



by Caryl Churchill
directed by Casey Stangl

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at the Guthrie Lab

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STUDY GUIDE

THE GUTHRIE THEATER

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Top Girls

by Caryl Churchill
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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAYWRIGHT

A Selected Chronology of the Life and Works of Caryl Churchill

- 1938 Caryl Churchill is born September 3 in London.
- 1948 Her family moves to Canada; Churchill lives in Montreal until age 17.
- 1957 She begins studying at Oxford where she writes *Downstairs*, *Having a Wonderful Time*, and *You've No Need to be Frightened*.
- 1960 She graduates with a B.A. in English from Oxford University.
- 1961 She marries barrister David Harter.
- 1962 *The Ants*, Churchill's first professional radio play.
- 1963 The first of three sons is born. Churchill takes an interest in politics.
- 1966 *Lovesick* (a radio play).
- 1968 *Identical Twins* (a radio play).
- 1971 *Abortive* and *Not, Not, Not, Not, Not Enough Oxygen* (radio plays).
- 1972 First professional stage production, *Owners*, performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. *The Judge's Wife* is broadcast on BBC television.
- 1973 *Owners* premieres in New York.
- 1974 Churchill becomes the first woman writer in residence at the Royal Court Theatre (1974-75).
- 1975 *Moving Clocks Go Slow*; *Objections to Sex and Violence*; *Perfect Happiness*.
- 1976 She begins writing plays in collaboration with improvisational theater companies, staging *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* with Joint Stock and *Vinegar Tom* with Monstrous Regiment.
- 1977 *Traps*.
- 1978 *After Dinner Joke* (a television play).
- 1979 *Cloud 9* in collaboration with Joint Stock (wins an Obie award in 1982).
- 1980 *Three More Sleepless Nights*.
- 1982 *Top Girls* premieres at the Royal Court Theatre (wins an Obie award in 1983).
- 1983 *Fen*, in collaboration with Joint Stock (wins Susan Smith Blackburn Prize).
- 1984 *Softcops*, a play written after reading Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.
- 1986 *A Mouthful of Birds* in collaboration with David Lan and Joint Stock. This play is also the first of a number of collaborations with choreographer Ian Spink and the Second Stride dance company.
- 1987 *Serious Money* (wins Susan Smith Blackburn prize and an Obie award).
- 1989 *Icecream* and *Hot Fudge*
- 1990 Churchill travels to Romania with English drama students. She writes *Mad Forest: A Play from Romania* about the Romanian revolution in 1989.
- 1991 *Lives of the Great Poisoners* in collaboration with Ian Spink and Second Stride.
- 1994 *The Skriker* in collaboration with Ian Spink and Second Stride. She translates *Thyestes*.

1997 *Hotel and Blue Heart*.

2000 *Far Away*.

A Politics of Style: Comments on the Work of Caryl Churchill

Whether Caryl Churchill writes about frighteningly familiar middle-class life, 17th-century witches, Levellers and Ranters of the 1640s, or 1960s burnouts, her plays challenge our most basic assumptions, those that make it possible for us to function in the most mundane and necessary ways. Forcing us to take a second look at our usually unshaken premises, Churchill's plays won't allow us the regular comfort of supposed truths about human nature, Western values, social organization, or historical progress. But Churchill's plays do not occupy a safely distant metaphorical stratosphere. Their issues confront us in terms of human, earthly existence. Churchill's questionings insinuate themselves into our experiences of her plays. Her plays do not assault their audiences, affording us the chance to erect barriers against their thorny uncertainties. They fascinate and entertain; their challenges are sneaky.

Alisa Solomon, "Witches, Ranters, and the Middle Class: The Plays of Caryl Churchill,"
Theater, Spring, 1981

Churchill admits to being troubled by some reviewers' responses to her work. "I'm accused of being both too optimistic and too pessimistic ... and of being too philosophical and aesthetic and not sufficiently political." But she also feels increasingly confident that her plays are political, and importantly so. What she wants to do, she continues, is what she sees feminism as doing – revising history of the past and in the present. But then she adds, she wants to do something more; what that is exactly, she will only know when she writes her next play. That such a project at once appears to reveal a pessimistic and an optimistic view of the world is not only consistent with Churchill's own acceptance of paradox but with the poignant clarity of her vision.

Helen Keyssar, "The Dramas of Caryl Churchill: The Politics of Possibility,"
Massachusetts Review, Spring 1983

Like Virginia Woolf, Churchill sees her life as a writer inseparable from her life as a woman. 'What politicized me,' she explains, 'was being discontent with my own way of life – of being a barrister's wife and just being at home with small children.' The mother of three sons, she came to feel that 'women's true liberation on the domestic front must involve the education of men to share fully in the raising of children even at the expense of their own careers.' Her barrister husband, himself an activist who left his law practice to work for a legal aid group, took a six months leave from his job to allow his wife more time for her work.

Roger Cornish and Violet Ketels, "Introduction to *Top Girls*," *Landmarks of Modern British Drama: The Plays of the Seventies*, London: Methuen, 1986

In *Owners*, *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls* as well as numerous other Churchill works ... stage conventions about time and character portrayal are manipulated to highlight the social and economic conditions which govern and restrict human possibility. Sometimes a character is written so as to be portrayed by multiple actors (as in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and *Cloud Nine*), or the same actor is expected to play several different roles (as in *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*). Churchill has also written parts to be portrayed by performers of a gender different from that of their character, thus leading to the notion of gender identification as a socially constructed role as well as a theatrical one. ...

In Churchill's work there are no easy, reformist solutions. The conditions she depicts, whether in a broad historical panorama, or in the domestic arena, or in the bourgeois work world, cannot be overcome either through individual will or personal relationships. In fact, the very conditions which frame the characters and their relationships limit them before the curtain is ever raised.

Lisa Merrill, "Monsters and Heroines: Caryl Churchill's Women," *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, 1989

Churchill deals with some of the most difficult questions of contemporary life – and typically concludes with these questions resolutely unanswered. Her manner of approaching even the most intractable issues, however, tends to be playful, startling, and subversively comic rather than authoritative and confrontational. Churchill's plays are, above all, theatrical. Their theatricality energizes the process of open-ended questioning that empowers audiences to ask further questions and seek satisfactory answers in the world outside the theater. Churchill's continual, imaginative challenges to the conventions of the theater she inherited distinguishes her work as much as does her overt, thematically based questioning of societal conventions. A dual fascination with ideas and theatrical forms is evident throughout her plays.

Amelia Howe Kritzer, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill*, 1991

The kind of questions that Churchill asks through her theater reflect her feminist and socialist viewpoints, but allied to her interrogative, political mode of writing is her experimental approach to dramatic and theatrical form. Churchill's theater is not just a question of politics, but a politics of style.

Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, 1997

One way to understand Churchill's politics is through understanding her use of various theatrical styles. Plays like *Light Shining*, *Vinegar Tom*, and more recently *Serious Money* and *Mad Forest* show her mastery of epic dramaturgy to portray communities in the midst of epistemic change. Scenes of extreme realism are offset by theatrical breaks in *Top Girls*, *Cloud 9*, and *Fen* to prevent the fixity of traditional plot and characters. Since *A Mouthful of Birds*, while continuing to work in the styles she has developed, she has used dance and music to expand her theatrical means of breaking through the limits of representation. As she is a living writer, we can expect her work to keep changing along with the times.

Janelle Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, 2000

Playwrighting and Political Positions: Caryl Churchill Comments on Her Work

For years and years I thought of myself as a writer before I thought of myself as a woman, but recently I've found that I would say I was a feminist writer as opposed to other people saying I was. I've found that as I go out more into the world and get into situations which involve women what I feel quite strongly is a feminist position and that inevitably comes into what I write.

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Ann McFerran, *Time Out*, October 28, 1977

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

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Judith Thurman, *Ms.*, May, 1982

It's almost impossible not to take [a moral and political stance], whether you intend to or not. Most plays can be looked at from a political perspective and have said something, even if it isn't what you set out to say. If you wrote a West End comedy relying on conventional sexist jokes, that's taking a moral and political stance, though the person who wrote it might say, "I was just writing an entertaining show." Whatever you do your point of view is going to show somewhere. It usually only gets noticed and called "political" if it's against the status quo. There are times when I feel I want to deal with immediate issues and times when I don't. I do like the stuff of theater, in the same way people who are painting like paint; and of course when you say "moral and political" that doesn't have to imply reaching people logically or overtly, because theater can reach people on all kinds of other levels too. Sometimes one side or the other is going to have more weight. Sometimes it's going to be about images, more like a dream to people, and sometimes it's going to be more like reading an article. And there's room for all that. But either way, the issues you feel strongly about are going to come through, and they're going to be a moral and political stance in some form.

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*, 1987

Though I do remember before I wrote *Top Girls* thinking about women barristers – 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. I don't have to put on a wig, speak in a special voice, but how far do I assume things that have been defined by men?" There isn't a simple answer to that. 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. Playwriting will change not just because more women are doing it but because more women are doing other things as well. And of course men will be influenced by that too.

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*, 1987

I do enjoy the form of things. I enjoy finding the form that seems best to fit what I'm talking about. I don't set out to find a bizarre way of writing. I certainly don't think that you have to force it. But, on the whole, I enjoy plays that are non naturalistic and don't move at real time.

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Jackie Kay, *New Statesman and Society*, April 21, 1989

THE PLAY

Characters and Synopsis

CHARACTERS

Marlene, managing director of the Top Girls Employment Agency

Isabella Bird (1831-1904), lived in Edinburgh, traveled extensively between the ages of 40 and 70

Lady Nijo (b. 1258), Japanese, an emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who traveled on foot through Japan

Dull Gret, the subject of the Bruegel painting *Dulle Griet*, in which a woman in an apron and armor leads a crowd of peasant women charging through hell and fighting the devils

Pope Joan, disguised as a man, is thought to have been pope between 854 and 856

Patient Griselda, the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in "The Clerk's Tale" of *The Canterbury Tales*

A Waitress

Joyce, Marlene's sister, a housecleaner

Angie, Joyce's daughter, 16 years old

Kit, Angie's friend, 12 years old

Nell, employee of Top Girls Employment Agency

Win, employee of Top Girls Employment Agency

Mrs. Kidd, married to an employee of Top Girls Employment Agency

Jeanine, a job applicant

Louise, a job applicant

Shona, a job applicant

SETTING

The action of the play takes place in England in 1982 with a flashback to 1981 and moves from a restaurant to an employment agency to Joyce's home.

SYNOPSIS

In a posh restaurant, Marlene celebrates her promotion to managing director of the Top Girls Employment Agency by throwing a delightful Mad Hatter's dinner party for an array of mythical and literary women. The guests include a Victorian-era Scottish traveler, a Japanese courtesan turned Buddhist nun, Pope Joan, Geoffrey Chaucer's Patient Griselda and Dull Gret, the subject of a painting by Bruegel. Crossing cultures, generations and politics, the women's conversation reveals the choices, sacrifices and joys they have in common with one another as each in her own way has pursued her life goals. Each has given up significant relationships—as mother, wife, lover, nurturer, partner—in order to attain a place in a patriarchal society. After this smashing opening, the rest of the play is set firmly in reality as we follow Marlene in her day-to-day experience as a woman working in Britain during the 1980s. She goes into the office the next Monday morning, gossips with her coworkers, interviews clients and deals with a surprise visit from her niece Angie. Soon the author's point becomes abundantly clear: this contemporary woman has a lot in common with her party guests, as she faces her sister, her niece, her coworkers and her own choices.

The social comedy *Top Girls* cleverly shifts multiple perspectives in order to explore the nature and meaning of success—economic, social and professional—for women in a world dominated by men. If women have to give up or redefine an essential part of themselves, how is the ultimate achievement to be valued? What kind of accomplishment is it to be successful in a competitive (and destructive) way? These are not questions strictly limited to women however, as anyone pondering the prevailing notions of success can vouch. How to define and/or redefine oneself in pursuit of a happy and fully rounded life in our time (career or public recognition notwithstanding) is a central concern that informs and shapes *Top Girls*.

Churchill's ambitious work challenges dominant societal and cultural conventions and assumptions about gender roles and the status of women, capitalism, class and the family. Frequently her specific dramaturgy moves freely within contrasting timeframes, shifts chronological sequence of events, engages historical and literary references and uses nontraditional casting and characterizations. The writer trusts that her audience will string together apparently unrelated elements in a play and find connections for themselves.

Marlene's Party Guests

Editor's Note: *Top Girls* begins with a fantasy dinner party to which Marlene invites an eclectic array of women from history, legend, art and literature. Each is in her own way a top girl.

Isabella Bird

Isabella Lucy Bird was born October 15, 1831 to Edward Bird, a clergyman, and Dora Lawson. She was an intelligent, precocious child, educated by her parents. She suffered from ill health her whole life but always pushed herself physically. Travel was prescribed repeatedly, first in 1854. She relived her travels in her writing, editing journals and letters for publication. *An Englishwoman in America*, her first book, was published anonymously in 1856. Her writing and lectures were not limited to travel however, but were also a tool for social commentary and education.

In 1872, she traveled to Australia, Hawaii and Colorado, returning to nurse her sister Hennie. After Hennie's death, Isabella married John Bishop in 1881. When Bishop too became ill, they traveled only for the benefit of his health until his death in 1886.

From 1888 to 1897, she traveled extensively in the Middle East and Asia. Her manuscripts increasingly established her as a keen social and cultural observer — not just an adventuress. Her later years were more political, and she was honored among the first female members of the Royal Geographical Society. She made her last trip abroad to Morocco in 1900 and died in Edinburgh on October 7, 1904.

Lady Nijo

Born in 1258, Lady Nijo was reared from the age of four in the palace of the ex-Emperor GoFukakusa to become a courtesan. The Emperor and his court at Kyoto held power in Japan only in theory, since the Minamoto clan uprising at the end of the 12th century had established the shogun military government in Kamakura.

Although highly favored at court, Nijo never received the rank of official consort and she never married. She did keep many lovers, dividing her time between the emperor and Akebono and the priest Ariake among others. Her affairs were kept relatively secret, but eventually she fell out of favor with the

emperor. A clash with the empress, along with her many affairs and growing lack of interest in GoFukakusa, finally forced Nijo to leave the palace at age twenty-six. Following her father's wishes she entered Buddhist orders, and traveled Japan extensively by foot. Renouncing the world and following a religious path was not unusual, but Nijo's travels were almost unprecedented for a woman of her rank. Lady Nijo's *Confessions* is her memoir of 36 years and ends with her still on her travels.

Dull Gret

Dull Gret is the prominent female subject of the painting *Dulle Griet* or "Mad Meg," (c.1562 or 1564) by Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525-1569). Little is known about the painting's origin or meaning, but Bruegel was influenced by the artist Hieronymus Bosch. Bruegel's biographer Karel van Mander mentions the painting in 1604 but makes no comment on it specifically, and Bruegel's intended allegorical or religious meaning is uncertain. It is generally accepted that Bruegel castigated human weakness, with avarice and greed as the main targets of his criticism. In *Dulle Griet*, we see these weaknesses realized in Griet's greedy female companions.

In *Top Girls*, Churchill's Dull Gret refers to having suffered under Spanish rule. The Netherlands were under the rule of the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. In 1556, the lands reverted to his son Philip II of Spain. The Calvinist Dutch disliked the Spanish Catholics and feared the Inquisition would be brought to the Netherlands, and personal, economic, and religious freedom would be lost. In 1567 Philip sent the Spanish Duke of Alba and 10,000 troops to bring order to the area. In 1572 the Dutch revolt began, beginning a bloody civil war that continued until 1579.

Pope Joan

The story of Pope Joan begins with ninth-century Englishman John Anglicus. He traveled to Athens to study and eventually came to lecture at the Trivium in Rome. He was appointed cardinal and then pope when Pope Leo IV died. Pope John VIII ruled for two years, until his true gender was discovered when "he" gave birth to a child during a papal procession. Pope Joan was consequently stoned to death.

The first known reference to Pope Joan occurs in the 13th century, 350 years after her death. Around this time her image also began to appear as the High Priestess card in the Tarot deck. Originally it seems the Catholic Church accepted the reality of Pope Joan. Marginal notes in a 15th-century document refer to a statue called "The Woman Pope with Her Child" that was supposedly erected near the Lateran in Rome. However, during the Reformation in the 16th century, the existence of Pope Joan was denied. At the same time, Protestant writers used the idea of a female pope as anti-Catholic propaganda. Modern scholars have been unable to resolve the historicity of Pope Joan.

Patient Griselda

The character of Patient Griselda appears in very similar stories by three major early Renaissance writers including Italian scholars/poets Francesco Petrarca (1304-74) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) and English poet and diplomat Geoffrey Chaucer (1342/43-1400).

Patient Griselda's story of love through loyalty and obedience is the same in each version with only relatively minor details differing. Boccaccio's *The Decameron* is a collection of 100 stories structured around the flight of 10 young people from plague-stricken Florence who entertain themselves for a fortnight through a number of activities including each telling one story a day for 10 days. Each day's storytelling has a theme; Patient Griselda's story is told on the 10th day, when "the discussion turns

upon those who have performed liberal or munificent deeds, whether in the cause of love or otherwise.” Petrarch was perhaps best known for his collection of poems to Laura, an idealized beloved, which were a major influence on Renaissance poetry. He retold Boccaccio’s Griselda story in Latin. Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* familiarized the English with stories from other writers. It is the longest and most detailed of the tales and probably the basis for Churchill’s Griselda.

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

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Lynne Truss, *Plays and Players*, January, 1982

A lot of people have latched on to Marlene leaving her child, which interestingly was something that came very late. Originally the idea was just that Marlene was “writing off” her niece, Angie, because she’d never make it; I didn’t yet have the plot idea that Angie was actually Marlene’s own child. Of course women are pressured to make choices between working and having children in a way that men aren’t, so it *is* relevant, but it isn’t the main point of it. ...

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

Caryl Churchill, interviewed by Emily Mann, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*, 1987

When Angie appears at the *Top Girls* agency, the inequities of a system that rewards the few exceptional women are made apparent. Angie, being intellectually limited and socially maladjusted, will never make it by Marlene’s standards. With this condition as a given, the final scene of *Top Girls*, the confrontation between the two value systems represented by Joyce and Marlene, which occurred one year earlier, takes on an even more plaintive note, since Churchill has already shown her audience the dim prospects for Angie’s future. This disruption of chronology is intentionally unsettling in that it refuses to allow the spectator to fantasize a sentimental ending for Angie and people like her.

Lisa Merrill, “Monsters and Heroines: Caryl Churchill’s Women,” *Modern Dramatists: A Casebook of Major British, Irish and American Playwrights*, 2001

The technique of intricately overlapping dialogue, whilst giving an aura of realism to the conversation, more importantly enables Churchill to embody these differences in her text. The characters interrupt and talk across each other not to demonstrate that “women ... don’t learn sufficiently from their accumulated experience” as Benedict Nightingale put it in *New Statesman*, but rather because they are locked in separate discourses. Their oppressions are rooted in a variety of economic systems: it is the oppression

of women under capitalism that forms the focus of the rest of the play, which Churchill presents alongside a recognition of the need for class analysis.

Linda Fitzsimmons, “‘I won’t turn back for you or anyone’: Caryl Churchill’s Socialist-Feminist Theatre,” *Essays in Theatre*, Fall 1987

Churchill’s minute concern for speech rhythms and her large-scale use of precisely-notated overlap in dialogue seem together to imply a scrupulously naturalistic intention. Yet the effect in the opening scene is somewhat abstract, musical – a kind of fugue for voices. More generally, a species of *Verfremdungseffekt*, a “making-strange,” is achieved through various strategies of discontinuity: historical, in the gathering of famous women for Marlene’s party; theatrical, in the space opened up between actor and role by the specified doubling of roles (inviting cross-referencing of characters) and by having Angie and her 12-year-old friend Kit played by adults; narrational, in the chronological shift of the final scene. Such strategies invite an awareness in the audience of the play’s status as artifact, thereby encouraging scrutiny and debate rather than identification. We are always aware of a group of women playing a script.

Paul Lawley, “Top Girls,” *International Dictionary of Theatre: Plays*, 1992

Aside from its theatrical charge, Churchill’s play with temporality has a subtle and essential political meaning: the fact is that if the play were to continue after the final act, the action would pick up again with the first act and play through the second—in a way, Churchill has caught us in a loop, with a play structured to end by cycling back to the beginning. We are frozen in time, and not even the unexplained intrusion of women from the past can pull us out of this impasse: the historical panoply of characters is subjected to the same debilitating time loop, and thus Churchill becomes (here and elsewhere) a theater poet of temporal stasis, the pioneer dramaturg of a fearful historical deadlock.

Michael Evenden, “No Future Without Marx: Dramaturgies of the ‘End of History’ in Churchill, Brenton, and Barker,” *Theater*, volume 29, no. 3, 1999

Some critics complain that Churchill’s juggling of chronology results in plays that seem to break into two unintegrated parts, the historical fantasy of *Top Girls*’ first act, followed by the contemporary realism of the second act, for example. Such a division certainly frustrates conventional expectations. The plot of *Top Girls* does not really begin until Act One, Scene Two, when Marlene begins to deal with the problems of her everyday world. But the earlier scene prepares audiences to see Marlene as a comrade-in-arms of the top girls who battled the confines of traditional roles before she did. If Marlene abandons her child to rise in a man’s world, she is no more extreme than Pope Joan, who abandoned her sexual identity to rise. If Marlene decides she must travel alone, she is no more perverse than Isabella Bird, who preferred solitude in a rat-infested ship’s cabin to a shared berth on land.

Scene One, then, is not a mere curtain-raiser, but a consciousness-raiser that prepares audiences to judge Marlene in the context of a centuries-old system of gender politics. That rootedness in political and social history enriches the play’s dramatic texture significantly.

Roger Kornish and Violet Ketels, *Landmarks of Modern British Drama: The Seventies*, Methuen, 1986

Like the ghost characters, Marlene has accomplished much in her life, and like them too, she has done so by making concessions to a phallogocentric system oppressive to women. Although she expresses disapproval of the extreme, vicious acts of Griselda’s marquis, for instance, or the more intolerant doctrines of the medieval Church, she often praises the ghost characters for their pragmatic manipulation

of the patriarchy to further their own ends. A compliment which, needless to say, baffles its recipients. ... Marlene's advancement helps no one but herself, however much she would like to believe in a right-wing feminism, and ... she endorses a hierarchical system oppressive to the less fortunate women and men in her society.

Joseph Marohl, "De-realised Women: Performance and Identity in *Top Girls*," *Modern Drama*, September 1987

[*Top Girls*] is a feminist play in that it's self-criticism of the women's movement. ... Some women are succeeding and getting on very well, but it's no good if feminism means that women get on and tread on men's heads, or other women's heads, as hard as men ever tread on theirs. If women do get the top jobs, there's also a job to be done in reassessing that job in feminist or humanitarian terms.

Lou Wakefield (who appeared in the original production of *Top Girls*), interviewed by Leslie Bennets, *The New York Times*, January 6, 1983

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* opens with a fantasy of the past and ends with a little girl's nightmare of the future. Between these two dreams lies a feminist critique of Marlene, a contemporary woman executive. Marlene has accepted the limited reform that makes her own success possible without recognizing the larger oppressions that continue even in her own family. Thus the play is expressive of the next wave of feminism, a feminism that focuses not on the individual woman's struggle for autonomy, but on the need for a radical transformation of society. The dream of the past reminds us not only of the historical weight of women's oppression but also of the futility of individual solutions. The child's dream of the future reminds us of what is at stake in the feminist struggle for societal transformation.

Janet Brown, "Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* Catches the Next Wave," *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, 1989

In [*Top Girls*] the fact that Marlene is a top girl is exceedingly important, and we are never allowed to forget it, not at the dinner party over which she presides, nor at the agency where she is kowtowed to, nor at her sister's home. The difference in philosophy of the two sisters is certainly important, but our sympathies are with Joyce, who picked up the detritus of Marlene's former life, including Marlene's daughter Angie. *Top Girls* is a feminist play, all right, and a sobering one. Marlene succeeds in a man's world, the capitalistic world, but at the tremendous personal sacrifice of her humanity. Joyce, who cleans houses for a living for herself and Angie, displays admirable personal strength and character, but at a great cost in economic security. Angie's howl at the end signals not only her own fate as one who has neither character nor aggressive ability but also the fate of feminists, who see limitations no matter which road is taken.

Phyllis R. Randall, "Beginnings: Churchill's Early Radio and Stage Plays," *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, 1989

Top Girls explores both inter- and intra-sexual oppression. The narrative threads of the dinner party conversation are significantly marked by a discourse of intersexual oppression as the women share their experiences of being daughters, wives, mistresses and mothers. Their dialogue records both patriarchal oppression and the desire to move beyond the conventional gender divide. ... The drunken climax of the dinner scene verbally and physically enacts a violent rejection of intersexual opposition. ... Despite Marlene's plea to Joan to shut up, and Isabella's command that everyone listen to Gret because she has been to hell, the women are largely and self-centeredly caught up in their own individual narratives. The

inability to listen and to share experiences with women is indicative of intresexual oppression, and underscored in [the] first act through Churchill's use of overlapping dialogue.

Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill*, 1997

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this play today is that in its attempt to redress the emerging political conservatism of its day, its own meanings were/are subject to change. Already by the time it was performed in San Francisco in 1985, audiences were arguing about its politics. From a family-value frame of American conservatism, Marlene can be seen to stand for all feminists, bringing the play's point of view in the 1990s uncomfortably close the recent calls for women to stay at home with their children, seeming to support the charges that feminism has failed women by promoting the workplace to the exclusion of marriage and motherhood. Theatrical art makes its meanings within and between the text, the production, and the moment of its reception – all three sides of this triangle contribute to signification.

Janelle Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, 2000

GLOSSARY

The Dinner Party

Hennie

Henrietta Bird, Isabella's younger sister, who was Isabella's lifelong companion and foil until Hennie died in June, 1880, of typhoid. Hennie is described as faithful, unobtrusive, studious, gentle, dreamy and constant.

"I sent for my sister Hennie to come and join me." (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

"my own pet"

A variation on phrases Isabella used for Hennie in her letters – "My Dearest Pet" and "My Ownest." She also referred to Hennie as "it," which seems to be a suggestion that Isabella and Hennie "formed a mutually absorbed and absorbing 'it,' a being that was indivisible, interdependent, complementary." (*A Curious Life for a Lady*)

"She was good. I did miss its face, my own pet." (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

tenth-century epic

Possibly the *Kokin-shu* (*Anthology of Ancient and Modern Poems*), compiled in A.D. 905 during the Heian period. A general theme in the anthology is the bond linking nature and humans.

"It's a literary allusion to a tenth-century epic, ..." (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

Emperor of Morocco

During her last trip abroad at age 70, Isabella went to Morocco and met the sultan.

"I once met the Emperor of Morocco." (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

ex-Emperor

Emperor GoSaga named his first-born son, GoFukakusa (1243-1304, reigned 1246-1260), to succeed him, but changed his mind some years later after his second-born, Kameyama (1249-1305, reigned 1260-1275), became a favorite. As a result, the brothers each spent most of his reign trying to overthrow the other. Eventually it was decided that a descendant from one brother would reign for 10 years and then be succeeded by a member of the other brother, who would reign for 10 years.

"In fact he was the ex-Emperor." (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

eight-layered gown

During the previous Heian dynasty, gowns consisting of many layers (20-40) were popular. A less exaggerated style followed in the Kamakura dynasty. An 8-layered gown would suggest a higher status and more wealth than would a lesser-layered gown.

"He sent me an eight-layered gown and I sent it back." (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

anthology

It was the tradition of Japanese emperors to commission anthologies of poetry. Nijo may be referring to the *Shin kokin wakashu* anthology (*New Collection of Poems from Ancient and Modern Times*), commissioned by the retired Emperor Go-Toba, completed in the early 13th century.

"Father had a poem / in the anthology." (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

John the Scot

Johannes Scotus Erigena, an Irish philosopher who lived c.810 - 877. Erigena's theories were based on Neo-Platonic ideas. Erigena philosophized that all thinking and being begin and end with God, who is above all being and thought. He made a fourfold division in *On the Division of Nature*:

- 1) That which creates and is not created: God
- 2) That which creates and is created: Logo (aka Wisdom, Holy Spirit)
- 3) That which does not create and is created: Man
- 4) That which is not created and does not create: God in the world

"I was always attracted by the teachings of John the Scot...though he was inclined to confuse God and the world." (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Church of England

Isabella is Anglican, not Catholic, and not a member of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), as might be assumed because she lived in Edinburgh.

"I am of course a member of the / Church of England." (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

Buddhism

One of the major religions of the world, founded in India around 500 B.C. by Siddhartha Gautama. When he became overwhelmed with the idea that life is full of suffering and unhappiness, he became a monk and sought enlightenment. After his discovery of why life is filled with suffering and how people could escape unhappiness, he became known as Buddha (Enlightened One). Buddha taught that life was a cycle of death and rebirth, with one's position and well-being determined by behavior in previous lives. Within this cycle, humans cannot escape suffering and pain. But the cycle can be broken through eliminating attachment and craving, and perfect peace – or nirvana – can be achieved. Nirvana can be attained by, among other things, following the Eightfold Path: (1) knowledge of the truth; (2) intent to resist evil; (3) saying nothing to hurt others; (4) respecting life, morality and property; (5) holding a job that does not injure others; (6) striving to free one's mind of evil; (7) controlling one's feelings and thoughts; and (8) practicing proper forms of concentration.

"I tried to understand Buddhism when I was in Japan ..." (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

Mahayana sutras

Key texts on the teaching of Buddhism. The Mahayana (or Greater Vehicle) is a sect of Buddhism practiced in Mongolia, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Nepal.

"I vowed to copy five Mahayana sutras." (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

Athens

After Athens was captured in 395 by the Visigoths, it became a center of religious education for the Byzantine empire.

"Also women weren't allowed in the library. We wanted to study in Athens." (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Mr Nugent

Jim Nugent, known as Rocky Mountain Jim, who Isabella met in Colorado, was a trapper who had a squatter's claim in Estes Park, making his living by raising cattle, trapping, serving as a guide. He had gained a reputation for his drinking and fighting. He and Isabella became friends and eventually, it is suspected, he proposed marriage. She had a soft spot in her heart for him but could not marry him as long as he drank.

"Rocky Mountain Jim, Mr Nugent, showed me no disrespect." (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

Denys the Areopagite

aka Dionysius the Areopagite (known to modern scholarship as Pseudo-Dionysius). Dionysius proclaimed the theology of divine incomprehensibility – negative theology: we can describe only what God is not, not what God is. Dionysius’ most important book maintained the decidedly biblical thesis that no appropriate name can be given to God at all unless God reveals it (“I am who I am.”) However, Dionysius asserted that even the revealed names, since they must be comprehensible to man’s finite understanding, cannot possibly reach or express the nature of God. His writings had great influence on the development of scholasticism, particularly through St. Thomas Aquinas. His treatises continued the concepts of Neo-Platonism and of the theology of angels into Western culture. Most scholars today guess that primary texts of negative theology were written in Syria, perhaps as late as the sixth century, but throughout most of Christian history they were considered the work of a first-century convert of the apostle Paul himself. Joan may call him “Denys” instead of Dionysius because Saint-Denis, the patron of France said to be the first bishop of Paris, was long identified with/confused with Dionysius the Areopagite. (Dionysius is the Latin of Denis. The Areopagus was the name of the prime council of Athens and also the name of the place they met)

“As Denys the Areopagite said – the pseudo-Denys – first we give God a name...” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Greek School in Rome

Joan may be referring to a “Greek school of thought.” This school had its origin in pre-Socratic philosophy; it insisted that no certainty about truth can ever be attained, that there are only degrees of probability and that all judgments are thereby relative.

“I taught at the Greek School in Rome, which St Augustine had made famous.” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Jaeger flannel

Named after Dr Gustav Jaeger, a German professor at the University of Stuttgart, who developed a pseudo-scientific theory – Dr Jaeger’s Sanitary Woollen System – about hygiene. He thought that wearing pure animal fibers against the body would help disperse noxious exhalations from the body. His ideas were not really scientific, but were promoted as such because they were “modern” and “rational.”

“...and sewed a complete outfit in Jaeger flannel.” (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

Pope Leo

Pope Leo IV (847-855). Among his accomplishments was the fortification of Rome and its suburbs and building a wall around the Vatican, the pope’s residence. Part of Rome is still called the Leonine City.

“Pope Leo died and I was chosen.” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

goddess

A possible reference to Amaterasu, the Japanese sun goddess, from whom the imperial family traces its descent. She is the supreme deity in Japanese mythology and her light, warmth and intelligence sustained the world.

“The goddess had vowed to save all living things.” (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

King of England

Aethelwulf, king of England from the house of Wessex (reigned 839-855), made a pilgrimage to Rome in 855. He was a highly religious man who gave generously to the church in Rome.

“I received the King of England when he came to submit to the church.” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Theodora of Alexandria

A wealthy 5th or 6th century noblewoman who, in her remorse for having committed adultery, entered a monastery disguised as a man. She remained there until she was accused of fathering a child. Theodora was expelled from the monastery and raised the boy as her own. When he was seven or nine years old she returned to the monastery, apparently knowing her own death was coming. Her disguise was discovered just before she was buried.

“...I expect I’d have lived to an old age like Theodora of Alexandria...” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Rogation Day

(from Latin for “to ask”) April 25 or any of the three days before Ascension Day (40 days after Easter) set aside for prayer, fasting and observance of the harvest. The procession was an adaptation of Roman pagan processions.

“It was Rogation Day, there was always a procession.” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

St Peter’s/St John’s

St Peter’s in Vatican City is the principal church of the Catholic Church. The original St. Peter’s built in the 4th century (and likely the one in existence during Joan’s life) was said to be over the grave of St. Peter. The current St. Peter’s was built during the 16th century. St. John’s is a basilica in Rome outside the Vatican called San Giovanni in Laterno or St. John Lateran. It’s the cathedral of Rome and the pope’s church.

“We set off from St Peter’s to go to St John’s.” (Pope, act 1, scene 1)

St Clement’s/Colosseum

The Church of San Clemente in Rome, which has frescoes depicting the life of first-century martyr St Clement. The Colosseum is the common name of the Flavian amphitheater in Rome, dating to the first century.

“We were in a little street that goes between St Clement’s and the Colosseum...” (Joan, act 1, scene 1)

Akebono

One of Nijo’s lovers, Saionji Sanekane, a liaison officer between the military government and the imperial court. To avoid confusion yet still keep identities secret in her *Confessions*, she gives her lovers poetic nicknames (Akebono and Ariake). Yuki no Akebono means “Snow Dawn.”

“She was three years old. ... Akebono’s wife had taken the child...” (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

Ariake

Another of Nijo’s lovers – scholars think that this is Shojo, GoFukakusa’s half brother, a prince-priest. Nijo’s nickname for him means “Dawn Moon.”

“When your lover dies – One of my lovers died. / The priest Ariake.” (Nijo, act 1, scene 1)

Spanish

The Netherlands were part of the empire of Charles V (the holy roman emperor) and were passed to his son, Philip II of Spain. Around 1566, the Netherlands revolted against Spanish domination, mostly on religious grounds. By 1577, Dutch Protestants, led by William of Orange, demanded freedom of worship. Philip sent his nephew with an army to regain control and soon had the southern provinces (now Belgium) back in Spain’s control.

“Well we’d had worse, you see, we’d had the Spanish.” (Gret, act 1, scene 1)

Berber sheiks

The Berbers are a North African people who were conquered by Muslim invaders in the 7th century. Their name derives from ‘barbarian’ and was given to them by the Romans in the 3rd century. Most Berbers are bilingual, speaking their own Berber dialect and Arabic, and refer to themselves as Imazighen (men of noble origin.)

“So off I went to visit the Berber sheiks in full blue trousers and great brass spurs.” (Isabella, act 1, scene 1)

Medical Ailments

Editor’s Note: Isabella Bird suffered from ill health her entire life, and in *Top Girls* she recounts some of her ailments (and those of her husband John Bishop).

carbuncles

tender red lumps, most commonly found on the back of the neck, caused by an infection of the skin and tissues just under the skin.

“I was ill again with carbuncles on the spine...”

nervous prostration

a generic term for a nervous condition that was more specifically “diagnosed” as neurasthenia by physicians in the U.S. in the late 1860s. It was a more prestigious form of female nervousness than hysteria, although the symptoms were very similar: pain or numbness in parts of the body, fatigue, fainting, anxiety, blushing, vertigo, headaches, insomnia, depression and uterine irritability. Unlike hysterics, neurasthenics were generally thought to be ladylike, well-bred and cooperative.

“I was ill again with carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration.”

erysipelas

an infection of the skin (frequently on the face, but not always) with sharp, shiny red swelling, accompanied by fever and general illness. Blood poisoning and pneumonia are the most common complications. Erysipelas is now controlled by antibiotics but likely during Isabella’s life it was highly contagious and life-threatening.

“And John himself fell ill, with erysipelas and anaemia.”

anaemia

low level of hemoglobin in one’s blood, caused by low number of red blood cells or low levels of hemoglobin within the blood cells (or both) and affecting the blood’s ability to carry oxygen.

“And John himself fell ill, with erysipelas and anaemia.”

gout

inflammation, tenderness and redness of joints, usually the big toe, sometimes the knee or ankle. It’s caused by and distinguished from other arthritis by a build up of uric acid crystals in the joint.

“The doctors said I had gout / and my heart was much affected.”

steel net

By 1870, Isabella’s health had deteriorated to a point that her doctor suggested she use a steel net to support her head at the back when she required to sit up, because the weight of her head was

too much for her weak spine.

“The doctor suggested a steel net to support my head...”

Food

avocado vinaigrette

a pureed dressing for salad or meats: avocado plus various ingredients which may include vinegar, parsley, garlic, red onion, wasabi paste, lime juice, olive oil, sugar.

“Were your travels just for penance? Avocado vinaigrette.” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

blanquette veau

French dish of veal and vegetables (carrots or mushrooms) in a heavy cream sauce

“...and their dirty dishes with blanquette of fucking veau.” (Joyce, act two, scene two)

canelloni

pasta tube filled with meat, cheese, vegetables, etc, and baked in a sauce; dates from 1906

“Canelloni, please, / and a salad.” (Joan, act one, scene one)

Frascati

Italian Frascati wine is straw yellow and dry, crisp and fresh, a good every day wine.

“I’d like a bottle of Frascati straight away if you’ve got one really cold.” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

passing the sake

Sake is the national beverage of Japan, is served by a special ceremony and can be warm or cold, although cold sake is preferred only when using the highest quality of sake. When served warm, the sake is warmed over a flame in a small decanter and sipped from small cups.

“I’d be one of the maidens, passing the sake.” (Nijo, act one, scene one)

profiteroles

French dessert: a miniature cream puff with a sweet filling

“I’d like profiteroles because they’re disgusting.” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

Waldorf salad

a salad of apples, celery and mayonnaise served on top of a bed of lettuce created at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1896 by the maitre d’. Chopped walnuts were later added.

“... he would have gone straight to heaven. / Waldorf salad.” (Nijo, act one, scene one)

zabaglione

Italian dessert: a whipped dessert consisting of egg yolks, sugar and usually Marsala wine that is often served on fruit (dating from the 1880s)

“Zabaglione, it’s Italian, it’s what Joan’s having.” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

Money

three pounds

£3 in 1982 is equal to approximately \$14 in 2000

“I still got three pounds birthday money.” (Kit, act one, scene three)

Hundred

£100 in 1982 is equal to approximately \$345 in 2000

“You’re getting – ?” “Hundred.” “It’s not bad you know.” (Marlene, act one, scene two)

Hundred and ten

£110 in 1982 is equal to approximately \$380 in 2000

“Hundred and ten, so that’s better than you’re doing now.” (Marlene, act one, scene two)

Nine thousand

£9,000 in 1982 is equal to approximately \$31,000 in 2000

“Nine thousand is very respectable. Have you dependants?” (Win, act two, scene one)

six basic and three commission

likely £600/month as a base salary and £300 through commission

“...you’re earning six basic and three commission. So what’s the problem?” (Nell, act two, scene one)

Monetarism

An economic theory that the money supply is the dominant influence on the economy; if the rate of increase (or decrease) of the money supply is controlled appropriately then stable growth ensues. Monetarism and supply-side economics were two theories that influenced the economic policies of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations.

“Monetarism is not stupid.” (Marlene, act two, scene two)

People and Places

John Conteh

(CON-tee) Former world light heavyweight boxing champion and one of Britain’s most popular sportsmen. Conteh started boxing at age 10, and at 19 he won the ABA (England’s most prestigious amateur boxing prize) and the 1970 Commonwealth Games gold medal. He held the world boxing crown from 1973 to 1977 and made a final attempt to regain the title in 1980. He became well-known on the lecture circuit and still works as a commentator.

“I’d call a rose Elvis. Or John Conteh.” (Win, act two, scene one)

Maggie

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “The Iron Lady.” Born in 1925, she attended Oxford University, then worked as a research chemist before becoming a tax law barrister. She was elected to the House of Commons in 1953 and became leader of the Conservative Party in 1975. She was elected Britain’s first (and only) female prime minister in 1979. After she resigned as prime minister in 1990, she was elected to the House of Lords as Baroness Thatcher in 1992.

“She’s a tough lady, Maggie.” (Marlene, act two, scene two)

Reagan

Ronald Reagan was president of the United States from 1980 to 1988. He and Prime Minister Thatcher were close allies in the ’80s. Before entering politics, Reagan was an actor in Hollywood and was often referred to as a B-movie actor.

“And I support Reagan even if he is a lousy movie star...” (Marlene, act two, scene two)

Ascot

a touristy and wealthy village in Berkshire. It is notable for Ascot Heath, a nearby race track where the Royal Ascot is held each June. The traditional event of the British social and sporting calendar is more about fashion than racing, with gentlemen in top hats and tails and women in the season's brightest and most outrageous fashions.

"I told him I'm not going to play house, not even in Ascot." (Nell, act two, scene one)

Dymchurch

a small seaside village on southeast coast of Kent, on the perimeter of the Romney Marshes. A farming and fishing community with a superb sandy beach and an amusement park, tourism is a large part of the quaint seaside village's economy today.

"He's got a bungalow in Dymchurch." (Nell, act two, scene one)

Edinburgh

the capital of Scotland; the Bird family moved there in 1860 after the death of Isabella's father. Isabella and Hennie continued to spend most of their time there until their deaths.

"...for what a pound of chops costs in Edinburgh." (Isabella, act one, scene one)

Ipswich

City in the eastern England county of Suffolk. It is a major regional commercial center for administration, financial services, high tech industries and a hub for rail and shipping transport and distribution. Among its natural attractions are more than 800 acres of parkland, the heritage coast, heathland, estuaries and rivers. Joyce and Marlene's mother is apparently living in a nursing home in Ipswich

"We'll go to Ipswich." (Kit, act one, scene three)

Sandwich Isles

Hawaiian Islands. Captain James Cook visited the islands in 1778 and named them after the Earl of Sandwich. At the time of Isabella's visit, the Sandwich Islands were under the rule of a constitutional monarchy.

"Australia to the Sandwich Islands, I fell in love with the sea." (Isabella, act one, scene one)

Siberia

geographic region of Russia between the Ural Mountains in the west and the Pacific Ocean on the east. During Stalin's Soviet regime, dissidents, intelligentsia and "alien" elements within the USSR were forced into labor camps, often in the harsh terrain of Siberia. This installation of fear through state terror was a means of social control.

"...and I won't be sent to Siberia / or a loony bin" (Marlene, act two, scene two)

Staffordshire

west central county in England. Like Yorkshire, the economy is mostly farming and light industry, especially ceramics (Wedgwood). It's also known for its picturesque countryside of great abbeys, castles and houses.

"...to where the clients are, Staffordshire, Yorkshire..." (Shona, act two, scene one)

Tobermory

a fishing village now a summer resort, and the largest settlement, on the island of Mull, the second largest island of the Inner Hebrides on the west coast of Scotland. Isabella and Hennie spent their summers in Tobermory.

"Hennie was suited to life in Tobermory." (Isabella, act one, scene one)

West Sussex

County of England on south central coast; tourism is the main source of income, with some light industry.

“He has one of the finest rose gardens in West Sussex.” (Win, act two, scene one)

Yorkshire

wealthy northern county in England. Ruined abbeys and castles, great houses and gardens are framed by high moors, wooded hills and lush farming country.

“...to where the clients are, Staffordshire, Yorkshire...” (Shona, act two, scene one)

Slang and Terminology**birds**

women

“Marilyn. Esther’s Baby. They’re all called after birds.” (Win, act two, scene one)

cut up

greatly distressed; deeply hurt or offended

“Howard’s really cut up.” (Win, act two, scene one)

day return

same-day return train ticket

“What time do you have to be back? Have you got a day return?” (Marlene, act two, scene one)

flying picket

Referring to picketers, generally unionized workers who join each others’ strikes, offering support whenever needed to become a strong network of activists

“...will not be pulled down to their level by a flying picket...” (Marlene, act two, scene two)

git

a foolish or worthless person

“Stuck up git. Connolly.” (Joyce, act two, scene two)

grizzle

to cry or whimper

“Don’t grizzle, Marlene, for God’s sake.” (Joyce, act two, scene two)

hoppit

hop-to-it

“...and I said go on, off you go, hoppit.” (Joyce, act two, scene two)

hang onto himself

relax

“Howard can just hang onto himself.” (Nell, act two, scene one)

holiday

vacation

“I haven’t time for a holiday.” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

house ace

ace means excellent

“If I chose to play house I would play house ace.” (Nell, act two, scene one)

inside

in prison

“... and he’s inside now, he’s been inside for four years...” (Nell, act two, scene one)

knackered

worn-out, exhausted

“And I’m not going out for lunch because I’m knackered.” (Win, act two, scene one)

laird

lord or, *chiefly Scottish*, landed proprietor

“Or the laird of Tobermory in his kilt.” (Isabella, act one, scene one)

liege

obliged to give allegiance and service

“Well everyone for miles around is his liege...” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

making a bomb

a large sum of money

“He’s making a bomb on the road but he thinks it’s time for an office.” (Win, act two, scene one)

marquis

a nobleman of hereditary rank; in the British peerage it ranks below a duke and above an earl.

“He’s only a marquis, Marlene.” (Griselda, act one, scene one)

nursery nurse

day care assistant

“Do you want to work with children, Angie? / Be a teacher or a nursery nurse?” (Marlene, act two, scene two)

on the hop

by surprise

“You’ve caught me on the hop with the play in a mess.” (Joyce, act two, scene two)

pirate

a headhunter who lures away an employee by better offers

“So who’s the pirate?” “There’s nothing definite.” (Win, Nell, act two, scene one)

slag

prostitute or promiscuous woman

“She’s a slag. ... She does it with everyone.” (Angie, act one, scene three)

sod

bugger; short for sodomite

“What a sod.” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

speeds

typing speeds (words per minute)

“Speeds, not brilliant, not too bad.” (Marlene, act one, scene two)

starters

appetizers

“Oh what about starters?” (Marlene, act one, scene one)

Ta

thank you

“Ta ever so.” (Marlene, act two, scene two)

British Cultural

Concorde, Laker

British Airways and Air France operate the sleek, super-sonic Concorde jets. The original Laker Airways was founded by Sir Freddie Laker on February 8, 1966. It was the first airline to have very cheap fares, half that of other airlines at the time. The original Laker Airways collapsed on February 6, 1982, under the stresses of competition with bigger airlines, particularly British Airways.

“They go on Concorde and Laker and get jet lag.” (Angie, act two, scene two)

M1

an expressway from western London near Hamstead Heath to Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham; it joins with the A1 around Leeds continuing up to Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

“I go up the M1 a lot. Burn up the M1 a lot.” (Shona, act two, scene one)

Madame Tussaud’s

A famous tourist attraction in London (now also in New York, Amsterdam, Hong Kong and Las Vegas), Madame Tussaud’s is a gallery of lifelike wax figures, featuring the world’s most important legends, celebrities, movie and rock stars.

“...I’ll take you out to lunch and we’d go to Madame Tussaud’s.” (Marlene, act two, scene one)

Os and As and CSEs

At the time of the play’s writing, 14-year-old students were routed into either Ordinary (O) level or Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) level. For two years they studied on those tracks (usually 6 to 8 courses on the O-level track) and then took examinations. After those exams, students were finished with compulsory education. Even if a student didn’t pass and receive any Os or CSEs, compulsory education was done. Those students who wished to go to college would study for two more years (in 2 to 4 subjects) and then take the Advanced (A) level exams, which are very difficult. In Angie’s case, she would most likely be on a CSE track, except that Joyce says she’s been remedial for the past two years. Then she probably wasn’t entered for any CSEs and didn’t take exams, but just concentrated on basic reading, writing and math. She too could quit school at 16 without passing or even taking CSE exams. CSE students aren’t expected to do as well academically, but they could still study academic courses as CSEs. More vocational classes are available at the CSE level but the CSEs are not exclusively vocational.

“Os and As. / No As, all those Os you probably could have got an A.” (Marlene, act one, scene two); “I was going to do a CSE in commerce but I didn’t.” (Angie, act two, scene one)

Odeon

major European cinema chain

“What’s on the Odeon?” (Kit, act one, scene three)

Ovaltine

A drink first introduced to England in 1910. The Ovaltiney Club was founded in 1935 and through broadcasts from Radio Luxembourg every Sunday evening it became a secret society for children, 5 million members strong by 1939. It had five million members. The program’s theme song (“We are the Ovaltineys”) became one of the best-known jingles in the world and was revived as part of Ovaltine’s television commercial in 1975.

“Sunday was best, I liked the Ovaltine.” (Nell, act two, scene one)

Packer in Tesco

packer is equivalent to a grocery bagger. Tesco is a major UK grocery/retail store

“She wants to work here.” “Packer in Tesco more like.” (Win, Marlene act two, scene one)

Prestel

a now-defunct communications system launched by British Telecom in 1979. It was a forerunner of e-mail and other online services of today. It flourished during the early 1980s but declined by the end of the decade.

“Prestel wants six high flyers...” (Nell, act two, scene one)

Third year, second year

second year of secondary school; the usual age for transfer to secondary schools is eleven in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

“What are you now? Third year?” “Second year.” (Joyce, Kit, act one, scene three)

Joan’s Latin

Pope Joan’s recitation of the poem *De Rerum Natura* (*Of the Nature of Things*), by poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, is a personal act of comfort and withdrawal, allowing her to cope with the chaotic end of the dinner party. One of Lucretius’ favorite themes was philosophy as a private citadel or quiet refuge. Book Two, which Joan recites, begins with a lyric passage celebrating the “serene sanctuaries” of philosophy and lamenting the condition of those individuals who struggle without its protective walls. The poet is the serene spectator looking down on a scene of strife.

The poems and metrical translation by William Ellery Leonard:

<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/l/194o/index.html>

Listen to the Latin pronunciation and a discussion of the poem’s meaning at:

<http://www.ukans.edu/~idea/> under Special Collections

THE GUTHRIE PRODUCTION

1982 looks a lot like 2003: Notes from director Casey Stangl

Top Girls is a unique experience for me, because I found that every single time I sat down to have a conversation with one of the production team members, every single one of them said some variation on, “This play is hard.” And we all sorta went, “Yeah, it's hard.” And it is. I love the play's incredible theatricality — one example of this is the way the play's structure uses some of our assumptions about feminism and about gender to start us out with one idea and end up with something quite different.

The play begins with a celebration, a party, that is a feminist fantasy of the past, and it ends with a young girl's nightmare, which is a look at the future. In this vision of the past, we see women's struggles throughout history to achieve, to live their lives to the fullest, to have the same choices available to them that men have. With the party guests being real and fictional women from the past, we see that this struggle not only spans history, but that also cultures and differing cultural values. As the celebration progresses, the party starts to unravel a little bit. By the end of it, someone is vomiting in the corner, someone is crying and everyone's drunk, and we realize that even though these women have achieved great things individually, their achievements have not really transformed the societies that they live in. And, in fact, in order to get ahead and to do the things that they've done, the women have had to embrace the values of the culture they live in. In doing so, they have ended up making enormous sacrifices.

Angie's nightmare at the end of the play is encapsulated with one word: “frightening.” I think that that is a prediction that applies to the Angies of the world. Angie, who is described by some people in the play as lazy, stupid and frightened, isn't going to be among the top girls of the world. She's going to be one of the individuals that get left behind. The play then becomes a plea for change, a hope for a societal transformation that's not going to leave these Angies behind.

In between these two bookends is a fairly realistic drama, although with the doubling and tripling of characters, we're encouraged to see the connections between the characters. The costume designs reflect a very specific choice to help visually draw those connections. So, in between, we have this realistic drama, about Marlene. She's actually going to be Marlene pronounced with a long e sound in the scenes with people who knew her before she left home, and after she moved to London, her name is pronounced “Marlayne.” She is a top girl, a woman executive on her way up in Britain in the early '80s. Like the historical characters that we see in the first scene, Marlene has, we realize, gotten ahead by embracing the values of her culture. She has become isolated. She's actually not entirely happy. This is where we start to see the play turning in on itself, which is structurally demonstrated by the last scene taking place a year earlier than the first scene. And suddenly, Marlene, who at the beginning of the play was sort of our hero, the person we're rooting for, the person we're projecting ourselves onto, has become someone that we're not sure we'd really like to emulate. However, we realize that she is not to blame. We see why she's made the choices that she's made. (Certainly in her circumstances, I would have probably made similar choices.) So again, the culprit here is not the individual, it's the society and its values that have forced her to make the choices she's made. I think that the key conclusion is that individual achievement is meaningless as long as there are huge inequities in society. As long as we have Angies in our midst, we can't fully be proud of the Marlenes.

Churchill wrote that she meant for the thing that is absent in her play to have a presence. I think that that absence is an ethic of caring. An idea that caring and nurturing can exist together with competition.

They don't have to be opposite things; they can be connected. Suddenly this connection transcends feminism and gender, and this play that we thought was a sort of fun feminist thing, has turned around and become a plea. It is a passionate desire for all of us to re-envision the world where the top girls can be celebrated, but we're not going to forget about those on the bottom.

After I figured all that out, I thought, that's very cool, but it is very much in the head. I struggled a little bit with this. Usually it's pretty easy for me to latch on to an image or something to kind of hang my hat on. Then I had a meeting with Carla Steen, our dramaturg, and she'd been in Scotland the previous winter and had picked up the *Sunday Times* magazine 1980s anniversary issue. At the time she gave it to me, I sort of went, "Oh, that's great, thanks," and I put it down. Later, I started looking at it, and I loved the cover collage, but then I realized that without very much extrapolation, it's kind of frighteningly still true. On the cover we've got Margaret Thatcher, and now we start talking about tax cuts and cutting programs, and suddenly we're not too worried about a federal deficit anymore. We're still obsessed with the royals, and if anything, our obsession with celebrities is even greater. We're definitely still obsessed with the Middle East. I realized that the more things change, the more they stay the same. That collage actually became the central image for our design process. I realized that if what we were trying to get at was the universal, our best route was to root ourselves in the specific. So our design is firmly visually rooted in 1982, and we are also trying to do everything we can to suggest the idea that although it might be 1982 in the play, there's a lot about it that's looking like 2003.

Set as Sculpture: Notes from set designer Troy Hourie

Director Casey Stangl presented me with a London *Sunday Times* cover with a collage of images of figures from the '80s, and this was our first inspiration. Having taken that, I started thinking about artists of the period. One way that I develop my design is to find an artist that inspires me. I came up with a pair of British artists named Gilbert and George. Their work is very much the techno-'80s look, with black and white figures on bright color fields. I've combined this with the visuals of Joseph Cornell. He created sculpture arrangements called portrait boxes. There was a particular piece that had a picture of a girl in it, along with some toys, and Casey liked the theme. The whole set became a sculpture. It moves like a sculpture; all the pieces evolve to become something else.

The next thing that we discussed was the idea of what or who these pictures in the portrait boxes should be. We knew we wanted pictures that represented the '80s to everyone, so initially we started looking at the *Sunday Times*. We wanted to show the correlation between then and now, politically and otherwise: that there was a Bush then, a Bush now, etc. This evolved into the question of who were the women who were important figures in the '80s and are still very present today. So we've got Madonna, and we've got Oprah Winfrey, etc. All of these figures were specifically chosen. We're going to use the images in the periphery of the set. All the images are printed on plexi-glass, and they'll be illuminated in various ways and brought into focus when they need to be, but for the most part, they are black and white so they disappear.

When we started working with the model, Casey and I thought it would be great if the women could be elevated in the first scene, to represent the struggle that brought them to their success. So we've got them up on a platform. The table's tall, and it's all frontal, presentational and theatrical. This particular scenic element evolves into the other elements in the different locales. The walls all turn and the table actually breaks down into individual units to become the desks. As for color, we start out with the beginning as the brightest, most vivid, theatrical part of the play and then we digress until we get to Joyce's house at the end of the play and it's all just beige. It lacks all the color of the other scenes.

Connections through Costumes: Notes from costume designer Devon Painter

Editor's Note: This piece has been edited from costume designer Devon Painter's comments to Guthrie actors and staff at the first rehearsal for the current production of *Top Girls*.

The play starts out in this fabulous fantasy. All of the top girls are in their best look, symbolizing the height of their power. For Marlene we are using research on designer cocktail dresses from the 1980s. It's a fabulous reptilian-print sexy shirtdress that sort of typifies the '80s — shoulder pads and everything. We start her in that as the premier top girl. Then each of the other women at the dinner party — Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda, Pope Joan, Dull Gret and Isabella Bird — are in metallic, fabulous, ultimate costumes.

Each actor has a costume element that we see with their character in the first scene, and they maintain that element in some form through the rest of the play. For example, Marlene has an animal-print theme: snakeskin, zebra, etc. She also stays in power colors until the very last scene. (As the set loses all color, costumes do, too.) Patient Griselda is all about pink, and all of the actor's characters are going to be in pink. Pope Joan is in green because the papal procession she mentions is the celebration of the harvest. Later, the actor will be in a darker faded dull green. Dull Gret starts out in her armor — chest plate and helmet. We've also striped her outfit; later, the actor as Angie has a striped, chest plated look through the show. Isabella Bird is all about plaid. She has a plaid throughline in the show. And the Waitress is our spectator, the commentator on the whole play. She is very formal and the actor wears glasses throughout the entire play. It's these small details that we hope will help lead the audience to make the connections between the characters.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Suggested Topics

How does the work of Caryl Churchill fit into canon of modern drama and theater? What writers and movements can be seen as influences on her work?

How does this play fit into the body of Caryl Churchill's other plays? What elements – themes, ideas, humor, character, language, etc. – identify this as a play by Caryl Churchill? What sets this play apart from her other works?

Discuss the title of the play. Who are the Top Girls in the play? How would you define a Top Girl?

Who are some other Top Girls from the 1980s, 1990s and today? What makes them Top Girls?

What aspects of British culture and history during the early 1980s are reflected in the story of *Top Girls*? Give examples from the play that relate to people, events and political circumstances from that period in history. How does this play comment on and reflect its time? In what ways are the story and theme universal? How does the play have relevance to the political and social climate in the U.S. of the 1980s? of the U.S. today?

What do you imagine is the function of the first scene, Marlene's dinner party? How does the information we learn during this scene inform our understanding of the rest of the play?

How are the dinner party guests similar to one another? How are they different? Why do suppose Marlene chose these five women? What do they have in common with Marlene? Who would you invite to a similar party and why?

Six of the seven actors in *Top Girls* play multiple characters. How does the doubling and tripling of roles affect your interpretation of the events? Does the Guthrie production play up or play down the multiple casting?

Discuss the character of Marlene. Do you find she is sympathetic or not? How do you understand the choices she made in her life? How would you imagine her life to be different if she hadn't left Ipswich?

The last scene of the play takes place a year before the other scenes. Churchill has also mixed up the chronology of other scenes. What is the function or effect of this unusual chronology? If you plot out the events in chronological order, do you feel differently about the play's story or characters?

Caryl Churchill has specifically marked in her script where characters are to overlap each other when talking. Could you imagine the sound of the overlapping while reading the play? What was the effect of hearing the overlapping while watching the production?

Compare your impressions of reading *Top Girls* with seeing it performed on the stage. Discuss the contributions of the director, designers and actors in bringing Caryl Churchill's text to life in performance.

Discuss the set, costumes, lighting and sound for the Guthrie production of *Top Girls*. What do the

design elements contribute to communicating the story, meaning, mood and atmosphere of the drama? What ideas and themes are evoked by the design choices, and how do they enhance the text?

Does the play raise a central question and, if so, what answer is implied? How do you respond to the questions brought to life by the playwright?

What are the most memorable moments of the play from your viewpoint? Describe them and consider the reasons why they made an impression on your memory.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

For Further Information

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Randall, Phylis, editor. *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988.

WEBSITES

Washington State University site devoted to Caryl Churchill and the play *Top Girls*.
<http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/topgirls.html>

Biographical information.
<http://imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc45.html>

Biographical information and brief summaries of Churchill's major plays.
<http://www.theaterpro.com/carylchurchill.html>