

DULL GRET is the subject of the Brueghel painting, *Dulle Griet*, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils.

POPE JOAN, disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854–856.

PATIENT GRISELDA is the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in 'The Clerk's Tale' of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Note on layout

A speech usually follows the one immediately before it BUT:

1: when one character starts speaking before the other has finished, the point of interruption is marked / .

e.g. **Isabella** This is the Emperor of Japan? / I once met the Emperor of Morocco.

Nijo In fact he was the ex-Emperor.

2: a character sometimes continues speaking right through another's speech:

e.g. **Isabella** When I was forty I thought my life was over. / Oh I was pitiful. I was

Nijo I didn't say I felt it for twenty years. Not every minute.

Isabella sent on a cruise for my health and I felt even worse. Pains in my bones, pins and needles … etc.

3: sometimes a speech follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it, and continuity is marked*.

e.g. **Griselda** I'd seen him riding by, we all had. And he'd seen me in the fields with the sheep*.

Isabella I would have been well suited to minding sheep.

Nijo And Mr Nugent riding by.

Isabella Of course not, Nijo, I mean a healthy life in the open air.

Joan *He just rode up while you were minding the sheep and asked you to marry him?

where 'in the fields with the sheep' is the cue to both 'I would have been' and 'He just rode up'.

Top Girls was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 28 August 1982 with the following cast:

Marlene	Gwen Taylor
Isabella Bird Joyce Mrs Kidd	Deborah Findlay
Lady Nijo Win	Lindsay Duncan
Dull Gret Angie	Carole Hayman
Pope Joan Louise	Selina Cadell
Patient Griselda Nell Jeanine	Lesley Manville
Waitress Kit Shona	Lou Wakefield

Directed by Max Stafford Clark
Designed by Peter Hartwell

This production transferred to Joe Papp's Public Theatre, New York, later the same year, and returned to the Royal Court early in 1983.

ACT ONE Restaurant. Saturday night.

ACT TWO

Scene One: Joyce's back yard. Sunday afternoon.

Scene Two: 'Top Girls' Employment agency. Monday morning.

ACT THREE Joyce's kitchen. Sunday evening, a year earlier.

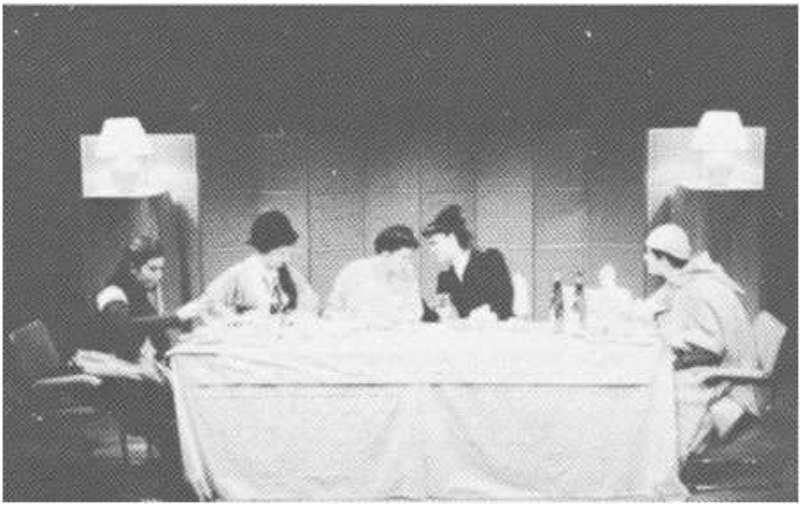
I originally wrote the play with this three-act structure – the dinner party, Angie goes to London, and a year earlier. For the first production at the Royal Court Theatre in 1982, it was decided that there should only be one interval and that the parts of Nell and Jeanine should be doubled, so the play was divided in the middle of Act II and one of the interviews was moved out of the main office scene. In earlier editions, I left the option of performing it as two or three acts, but left the interview scene in its new place. Since then, I have found I prefer the original simple structure, which has been used in several recent productions, and this is the way I would like the play to be performed in future. There is no need for two full-scale intervals, where the audience leave the theatre, if that is inconvenient – there can be a short break after Act I

and a main interval after Act II, when we have had Saturday, Sunday and Monday and come to the chronological end of the play, before going back a year.

Caryl Churchill, May 2012

Carole Hayman as Dull Gret in the 1982 Royal Court, London production. Photo © Catherine Ashmore

l. to r.: Carole Hayman as Dull Gret, Lindsay Duncan as Lady Nijo, Gwen Taylor as Marlene, Selina Cadell as Pope Joan, Lou Wakefield as Waitress (standing), Lesley Manville as Patient Griselda and Deborah Findlay as Isabella Bird in the 1982 Royal Court, London production. Photo © Catherine Ashmore.

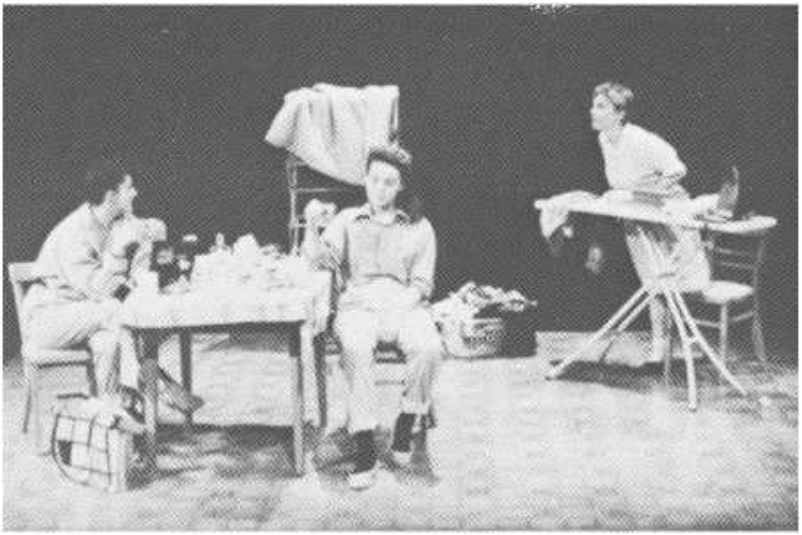


l. to r.: Nicola Hollinshead as Dull Gret, Nancy McClean as Lady Nijo, Patricia Phoenix as Marlene, Emma Healey as Isabella Bird and Helene Zumbrunn as Pope Joan in the 1985 New Cross Theatre, London production. Photo © Tony Nandi.

l. to r.: Carole Hayman as Angie and Gwen Taylor as Marlene in the 1982 Royal Court, London production. Photo © Catherine Ashmore.

l. to r.: Patricia Phoenix as Marlene and Nicola Hollinshead as Jeanine in the 1985 New Cross Theatre, London production. Photo © Tony Nandi.

l. to r.: Deborah Findlay as Joyce and Gwen Taylor as Marlene in the 1982 Royal Court, London production. Photo © Catherine Ashmore.



l. to r.: Patricia Phoenix as Marlene, Emma Healey as Joyce and Sally Poplar as Angie in the 1985 New Cross Theatre, London production. Photo © Tony Nandi.

Act One

Restaurant. Table set for dinner with white tablecloth. Six places. **Marlene** *and* **Waitress**.

Marlene Excellent, yes, table for six. One of them's going to be late but we won't wait. I'd like a bottle of Frascati straight away if you've got one really cold.

The **Waitress** *goes.*

Isabella Bird *arrives.*

Here we are. Isabella.

Isabella Congratulations, my dear.

Marlene Well, it's a step. It makes for a party. I haven't time for a holiday. I'd like to go somewhere exotic like you but I can't get away. I don't know how you could bear to leave Hawaii. / I'd like to lie in the sun forever, except of course I

Isabella I did think of settling.

Marlene can't bear sitting still.

Isabella I sent for my sister Hennie to come and join me. I said, Hennie we'll live here forever and help the natives. You can buy two sirloins of beef for what a pound of chops costs in Edinburgh. And Hennie wrote back, the dear, that yes, she would come to Hawaii if I wished, but I said she had far better stay where she was. Hennie was suited to life in Tobermory.

Marlene Poor Hennie.

Isabella Do you have a sister?

Marlene Yes in fact.

Isabella Hennie was happy. She was good. I did miss its face, my own pet. But I couldn't stay in Scotland. I loathed the constant murk.

Marlene Ah! Nijo!

She sees **Lady Nijo** *arrive.*

The **Waitress** *enters with wine.*

Nijo Marlene!

Marlene I think a drink while we wait for the others. I think a drink anyway. What a week.

The **Waitress** *pours wine.*

Nijo It was always the men who used to get so drunk. I'd be one of the maidens, passing the
sake.

Isabella I've had sake. Small hot drink. Quite fortifying after a day in the wet.

Nijo One night my father proposed three rounds of three cups, which was normal, and then the Emperor should have said three rounds of three cups, but he said three rounds of nine cups, so you can imagine. Then the Emperor passed his sake cup to my father and said, '
Let the wild goose come to me this spring.'

Marlene Let the what?

Nijo It's a literary allusion to a tenth-century epic, / His Majesty was very cultured.

Isabella This is the Emperor of Japan? / I once met the Emperor of Morocco.

Nijo In fact he was the ex-Emperor.

Marlene But he wasn't old? / Did you, Isabella?

Nijo Twenty-nine.

Isabella Oh it's a long story.

Marlene Twenty-nine's an excellent age.

Nijo Well I was only fourteen and I knew he meant something but I didn't know what. He sent me an eight-layered gown and I sent it back. So when the time came I did nothing but cry. My thin gowns were badly ripped. But even
that morning when he left / – he'd a green robe with a scarlet lining and

Marlene Are you saying he raped you?

Nijo very heavily embroidered trousers, I already felt different about him. It made me uneasy. 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.

Isabella I certainly never saw my father drunk. He was a clergyman. / And I didn't get married till I was fifty.

The **Waitress** *brings menus.*

Nijo Oh, my father was a very religious man. Just before he died he said to me, 'Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders.'

Marlene But he meant stay in a convent, not go wandering round the country.

Nijo Priests were often vagrants, so why not a nun? You think I shouldn't? / I still did what my father wanted.

Marlene No no, I think you should. / I think it was wonderful.

Dull Gret *arrives.*

Isabella I tried to do what my father wanted.

Marlene Gret, good. Nijo. Gret. / I know Griselda's going to be late, but should we wait for Joan? / Let's get you a drink.

Isabella Hello Gret! (*Continues to* **Nijo**.) I tried to be a clergyman's daughter. Needlework, music, charitable schemes. I had a tumour removed from my spine and spent a great deal of time on the sofa. I studied the
metaphysical poets and
hymnology. / I thought I enjoyed intellectual pursuits.

Nijo Ah, you like poetry. I come of a line of eight generations of poets. Father had a poem / in the anthology.

Isabella My father taught me Latin although I was a girl. / But

Marlene They didn't have Latin at my school.

Isabella really I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses. / Better than reading books,

Nijo Oh but I'm sure you're very clever.

Isabella eh Gret? A rough life in the open air.

Nijo I can't say I enjoyed my rough life. What I enjoyed most was being the Emperor's favourite / and wearing thin silk.

Isabella Did you have any horses, Gret?

Gret Pig.

Pope Joan *arrives.*

Marlene Oh Joan, thank God, we can order. Do you know everyone? We were just talking about learning Latin and being clever girls. Joan was by way of an infant prodigy. Of course you were. What excited you when you were ten?

Joan Because angels are
without matter they are not individuals. Every angel is a species.

Marlene There you are.

They laugh. They look at menus.

Isabella Yes, I forgot all my Latin. But my father was the mainspring of my life and when he died I was so grieved. I'll have the chicken, please, / and the soup.

Nijo Of course you were grieved. My father was saying his prayers and he dozed off in the sun. So I touched his knee to

rouse him. ‘I wonder what will happen,’ he said, and then he was dead before he finished the sentence. / If he’d died saying

Marlene What a shock.

Nijo his prayers he would have gone straight to heaven. / Waldorf salad.

Joan Death is the return of all creatures to God.

Nijo I shouldn’t have woken him.

Joan Damnation only means ignorance of the truth. I was always attracted by the teachings of John the Scot, though he was inclined to confuse / God and the world.

Isabella Grief always overwhelmed me at the time.

Marlene What I fancy is a rare steak. Gret?

Isabella I am of course a member of the / Church of England.*

Gret Potatoes.

Marlene *I haven’t been to church for years. / I like Christmas carols.

Isabella Good works matter more than church attendance.

Marlene Make that two steaks and a lot of potatoes. Rare. But I don’t do good works either.

Joan
Canelloni, please, / and a salad.

Isabella Well, I tried, but oh dear. Hennie did good works.

Nijo The first half of my life was all sin and the second / all repentance.*

Marlene Oh what about starters?

Gret Soup.

Joan *And which did you like best?

Marlene Were your travels just a penance?
Avocado vinaigrette. Didn't you / enjoy yourself?

Joan Nothing to start with for me, thank you.

Nijo Yes, but I was very unhappy. / It hurt to remember

Marlene And the wine list.

Nijo the past. I think that was repentance.

Marlene Well I wonder.

Nijo I might have just been homesick.

Marlene Or angry.

Nijo Not angry, no, / why angry?

Gret Can we have some more bread?

Marlene Don't you get angry? I get angry.

Nijo But what about?

Marlene Yes let's have two more Frascati. And some more bread, please.

The **Waitress** *exits.*

Isabella I tried to understand
Buddhism when I was in Japan but all this birth and death succeeding each other through eternities just filled me with the most profound melancholy. I do like something more active.

Nijo You couldn't say I was inactive. I walked every day for twenty years.

Isabella I don't mean walking. / I mean in the head.

Nijo I vowed to copy five
Mahayana sutras. / Do you know how

Marlene I don't think religious beliefs are something we have in common. Activity yes.

Nijo long they are? My head was active. / My head ached.

Joan It's no good being active in heresy.

Isabella What heresy? She's calling the Church of England / a heresy.

Joan There are some very attractive / heresies.

Nijo I had never heard of Christianity. Never / heard of it. Barbarians.

Marlene Well I'm not a Christian. / And I'm not a Buddhist.

Isabella You have heard of it?

Marlene We don't all have to believe the same.

Isabella I knew coming to dinner with a pope we should keep off religion.

Joan I always enjoy a theological argument. But I won't try to convert you, I'm not a missionary. Anyway I'm a heresy myself.

Isabella There are some barbaric practices in the east.

Nijo Barbaric?

Isabella Among the lower classes.

Nijo I wouldn't know.

Isabella Well theology always made my head ache.

Marlene Oh good, some food.

Waitress *is bringing the first course*.

Nijo How else could I have left the court if I wasn't a nun? When Father died I had only His Majesty. So when I fell out of favour I had nothing. Religion is a kind of nothing / and I dedicated what was left of me to nothing.

Isabella That's what I mean about Buddhism. It doesn't brace.

Marlene Come on, Nijo, have some wine.

Nijo Haven't you ever felt like that? Nothing will ever happen again. I am dead already. You've all felt / like that.

Isabella You thought your life was over but it wasn't.

Joan You wish it was over.

Gret Sad.

Marlene Yes, when I first came to London I sometimes … and when I got back from America I did. But only for a few hours. Not twenty years.

Isabella When I was forty I thought my life was over. / Oh I

Nijo I didn't say I felt it for twenty years. Not every minute.

Isabella was pitiful. I was sent on a cruise for my health and I felt even worse. Pains in my bones, pins and needles in my hands, swelling behind the ears, and – oh, stupidity. I shook all over, indefinable terror. And Australia seemed to me a hideous country, the
acacias stank like drains. / I had a

Nijo You were homesick.

Isabella photograph for Hennie but I told her I wouldn't send it, my hair had fallen out and my clothes were crooked, I looked completely insane and suicidal.

Nijo So did I, exactly, dressed as a nun. I was wearing walking shoes for the first time.

Isabella I longed to go home, / but home to what? Houses

Nijo I longed to go back ten years.

Isabella are so perfectly dismal.

Marlene I thought travelling cheered you both up.

Isabella Oh it did / of course. It was on the trip from

Nijo I'm not a cheerful person, Marlene. I just laugh a lot.

Isabella Australia to
the Sandwich Isles, I fell in love with the sea. There were rats in the cabin and ants in the food but suddenly it was like a new world. I woke up every morning happy, knowing there would be nothing to annoy me. No nervousness. No dressing.

Nijo Don't you like getting dressed? I adored my clothes. / When I was chosen to give sake to His Majesty's brother,

Marlene You had prettier colours than Isabella.

Nijo the Emperor Kameyana, on his formal visit, I wore raw silk pleated trousers and a seven-layered gown in shades of red, and two outer garments, / yellow lined with green and a light

Marlene Yes, all that silk must have been very …

The **Waitress** *starts to clear the first course.*

Joan I dressed as a boy when I left home.*

Nijo green jacket.
Lady Betto had a five-layered gown in shades of green and purple.

Isabella *You dressed as a boy?

Marlene Of course, / for safety.

Joan It was easy, I was only twelve. Also women weren't / allowed in the library. We wanted to study in Athens.

Marlene You ran away alone?

Joan No, not alone, I went with my friend. / He was sixteen

Nijo Ah, an elopement.

Joan but I thought I knew more science than he did and almost as much philosophy.

Isabella Well I always travelled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine.

Marlene I don't wear trousers in the office. / I could but I don't.

Isabella There was no great danger to a woman of my age and appearance.

Marlene And you got away with it, Joan?

Joan I did then.

The **Waitress** *starts to bring the main course.*

Marlene And nobody noticed anything?

Joan They noticed I was a very clever boy. / And when I

Marlene I couldn't have kept pretending for so long.

Joan shared a bed with my friend, that was ordinary – two poor students in a lodging house. I think I forgot I was pretending.

Isabella Rocky Mountain Jim, Mr Nugent, showed me no disrespect. He found it interesting, I think, that I could make scones and also lasso cattle. Indeed he declared his love for me, which was most distressing.

Nijo What did he say? / We always sent poems first.

Marlene What did you say?

Isabella I urged him to give up whisky, / but he said it was too late.

Marlene Oh Isabella.

Isabella He had lived alone in the mountains for many years.

Marlene But did you – ?

The **Waitress** *goes.*

Isabella Mr Nugent was a man that any woman might love but none could marry. I came back to England.

Nijo Did you write him a poem when you left? / Snow on the

Marlene Did you never see him again?

Isabella No, never.

Nijo mountains. My sleeves are wet with tears. In England no tears, no snow.

Isabella Well, I say never. One morning very early in Switzerland, it was a year later, I had a vision of him as I last saw him / in his trapper's clothes with his hair round his face,

Nijo A ghost!

Isabella and that was the day, / I learnt later, he died with a

Nijo Ah!

Isabella bullet in his brain. / He just bowed to me and vanished.

Marlene Oh Isabella.

Nijo When your lover dies – One of my lovers died. / The priest Ariake.

Joan My friend died. Have we all got dead lovers?

Marlene Not me, sorry.

Nijo (*to* **Isabella**) I wasn't a nun, I was still at court, but he was a priest, and when he came to me he dedicated his whole life to hell. / He knew that when he died he would fall into one of the three lower realms. And he died, he did die.

Joan (*to* **Marlene**) I'd quarrelled with him over the teachings of John the Scot, who held that our ignorance of God is the same as his ignorance of himself. He only knows what he creates because he creates everything he knows but he himself is above being – do you follow?

Marlene No, but go on.

Nijo I couldn't bear to think / in what shape would he be reborn.*

Joan
St Augustine maintained that the

Neo-Platonic Ideas are indivisible from God, but I agreed with John that the created

Isabella *Buddhism is really most uncomfortable.

Joan world is essences derived from Ideas which derived from God. As
Denys the Areopagite said – the pseudo-Denys – first we give God a name, then deny it / then reconcile the

Nijo In what shape would he return?

Joan contradiction by looking beyond / those terms.

Marlene Sorry, what? Denys said what?

Joan Well we disagreed about it, we quarrelled. And next day he was ill, / I was so annoyed with him, all the time I was

Nijo Misery in this life and worse in the next, all because of me.

Joan nursing him I kept going over the arguments in my mind. Matter is not a means of knowing the essence. The source of the species is the Idea. But then I realised he'd never understand my arguments again, and that night he died. John the Scot held that the individual disintegrates / and there is no personal immortality.

Isabella I wouldn't have you think I was in love with Jim Nugent. It was yearning to save him that I felt.

Marlene (*to* **Joan**) So what did you do?

Joan First I decided to stay a man. I was used to it. And I wanted to devote my life to learning. Do you know why I went to Rome? Italian men didn't have beards.

Isabella The loves of my life were Hennie, my own pet, and my dear husband the doctor, who nursed Hennie in her last illness. I knew it would be terrible when Hennie died but I didn't know how terrible. I felt half of myself had gone. How could I go on my travels without that sweet soul waiting at home for my letters? It was Doctor Bishop's devotion to her in her last illness that made me decide to marry him. He and Hennie had the same sweet character. I had not.

Nijo I thought His Majesty had a sweet character because when he found out about Ariake he was so kind. But really it was because he no longer cared for me. One night he even sent me out to a man who had been pursuing me. / He lay awake on the other side of the screens and listened.

Isabella I did wish marriage had seemed more of a step. I tried very hard to cope with the ordinary drudgery of life. I was ill again with
carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration. I ordered a tricycle, that was my idea of adventure then. And John himself fell ill, with
erysipelas and
anaemia. I
began to love him with my whole heart but it was too late. He was a skeleton with transparent white hands. I wheeled him on various seafronts in a
bathchair. And he faded and left me. There was nothing in my life. The doctors said I had
gout / and my heart was much affected.

Nijo There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor's favour. The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. / But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk.

Joan There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with pursuit of the truth. I taught at the Greek School in Rome, which St Augustine had made famous. I was poor, I worked hard. I spoke apparently brilliantly, I was still very young, I was a stranger; suddenly I was quite famous, I was everyone's favourite. Huge crowds came to hear me. The day after they made me cardinal I fell ill and lay two weeks without speaking, full of terror and regret. / But then I got up

Marlene Yes, success is very …

Joan determined to go on. I was seized again / with a desperate longing for the absolute.

Isabella Yes, yes, to go on. I sat in Tobermory among Hennie's flowers and sewed a complete outfit in Jaeger flannel. / I was fifty-six years old.

Nijo Out of favour but I didn't die. I left on foot, nobody saw me go. For the next twenty years I walked through Japan.

Gret Walking is good.

The **Waitress** *enters.*

Joan Pope Leo died and I was chosen. All right then. I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything.

Isabella I determined to leave my grief behind and set off for Tibet.

Marlene Magnificent all of you. We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think, Griselda isn't even here yet, and I want to drink a toast to you all.

Isabella To yourself surely, / we're here to celebrate your success.

Nijo Yes, Marlene.

Joan Yes, what is it exactly, Marlene?

Marlene Well it's not Pope but it is managing director.*

Joan And you find work for people.

Marlene Yes, an employment agency.

Nijo *Over all the women you work with. And the men.

Isabella And very well deserved too. I'm sure it's just the beginning of something extraordinary.

Marlene Well it's worth a party.

Isabella To Marlene.*

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.

They laugh and drink a toast.

Isabella Such adventures. We were crossing a mountain pass at seven thousand feet, the cook was all to pieces, the muleteers suffered fever and snow blindness. But even though my spine was agony I managed very well.

Marlene Wonderful.

Nijo Once I was ill for four months lying alone at an inn. Nobody to offer a horse to Buddha. l had to live for myself, and I did live.

Isabella Of course you did. It was far worse returning to Tobermory. I always felt dull when I was stationary. / That's why I could never stay anywhere.

Nijo Yes, that's it exactly. New sights. The shrine by the beach, the moon shining on the sea. The goddess had vowed to save all living things. / She would even save the fishes. I was full of hope.

Joan 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.

Marlene But nobody else even suspected?

The **Waitress** *brings more wine.*

Joan In the end I did take a lover again.*

Isabella In the Vatican?

Gret *Keep you warm.

Nijo *Ah, lover.

Marlene *Good for you.

Joan He was one of my
chamberlains. There are such a lot of servants when you're a Pope. The food's very good. And I realised I did know the truth. Because whatever the Pope says, that's true.

Nijo What was he like, the chamberlain?*

Gret Big cock.

Isabella Oh Gret.

Marlene *Did he fancy you when he thought you were a fella?

Nijo What was he like?

Joan He could keep a secret.

Marlene So you did know everything.

Joan Yes, I enjoyed being Pope. I consecrated bishops and let people kiss my feet. I received the King of England when he came to submit to the church. Unfortunately there were earthquakes, and some village reported it had rained blood, and in France there was a plague of giant grasshoppers, but I don't think that can have been my fault, do you?*

Laughter.

The grasshoppers fell on the English Channel and were washed up on shore and their bodies rotted and poisoned the air and everyone in those parts died.

Laughter.

Isabella *Such superstition! I was nearly murdered in China by a howling mob. They thought the barbarians ate babies and put them under railway sleepers to make the tracks steady, and ground up their eyes to make the lenses of cameras. / So

Marlene And you had a camera!

Isabella they were shouting, 'child-eater, child-eater'. Some people tried to sell girl babies to Europeans for cameras or stew!

Laughter.

Marlene So apart from the grasshoppers it was a great success.

Joan Yes, if it hadn't been for the baby I expect I'd have lived to an old age like
Theodora of Alexandria, who lived as a monk. She was accused by a girl / who fell in love with her of being the father of her child and –

Nijo But tell us what happened to your baby. I had some babies.

Marlene Didn't you think of getting rid of it?

Joan Wouldn't that be a worse sin than having it? / But a Pope with a child was about as bad as possible.

Marlene I don't know, you're the Pope.

Joan But I wouldn't have known how to get rid of it.

Marlene Other Popes had children, surely.

Joan They didn't give birth to them.

Nijo Well you were a woman.

Joan Exactly and I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope.

Marlene So the only thing to do / was to get rid of it somehow.

Nijo You had to have it adopted secretly.

Joan But I didn't know what was happening. I thought I was getting fatter, but then I was eating more and sitting about, the life of a Pope is quite luxurious. I don't think I'd spoken to a woman since I was twelve. The chamberlain was the one who realised.

Marlene And by then it was too late.

Joan Oh I didn't want to pay attention. It was easier to do nothing.

Nijo But you had to plan for having it. You had to say you were ill and go away.

Joan That's what I should have done I suppose.

Marlene Did you want them to find out?

Nijo I too was often in embarrassing situations, there's no need for a scandal. My first child was His Majesty's, which unfortunately died, but my second was Akebono's. I was seventeen. He was in love with me when I was thirteen, he was very upset when I had to go to the Emperor, it was very romantic, a lot of poems. Now His Majesty hadn't been near me for two months so he thought I was four months pregnant when I was really six, so when I reached the ninth month / I

Joan I never knew what month it was.

Nijo announced I was seriously ill, and Akebono announced he had gone on a religious retreat. He held me round the waist

and lifted me up as the baby was born. He cut the cord with a short sword, wrapped the baby in white and took it away. It was only a girl but I was sorry to lose it. Then I told the Emperor that the baby had miscarried because of my illness, and there you are. The danger was past.

Joan But Nijo, I wasn't used to having a woman's body.

Isabella So what happened?

Joan I didn't know of course that it was near the time. It was Rogation Day, there was always a procession. I was on the horse dressed in my robes and a cross was carried in front of me, and all the cardinals were following, and all the clergy of Rome, and a huge crowd of people. / We set off from

Marlene Total Pope.

Joan
St Peter's to go to St John's. I had felt a slight pain earlier, I thought it was something I'd eaten, and then it came back, and came back more often. I thought when this is over I'll go to bed. There were still long gaps when I felt perfectly all right and I didn't want to attract attention to myself and spoil the ceremony. Then I suddenly realised what it must be. I had to last out till I could get home and hide. Then something changed, my breath started to catch, I couldn't plan things properly any more. We were in a little street that goes between
St Clement's and the Colosseum, and I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. Great waves of pressure were going through my body, I heard sounds like a cow lowing, they came out of my mouth. Far away I heard people

screaming, ‘The Pope is ill, the Pope is dying.’ And the baby just slid out onto the road.*

Marlene The cardinals / won’t have known where to put themselves.

Nijo Oh dear, Joan, what a thing to do! In the street!

Isabella *How embarrassing.

Gret In a field, yah.

They are laughing.

Joan One of the cardinals said, ‘The Antichrist!’ and fell over in a faint.

They all laugh.

Marlene So what did they do? They weren’t best pleased.

Joan They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.

They stop laughing.

Marlene Joan, how horrible.

Joan I don’t really remember.

Nijo And the child died too?

Joan Oh yes, I think so, yes.

Pause.

The **Waitress** *enters to clear the plates. They start talking quietly.*

Isabella (*to* **Joan**) I never had any children. I was very fond of horses.

Nijo (*to* **Marlene**) I saw my daughter once. She was three years old. She wore a plum-red / small-sleeved gown. Akebono's

Isabella Birdie was my favourite. A little Indian
bay mare I rode in the
Rocky Mountains.

Nijo wife had taken the child because her own died. Everyone thought I was just a visitor. She was being brought up carefully so she could be sent to the palace like I was.

Isabella Legs of iron and always cheerful, and such a pretty face. If a stranger led her she reared up like a
bronco.

Nijo I never saw my third child after he was born, the son of Ariake the priest. Ariake held him on his lap the day he was born and talked to him as if he could understand, and cried. My fourth child was Ariake's too. Ariake died before he was born. I didn't want to see anyone, I stayed alone in the hills. It was a boy again, my third son. But oddly enough I felt nothing for him.

Marlene How many children did you have, Gret?

Gret Ten.

Isabella Whenever I came back to England I felt I had so much to atone for. Hennie and John were so good. I did no good in my life. I spent years in self-gratification. So I hurled myself into committees, I nursed the people of Tobermory in the epidemic of influenza, I lectured the Young Women's Christian Association on Thrift. I talked and talked explaining how the East was corrupt and vicious. My travels must do good to someone beside myself. I wore myself out with good causes.

Marlene Oh God, why are we all so miserable?

Joan The procession never went down that street again.

Marlene They rerouted it specially?

Joan Yes they had to go all round to avoid it. And they introduced a pierced chair.

Marlene A pierced chair?

Joan Yes, a chair made out of solid marble with a hole in the seat / and it was in the Chapel of the Saviour, and after he was

Marlene You're not serious.

Joan elected the Pope had to sit in it.

Marlene And someone looked up his skirts? Not really?

Isabella What an extraordinary thing.

Joan Two of the clergy / made sure he was a man.

Nijo On their hands and knees!

Marlene A pierced chair!

Gret Balls!

Griselda *arrives unnoticed.*

Nijo Why couldn't he just pull up his robe?

Joan He had to sit there and look dignified.

Marlene You could have made all your chamberlains sit in it.*

Gret Big one, small one.

Nijo Very useful chair at court.

Isabella *Or the laird of Tobermory in his kilt.

They are quite drunk. They get the giggles.

Marlene *notices* **Griselda**.

Marlene Griselda! / There you are. Do you want to eat?

Griselda I'm sorry I'm so late. No, no, don't bother.

Marlene Of course it's no bother. / Have you eaten?

Griselda No really, I'm not hungry.

Marlene Well have some pudding.

Griselda I never eat pudding.

Marlene Griselda, I hope you're not
anorexic. We're having pudding, I am, and getting nice and fat.

Griselda Oh if everyone is. I don't mind.

Marlene Now who do you know? This is Joan who was Pope in the ninth century, and Isabella Bird, the Victorian traveller, and Lady Nijo from Japan, Emperor's concubine and Buddhist nun, thirteenth century, nearer your own time, and Gret who was painted by
Brueghel. Griselda's in
Boccaccio and
Petrarch and
Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage. I'd like
profiteroles because they're disgusting.

Joan
Zabaglione, please.

Isabella Apple pie / and cream.

Nijo What's this?

Marlene Zabaglione, it's Italian, it's what Joan's having, / it's delicious.

Nijo A Roman Catholic / dessert? Yes please.

Marlene Gret?

Gret Cake.

Griselda Just cheese and biscuits, thank you.

Marlene Yes, Griselda's life is like a fairy-story, except it starts with marrying the prince.

Griselda He's only a marquis, Marlene.

Marlene Well everyone for miles around is his liege and he's absolute lord of life and death and you were the poor but beautiful peasant girl and he whisked you off. / Near enough a prince.

Nijo How old were you?

Griselda Fifteen.

Nijo I was brought up in court circles and it was still a shock. Had you ever seen him before?

Griselda I'd seen him riding by, we all had. And he'd seen me in the fields with the sheep.*

Isabella I would have been well suited to minding sheep.

Nijo And Mr Nugent riding by.

Isabella Of course not, Nijo, I mean a healthy life in the open air.

Joan *He just rode up while you were minding the sheep and asked you to marry him?

Griselda No, no, it was on the wedding day. I was waiting outside the door to see the procession. Everyone wanted him to get married so there'd be an heir to look after us when he died, / and at last he announced a day for the wedding but

Marlene I don't think Walter wanted to get married. It is Walter? Yes.

Griselda nobody knew who the bride was, we thought it must be a foreign princess, we were longing to see her. Then the carriage stopped outside our cottage and we couldn't see the bride anywhere. And he came and spoke to my father.

Nijo And your father told you to serve the Prince.

Griselda My father could hardly speak. The Marquis said it wasn't an order, I could say no, but if I said yes I must always obey him in everything.

Marlene That's when you should have suspected.

Griselda But of course a wife must obey her husband. / And of course I must obey the Marquis.*

Isabella I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn't seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn't have wanted to go abroad while I was married.

Marlene *Then why bother to mention it at all? He'd got a thing about it, that's why.

Griselda I'd rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village.

Marlene Yes, that's a point.

Joan I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me.

Nijo And what did you wear? He didn't make you get married in your own clothes? That would be perverse.*

Marlene Oh, you wait.

Griselda *He had ladies with him who undressed me and they had a white silk dress and jewels for my hair.

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.

Griselda It was hard for him too.

Joan How do you mean he took away your baby?

Nijo Was it a boy?

Griselda No, the first one was a girl.

Nijo Even so it's hard when they take it away. Did you see it at all?

Griselda Oh yes, she was six weeks old.

Nijo Much better to do it straight away.

Isabella But why did your husband take the child?

Griselda He said all the people hated me because I was just one of them. And now I had a child they were restless. So he had to get rid of the child to keep them quiet. But he said he wouldn't snatch her, I had to agree and obey and give her up. So when I was feeding her a man came in and took her away. I
thought he was going to kill her even before he was out of the room.

Marlene But you let him take her? You didn't struggle?

Griselda I asked him to give her back so I could kiss her. And I asked him to bury her where no animals could dig her up. / It

Isabella Oh my dear.

Griselda was Walter's child to do what he liked with.*

Marlene Walter was bonkers.

Gret Bastard.

Isabella *But surely, murder.

Griselda I had promised.

Marlene I can't stand this. I'm going for a pee.

Marlene *goes out.*

The **Waitress** *brings dessert.*

Nijo No, I understand. Of course you had to, he was your life. And were you in favour after that?

Griselda Oh yes, we were very happy together. We never spoke about what had happened.

Isabella I can see you were doing what you thought was your duty. But didn't it make you ill?

Griselda No, I was very well, thank you.

Nijo And you had another child?

Griselda Not for four years, but then I did, yes, a boy.

Nijo Ah a boy. / So it all ended happily.

Griselda Yes he was pleased. I kept my son till he was two years old. A peasant's grandson. It made the people angry. Walter explained.

Isabella But surely he wouldn't kill his children / just because –

Griselda Oh it wasn't true. Walter would never give in to the people. He wanted to see if I loved him enough.

Joan He killed his children / to see if you loved him enough?

Nijo Was it easier the second time or harder?

Griselda It was always easy because I always knew I would do what he said.

Pause. They start to eat.

Isabella I hope you didn't have any more children.

Griselda Oh no, no more. It was twelve years till he tested me again.

Isabella So whatever did he do this time? / My poor John, I never loved him enough, and he would never have dreamt …

Griselda He sent me away. He said the people wanted him to marry someone else who'd give him an heir and he'd got special permission from the Pope. So I said I'd go home to my father. I came with nothing / so I went with nothing. I

Nijo Better to leave if your master doesn't want you.

Griselda took off my clothes. He let me keep a slip so he wouldn't be shamed. And I walked home barefoot. My father came out in tears. Everyone was crying except me.

Nijo At least your father wasn't dead. / I had nobody.

Isabella Well it can be a relief to come home. I loved to see Hennie's sweet face again.

Griselda Oh yes, I was perfectly content. And quite soon he sent for me again.

Joan I don't think I would have gone.

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.

Nijo It's always hard taking him another woman.

Marlene *comes back.*

Joan I didn't live a woman's life. I don't understand it.

Griselda The girl was sixteen and far more beautiful than me. I could see why he loved her. / She had her younger brother with her as a page.

The **Waitress** *enters.*

Marlene Oh God, I can't bear it. I want some coffee. Six coffees. Six brandies. / Double brandies. Straight away.

Griselda They all went in to the feast I'd prepared. And he stayed behind, and put his arms round me and kissed me. / I felt half asleep with the shock.

Nijo Oh, like a dream.

Marlene And he said, 'This is your daughter and your son.'

Griselda Yes.

Joan What?

Nijo Oh. Oh I see. You got them back.

Isabella I did think it was remarkably barbaric to kill them but you learn not to say anything. / So he had them brought up secretly I suppose.

Marlene Walter's a monster. Weren't you angry? What did you do?

Griselda Well I fainted. Then I cried and kissed the children. / Everyone was making a fuss of me.

Nijo But did you feel anything for them?

Griselda What?

Nijo Did you feel anything for the children?

Griselda Of course, I loved them.

Joan So you forgave him and lived with him?

Griselda He suffered so much all those years.

Isabella Hennie had the same sweet nature.

Nijo So they dressed you again?

Griselda Cloth of gold.

Joan I can't forgive anything.

Marlene You really are exceptional, Griselda.

Nijo Nobody gave me back my children.

Nijo *cries. The* **Waitress** *brings brandies.*

Isabella I can never be like Hennie. I was always so busy in England, a kind of business I detested. The very presence of people exhausted my emotional reserves. I could not be like Hennie however I tried. I tried and was as ill as could be. The doctor suggested a steel net to support my head, the weight of my own head was too much for my diseased spine. / It is dangerous to put oneself in depressing circumstances. Why should I do it?

Joan Don't cry.

Nijo My father and the Emperor both died in the autumn. So much pain.

Joan Yes, but don't cry.

Nijo They wouldn't let me into the palace when he was dying. I hid in the room with his coffin, then I couldn't find where I'd left my shoes, I ran after the funeral procession in bare feet, I couldn't keep up. When I got there it was over, a few wisps of smoke in the sky, that's all that was left of him. What I want to know is, if I'd still been at court, would I have been allowed to wear full mourning?

Marlene I'm sure you would.

Nijo Why do you say that? You don't know anything about it. Would I have been allowed to wear full mourning?

Isabella How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady.

Nijo I'll tell you something that made me angry. I was eighteen, at the Full Moon Ceremony. They make a special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks, and then they beat their women across the loins so they'll have sons and not daughters. So the Emperor beat us all / very hard as usual – that's not it,

Marlene What a sod.

Nijo Marlene, that's normal, what made us angry, he told his attendants they could beat us too. Well they had a wonderful time. / So Lady Genki and I made a plan, and the ladies all hid

The **Waitress** *has entered with coffees.*

Marlene I'd like another brandy please. Better make it six.

Nijo in his rooms, and Lady Mashimizu stood guard with a stick at the door, and when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. 'We wouldn't even dream of stepping on your Majesty's shadow.' And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick.

Joan
Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,

e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;

non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,

sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.

Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri

per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.

Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere

edita doctrina sapientum templa serena, /

despicere unde queas alios passimque videre

errare atquc viam palantis quaerere vitae,

Griselda I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to.

Isabella Why should I? Why should I?

Marlene Of course not.

Nijo I hit him with a stick.

Joan certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,

noctes atque dies niti praestante labore

ad summas emergere opes retumque potiri.

O miseras / hominum mentis, I pectora caeca!*

Isabella Oh miseras!

Nijo *Pectora caeca.

Joan qualibus in tenebris vitae quantisque periclis

degitur hoc aevi quodcumquest! / nonne videre

nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui

corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur.

Joan *subsides.*

Gret
We come into hell through a big mouth. Hell's black and red. / It's like the village where I come from. There's a river and

Marlene (*to* **Joan**) Shut up, pet.

Isabella Listen, she's been to hell.

Gret a bridge and houses. There's places on fire like when the soldiers come. There's a big devil sat on a roof with a big hole in his arse and he's scooping stuff out of it with a big ladle and it's falling down on us, and it's money, so a lot of the women stop and get some. But most of us is fighting the devils. There's lots of little devils, our size, and we get them down all right and give them a beating. There's lots of funny creatures round your feet, you don't like to look, like rats and lizards, and nasty things, a bum with a face, and fish with legs, and faces on things that don't have faces on. But they don't hurt, you just keep going. Well we'd had worse, you see, we'd had the
Spanish. 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. I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. 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 come from and pay the bastards out.' And they all come out just as they was / from baking or washing in their

Nijo All the ladies come.

Gret aprons, and we push down the street and the ground opens up and we go through a big mouth into a street just like ours but in hell. I've got a sword in my hand from somewhere and I fill a basket with gold cups they drink out of down there. You just keep running on and fighting / you didn't stop for nothing. Oh we give them devils such a beating.

Nijo Take that, take that.

Joan Something something something mortisque timores tum vacuum pectus – damn.

Quod si ridicula –

something something on and on and on and something splendorem pupureai.

Isabella I thought I would have a last jaunt up the west river in China. Why not? But the doctors were so very grave. I just went to Morocco. The sea was so wild I had to be landed by ship's crane in a coal bucket. / My horse was a terror to me a

Gret Coal bucket, good.

Joan nos in luce timemus

something

terrorem.

Isabella powerful black charger.

Nijo *is laughing and crying.*

Joan *gets up and is sick in a corner.*

Marlene *is drinking* **Isabella***'s brandy.*

So off I went to visit the
Berber sheikhs in full blue trousers and great brass spurs. I was the only European woman ever to have seen the Emperor of Morocco. I was seventy years old. What lengths to go to

for a last chance of joy. I knew my return of vigour was only temporary, but how marvellous while it lasted.

Act Two

Scene One

Joyce*'s back yard. The house with back door is upstage. Downstage a shelter made of junk, made by children. Two girls,* **Angie** *and* **Kit***, are in it, squashed together.* **Angie** *is sixteen,* **Kit** *is twelve. They cannot be seen from the house.* **Joyce** *calls from the house.*

Joyce Angie. Angie are you out there?

Silence. They keep still and wait. When nothing else happens they relax.

Angie Wish she was dead.

Kit Wanna watch
The Exterminator?

Angie You're sitting on my leg.

Kit There's nothing on telly. We can have an ice cream. Angie?

Angie Shall I tell you something?

Kit Do you wanna watch *The Exterminator*?

Angie

It's X, innit.

Kit I can get into Xs.

Angie Shall I tell you something?

Kit We'll go to something else. We'll go to Ipswich. What's on the Odeon?

Angie She won't let me, will she?

Kit Don't tell her.

Angie I've no money.

Kit I'll pay.

Angie She'll moan though, won't she?

Kit I'll ask her for you if you like.

Angie I've no money, I don't want you to pay.

Kit I'll ask her.

Angie She don't like you.

Kit I still got three pounds birthday money. Did she say she don't like me? I'll go by myself then.

Angie Your mum don't let you. I got to take you.

Kit She won't know.

Angie You'd be scared who'd sit next to you.

Kit No I wouldn't.

She does like me anyway.

Tell me then.

Angie Tell you what?

Kit It's you she doesn't like.

Angie Well I don't like her so tough shit.

Joyce (*off*) Angie. Angie. Angie. I know you're out there. I'm not coming out after you. You come in here.

Silence. Nothing happens.

Angie Last night when I was in bed. I been thinking yesterday could I make things move. You know, make things move by thinking about them without touching them. Last night I was in bed and suddenly a picture fell down off the wall.

Kit What picture?

Angie My gran, that picture. Not the poster. The photograph in the frame.

Kit Had you done something to make it fall down?

Angie I must have done.

Kit But were you thinking about it?

Angie Not about it, but about something.

Kit I don't think that's very good.

Angie You know the kitten?

Kit Which one?

Angie There only is one. The dead one.

Kit What about it?

Angie I heard it last night.

Kit Where?

Angie Out here. In the dark. What if I left you here in the dark all night?

Kit You couldn't. I'd go home.

Angie You couldn't.

Kit I'd / go home.

Angie No you couldn't, not if I said.

Kit I could.

Angie Then you wouldn't see anything. You'd just be ignorant.

Kit I can see in the daytime.

Angie No you can't. You can't hear it in the daytime.

Kit I don't want to hear it.

Angie You're scared that's all.

Kit I'm not scared of anything.

Angie You're scared of blood.

Kit It's not the same kitten anyway. You just heard an old cat, / you just heard some old cat.

Angie You don't know what I heard. Or what I saw. You don't know nothing because you're a baby.

Kit You're sitting on me.

Angie Mind my hair / you silly cunt.

Kit Stupid fucking cow, I hate you.

Angie I don't care if you do.

Kit You're horrible.

Angie I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch.

Kit I'm not playing.

Angie You're scared of blood.

Kit *puts her hand under her dress, brings it out with blood on her finger.*

Kit There, see, I got my own blood, so.

Angie *takes* **Kit***'s hand and licks her finger.*

Angie Now I'm a cannibal. I might turn into a vampire now.

Kit That picture wasn't nailed up right.

Angie You'll have to do that when I get mine.

Kit I don't have to.

Angie You're scared.

Kit I'll do it, I might do it. I don't have to just because you say. I'll be sick on you.

Angie I don't care if you are sick on me, I don't mind sick. I don't mind blood. If I don't get away from here I'm going to die.

Kit I'm going home.

Angie You can't go through the house. She'll see you.

Kit I won't tell her.

Angie Oh great, fine.

Kit I'll say I was by myself. I'll tell her you're at my house and I'm going there to get you.

Angie She knows I'm here, stupid.

Kit Then why can't I go through the house?

Angie Because I said not.

Kit My mum don't like you anyway.

Angie I don't want her to like me. She's a slag.

Kit She is not.

Angie She does it with everyone.

Kit She does not.

Angie You don't even know what it is.

Kit Yes I do.

Angie Tell me then.

Kit We get it all at school, cleverclogs. It's on television. You haven't done it.

Angie How do you know?

Kit Because I know you haven't.

Angie You know wrong then because I have.

Kit Who with?

Angie I'm not telling you / who with.

Kit You haven't anyway.

Angie How do you know?

Kit Who with?

Angie I'm not telling you.

Kit You said you told me everything.

Angie I was lying wasn't I?

Kit Who with? You can't tell me who with because / you never –

Angie Sh.

Joyce *has come out of the house. She stops halfway across the yard and listens. They listen.*

Joyce You there Angie? Kit? You there Kitty? Want a cup of tea? I've got some chocolate biscuits. Come on now I'll put the kettle on. Want a choccy biccy, Angie?

They all listen and wait.

Fucking rotten little cunt. You can stay there and die. I'll lock the back door.

They all wait.

Joyce *goes back to the house.*

Angie *and* **Kit** *sit in silence for a while.*

Kit When there's a war, where's the safest place?

Angie Nowhere.

Kit New Zealand is, my mum said.
Your skin's burned right off. Shall we go to New Zealand?

Angie I'm not staying here.

Kit Shall we go to New Zealand?

Angie You're not old enough.

Kit You're not old enough.

Angie I'm old enough to get married.

Kit You don't want to get married.

Angie No but I'm old enough.

Kit I'd find out where they were going to drop it and stand right in the place.

Angie You couldn't find out.

Kit Better than walking round with your skin dragging on the ground. Eugh. / Would you like walking round with your skin dragging on the ground?

Angie You couldn't find out, stupid, it's a secret.

Kit Where are you going?

Angie I'm not telling you.

Kit Why?

Angie It's a secret.

Kit But you tell me alll your secrets.

Angie Not the true secrets.

Kit Yes you do.

Angie No I don't.

Kit I want to go somewhere away from the war.

Angie Just forget the war.

Kit I can't.

Angie You have to. It's so boring.

Kit I'll remember it at night.

Angie I'm going to do something else anyway.

Kit What? Angie come on. Angie.

Angie It's a true secret.

Kit It can't be worse than the kitten. And killing your mother. And the war.

Angie Well I'm not telling you so you can die for all I care.

Kit My mother says there's something wrong with you playing with someone my age. She says why haven't you got friends your own age. People your own age know there's something funny about you. She says you're a bad influence. She says she's going to speak to your mother.

Angie *twists* **Kit***'s arm till she cries out.*

Angie Say you're a liar.

Kit She said it not me.

Angie Say you eat shit.

Kit You can't make me.

Angie *lets go.*

Angie I don't care anyway. I'm leaving.

Kit Go on then.

Angie You'll all wake up one morning and find I've gone.

Kit Good.

Angie I'm not telling you when.

Kit Go on then.

Angie I'm sorry I hurt you.

Kit I'm tired.

Angie Do you like me?

Kit I don't know.

Angie You do like me.

Kit I'm going home.

Kit *gets up.*

Angie No you're not.

Kit I'm tired.

Angie She'll see you.

Kit She'll give me a chocolate biscuit.

Angie Kitty.

Kit Tell me where you're going.

Angie Sit down.

Kit *sits in the hut again.*

Kit Go on then.

Angie Swear?

Kit Swear.

Angie I'm going to London. To see my aunt.

Kit And what?

Angie That's it.

Kit I see my aunt all the time.

Angie I don't see my aunt.

Kit What's so special?

Angie It is special. She's special.

Kit Why?

Angie She is.

Kit Why?

Angie She is.

Kit Why?

Angie My mother hates her.

Kit Why?

Angie Because she does.

Kit Perhaps she's not very nice.

Angie She is nice.

Kit How do you know?

Angie Because I know her.

Kit You said you never see her.

Angie I saw her last year. You saw her.

Kit Did I?

Angie Never mind.

Kit I remember her. That aunt. What's so special?

Angie She gets people jobs.

Kit What's so special?

Angie I think I'm my aunt's child. I think my mother's really my aunt.

Kit Why?

Angie Because she goes to America, now shut up.

Kit I've been to London.

Angie Now give us a cuddle and shut up because I'm sick.

Kit You're sitting on my arm.

Silence.

Joyce *comes out and comes up to them quietly.*

Joyce Come on.

Kit Oh hello.

Joyce Time you went home.

Kit We want to go to the Odeon.

Joyce What time?

Kit Don't know.

Joyce What's on?

Kit Don't know.

Joyce Don't know much do you?

Kit That all right then?

Joyce Angie's got to clean her room first.

Angie No I don't.

Joyce Yes you do, it's a pigsty.

Angie Well I'm not.

Joyce Then you're not going. I don't care.

Angie Well I am going.

Joyce You've no money, have you?

Angie Kit's paying anyway.

Joyce No she's not.

Kit I'll help you with your room.

Joyce That's nice.

Angie No you won't. You wait here.

Kit Hurry then.

Angie I'm not hurrying. You just wait.

Angie *goes into the house. Silence.*

Joyce I don't know.

Silence.

How's school then?

Kit All right.

Joyce What are you now?
Third year?

Kit Second year.

Joyce Your mum says you're good at English. *Silence.*

Maybe Angie should've stayed on.

Kit She didn't like it.

Joyce I didn't like it. And look at me. If your face fits at school it's going to fit other places too. It wouldn't make no difference to Angie. She's not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get. I'd be sorry for anyone in charge of her. She'd better get married. I don't know who'd have her, mind. She's one of those girls might never leave home. What do you want to be when you grow up, Kit?

Kit Physicist.

Joyce What?

Kit Nuclear physicist.

Joyce Whatever for?

Kit I could, I'm clever.

Joyce I know you're clever, pet.

Silence.

I'll make a cup of tea.

Silence.

Looks like it's going to rain.

Silence.

Don't you have friends your own age?

Kit Yes.

Joyce Well then.

Kit I'm old for my age.

Joyce And Angie's simple is she? She's not simple.

Kit I love Angie.

Joyce She's clever in her own way.

Kit You can't stop me.

Joyce I don't want to.

Kit You can't, so.

Joyce Don't be cheeky, Kitty. She's always kind to little children.

Kit She's coming so you better leave me alone.

Angie *comes out. She has changed into an old best dress, slightly small for her.*

Joyce What you put that on for? Have you done your room? You can't clean your room in that.

Angie I looked in the cupboard and it was there.

Joyce Of course it was there, it's meant to be there. Is that why it was a surprise, finding something in the right place? I should think she's surprised, wouldn't you Kit, to find something in her room in the right place.

Angie I decided to wear it.

Joyce Not today, why? To clean your room? You're not going to the pictures till you've done your room. You can put your dress on after if you like.

Angie *picks up a brick.*

Have you done your room? You're not getting out of it, you know.

Kit Angie, let's go.

Joyce She's not going till she's done her room.

Kit It's starting to rain.

Joyce Come on, come on then. Hurry and do your room, Angie, and then you can go to the cinema with Kit. Oh it's wet, come on. We'll look up the time in the paper. Does your mother know, Kit, it's going to be a late night for you, isn't it? Hurry up, Angie. You'll spoil your dress. You make me sick.

Joyce *and* **Kit** *run in.*

Angie *stays where she is. Sound of rain.*

Kit *comes out of the house and shouts.*

Kit Angie. Angie, come on, you'll get wet.

Kit *comes back to* **Angie**.

Angie I put on this dress to kill my mother.

Kit I suppose you thought you'd do it with a brick.

Angie You can kill people with a brick.

Kit Well you didn't, so.

Scene Two

Office of 'Top Girls' Employment Agency. Three desks and a small interviewing area. Monday morning. **Win** *and* **Nell** *have just arrived for work.*

Nell Coffee coffee coffee coffee / coffee.

Win The roses were smashing. / Mermaid.

Nell Ohhh.

Win Iceberg. He taught me all their names.

Nell *has some coffee now.*

Nell Ah. Now then.

Win He has one of the finest rose gardens in West Sussex. He exhibits.

Nell He what?

Win His wife was visiting her mother. It was like living together.

Nell Crafty, you never said.

Win He rang on Saturday morning.

Nell Lucky you were free.

Win That's what I told him.

Nell Did you hell.

Win Have you ever seen a really beautiful rose garden?

Nell I don't like flowers. / I like swimming pools.

Win Marilyn. Esther's Baby. They're all called after birds.

Nell Our friend's late. Celebrating all weekend I bet you.

Win I'd call a rose
Elvis. Or
John Conteh.

Nell Is Howard in yet?

Win If he is he'll be bleeping us with a problem.

Nell Howard can just hang on to himself.

Win Howard's really cut up.

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.

Nell He'll live.

Win He'll move on.

Nell I wouldn't mind a change of air myself.

Win Serious?

Nell I've never been a staying put lady. Pastures new.

Win So who's the
pirate?

Nell There's nothing definite.

Win Inquiries?

Nell There's always inquiries. I'd think I'd got bad breath if there stopped being inquiries. Most of them can't afford me. Or you.

Win I'm all right for the time being. Unless I go to Australia.

Nell There's not a lot of room upward.

Win Marlene's filled it up.

Nell Good luck to her. Unless there's some prospects moneywise.

Win You can but ask.

Nell Can always but ask.

Win So what have we got? I've got a Mr Holden I saw last week.

Nell Any use?

Win Pushy. Bit of a cowboy.

Nell Good-looker?

Win Good dresser.

Nell High flyer?

Win That's his general idea certainly but I'm not sure he's got it up there.

Nell
Prestel wants six high flyers and I've only seen two and a half.

Win He's making a bomb on the road but he thinks it's time for an office. I sent him to

IBM but he didn't get it.

Nell Prestel's on the road.

Win He's not overbright.

Nell Can he handle an office?

Win Provided his secretary can punctuate he should go far.

Nell Bear Prestel in mind then, I might put my head round the door. I've got that poor little nerd I should never have said I could help. Tender heart me.

Win Tender like old boots. How old?

Nell Yes well forty-five.

Win Say no more.

Nell He knows his place, he's not after calling himself a manager, he's just a poor little bod wants a better commission and a bit of sunshine.

Win Don't we all.

Nell He's just got to relocate. He's got a bungalow in Dymchurch.

Win And his wife says.

Nell The lady wife wouldn't care to relocate. She's going through

the change.

Win It's his funeral, don't waste your time.

Nell I don't waste a lot.

Win Good weekend you?

Nell You could say.

Win Which one?

Nell One Friday, one Saturday.

Win Aye aye.

Nell Sunday night I watched telly.

Win Which of them do you like best really?

Nell Sunday was best, I liked the Ovaltine.

Win Holden, Barker, Gardner, Duke.

Nell I've a lady here thinks she can sell.

Win Taking her on?

Nell She's had some jobs.

Win Services?

Nell No, quite heavy stuff, electric.

Win Tough bird like us.

Nell We could do with a few more here.

Win There's nothing going here.

Nell No but I always want the tough ones when I see them. Hang on to them.

Win I think we're plenty.

Nell Derek asked me to marry him again.

Win He doesn't know when he's beaten.

Nell I told him I'm not going to play house, not even in Ascot.

Win Mind you, you could play house.

Nell If I chose to play house I would play house ace.

Win You could marry him and go on working.

Nell I could go on working and not marry him.

Marlene *arrives.*

Marlene Morning ladies.

Win *and* **Nell** *cheer and whistle.*

Mind my head.

Nell Coffee coffee coffee.

Win We're tactfully not mentioning you're late.

Marlene Fucking tube.

Win We've heard that one.

Nell We've used that one.

Win It's the top executive doesn't come in as early as the poor working girl.

Marlene Pass the sugar and shut your face, pet.

Win Well I'm delighted.

Nell Howard's looking sick.

Win Howard is sick. He's got ulcers and heart. He told me.

Nell He'll have to stop then won't he?

Win Stop what?

Nell Smoking, drinking, shouting. Working.

Win Well, working.

Nell We're just looking through the day.

Marlene I'm doing some of
Pam's ladies. They've been piling up while she's away.

Nell Half a dozen little girls and an arts graduate who can't type.

Win I spent the whole weekend at his place in Sussex.

Nell She fancies his rose garden.

Win I had to lie down in the back of the car so the neighbours wouldn't see me go in.

Nell You're kidding.

Win It was funny.

Nell Fuck that for a joke.

Win It was funny.

Marlene Anyway they'd see you in the garden.

Win The garden has extremely high walls.

Nell I think I'll tell the wife.

Win Like hell.

Nell She might leave him and you could have the rose garden.

Win The minute it's not a secret I'm out on my ear.

Nell Don't know why you bother.

Win Bit of fun.

Nell I think it's time you went to Australia.

Win I think it's pushy Mr Holden time.

Nell If you've any really pretty bastards, Marlene, I want some for Prestel.

Marlene I might have one this aftemoon. This morning it's all Pam's secretarial.

Nell Not long now and you'll be upstairs watching over us all.

Marlene Do you feel bad about it?

Nell I don't like coming second.

Marlene Who does?

Win We'd rather it was you than Howard. We're glad for you, aren't we Nell.

Nell Oh yes. Aces.

Interview

Marlene *and* **Jeanine**.

Marlene Right Jeanine, you are Jeanine aren't you? Let's have a look.
Os and As. / No As, all those Os you probably

Jeanine Six Os.

Marlene could have got an A. /
Speeds, not brilliant, not too bad.

Jeanine I wanted to go to work.

Marlene Well, Jeanine, what's your present job like?

Jeanine I'm a secretary.

Marlene
Secretary or typist?

Jeanine I did start as a typist but the last six months I've been a secretary.

Marlene To?

Jeanine To three of them, really, they share me. There's Mr Ashford, he's the office manager, and Mr Philby / is sales, and –

Marlene Quite a small place?

Jeanine A bit small.

Marlene Friendly?

Jeanine Oh it's friendly enough.

Marlene Prospects?

Jeanine I don't think so, that's the trouble. Miss Lewis is secretary to the managing director and she's been there forever, and Mrs Bradford / is –

Marlene So you want a job with better prospects?

Jeanine I want a change.

Marlene So you'll take anything comparable?

Jeanine No, I do want prospects. I want more money.

Marlene You're getting –?

Jeanine
Hundred.

Marlene It's not bad you know. You're what? Twenty?

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, not yet.

Marlene So you won't tell them you're getting married?

Jeanine Had I better not?

Marlene It would probably help.

Jeanine I'm not wearing a ring. We thought we wouldn't spend on a ring.

Marlene Saves taking it off.

Jeanine I wouldn't take it off.

Marlene There's no need to mention it when you go for an interview. / Now Jeanine do you have a feel for any particular

Jeanine But what if they ask?

Marlene kind of company?

Jeanine I thought advertising.

Marlene People often do think advertising. 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.

Jeanine dress like this on purpose for where I am now.

Marlene I have a marketing department here of a knitwear manufacturer. / Marketing is near enough advertising. Secretary

Jeanine Knitwear?

Marlene to the marketing manager, he's thirty-five, married, I've sent him a girl before and she was happy, left to have a baby, you won't want to mention marriage there. He's very fair I think, good at his job, you won't have to nurse him along. Hundred and ten, so that's better than you're doing now.

Jeanine I don't know.

Marlene I've a fairly small concern here, father and two sons, you'd have more say potentially, secretarial and reception duties, only a hundred but the job's going to grow with the concern and then you'll be in at the top with new girls coming in underneath you.

Jeanine What is it they do?

Marlene Lampshades. / This would be my first choice for you.

Jeanine Just lampshades?

Marlene There's plenty of different kinds of lampshade. So we'll send you there, shall we, and the knitwear second choice. Are you free to go for an interview any day they call you?

Jeanine I'd like to travel.

Marlene We don't have any foreign clients. You'd have to go elsewhere.

Jeanine Yes I know. I don't really … I just mean …

Marlene Does your fiancé want to travel?

Jeanine I'd like a job where I was here in London and with him and everything but now and then – I expect it's silly. Are there jobs like that?

Marlene There's personal assistant to a top executive in a multinational. If that's the idea you need to be planning ahead. Is that where you want to be in ten years?

Jeanine I might not be alive in ten years.

Marlene Yes but you will be. You'll have children.

Jeanine I can't think about ten years.

Marlene You haven't got the speeds anyway. So I'll send you to these two shall I? You haven't been to any other agency? Just so we don't get crossed wires. Now Jeanine I want you to get one of these jobs, all right? If I send you that means I'm putting myself on the line for you. Your presentation's OK, you look fine, just be confident and 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.

Jeanine Do you believe it?

Marlene I think you could make me believe it if you put your mind to it.

Jeanine Yes, all right.

Interview

Win *and* **Louise**.

Win Now Louise, hello, I have your details here. You've been very loyal to the one job I see.

Louise Yes I have.

Win Twenty-one years is a long time in one place.

Louise I feel it is. I feel it's time to move on.

Win And you are what age now?

Louise I'm in my early forties.

Win Exactly?

Louise Forty-six.

Win It's not necessarily a handicap, well it is of course we have to face that, but it's not necessarily a disabling handicap, experience does count for something.

Louise I hope so.

Win Now between ourselves is there any trouble, any reason why you're leaving that wouldn't appear on the form?

Louise Nothing like that.

Win Like what?

Louise Nothing at all.

Win No long-term understandings come to a sudden end, making for an insupportable atmosphere?

Louise I've always completely avoided anything like that at all.

Win No personality clashes with your immediate superiors or inferiors?

Louise I've always taken care to get on very well with everyone.

Win I only ask because it can affect the reference and it also affects your motivation, I want to be quite clear why you're moving on. So I take it the job itself no longer satisfies you. Is it the money?

Louise It's partly the money. It's not so much the money.

Win Nine thousand is very respectable. Have you dependants?

Louise No, no dependants. My mother died.

Win So why are you making a change?

Louise Other people make changes.

Win But why are you, now, after spending most of your life in the one place?

Louise There you are, I've lived for that company, I've given my life really you could say because I haven't had a great deal of social life, I've worked in the evenings. I haven't had office entanglements for the very reason you just mentioned and if you are committed to your work you don't move in many other circles. I had management status from the age of twenty-seven and you'll appreciate what that means. I've built up a department. And there it is, it works extremely well, and I feel I'm stuck there. I've spent twenty years in middle management. I've seen young men who I trained go on, in my own company or elsewhere, to higher things. Nobody notices me, I don't expect it, I don't attract attention by making mistakes, everybody takes it for granted that my work is perfect. They will notice me when I go, they will be sorry I think to lose me, they will offer me more money of course, I will refuse. They will see when I've gone what I was doing for them.

Win If they offer you more money you won't stay?

Louise No I won't.

Win Are you the only woman?

Louise Apart from the girls of course, yes. There was one, she was my assistant, it was the only time I took on a young woman assistant, I always had my doubts. I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work. But I did take on this young woman, her qualifications were excellent, and she did well, she got a department of her own,

and left the company for a competitor where she's now on the board and good luck to her. She has a different style, she's a new kind of attractive well-dressed – I don't mean I don't dress properly. But there is a kind of woman who is thirty now who grew up in a different climate. They are not so careful. They take themselves for granted. I have had to justify my existence every minute, and I have done so, I have proved – well.

Win Let's face it, vacancies are going to be ones where you'll be in competition with younger men. And there are companies that will value your experience enough you'll be in with a chance. There are also fields that are easier for a woman, there is a cosmetic company here where your experience might be relevant. It's eight and a half, I don't know if that appeals.

Louise I've proved I can earn money. It's more important to get away. I feel it's now or never. I sometimes / think –

Win You shouldn't talk too much at an interview.

Louise I don't. I don't normally talk about myself. I know very well how to handle myself in an office situation. I only talk to you because it seems to me this is different, it's your job to understand me, surely. You asked the questions.

Win I think I understand you sufficiently.

Louise Well good, that's good.

Win Do you drink?

Louise Certainly not. I'm not a teetotaller, I think that's very suspect, it's seen as being an alcoholic if you're teetotal. What do you mean? I don't drink. Why?

Win I drink.

Louise I don't.

Win Good for you.

Main office

Marlene *and* **Angie**.

Angie *arrives.*

Angie Hello.

Marlene Have you an appointment?

Angie It's me. I've come.

Marlene What? It's not Angie?

Angie It was hard to find this place. I got lost.

Marlene How did you get past the receptionist? The girl on the desk, didn't she try to stop you?

Angie What desk?

Marlene Never mind.

Angie I just walked in. I was looking for you.

Marlene Well you found me.

Angie Yes.

Marlene So where's your mum? Are you up in town for the day?

Angie Not really.

Marlene Sit down. Do you feel all right?

Angie Yes thank you.

Marlene So where's Joyce?

Angie She's at home.

Marlene Did you come up on a school trip then?

Angie I've left school.

Marlene Did you come up with a friend?

Angie No. There's just me.

Marlene You came up by yourself, that's fun. What have you been doing? Shopping? Tower of London?

Angie No, I just come here. I come to you.

Marlene That's very nice of you to think of paying your aunty a visit. There's not many nieces make that the first port of call. Would you like a cup of coffee?

Angie No thank you.

Marlene Tea, orange?

Angie No thank you.

Marlene Do you feel all right?

Angie Yes thank you.

Marlene Are you tired from the journey?

Angie Yes, I'm tired from the journey.

Marlene You sit there for a bit then. How's Joyce?

Angie She's all right.

Marlene Same as ever.

Angie Oh yes.

Marlene Unfortunately you've picked a day when I'm rather busy, if there's ever a day when I'm not, or I'd take you out to lunch and we'd go to Madame Tussaud's. We could go shopping. What time do you have to be back? Have you got a day return?

Angie No.

Marlene So what train are you going back on?

Angie I came on the bus.

Marlene So what bus are you going back on? Are you staying the night?

Angie Yes.

Marlene Who are you staying with? Do you want me to put you up for the night, is that it?

Angie Yes please.

Marlene I haven't got a spare bed.

Angie I can sleep on the floor.

Marlene You can sleep on the sofa.

Angie Yes please.

Marlene I do think Joyce might have phoned me. It's like her.

Angie This is where you work is it?

Marlene It's where I have been working the last two years but I'm going to move into another office.

Angie It's lovely.

Marlene My new office is nicer than this. There's just the one big desk in it for me.

Angie Can I see it?

Marlene Not now, no, there's someone else in it now. But he's leaving at the end of next week and I'm going to do his job.

Angie Is that good?

Marlene Yes, it's very good.

Angie Are you going to be in charge?

Marlene Yes I am.

Angie I knew you would be.

Marlene How did you know?

Angie I knew you'd be in charge of everything.

Marlene Not quite everything.

Angie You will be.

Marlene Well we'll see.

Angie Can I see it next week then?

Marlene Will you still be here next week?

Angie Yes.

Marlene Don't you have to go home?

Angie No.

Marlene Why not?

Angie It's all right.

Marlene Is it all right?

Angie Yes, don't worry about it.

Marlene Does Joyce know where you are?

Angie Yes of course she does.

Marlene Well does she?

Angie Don't worry about it.

Marlene How long are you planning to stay with me then?

Angie You know when you came to see us last year?

Marlene Yes, that was nice wasn't it?

Angie That was the best day of my whole life.

Marlene So how long are you planning to stay?

Angie Don't you want me?

Marlene Yes yes, I just wondered.

Angie I won't stay if you don't want me.

Marlene No, of course you can stay.

Angie I'll sleep on the floor. I won't be any bother.

Marlene Don't get upset.

Angie I'm not, I'm not. Don't worry about it.

Mrs Kidd *comes in.*

Mrs Kidd Excuse me.

Marlene Yes.

Mrs Kidd Excuse me.

Marlene Can I help you?

Mrs Kidd Excuse me bursting in on you like this but I have to talk to you.

Marlene I am engaged at the moment. / If you could go to reception –

Mrs Kidd I'm Rosemary Kidd, Howard's wife, you don't recognise me but we did meet, I remember you of course / but you wouldn't –

Marlene Yes of course, Mrs Kidd, I'm sorry, we did meet. Howard's about somewhere I expect, have you looked in his office?

Mrs Kidd Howard's not about, no. I'm afraid it's you I've come to see if I could have a minute or two.

Marlene I do have an appointment in five minutes.

Mrs Kidd This won't take five minutes. I'm very sorry. It is a matter of some urgency.

Marlene Well of course. What can I do for you?

Mrs Kidd I just wanted a chat, an informal chat. It's not something I can simply – I'm sorry if I'm interrupting your work. I know office work isn't like housework / which is all interruptions.

Marlene No no, this is my niece, Angie. Mrs Kidd.

Mrs Kidd Very pleased to meet you.

Angie Very well thank you.

Mrs Kidd Howard's not in today.

Marlene Isn't he?

Mrs Kidd He's feeling poorly.

Marlene I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear that.

Mrs Kidd The fact is he's in a state of shock. About what's happened.

Marlene What has happened?

Mrs Kidd You should know if anyone. I'm referring to you being appointed managing director instead of Howard. He

hasn't been at all well all weekend. He hasn't slept for three nights. I haven't slept.

Marlene I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs Kidd. Has he thought of taking sleeping pills?

Mrs Kidd It's very hard when someone has worked all these years.

Marlene Business life is full of little setbacks. I'm sure Howard knows that. He'll bounce back in a day or two. We all bounce back.

Mrs Kidd If you could see him you'd know what I'm talking about. What's it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he'd get over it as something normal.

Marlene I think he's going to have to get over it.

Mrs Kidd It's me that bears the brunt. I'm not the one that's been promoted. I put him first every inch of the way. And now what do I get? You women this, you women that. It's not my fault. You're going to have to be very careful how you handle him. He's very hurt.

Marlene Naturally I'll be tactful and pleasant to him, you don't start pushing someone round. I'll consult him over any decisions affecting his department. But that's no different, Mrs Kidd, from any of my other colleagues.

Mrs Kidd I think it is different, because he's a man.

Marlene I'm not quite sure why you came to see me.

Mrs Kidd I had to do something.

Marlene Well you've done it, you've seen me. I think that's probably all we've time for. I'm sorry he's been taking it out on you. He really is a shit, Howard.

Mrs Kidd But he's got a family to support. He's got three children. It's only fair.

Marlene Are you suggesting I give up the job to him then?

Mrs Kidd It had crossed my mind if you were unavailable after all for some reason, he would be the natural second choice I think, don't you? I'm not asking.

Marlene Good.

Mrs Kidd You mustn't tell him I came. He's very proud.

Marlene If he doesn't like what's happening here he can go and work somewhere else.

Mrs Kidd Is that a threat?

Marlene I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

Mrs Kidd It's not that easy, a man of Howard's age. You don't care. I thought he was going too far but he's right. You're one of these ballbreakers / that's what you are. You'll end up

Marlene I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

Mrs Kidd miserable and lonely. You're not natural.

Marlene Could you please piss off?

Mrs Kidd I thought if I saw you at least I'd be doing something.

Mrs Kidd *goes.*

Marlene I've got to go and do some work now. Will you come back later?

Angie I think you were wonderful.

Marlene I've got to go and do some work now.

Angie You told her to piss off.

Marlene Will you come back later?

Angie Can't I stay here?

Marlene Don't you want to go sightseeing?

Angie I'd rather stay here.

Marlene You can stay here I suppose, if it's not boring.

Angie It's where I most want to be in the world.

Marlene I'll see you later then.

Marlene *goes.*

Angie *sits at* **Win***'s desk.*

Interview

Nell *and* **Shona**.

Nell Is this right? You are Shona?

Shona Yeh.

Nell It says here you're twenty-nine.

Shona Yeh.

Nell Too many late nights, me. So you've been where you are for four years, Shona, you're earning
six basic and three commission. So what's the problem?

Shona No problem.

Nell Why do you want a change?

Shona Just a change.

Nell Change of product, change of area?

Shona Both.

Nell But you're happy on the road?

Shona I like driving.

Nell You're not after management status?

Shona I would like management status.

Nell You'd be interested in titular management status but not come off the road?

Shona I want to be on the road, yeh.

Nell So how many calls have you been making a day?

Shona Six.

Nell And what proportion of those are successful?

Shona Six.

Nell That's hard to believe.

Shona Four.

Nell You find it easy to get the initial interest do you?

Shona Oh yeh, I get plenty of initial interest.

Nell And what about
closing?

Shona I close, don't I?

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 his feelings.

Shona I never consider people's feelings.

Nell I was selling for six years, I can sell anything, I've sold in three continents, and I'm jolly as they come but I'm not very nice.

Shona I'm not very nice.

Nell What sort of time do you have on the road with the other reps? Get on all right? Handle the chat?

Shona I get on. Keep myself to myself.

Nell Fairly much of a loner are you?

Shona Sometimes.

Nell So what field are you interested in?

Shona Computers.

Nell That's a top field as you know and you'll be up against some very slick fellas there, there's some very pretty boys in computers, it's an American-style field.

Shona That's why I want to do it.

Nell Video systems appeal? That's a high-flying situation.

Shona Video systems appeal OK.

Nell Because Prestel have half a dozen vacancies I'm looking to fill at the moment. We're talking in the area of ten to fifteen thousand here and upwards.

Shona Sounds OK.

Nell I've half a mind to go for it myself. But it's good money here if you've got the top clients. Could you fancy it do you think?

Shona Work here?

Nell I'm not in a position to offer, there's nothing officially going just now, but we're always on the lookout. There's not that many of us. We could keep in touch.

Shona I like driving.

Nell So the Prestel appeals?

Shona Yeh.

Nell What about ties?

Shona No ties.

Nell So relocation wouldn't be a problem.

Shona No problem.

Nell So just fill me in a bit more could you about what you've been doing.

Shona What I've been doing. It's all down there.

Nell The bare facts are down here but I've got to present you to an employer.

Shona I'm twenty-nine years old.

Nell So it says here.

Shona We look young.
Youngness runs in the family in our family.

Nell So just describe your present job for me.

Shona
My present job at present. I have a car. I have a Porsche. I go up the M1 a lot. Burn up the M1 a lot. Straight up the M1 in the fast lane to where the clients are, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, I do a lot in Yorkshire. I'm selling electric things. Like dishwashers, washing machines, stainless steel tubs are a feature and the reliability of the programme. After sales service, we offer a very good after sales service, spare parts, plenty of spare parts. And fridges, I sell a lot of fridges specially in the summer. People want to buy fridges in
the summer because of the heat melting the butter and you get fed up standing the milk in a basin of cold water with a cloth over, stands to reason people don't want to do that in this day and age. So I sell a lot of them. Big ones with big freezers. Big freezers. And I stay in hotels at night when I'm away from home. On my expense account. I stay in various hotels. They know me, the ones I go to. I check in, have a bath, have a shower. Then I go down to the bar, have a gin and tonic, have a chat. Then I go into the dining room and have dinner. I

usually have fillet steak and mushrooms, I like mushrooms. I like smoked salmon very much. I like having a salad on the side. Green salad. I don't like tomatoes.

Nell Christ what a waste of time.

Shona Beg your pardon?

Nell Not a word of this is true is it?

Shona How do you mean?

Nell You just filled in the form with a pack of lies.

Shona Not exactly.

Nell How old are you?

Shona Twenty-nine.

Nell Nineteen?

Shona Twenty-one.

Nell And what jobs have you done? Have you done any?

Shona I could though, I bet you.

Main office

Angie *sitting as before.*

Win *comes in.*

Win
Who's sitting in my chair?

Angie What? Sorry.

Win
Who's been eating my porridge?

Angie What?

Win It's all right, I saw Marlene. Angie isn't it? I'm Win. And I'm not going out for lunch because I'm knackered. I'm going to set me down here and have a yoghurt. Do you like yoghurt?

Angie No.

Win That's good because I've only got one. Are you hungry?

Angie No.

Win There's a cafe on the corner.

Angie No thank you. Do you work here?

Win How did you guess?

Angie Because you look as if you might work here and you're sitting at the desk. Have you always worked here?

Win No
I was headhunted. That means I was working for another outfit like this and this lot came and offered me more money.

I broke my contract, there was a hell of a stink. There's not many top ladies about. Your aunty's a smashing bird.

Angie Yes I know.

Marlene Fan are you? Fan of your aunty's?

Angie Do you think I could work here?

Win Not at the moment.

Angie How do I start?

Win What can you do?

Angie I don't know. Nothing.

Win Type?

Angie Not very well. The letters jump up when I do capitals. I was going to do a
CSE in commerce but I didn't.

Win What have you got?

Angie What?

Win CSEs, Os.

Angie Nothing, none of that. Did you do all that?

Win Oh yes, all that, and a science degree funnily enough. I started out doing medical research but there's no money in it. I thought I'd go abroad. Did you know they sell Coca-Cola in Russia and Pepsi-cola in China? You don't have to be qualified as much as you might think. Men are awful bullshitters, they like to make out jobs are harder than they are. Any job I ever did I started doing it better than the rest of the crowd and they didn't like it. So I'd get unpopular and I'd have a drink to cheer myself up. I lived with a fella and supported him for four years, he couldn't get work. After that I went to California. I like the sunshine. Americans know how to live. This country's too slow. Then I went to Mexico, still in sales, but it's no country for a single lady. I came home, went bonkers for a bit, thought I was five different people, got over that all right, the psychiatrist said I was perfectly sane and highly intelligent. Got married in a moment of weakness and he's inside now, he's been inside four years, and I've not been to see him too much this last year. I like this better than sales, I'm not really that aggressive. I started thinking sales was a good job if you want to meet people, but you're meeting people that don't want to meet you. It's no good if you like being liked. Here your clients want to meet you because you're the one doing them some good. They hope.

Angie *has fallen asleep.* **Nell** *comes in.*

Nell You're talking to yourself, sunshine.

Win So what's new?

Nell Who is this?

Win Marlene's little niece.

Nell What's she got, brother, sister? She never talks about her family.

Win I was telling her my life story.

Nell
Violins?

Win No, success story.

Nell You've heard Howard's had a heart attack?

Win No, when?

Nell I heard just now. He hadn't come in, he was at home, he's gone to hospital. He's not dead. His wife was here, she rushed off in a cab.

Win Too much butter, too much smoke. We must send him some flowers.

Marlene *comes in*.

You've heard about Howard?

Marlene Poor sod.

Nell Lucky he didn't get the job if that's what his health's like.

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.

Act Three

A year earlier. Sunday evening. **Joyce***'s kitchen*. **Joyce***,* **Angie***,* **Marlene**. **Marlene** *is taking presents out of a bright carrier bag.* **Angie** *has already opened a box of chocolates.*

Marlene Just a few little things. / I've no memory for

Joyce There's no need.

Marlene birthdays have I, and Christmas seems to slip by. So I think I owe Angie a few presents.

Joyce What do you say?

Angie Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Aunty Marlene.

She opens a present. It is the dress from Act One, new.

Angie Oh look, Mum, isn't it lovely?

Marlene I don't know if it's the right size. She's grown up since I saw her. / I knew she was always tall for her age.

Angie Isn't it lovely?

Joyce She's a big lump.

Marlene Hold it up, Angie, let's see.

Angie I'll put it on, shall I?

Marlene Yes, try it on.

Joyce Go on to your room then, we don't want / a strip show thank you.

Angie Of course I'm going to my room, what do you think? Look Mum, here's something for you. Open it, go on. What is it? Can I open it for you?

Joyce Yes, you open it, pet.

Angie Don't you want to open it yourself? / Go on.

Joyce I don't mind, you can do it.

Angie It's something hard. It's – what is it? A bottle. Drink is it? No, it's what? Perfume, look. What a lot. Open it, look, let's smell it. Oh it's strong. It's lovely. Put it on me. How do you do it? Put it on me.

Joyce You're too young.

Angie I can play wearing it like dressing up.

Joyce And you're too old for that. Here, give it here, I'll do it, you'll tip the whole bottle over yourself / and we'll have you smelling all summer.

Angie Put it on you. Do I smell? Put it on Aunty too. Put it on Aunty too. Let's all smell.

Marlene I didn't know what you'd like.

Joyce There's no danger I'd have it already, / that's one thing.

Angie Now we all smell the same.

Marlene It's a bit of nonsense.

Joyce It's very kind of you Marlene, you shouldn't.

Angie Now. I'll put on the dress and then we'll see.

Angie *goes.*

Joyce You've caught me on the hop with the place in a mess. / If you'd let me know you was coming I'd have got

Marlene That doesn't matter.

Joyce something in to eat. We had our dinner dinnertime. We're just going to have a cup of tea. You could have an egg.

Marlene No, I'm not hungry. Tea's fine.

Joyce I don't expect you take sugar.

Marlene Why not?

Joyce You take care of yourself.

Marlene How do you mean you didn't know I was coming?

Joyce You could have written. I know we're not on the phone but we're not completely in the dark ages, / we do have a postman.

Marlene But you asked me to come.

Joyce How did I ask you to come?

Marlene Angie said when she phoned up.

Joyce Angie phoned up, did she?

Marlene Was it just Angie's idea?

Joyce What did she say?

Marlene She said you wanted me to come and see you. / It was a couple of weeks ago. How was I to know that's a

Joyce Ha.

Marlene ridiculous idea? My diary's always full a couple of weeks ahead so we fixed it for this weekend. I was meant to get here earlier but I was held up. She gave me messages from you.

Joyce Didn't you wonder why I didn't phone you myself?

Marlene She said you didn't like using the phone. You're shy on the phone and can't use it. I don't know what you're like, do I.

Joyce Are there people who can't use the phone?

Marlene I expect so.

Joyce I haven't met any.

Marlene Why should I think she was lying?

Joyce Because she's like what she's like.

Marlene How do I know / what she's like?

Joyce It's not my fault you don't know what she's like. You never come and see her.

Marlene Well I have now / and you don't seem over the moon.*

Joyce Good.

*Well I'd have got a cake if she'd told me.

Pause.

Marlene I did wonder why you wanted to see me.

Joyce I didn't want to see you.

Marlene Yes, I know. Shall I go?

Joyce I don't mind seeing you.

Marlene Great, I feel really welcome.

Joyce You can come and see Angie any time you like, l'm not stopping you. / You know where we are. You're the

Marlene Ta ever so.

Joyce one went away, not me. I'm right here where I was.

And will be a few years yet I shouldn't wonder.

Marlene All right. All right.

Joyce *gives* **Marlene** *a cup of tea*.

Joyce Tea.

Marlene Sugar?

Joyce *passes* **Marlene** *the sugar*.

It's very quiet down here.

Joyce I expect you'd notice it.

Marlene The air smells different too.

Joyce That's the scent.

Marlene No, I mean walking down the lane.

Joyce What sort of air you get in London then?

Angie *comes in, wearing the dress. It fits.*

Marlene Oh, very pretty. You do look pretty, Angie.

Joyce That fits all right.

Marlene Do you like the colour?

Angie Beautiful. Beautiful.

Joyce You better take it off, you'll get it dirty.

Angie I want to wear it. I want to wear it.

Marlene It is for wearing after all. You can't just hang it up and look at it.

Angie I love it.

Joyce Well if you must you must.

Angie If someone asks me what's my favourite colour I'll tell them it's this. Thank you very much, Aunty Marlene.

Marlene You didn't tell your mum you asked me down.

Angie I wanted it to be a surprise.

Joyce I'll give you a surprise / one of these days.

Angie I thought you'd like to see her. She hasn't been here since I was nine. People do see their aunts.

Marlene Is it that long? Doesn't time fly?

Angie I wanted to.

Joyce I'm not cross.

Angie Are you glad?

Joyce I smell nicer anyhow, don't I?

Kit *comes in without saying anything, as if she lived there.*

Marlene I think it was a good idea, Angie, about time. We are sisters after all. It's a pity to let that go.

Joyce This is Kitty, / who lives up the road. This is Angie's Aunty Marlene.

Kit What's that?

Angie It's a present. Do you like it?

Kit It's all right. / Are you coming out?

Marlene Hello, Kitty.

Angie *No.

Kit What's that smell?

Angie It's a present.

Kit It's horrible. Come on.

Marlene Have a chocolate.

Angie *No, I'm busy.

Kit Coming out later?

Angie No.

Kit (*to* **Marlene**) Hello.

Kit *goes without a chocolate.*

Joyce She's a little girl Angie sometimes plays with because she's the only child lives really close. She's like a little sister to her really. Angie's good with little children.

Marlene Do you want to work with children, Angie? / Be a teacher or a nursery nurse?

Joyce I don't think she's ever thought of it.

Marlene What do you want to do?

Joyce She hasn't an idea in her head what she wants to do. / Lucky to get anything.

Marlene Angie?

Joyce She's not clever like you.

Pause.

Marlene I'm not clever, just pushy.

Joyce True enough.

Marlene *takes a bottle of whisky out of the bag.*

I don't drink spirits.

Angie You do at Christmas.

Joyce It's not Christmas, is it?

Angie It's better than Christmas.

Marlene Glasses?

Joyce Just a small one then.

Marlene Do you want some, Angie?

Angie I can't, can I?

Joyce Taste it if you want. You won't like it.

Marlene We got drunk together the night your grandfather died.

Joyce We did not get drunk.

Marlene I got drunk. You were just overcome with grief.

Joyce I still keep up the grave with flowers.

Marlene Do you really?

Joyce Why wouldn't I?

Marlene Have you seen Mother?

Joyce Of course I've seen Mother.

Marlene I mean lately.

Joyce Of course I've seen her lately, I go every Thursday.

Marlene (*to* **Angie**) Do you remember your grandfather?

Angie He got me out of the bath one night in a towel.

Marlene Did he? I don't think he ever gave me a bath. Did he give you a bath, Joyce? He probably got soft in his old age. Did you like him?

Angie Yes of course.

Marlene Why?

Angie What?

Marlene So what's the news? How's Mrs Paisley? Still going crazily? / And Dorothy. What happened to Dorothy?*

Angie Who's Mrs Paisley?

Joyce *She went to Canada.

Marlene Did she? What to do?

Joyce I don't know. She just went to Canada.

Marlene Well / good for her.

Angie Mr Connolly killed his wife.

Marlene What, Connolly at Whitegates?

Angie They found her body in the garden. / Under the cabbages.

Marlene He was always so proper.

Joyce Stuck up git. Connolly. Best lawyer money could buy but he couldn't get out of it. She was carrying on with Matthew.

Marlene How old's Matthew then?

Joyce Twenty-one. / He's got a motorbike.

Marlene I think he's about six.

Angie How can he be six? He's six years older than me. / If he was six I'd be nothing, I'd be just born this minute.

Joyce Your aunty knows that, she's just being silly. She means it's so long since she's been here she's forgotten about Matthew.

Angie You were here for my birthday when I was nine. I had a pink cake. Kit was only five then, she was four, she hadn't started school yet. She could read already when she went to school. You remember my birthday? / You remember me?

Marlene Yes, I remember the cake.

Angie You remember me?

Marlene Yes, I remember you.

Angie And Mum and Dad was there, and Kit was.

Marlene Yes, how is your dad? Where is he tonight? Up the pub?

Joyce No, he's not here.

Marlene I can see he's not here.

Joyce He moved out.

Marlene What? When did he? /Just recently?*

Angie Didn't you know that? You don't know much.

Joyce *No, it must be three years ago. Don't be rude, Angie.

Angie I'm not, am I Aunty? What else don't you know?

Joyce You was in America or somewhere. You sent a postcard.

Angie I've got that in my room. It's the Grand Canyon. Do you want to see it? Shall I get it? I can get it for you.

Marlene Yes, all right.

Angie *goes.*

Joyce You could be married with twins for all I know. You must have affairs and break up and I don't need to know about any of that so I don't see what the fuss is about.

Marlene What fuss?

Angie *comes back with the postcard.*

Angie 'Driving across the states for a new job in
L.A. It's a long way but the car goes very fast. It's very hot. Wish you were here. Love from Aunty Marlene.'

Joyce Did you make a lot of money?

Marlene I spent a lot.

Angie I want to go to America. Will you take me?

Joyce She's not going to America, she's been to America, stupid.

Angie She might go again, stupid. It's not something you do once. People who go keep going all the time, back and forth on jets. They go on
Concorde and
Laker and get
jet lag. Will you take me?

Marlene I'm not planning a trip.

Angie Will you let me know?

Joyce Angie, / you're getting silly.

Angie I want to be American.

Joyce It's time you were in bed.

Angie No it's not. / I don't have to go to bed at all tonight.

Joyce School in the morning.

Angie I'll wake up.

Joyce Come on now, you know how you get.

Angie How do I get? / I don't get anyhow.

Joyce Angie. Are you staying the night?

Marlene Yes, if that's all right. / I'll see you in the morning.

Angie You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the sofa.

Joyce You will not, you'll sleep in your bed. / Think I can't

Angie Mum.

Joyce see through that? I can just see you going to sleep / with us talking.

Angie I would, I would go to sleep, I'd love that.

Joyce I'm going to get cross, Angie.

Angie I want to show her something.

Joyce Then bed.

Angie It's a secret.

Joyce Then I expect it's in your room so off you go. Give us a shout when you're ready for bed and your aunty'll be up and see you.

Angie Will you?

Marlene Yes of course.

Angie *goes.*

Silence.

It's cold tonight.

Joyce Will you be all right on the sofa? You can / have my bed.

Marlene The sofa's fine.

Joyce Yes the forecast said rain tonight but it's held off.

Marlene I was going to walk down to the estuary but I've left it a bit late. Is it just the same?

Joyce They cut down the hedges a few years back. Is that since you were here?

Marlene But it's not changed down the end, all the mud? And the reeds? We used to pick them when they were bigger than us. Are there still
lapwings?

Joyce You get strangers walking there on a Sunday. I expect they're looking at the mud and the lapwings, yes.

Marlene You could have left.

Joyce Who says I wanted to leave?

Marlene Stop getting at me then, you're really boring.

Joyce How could I have left?

Marlene Did you want to?

Joyce I said how, / how could I?

Marlene If you'd wanted to you'd have done it.

Joyce Christ.

Marlene Are we getting drunk?

Joyce Do you want something to eat?

Marlene No, I'm getting drunk.

Joyce Funny time to visit, Sunday evening.

Marlene I came this morning. I spent the day.

Angie (*off*) Aunty! Aunty Marlene!

Marlene I'd better go.

Joyce Go on then.

Marlene All right.

Angie (*off*) Aunty! Can you hear me? I'm ready.

Marlene *goes.*

Joyce *goes on sitting.*

Marlene *comes back.*

Joyce So what's the secret?

Marlene It's a secret.

Joyce I know what it is anyway.

Marlene I bet you don't. You always said that.

Joyce It's her exercise book.

Marlene Yes, but you don't know what's in it.

Joyce It's some game, some secret society she has with Kit.

Marlene You don't know the password. You don't know the code.

Joyce You're really in it, aren't you. Can you do the handshake?

Marlene She didn't mention a handshake.

Joyce I thought they'd have a special handshake. She spends hours writing that but she's useless at school. She copies

things out of books about black magic, and politicians out of the paper. It's a bit childish.

Marlene I think it's a plot to take over the world.

Joyce She's been in the remedial class the last two years.

Marlene I came up this morning and spent the day in Ipswich. I went to see Mother.

Joyce Did she recognise you?

Marlene Are you trying to be funny?

Joyce No, she does wander.

Marlene She wasn't wandering at all, she was very lucid thank you.

Joyce You were very lucky then.

Marlene Fucking awful life she's had.

Joyce Don't tell me.

Marlene Fucking waste.

Joyce Don't talk to me.

Marlene Why shouldn't I talk? Why shouldn't I talk to you? / Isn't she my mother too?

Joyce Look, you've left, you've gone away, / we can do without you.

Marlene I left home, so what, I left home. People do leave home / it is normal.

Joyce We understand that, we can do without you.

Marlene We weren't happy. Were you happy?

Joyce Don't come back.

Marlene So it's just your mother is it, your child, you never wanted me round, / you were jealous of me because I was the

Joyce Here we go.

Marlene little one and I was clever.

Joyce I'm not clever enough for all this psychology / if that's what it is.

Marlene Why can't I visit my own family / without all this?*

Joyce Aah.

Just don't go on about Mum's life when you haven't been to see her for how many years. / I go and see her every week.

Marlene It's up to me.

*Then don't go and see her every week.

Joyce Somebody has to.

Marlene No they don't. / Why do they?

Joyce How would I feel if I didn't go?

Marlene A lot better.

Joyce I hope you feel better.

Marlene It's up to me.

Joyce You couldn't get out of here fast enough.

Marlene 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? / Don't you fucking this fucking that fucking bitch

Joyce Christ.

Marlene fucking tell me what to fucking do fucking.

Joyce I don't know how you could leave your own child.

Marlene You were quick enough to take her.

Joyce What does that mean?

Marlene You were quick enough to take her.

Joyce Or what? Have her put in a home? Have some stranger / take her would you rather?

Marlene You couldn't have one so you took mine.

Joyce I didn't know that then.

Marlene Like hell, / married three years.

Joyce I didn't know that. Plenty of people / take that long.

Marlene Well it turned out lucky for you, didn't it?

Joyce Turned out all right for you by the look of you. You'd be getting a few less thousand a year.

Marlene Not necessarily.

Joyce You'd be stuck here / like you said.

Marlene I could have taken her with me.

Joyce You didn't want to take her with you. It's no good coming back now, Marlene, / and saying –

Marlene I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because
she's an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money.

Joyce So what's that got to do with you at the age of seventeen?

Marlene Just because you were married and had somewhere to live –

Joyce You could have lived at home. / Or live with me

Marlene Don't be stupid.

Joyce and Frank. / You said you weren't keeping it. You

Marlene You never suggested.

Joyce shouldn't have had it / if you wasn't going to keep it.

Marlene Here we go.

Joyce You was the most stupid, / for someone so clever you was the most stupid, get yourself pregnant, not go to the doctor, not tell.

Marlene You wanted it, you said you were glad, I remember the day, you said I'm glad you never got rid of it, I'll look after it, you said that down by the river. So what are you saying, sunshine, you don't want her?

Joyce Course I'm not saying that.

Marlene Because I'll take her, / wake her up and pack now.

Joyce You wouldn't know how to begin to look after her.

Marlene Don't you want her?

Joyce Course I do, she's my child.

Marlene Then what are you going on about / why did I have her?

Joyce You said I got her off you / when you didn't –

Marlene I said you were lucky / the way it –

Joyce Have a child now if you want one. You're not old.

Marlene I might do.

Joyce Good.

Pause.

Marlene I've been on the pill so long / I'm probably sterile.

Joyce Listen when Angie was six months I did get pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking after your fucking baby / because she cried so much – yes I did tell

Marlene You never told me.

Joyce you – / and the doctor said if I'd sat down all day with

Marlene Well I forgot.

Joyce my feet up I'd've kept it / and that's the only chance I ever had because after that –

Marlene I've had two abortions, are you interested? Shall I tell you about them? Well I won't, it's boring, it wasn't a problem. I don't like messy talk about blood / and what a bad

Joyce If I hadn't had your baby. The doctor said.

Marlene time we all had. I don't want a baby. I don't want to talk about gynaecology.

Joyce Then stop trying to get Angie off of me.

Marlene I come down here after six years. All night you've been saying I don't come often enough. If I don't come for another six years she'll be twenty-one, will that be OK?

Joyce That'll be fine, yes, six years would suit me fine.

Pause.

Marlene I was afraid of this.

I only came because I thought you wanted …

I just want …

Marlene *cries.*

Joyce Don't grizzle, Marlene, for God's sake.

Marly? Come on, pet. Love you really.

Fucking stop it, will you?

Marlene No, let me cry. I like it.

They laugh, **Marlene** *begins to stop crying.*

I knew I'd cry if I wasn't careful.

Joyce Everyone's always crying in this house. Nobody takes any notice.

Marlene You've been wonderful looking after Angie.

Joyce Don't get carried away.

Marlene I can't write letters but I do think of you.

Joyce You're getting drunk. I'm going to make some tea.

Marlene Love you.

Joyce *gets up to make tea.*

Joyce I can see why you'd want to leave. It's a dump here.

Marlene So what's this about you and Frank?

Joyce He was always carrying on, wasn't he? And if I wanted to go out in the evening he'd go mad, even if it was nothing, a class, I was going to go to an evening class. So he had this girlfriend, only twenty-two poor cow, and I said go on, off you go, hoppit. I don't think he even likes her.

Marlene So what about money?

Joyce I've always said I don't want your money.

Marlene No, does he send you money?

Joyce I've got four different cleaning jobs. Adds up. There's not a lot round here.

Marlene Does Angie miss him?

Joyce She doesn't say.

Marlene Does she see him?

Joyce He was never that fond of her to be honest.

Marlene He tried to kiss me once. When you were engaged.

Joyce Did you fancy him?

Marlene No, he looked like a fish.

Joyce He was lovely then.

Marlene Ugh.

Joyce Well I fancied him. For about three years.

Marlene Have you got someone else?

Joyce There's not a lot round here. Mind you, the minute you're on your own, you'd be amazed how your friends' husbands drop by. I'd sooner do without.

Marlene I don't see why you couldn't take my money.

Joyce I do, so don't bother about it.

Marlene Only got to ask.

Joyce So what about you? Good job?

Marlene Good for a laugh. / Got back from the US of A a bit

Joyce Good for more than a laugh I should think.

Marlene wiped out and slotted into this speedy employment agency and still there.

Joyce You can always find yourself work then.

Marlene That's right.

Joyce And men?

Marlene Oh there's always men.

Joyce No one special?

Marlene There's fellas who like to be seen with a high-flying lady. Shows they've got something really good in their pants. But they can't take the day to day. They're waiting for me to turn into the little woman. Or maybe I'm just horrible of course.

Joyce Who needs them?

Marlene Who needs them? Well I do. But I need adventures more. So on on into the sunset. I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

Joyce Who for?

Marlene For me. / I think I'm going up up up.

Joyce Oh for you. Yes, I'm sure they will.

Marlene And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She's a tough lady,
Maggie. I'd give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there. This country

Joyce You voted for them, did you?

Marlene needs to stop whining. /
Monetarism is not stupid.

Joyce Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

Marlene It takes time, determination. No more slop. / And

Joyce Well I think they're filthy bastards.

Marlene who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

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

Marlene Bosses still walking on the workers' faces? Still Dadda's little parrot? Haven't you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.

Joyce I am looking at you.

Marlene Come on, Joyce, we're not going to quarrel over politics.

Joyce We are though.

Marlene Forget I mentioned it. Not a word about
the slimy unions will cross my lips.

Pause.

Joyce You say Mother had a wasted life.

Marlene Yes I do. Married to that bastard.

Joyce What sort of life did he have? / Working in the fields like

Marlene Violent life?

Joyce an animal. / Why wouldn't he want a drink?

Marlene Come off it.

Joyce You want a drink. He couldn't afford whisky.

Marlene I don't want to talk about him.

Joyce You started, I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.

Marlene She was hungry because he drank the money. / He used to hit her.

Joyce It's not all down to him. / Their lives were rubbish. They

Marlene She didn't hit him.

Joyce were treated like rubbish. He's dead and she'll die soon and what sort of life / did they have?

Marlene I saw him one night. I came down.

Joyce Do you think I didn't? / They didn't get to America and

Marlene I still have dreams.

Joyce drive across it in a fast car. / Bad nights, they had bad days.

Marlene America, America, you're jealous. / I had to get out,

Joyce Jealous?

Marlene I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, / never let him, make my own way, out.

Joyce Jealous of what you've done, you're ashamed of me if I came to your office, your smart friends, wouldn't you, I'm ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself, you've got on, nothing's changed for most people / has it?

Marlene I hate the working class / which is what you're going

Joyce Yes you do.

Marlene to go on about now, it doesn't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid. / I don't like the way they talk. I don't

Joyce Come on, now we're getting it.

Marlene like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits / and brothers and sisters –

Joyce I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring / Mercedes it was.

Marlene Oh very mature –

Joyce I hate the cows I work for / and their dirty dishes with blanquette of fucking veau.

Marlene and I will not be pulled down to their level by
a flying picket and I won't be
sent to Siberia / or a loony bin

Joyce No, you'll be on a yacht, you'll be head of Coca-Cola and you wait, the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs –

Marlene just because I'm original. And I support Reagan even if he is a lousy movie star because the
reds are swarming up his map and I want to be free in a free world -

Joyce What? / What?

Marlene I know what l mean / by that – not shut up here.

Joyce So don't be round here when it happens because if someone's kicking you I'll just laugh.

Silence.

Marlene I don't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.

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.

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 us, wonderful us, and Angie's us / and Mum and Dad's us.

Joyce Yes, that's right, and you're them.

Marlene Come on, Joyce, what a night. You've got what it takes.

Joyce I know I have.

Marlene I didn't really mean all that.

Joyce I did.

Marlene But we're friends anyway.

Joyce I don't think so, no.

Marlene Well it's lovely to be out in the country. I really must make the effort to come more often.

I want to go to sleep.

I want to go to sleep.

Joyce *gets blankets for the sofa.*

Joyce Goodnight then. I hope you'll be warm enough.

Marlene Goodnight. Joyce –

Joyce No, pet. Sorry.

Joyce *goes*.

Marlene *sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink.*

Angie *comes in.*

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.

Notes

Act One

1
Frascati: popular Italian dry white wine.

1
Hawaii: a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean – the 'ideal' holiday destination – whose capital is Honolulu. Discovered by Captain Cook in 1778, they were originally named the Sandwich Islands. Annexed by the USA in 1898, they became that country's fiftieth state in 1959.

1
Tobermory: a small Scottish burgh (i.e. borough) on the north coast of the island of Mull, Argyllshire.

1
miss its face: miss seeing her. The use of 'its' is patronising.

2
sake: (also saki, or sakki) Japan's chief alcoholic drink, similar to beer but clearer in texture and made from fermented rice.

2
Let the wild goose come to me this spring: metaphorical allusion meaning bring her (Nijo) to my bed.

3

metaphysical poets: school of English poets of the early seventeenth century whose work is characterised by concision, ingenious, often highly intricate word-play (known as 'conceits') and striking imagery. The best-known exponent was John Donne (1571–1631) whose early love poetry gave way to the writing of religious sonnets when he took holy orders and, later, became Dean of St Paul's in London.

3
hymnology: study of the history and composition of religious hymns.

4
without matter: without physical substance.

5
Waldorf salad: a salad of apple, celery and walnuts.

5
John the Scot: John Duns 'Scotus', thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian. His date indicates the extent of Churchill's inventiveness with regard to Pope Joan, who didn't really exist.

5
Canelloni: Italian pasta dish.

5
Avocado vinaigrette: large pear-shaped fruit, usually served in half with a dressing of oil and vinegar.

6

Buddhism ... in Japan: the Buddhist religion originated in India around 500 BC and derives from the teachings of Buddha, whose most important doctrine is that of *karma* – good or evil deeds reaping an appropriate reward in this life or (through reincarnation) a succession of lives. The main divisions are *Theravada* in South-East Asia and *Mahayana* in North Asia. *Lamaism* in Tibet and Zen in Japan are among the many *Mahayana* sects.

6
Mahayana sutras: Buddhistic textbooks.

7
brace: refresh, stimulate.

8
acacias: one of a large group of shrubs and trees belonging to the pea family. Acacias include the thorn trees of the African savannah and the gum Arabic tree of North Africa.

8
the Sandwich Isles: see note on *Hawaii* (p. 98). When Captain Cook named the Pacific islands it was in honour of Lord Sandwich, who also lent his name to the common snack.

9
Lady Betto: court lady, contemporary of Nijo.

11
one of the three lower realms: the lowest of six realms into which the human spirit can be reborn according to Buddhist thought.

11
St Augustine: St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) (not to be confused with St Augustine, Archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 604). Among his many writings are his *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography, and *The City of God*, which sets out, in twenty-two books, to vindicate the Christian Church and Divine Providence.

11
Neo-Platonic Ideas: 'Ideal Forms' derived from the Greek philosopher Plato (426–347 BC), a pupil of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle. He was the author of philosophical dialogues on such topics as metaphysics, ethics and politics. Central to his teaching is the notion of 'Ideal Forms' which he located outside the everyday world and which, for him, constituted 'ideal' versions of reality. The
nature of these ideas subsequently lent themselves conveniently to religious modes of thought. In Neoplatonism, after death all life returns to its original source where it is stripped of individual identity, a process called *henosis*. In Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, *theosis* gives the individual the possibility of uniting with God in divine eternal union.

11
Denys the Areopagite … the pseudo-Denys: pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (also known as the pseudo-Denys) was an anonymous theologian and philosopher of the late fifth century. One of his most important works, *Corpus Areopagiticus*, was mistakenly attributed to someone of the same name who was known as Dionysius the Areopagite, a convert to Christianity mentioned in the Bible by St Paul (Acts 17:34). The real Denys's works are mystical and show a

strong Neoplatonic influence. Although the validity of his thinking has now been accepted by Catholic theologians, many of his claims are known to have been false, such as his having witnessed the solar eclipse at Christ's crucifixion and of having seen Christ's mother, when he obviously wasn't around at the time! An areopagite was a member of the Areopagus, an open-air court situated on a hill in Athens in Greece, the highest court in the land. It was a site of public rhetorical declamation and has become associated, historically, with the idea of free speech. The English poet John Milton's *Areopagitica*, written in 1644, is an impassioned plea for freedom of the press.

12
carbuncles: malignant boils on the skin.

12
erysipelas: inflammation of the skin.

12
anaemia: lack of blood, or of red corpuscles in the blood.

13
bathchair: invalid chair on wheels.

13
gout: disease characterised by painful inflammation of the smaller joints.

13
Jaeger flannel: a woven patterned tweed. The trade name carries associations of aristocratic taste and expense.

14
muleteers: mule-drivers.

15
offer a horse to Buddha: a sacrifice, in the hope of a miracle.

15
chamberlain: steward.

16
Theodora of Alexandria: St Theodora of Alexandria (474–91) committed adultery, then, overcome with remorse, disguised herself as a man and took holy orders. She was accepted into a monastery where she took the name of Theodore. A woman who subsequently visited the monastery accused 'him' of impregnating her but, instead of defending herself, Theodora adopted the child as her own. Her son later became an abbot. Theodore's true sex was not discovered until her death. Her husband attended her funeral before himself taking holy orders and taking up residence in the monastic cell formerly occupied by his late wife.

18
Rogation Day: one of the three days before Ascension Day when litanies of the saints were chanted in procession.

18
St Peter's to go to St John's: San Pietro in Vaticano is St Peter's cathedral in the Vatican City, Rome. Considered the mother church of the Catholic community, it is a Renaissance and Baroque edifice built over an earlier structure erected by the Emperor Constantine in 319, over the supposed grave of the apostle Peter. San Giovanni in Laterano (St John's) is the

papal bishop's church and is the earliest Roman church building, dating from 313. The only other St John's church in Rome is the Santo Giovanni in Fonte, which stands at the southern end of the Lateran basilica and was also built by Emperor Constantine, who was responsible for bringing Rome within the orbit of the Christian Church.

18
St Clement's and the Colosseum: the church of Santo Clemente is known to have existed as early as the third century, although the present building dates from the early twelfth century. The Colosseum (Colosseo) is, as its name suggests, huge – a massive amphitheatre dating from Roman times, much of which remains standing despite fires, earthquakes and looting. It could accommodate over 70,000 spectators to watch gladiatorial contests, animal hunts and even mock naval battles.

19
Antichrist: diabolical being opposed to the true Messiah.

19
bay: reddish brown.

19
Rocky Mountains: a vast mountain range in western Canada and the USA extending from the Yukon to New Mexico.

20
bronco: untamed horse.

21

anorexic: suffering from an eating disorder that reduces appetite.

22
Brueghel: one of a family of Flemish painters, Pieter Brueghel (1515–69) was known as the 'Elder' and is now recognised as one of the greatest artists of his time. Noted for his satirical depiction of everyday life among the peasantry, he was also a wonderful landscape painter, evident in a series of paintings based on the months of the year of which the most famous is perhaps *Hunters in the Snow*. Some of his last works are considered among his finest, for instance, *Dulle Griet*, a satanic landscape peopled by all the devils of medieval folklore, and *The Triumph of Death*, with its depiction of the almost mechanical destruction of human life, which confirms the permanent influence on his work of Hieronymous Bosch.

22
Boccaccio: Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) was an Italian poet whose best-known work is *The Decameron*, a hundred tales told by ten young people seeking refuge in the countryside during time of plague. Their bawdiness and exuberance, as well as narrative skill and characterisation, made this work both popular and influential, inspiring, among others, the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer.

22
Petrarch: Francisco Petrarca (1304–74) was an Italian poet who, in composing love poems to his divine Laura, popularised the fourteen-line sonnet whose strict form was imported into England by the sixteenth-century poets, the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt. The form was imitated with

great success by Sir Philip Sidney and then further modified and anglicised by William Shakespeare in
his great cycle of sonnets dedicated to 'Mr W.H. and the Dark Lady'.

22
Chaucer: Geoffrey Chaucer (*c*. 1340–1400) was an English poet and author of *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims during the course of a journey to visit the shrine of St Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. He writes in Middle English, the transitional form of the language, which developed from Anglo-Saxon and was close to modern English. Literature at that time was usually written in French, understood by the nobility. By writing in the demotic, Chaucer opened his work to a much wider audience. His other work includes the French-influenced *Romance of the Rose* and an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

22
profiteroles: Italian dessert, cream-filled balls of choux pastry covered with chocolate.

22
Zabaglione: Italian dessert, egg yolks, sugar and marsala wine whipped together.

29
Suave, mari magno … (Joan's Latin): taken from Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, II, lines 1–18, 45–7, 52, 55–9. Greg Giesekam translates as follows:

It's pleasing, when over a swollen sea winds are stirring up the waters, to watch from the shore another's peril: not because his troubles are a cause of delight or joy, but because it's pleasing to recognise what troubles you are free from yourself. It's just as pleasing to witness battle being waged across a plain, when you're out of danger yourself. But nothing is more delightful than to occupy the calm of an ivory tower built on the teachings of wise men; from here you can look down on others as they wander about seeking some path through life, as they strive to be clever, to out-do each other in reputation, battling night and day to get to the top of the pile with their power and wealth. What miserable minds men have! How blind their hearts are! To waste their brief span of life in darkness, in peril! Don't they see all nature needs is for life to be lived without physical pain,
while the mind, freed from cares, enjoys a sense of delight?

30
We come into hell through a big mouth: this remark contains a reference to the medieval mystery plays of fourteenth-century Europe, some of which were acted out on extended stages built in front of cathedral buildings, on which the biblical version of Man's origins and eventual 'fall', his death and resurrection were enacted against the background of a number of 'mansions' or permanent settings. The setting for Paradise was always at the furthest point stage-right while 'Hell's Mouth' was always placed furthest stage-left and was usually represented by the gaping maw of some monster which served as both the entry point for those who were permanently damned as well as an exit point for those saved at the Day of Judgment.

31

the Spanish: Spanish armies invaded and occupied the Netherlands during the sixteenth century. Their ports were attacked by Sir Francis Drake. He later commanded the English forces who defeated the Spanish Armada, which attempted an invasion of Britain in 1588.

31
die on a wheel: a reference to the medieval practice of torturing people to death tied to a wheel.

32
Berber sheikhs: the Berbers are a people of North Africa who, since prehistoric times, have inhabited the Mediterranean coastlands between Egypt and the Atlantic. Their language is spoken by about one-third of Algerians and nearly two-thirds of Moroccans. A 'sheikh' would have been a Berber leader.

Act Two

33
The Exterminator: the first of two violent films made in 1980 (the other being *Exterminator 2*), both starring Robert Ginty as an avenging veteran of the Vietnam War on the trail of a murderous gang and, in Part 2, a mysterious master criminal who uses brutal combat skills, learned in the army, to achieve his goals.

33
It's X, innit: at the time, an 'X' certificate given to a film meant that you had to be over eighteen to be allowed in to the cinema to see it. The expression 'innit' (a contraction of 'isn't it?') is an attempt to convey popular vernacular speech.

38
Your skin's burned right off: this was an effect of napalm, used by the American forces fighting the North Vietnamese during the 1960s and 1970s. However, what Kit's reference to finding out where they were going 'to drop it' seems to infer is the effect of a nuclear attack and the consequences of the fireball which occurred when the atomic bomb was first used against the civilian population of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagaski in 1946. The possible recurrence of an event like this haunted people of Caryl Churchill's generation, especially during the years of the so-called 'Cold War', with the invention of powerful hydrogen weapons and ever more sophisticated means of delivering them.

43
Third year? Second year: classes in secondary school covering twelve-to fourteen-year-olds, now termed Year 9 and Year 8.

46
West Sussex: affluent area of the Home Counties, close to London.

45 *Marilyn. Esther's Baby. They're all called after birds*: 'birds', a sexist reference to young women, in this case the Hollywood film-star icon, Marilyn Monroe, whose name was synonymous with sexual allure, and, because of the reference to swimming pools, another Hollywood star who was invariably clad in a swimsuit, Esther Williams, who appeared in films with titles such as *Dangerous When Wet* (1953).

47
Elvis: Elvis Presley, American singer.

47
John Conteh: a Liverpudlian boxer born in 1951 to an Irish mother and Sierra Leonean father. In October 1974, he became the first British boxer for a quarter of a century to win the World Light Heavyweight Championship – a title which he held for four years before quitting the ring in 1980.

47
pirate: person or company tempting Nell away from the 'Top Girls' agency with an offer of either more money or better prospects or both.

48
Prestel: computerised information service: a large business extension of British Telecom.

48
IBM: International Business Machines, a large corporation.

49
Dymchurch: a small town in Kent on the edge of Romney Marsh, famous for its light railway which ran via New Romney and Hythe to the lighthouses at Dungeness.

49
the change: menopause.

49
Ovaltine: bedtime malt-flavoured milky drink.

50
Ascot: a small town in Berkshire, near Windsor Great Park, famous for its racecourse, especially the annual Ascot Week

patronised by race-going members of the British upper class, where the men traditionally wear morning dress of grey top hat and tails while the ladies wear large, expensive hats and extremely smart dresses. The race is traditionally patronised by the royal family who are driven down the course in an open carriage.

51
Pam's ladies: clients of 'Pam', a colleague of the office women who does not appear onstage.

52
Os and As: 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' level subject passes in the General Certificate of Education taken in British schools until 1987, at sixteen and eighteen years of age.

52
Speeds: clerical skills, typing and shorthand speeds.

53
Secretary or typist: Marlene distinguishes. A secretary usually has more responsibility than a typist.

53
Hundred: one hundred pounds per week. A decent wage in 1982 for a twenty-year-old.

55
a multinational: a company whose financial interests and activities extend beyond the country where it is ostensibly based to embrace the globe, with outposts and manufacturing sites in several countries often chosen because labour costs are cheaper and, therefore, profits greater.

55 *Madame Tussaud's*: a waxwork museum located in central London. Madame Tussaud (born Anne-Marie Grosholtz, 1760–1850) was a French wax modeller who, in 1802, established an exhibition of wax models of famous people on the Strand thoroughfare in London. This transferred to Baker Street and thence, in 1884, to the Marylebone Road where it remains to this day. Its 'Chamber of Horrors' with wax effigies of famous murderers is especially notorious.

67
six basic and three commission: six thousand pounds per year as salary, with three thousand added as a reward for successful selling.

67
closing: clinching the deal, completing the sale.

69
Youngness: Shona's lack of education is here suggested by her using the wrong word – it should be 'youthfulness' – as well as her redundant repetition of the phrase 'in our family'.

69
My present job at present: another example of Shona's use of repetitive phrases. This speech shows the influence of Harold Pinter on Churchill's writing at this stage in her career. Compare, for example, some of Mick's speeches in *The Caretaker* or Lenny's speeches in *The Homecoming*, which contain a similar blend of fantasy and comic pretentiousness.

70–1
Who's sitting in my chair?

Who's been eating my porridge?: a reference to the children's story of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', in which these questions are asked by Father, Mother and Baby Bear, who return from the forest to find their home occupied by Goldilocks. She has not only been sitting in each of their chairs in turn but has also sampled their porridge and eaten all of Baby Bear's helping. She is then discovered sleeping in Baby Bear's bed but, happily, manages to make good her escape.

71
I was headhunted: a reference to the tendency of unscrupulous firms to poach successful, usually commercially aggressive personnel from their business rivals by offering them inducements, financial and other, in order to recuit them. The term derives from warfare among primitive tribes of cannibals.

71
CSE: Certificate of Secondary Education (less prestigious than O level in 1982).

72
Coca-Cola in Russia and Pepsi-cola in China: one would expect both brands to be competing in both markets. However, the suggestion here is that, like the oil companies and other large multinationals, capitalist enterprises which are supposed to represent free-market competition in actual fact enter into agreements with each other not to compete but to share, or divide, world markets between themselves, thus maximising the selling price for their particular product.

73

Violins?: refers to the musical accompaniment to sad moments in silent films.

73
Packer in Tesco: Tesco's the supermarket chain. A packer fills the shelves – a menial task.

Act Three

82
Grand Canyon: a vast gorge in Arizona, USA, containing the Colorado River. It is 217 miles long, more than a mile deep in places and between four to eighteen miles wide.

83
L.A.: Los Angeles (literally City of the Angels), a port in California famous for its Long Beach and its suburb, Hollywood, the headquarters of the American film industry.

83
Concorde: the only successful supersonic airliner, it was capable of flying at twice the speed of sound. The result of Anglo-French cooperation, it made its maiden flight in 1969 before entering commercial service seven years later. However, despite halving the time between Europe and America, the aircraft proved to be uncommercial and, following a serious crash in the year 2000 resulting from design flaws, the aircraft was eventually withdrawn from service in 2003.

83
Laker: Sir Freddie Laker (1922–2006) was the founder of Laker Airways in 1966, the first budget airline to offer 'no

frills' flights at low cost – a model which has been successfully imitated by other budget airlines since. His company went spectacularly bust in 1982.

83
jet lag: a condition of exhaustion and confusion experienced by long-distance jet travellers as a result of crossing different time zones.

84
lapwings: birds of the plover family known both as the green plover and as the peewit (because of its call). It inhabits moorland in Europe and Asia and scratches its nest in the ground.

93
Maggie: Margaret Thatcher (see p. xxxvii).

93
Monetarism: economic policy distinguished by control of the money supply (see p. xxxvii).

93
Hitler: Adolf Hitler (real name Shicklgrueber, 1889–1945), the German dictator of Austrian origin who became Fuhrer (leader) of the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party in 1921 and was elected Chancellor of Germany in 1933. His ideology, based on German Nationalism and anti-Semitism, was set out in his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) written between 1925 and 1927.

94

the slimy unions: a contemptuous reference to the Trade Union Movement – organisations of employed workers first formed during the nineteenth century to undertake collective bargaining with employers to try to achieve improved working conditions for their members. The British Labour Party grew out of the Trade Union Movement but the failed General Strike of 1926 showed the extent to which the Labour Party and the trade unions had diverged. Their comparative power and influence after the Second World War increased and strike action brought down the Conservative government of Edward Heath in the early 1970s. The Thatcher administration after 1979 set out to curb their power through government legislation aimed, in particular, at the powerful Miners' Union. The failure of the Miners' Strike in 1984 led to a subsequent decline in trade union influence in Britain's political affairs.

95
blanquette of fucking veau: in the language of French haute cuisine, a *blanquette de veau* is a dish of white veal
in a white sauce, derived from the French word *blanc*, meaning white.

95
a flying picket: trade unionists who support strikes at places of work other than their own. This action was made illegal by the Thatcher administration and contributed to the further weakening of the trade unions. The legislation confined strike action to a particular workplace, banned 'sympathy' strikes and prohibited other workers from rallying at the site of the strike (known as 'secondary picketing'). It also made the particular strike action subject to a secret ballot of members of the local workforce.

95
sent to Siberia: sent into exile. In Russia, from the nineteenth century, convicts and political prisoners were often sentenced to hard labour in this remote eastern area of the continent where living conditions were extreme, especially in winter, when temperatures could drop to as low as minus 40 degrees centigrade.

96 *Reagan ... free world*: Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) was a Hollywood film actor of the 1940s and 1950s who became Governor of California (1967–75), before being elected fortieth President of the United States and serving two terms (1981–89). After surviving an assassination attempt early in his presidency, he espoused a form of unfettered free-market politics, colloquially known as 'Reaganomics', which found an enthusiastic ally in the person of the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

96
reds: communists. Ronald Reagan was a staunch anti-communist and even labelled the Soviet Union an 'evil empire'.

Questions for Further Study

1. To what extent are Churchill's characters 'top girls'?

2. The absence of men from the play is a clear dramatic decision. Explore Churchill's reasons for this.

3. The historical figures in Act One make an initial presentation of the ideas in the play. What are these ideas? Discuss their significance to the wider framework of the play.

4. Marlene's success as the 'new boss' is undermined by her failure as a mother. Discuss this suggestion.

5. '*Top Girls* belongs in its 1980s past.' Discuss.

6. 'Don't you get angry? I get angry' (Marlene, Act One). Discuss the importance of anger as a motif in the play.

7. Explore Churchill's experiments with speech techniques, including dialogue, with reference to specific examples.

8. 'I don't know who'd have her, mind' (Joyce, Act Two, Scene One). Explore the theme of ownership within marriage as it appears within the play.

9. Churchill shows an opposition between work and marriage. Discuss the use of characterisation and staging methods, for example the use of various settings, to express this.

10. 'Nobody notices me, I don't expect it' (Louise, Act Two, Scene Two). The question of visibility is of central thematic

importance in the play. Discuss Churchill's treatment of this idea.

11. Marlene's confrontation with Mrs Kidd exposes clear tensions between genders in the workplace. Explore Churchill's treatment of these tensions and the significance of Howard Kidd's offstage presence.

12. The movement backwards in time from Angie's appearance at the employment agency to Marlene's visit to Joyce's house offers the audience new insights into the relationship between Angie and Marlene. Explore this movement and the related themes and ideas.

13. 'How could I have left?' (Joyce, Act Three). Churchill carefully builds towards the confrontation between the sisters in Act Three. Explore how this is achieved throughout the play.

14. Motherhood and the rights and responsibilities of the mother are sensitively handled in Act Three. How does this act enhance Churchill's treatment of the theme elsewhere in the play?

15. Marlene and Joyce offer opposing visions of the available life choices for women in the 1970s and 80s. Is Churchill suggesting any possible solutions? How are we invited to respond to the dilemmas described?

16. 'I believe in the individual. Look at me' (Marlene, Act Three). Examine the politics of self as it is explored by Churchill in the play.

17. ‘Oh God, why are we all so miserable?’ (Marlene, Act One). Explore the importance of the themes of misery and joy in the play.

18. The desire to escape through travel and exploration of other cultures is a strong thematic element in the play. What is the significance of this idea to Churchill’s examination of the opportunities available for women in the late twentieth century?

19. Discuss the use of humour as a strategy to engage the audience and examine the balance between serious and comic in the play.

20. ‘The play is original in presenting so many kinds of women and letting them speak for themselves.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement? Explore the range of women represented in the play and the extent to which they can still speak to a modern audience.

21. The possibility of change is the most positive aspect of the drama. Explore Churchill’s representation of both change and frustration in the play.

22. ‘The distinctive quality of the language in the play is its clarity and incisiveness and how sensitive the text is to live performance.’ Examine the use of language in the play as a tool to define social status and character.

23. Is *Top Girls* ultimately a gloomy play?

24. ‘The structure of *Top Girls* is unsuccessful and the play falls apart.’ Discuss.