

FEMINIST AND MATERIALIST PHILOSOPHIES OF HISTORY IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S TOP GIRLS

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MARLENE. *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.* (Churchill 86)

The first act of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* does away with temporal boundaries, inviting women across historical periods, artistic masterworks, and literary epics to a dinner party. During the evening, the women share their life stories, interrupt each other, and attempt to be heard over the roar of their fellow guests. In some ways, it resembles an indecipherable oral history. What is history if not indecipherable? It is the role of the historian to wade through primary and secondary sources, cultural memories, and forgotten artifacts in order to construct a written, visual, or auditory historical narrative. Thus, a history as we consume it, although based in fact, necessarily relies on narrative structure. *Top Girls* reminds us that history is like any other narrative: shaped by social, political, and economic forces; made unintelligible, fantastical, and surreal at times, by representative modes and their failings. By playing with the notion of history, notably combining fictional and historical figures in the first act, *Top Girls* emphasizes the claim that history is, among other things, reliant on both factual and fictional elements like concrete dates and narrative structures.

Top Girls narrows in on two models of historical narratives: the feminist history, which revises traditional histories by bringing women to the forefront, and the materialist history, which centers class struggle and economic conditions in its narrative structure. In this play, there are only women on stage. Women picture, or reference, the men in their past and present—an alcoholic father, a lousy ex-husband, an insecure coworker, Rocky Mountain Jim, and the Emperor of Japan—but a man never sets foot on stage. Only women enter and exit, only women go to and from work, only women tell their histories, signaling Churchill's dual interest in a Marxist philosophy of history and the notion of a feminist history, which emerged in the feminist movement in the '70s and '80s. Another signal of her dual interest in material and feminist philosophies of history is the relationship between the two sisters Marlene and Joyce. Marlene's feminism lacks an examination of class. This lack is more than a blind spot in Marlene's politics; it impacts her relationship with her sister, who advocates for a feminism that considers socialism. But Churchill's *Top Girls* is not reenacting well-tread feminist debates and calling it theatre. Made possible by the

dream-logic of theatre, the element of fantasy swims underneath the surface of Churchill's work. Fantasy infuses real-world debates about "bourgeois feminism" and "socialist feminism," or models of historical narratives proposed throughout the course of the play, animating and complicating these familiar debates.

Top Girls begins with a one-sided conversation between a waitress and her customer, Marlene, in a restaurant with a "table set for dinner with white tablecloth. Six places." (Churchill 55). Churchill's stage directions are precise in their paucity. Marlene, living in Margaret Thatcher's England, has organized the dinner to celebrate her promotion to General Manager at 'Top Girls' Employment Agency. But before any guest arrives—the guests solely include women from the past, from various historical periods and literary works—Marlene orders the 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.* (55)

Amid the frenzy of the dinner party, the waitress nearly disappears, fading into the background, as if a part of the set. The waitress never speaks; she only exists on the page in the stage directions and through the guests' food and drink orders. While sharing their personal histories, the women call to the waitress for more food and wine: "I think a drink while we wait for the others" (56); "I'll have the chicken, please, and the soup" (58); "Yes let's have two more Frascati. And some more bread, please (60); "We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think..." (66). She does their bidding, fetching dishes for the main course and refilling glasses of wine. As the stage direction above describes, she "goes" (55), constantly in motion, in the act of labor. If Marlene represents the successful, corporate woman following Thatcher's lead, then the waitress represents the working-class women in England: unheard and, excluding moments where others require their labor, unseen.

Labor foregrounds the meal and its many overlapping, divergent dialogues and monologues, which is to say the waitress' labor makes the meal possible. Amid the swirl of the women's fantastical accounts, speeches, and recollections, the waitress gets lost in the shuffle, referred to by named characters with a summoning hand wave. Regardless, before anyone else appears, *Top Girls* opens with her and Marlene: a waitress and a woman who later declares she "hate[s] the working class" (139). In a play remembered for its surreal first act, an act defined by the constant interruptions and a discordant symphony of women's voices, the silence of the waitress rings loudly. She is the specter of the working class in a capitalist society which orders the play's interpersonal relationships and phenomena.

First performed in 1982, *Top Girls* was, in part, a response to Margaret Thatcher's election as the first woman Prime Minister in the United Kingdom. Mary Luckhurst's monograph *Caryl Churchill* notes that *Top Girls* is "sometimes referred to

as her “Thatcher play” (Luckhurst 85). Thatcher, who served as Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990 decried feminism, privatized public industries, and described people in poverty as “drooling and driveling” (86). In Churchill’s *Vogue* interview with John Simon, she addressed her inspiration for *Top Girls*:

...there was also an idea in my head about women and success and the fact that Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister was not an achievement for women because she was right wing. And I was talking to some people in the US who said women were getting on so well here because there are a lot of women in executive positions—like the vice president of Coca-Cola. I thought: that isn’t feminism as I mean it. (Simon 126)

Thatcher looms over the play’s central characters, especially Marlene, who shadows Thatcher: both come from a lower-middle class background and escape their homes through dogged determination and steadfast individualism. “She’s a tough lady, Maggie,” Marlene tells her sister Joyce. “I’d give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there” (Churchill 138). Marlene’s praise for Thatcher prompts her sister, Joyce, to retort: “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” (138). For a wealthy Western nation to elect a woman to the highest office represents a feminist victory for Marlene. A bourgeois-feminist, who configures her feminism within a capitalist framework, Thatcher’s success encourages Marlene’s personal feminism and careerism. “Monetarism is not stupid,” Marlene insists, referencing Milton Friedman’s theory for which Thatcher advocated while serving as Prime Minister; monetarism “privileged the free market economy ... privatising public industries and deregulating government services” (Luckhurst 85). Marlene’s elder sister Joyce, who is materially impacted by Thatcher’s sustained political attacks on working people, cannot see her election as a victory for anyone, particularly working-class women. Bourgeois-feminists, like Marlene, unequivocally insist upon the importance of representational politics¹—seeing women in leadership positions as a feminist victory. But Joyce’s material conditions, a single mother who works four jobs, allow her to see through the superficiality of a feminism that celebrates women who perpetuate the oppression of working-class people and other marginalized groups.

Not unlike Thatcher, Marlene abandons her child Angie and sister Joyce for corporate success made possible by a dangerous solipsism. James Wood, reviewing an authorized biography of Thatcher’s life entitled *Herself Alone* in *The New Yorker*, writes

¹ In Abi Wilkinson’s article in *The New Republic*, “Empowerment For What?: The Limits of a Feminist Politics of Elite Representation,” she destabilizes the superficial progress of representational politics by thinking about women political leaders in England and America since Margaret Thatcher’s regime in 1979: “Despite the claims of the many high-profile apostles of trickle-down feminism, women simply cannot live on inspiration alone. It doesn’t matter how many kick-ass, powerful role models present themselves on the public stage; material factors significantly shape what’s possible for different people” (Wilson 44).

of the Iron Lady, “Nearly every normal habit of life—engaged parenthood, sibling loyalty, marital intimacy, deep friendship, ordinary social intercourse—gave way to the achievement of that one thing” (Wood). For Thatcher, that “one thing” that necessitated a complete abandonment of filial and friendly community was political success; for Marlene, that “one thing” was success in the business world. Marlene, too, is alone. When she does receive a promotion, only fictional, fantastical women from the past attend her celebration. Thatcher’s personal individualism influenced her political projects as Prime Minister, exemplified by her systematic destruction of miners and miners’ unions in northern England (Luckhurst 86). Even in the dinner party scene, which at first glance could be interpreted as an atemporal display of solidarity between various, diverse women, results in a chaos of individual stories that never coalesce. Thatcher’s infamous words, “there is no such thing as a society” (qtd. in Luckhurst 85), ricochet through the first act. Isolated in a corporate sphere, Marlene refuses to engage with her social world, evidenced by her abandonment of her daughter and sister, favoring instead to construct a fantastical world of individual women declaring their individual narratives.

In order to understand Marlene’s abdication of motherhood in favor of a capitalist, corporate ascendancy, we can turn to Marxist-feminist theory, which illuminates the precarity in being a woman and a worker in a capitalist society. Marx and Engels, in their *Critique of the German Ideology*, write, “The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals” (qtd. in Wills 230). Motherhood, or the creation of life, is the first historical act:

[W]e must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history.” But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (qtd. in Wills 238)

A Marxist historical narrative, then, follows the development of humans as they discover means of subsistence through developing modes of production; these modes of production support humans’ survival. For Marxist-feminists, the language of material production connects in key ways to sexual or biological reproduction. As Vanessa Wills writes in “What Could It Mean to Say, ‘Capitalism Causes Sexism and Racism?’”, sexual reproduction is “an essential aspect of human reproductive activity” (Wills 240). Therefore, women “who perform not only wage labor, but also the brunt of the biological work of sexual reproduction, experience a particularly intense form

of oppression and experience economic exploitation more intensely” (240). Through a Marxist-feminist framework, Marlene’s specific predicament in the years before the play’s time frame—pregnant with a baby she is unequipped to care for; harboring ambitions to become a cosmopolitan businesswoman and leave her rural, lower-middle class background—comes into focus. Marlene’s situation articulates the cruelty of capitalism for women. If she chose to raise Angie, her future seemed determined: remain in her hometown and “marry a dairyman who’d come home pissed” (Churchill 134) like her father, an alcoholic who physically abused her mother. Like Joyce, she would work many jobs, never making enough money to live comfortably, travel, or enjoy the occasional extravagance. Despite Marlene’s reprehensible selfishness, audience members and readers may recognize themselves in Marlene’s predicament; neither of her choices were optimal.

Marlene chose to abandon her work as a mother in favor of her work in business. On the other hand, Joyce, Marlene’s sister who raises her daughter Angie as her own, is a working-class, single mother. She still lives in her hometown, visits their mother every Thursday, and regularly places flowers on their father’s grave. Marlene can go to America and “have affairs and break up” (Churchill 128), but Joyce, as a primary caregiver for both Angie and her mother, cannot indulge in these freedoms. Not only is she the primary caregiver, but she is also the sole caregiver; Joyce’s partner, Frank—who would “go mad, even if it was nothing” if she “wanted to go out in the evening” to a class—left her and Angie three years ago (136). When Marlene asks Joyce if Frank sends her money, she deflects, explaining she’s “got four different cleaning jobs,” implying she’s not receiving financial support. On all fronts, in her personal and professional life, Joyce cares for others while Marlene prioritizes her individual wellbeing.

Marlene and Joyce’s personal and political differences about class and gender appear in Churchill’s dialogue. Churchill uses markings to indicate when an actor should interrupt or begin their next line; in order to simulate a conversation as it would occur in reality, the script dictates specific directions with a slash (point of interruption) and an asterisk (to cue the next line). In the exchange below, both markers facilitate a pivotal moment of eruption in their argument:

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. (132-133)

To the audience, the lines sound like a typical argument with overlapping voices and impassioned outbursts. Joyce sighs in the middle of Marlene’s line; Marlene interrupts Joyce to rebut her point. Paradoxically, to illustrate the characters’ opposition, the actors must intentionally collaborate. In order to realistically portray friction, they must work in harmony. Although any scene work requires engaged listening, Churchill’s

degree of specificity requires her actors to employ a heightened level of attentiveness. This moment of intense specificity recalls the near-constant highly specified interruptions in act 1. Lesley Manville, who played Griselda, Nell, and Jeanine in the 1982 premiere of *Top Girls*, testified to the challenging nature of the interruptions, describing it as “horrendously difficult” (qtd. in Luckhurst 92). Olivia Poulet, an actor from the 2011 West End revival, argues “no other playwright has done overlaps to the same extent as Caryl” (qtd. in Luckhurst 93). In a play preoccupied with questions of labor, exploitation, and the impact of capitalism on women laborers, it is significant that Churchill makes actors’ work particularly arduous; in some ways, the arduous nature of their work exemplifies the play’s concerns with labor as it impacts women.

Marlene’s choice to abandon Angie for her personal fulfillment, to leave home and monetarily provide for herself, is a story of loss. In act 1, the dinner party scene, most of the guests recall stories of motherhood. Some historical characters, some fictional, all from different time periods, include loss as a central theme in their recollections. Joan begins, explaining that she unknowingly became pregnant as the reigning Pope. Lady Nijo, interrupting Joan, shares her maternal experiences: she first had a child by the Emperor, but her second was from a love affair. Since this baby was not conceived by the Emperor, it had to be killed. Barely absorbing Nijo’s story, Joan resumes her birth story, explaining that on Rogation Day, during the public procession, she gave birth to the baby: “And the baby just slid out onto the road,” Joan recalls. Marlene asks, “So what did they do?” “They weren’t best pleased.” Joan responds, silencing the ladies’ laughter: “They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death” (71). After this pause, the waitress clears the plates and the women tentatively continue their conversation. Isabella explains she “never had any children” (72); Nijo recalls her third and fourth children, although she never saw her third child after his birth. Marlene attempts to include Gret in the conversation, asking how many children she had. “Ten,” Gret states (72).

Even before Patient Griselda arrives at the dinner party and shares her violent maternal story—wherein her husband, the Marquis, tells her he has killed both her children before returning them, fully grown, years later—Marlene exclaims, “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?” (72). The first-time audience member and reader will not know yet that Marlene, too, has lost a child—although the loss was of her own volition. Marlene’s “we” in her question could refer to many groups: the group of women before her, the mothers she knows, the women she knows. It is notable that, in using “we,” Marlene includes herself in this statement: she is a mother, a woman, she is miserable, and she dares to ask “why?” Why does each story of motherhood include loss as a central component? Considering that motherhood is a fundamentally creative and vital force, why do these fictional, historical, and contemporary women in *Top Girls* create life only to lose it—to participate in the means of production, via sexual

reproduction, only to lose their children and be reduced to an instrument of production?²

The majority of the guests at the dinner party, barring Isabella and Marlene, lived in a pre-capitalist society.³ “We know that the oppression of women well precedes the emergence of capitalism onto the world stage,” Wills writes (237). Despite living in pre-capitalist societies, the oppression of women doubtlessly informs Pope Joan’s, Lady Nijo’s, Dull Gret’s and Patient Griselda’s histories.⁴ The two remaining women at the dinner party—Isabella Bird, born in 1831 and living into the fourth year of the twentieth century, and Marlene, a middle-aged woman during the early 1980s—lived in a capitalist society: the United Kingdom during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively. Neither Isabella nor Marlene shares a story of motherhood. It is significant that the two most contemporary women, growing up in the same western, capitalist nation, refuse to contribute to discussions of maternal care. Isabella, who never had children, remains relatively silent on the topic of motherhood. But as for Marlene, who we later learn gave birth while never fulfilling the social role of a mother, her silence is notable. Both abstained from motherhood, and while Marlene’s abstention is more complex, both fail to contribute their own story of motherhood to the dinner table. Their abstention indicates the complexity of sexual reproduction under capitalism that uniquely perpetuates inequality, as opposed to sexual reproduction in pre-capitalist eras. Marlene and Isabella, as women in a capitalist society, are uniquely exploited as both wage laborers and reproductive laborers. That these two women, for differing reasons, do not contribute to this conversation about motherhood, articulates the issues perpetuated for women due to capitalism.

If there were questions about whether *Top Girls* truly concerns women living in a capitalist society, the second act, which opens and closes at “Top Girls’ Employment Agency, eliminates any doubts. An employment agency epitomizes a contemporary capitalist society wherein workers at the agency, like Marlene, help clients become workers for other companies. An employment agency is an establishment that exists to oil the wheel of capitalism, easing the exploitation of

² Wills writes of Marx and Engels’ belief in communism to rid societies and countries of gender inequality. While, in practice, women continued to experience gender-based oppression in communist nations, theoretically Marx and Engels held that “transforming the social status of women is a key pillar of Marx’s program ... ‘[T]he real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production’” (Wills 240).

³ Henry Heller’s *A Marxist History of Capitalism* (2018) dates the origin of capitalism to the beginning of the sixteenth century with merchant capitalism. This era of “merchant capitalism” continued until 1780. Heller labels the century after, from 1780-1880, as “industrial capitalism” following the Industrial Revolution. The next era was “monopoly capitalism and imperialism,” from 1880 until the end of World War II in 1945. This is the period during which Isabella Bird lived, which aligns with her imperialist expeditions to various countries. There was an overlapping period of “late capitalism” from 1917-2017 and consumer capitalism from 1945-1980. From 1980-present, we are in the years of “neoliberalism and global monopoly capitalism” (Heller 2-3).

⁴ Martha E. Gimenez, in *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction*, also underscores that while “inequality between men and women precedes capitalism, what matters is not its chronological origins but its ‘organic connections’ or ‘ideal genesis’ within capitalism, established in the relationship between the capitalist modes of production and reproduction and observable in its effects, the division between the public production of commodities and the private reproduction of labourers and labour power” (Gimenez 13).

others' labor. In the chapter "Top Girls and Other Epithets" from *Clever Girls and the Literature of Women's Upward Mobility*, Mary Eagleton observes the capitalist feminism apparent in the employees at "Top Girls": "What they take from capitalism is its individualism, competitiveness, its identification with corporate values and its rejection of the state in favour of self-reliance. What they take from feminism is a belief in opportunities for women" (Eagleton 141). In the interview scenes, Marlene and her co-workers, Win and Nell, all begin with simple, straightforward queries in an attempt to ascertain the candidate's qualifications before sending them on interviews to be a secretary, typist, or general assistant to—almost certainly—a man.

The mundane interview questions levied in *Top Girls* lead each interviewer and interviewee towards an emotional tipping point, exposing the people underneath their identity as a worker. Marlene first asks her interviewee Jeanine about her O-level scores (Churchill 84). Win, noticing her interviewee Louise's long tenure at her previous job, asks for her age (104). Nell asks her interviewee Shona why she wants a change (114). All innocuous, typical first interview questions lead to moments of profound sadness. After Marlene asks where Jeanine would like to be in ten years, she responds, "I might not be alive in ten years ... I can't think about ten years" (86). Louise soliloquizes about dedicating her whole life to her job, to pleasing her superiors, but always being taken for granted: "I have had to justify my existence every minute, and I have done so, I have proved...I've proved I can earn money. It's more important to get away. I feel it's now or never" (106-107). Listening to Shona attempt to describe her job, Nell realizes she is lying about her experience and age: she's only nineteen years old. Abstractly considering an interview's structure, an interviewer asks questions of an interviewee that require them to relate themselves to their work history, thereby defining themselves through their labor; an interviewer will avoid personal questions about an interviewee's past; an interviewer deals with facts and skills, all items generally unrelated to emotional depth.

Churchill seizes on the logistics of office work, like the formal interview structure, and subverts the structure to criticize capitalism. Instead of Marlene, Win, and Nell evaluating their interviewees' qualifications, the trio find themselves in unexpected territory, learning about their interviewees' fraught relationships to capitalism. The three scenes, which begin normally and end in a moment of strangeness, undermine the dominant capitalist ideology. As Victoria Bazin identifies in her essay "[Not] talking 'bout my generation': Historicizing Feminisms in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*," Churchill employs Bertolt Brecht's alienation devices to "make strange" the contemporary character of Marlene and her top girl ideology, an ideology that owes much to Margaret Thatcher, the country's top girl at the time the play was performed" (Bazin 120). Bazin interprets the first act through the lens of Brecht's alienation effect. However, the interview scenelets—the small vignettes, floating and interspersed throughout act 2—do a similar alienating work. Furthermore, employing the alienation effect in the more superficially realistic workspace, rather than the

atemporal dinner party, results in a more pointed, or apparent, capitalist critique. The ordering capitalist structure bringing Marlene and Jeanine, Win and Louise, and Nell and Shona together is put into question by each startlingly intimate conversation. In this way, Churchill cuttingly exposes the fragility of human life and the cruelty of capitalist exploitation more acutely in the workplace scenes in act 2 than in act 1.

Luckhurst, in her survey of Churchill's life and work, culturally contextualizes *Top Girls* as thematically similar to works of literature such as Shirley Conran's bestselling book *Superwoman*. Conran's premise is the idea that "women could have it all, and that everything could be juggled without sacrifice" (Luckhurst 86). This is a symptom of a feminism informed by capitalism, popular in the '80s, that women should strive to simultaneously be a CEO and a devoted mother; Marlene propagates this myth to her sister Joyce. In conversation with Joyce, Marlene shares an anecdote of 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" (Churchill 134). Although Marlene herself cannot balance a child and a high-powered career, she internalizes and perpetuates the dual forms of exploitative and oppressive labor for women.

Marlene avoids her child and embraces her career, but believes in the myth of women "having it all," claiming "anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (140). On the other hand, Joyce, who refuses to be indoctrinated into the "women can have it all myth," remains pessimistic about the oppressive conditions for women as wage laborers and reproductive laborers:

MARLENE. You run [Angie] 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 (140).

Just as Marlene's interviewee Jeanine is pessimistic about her future, raising doubts about the likelihood of her surviving ten more years, Joyce is pessimistic about Angie's future. If the material conditions remain the same, which she accurately anticipates they will—indeed, Thatcher remains Prime Minister until 1990—then Angie, and other lower-middle class women, will remain doubly exploited by capitalism and sexism.

While Joyce's final moment displays her giving up on the possibility of change, the play's final moment returns to the idea of fantasy, dreams, and therefore the possibility of material change:

ANGIE. Mum?

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

ANGIE. Frightening.

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

ANGIE. Frightening. (141)

Bazin analyzes this exchange, arguing that “it is Angie who represents the revolutionary force within the play, and it is Angie's ‘frightening’ vision of the future that suggests the possibility of political change. It is not, however, that Angie represents the way ‘forward’ but rather that she represents both the way forward and the way backward” (Bazin 119). Marlene and Joyce represent the capitalist-feminist and the socialist-feminist, and Angie represents the “dialectical embodiment” of these opposing feminisms (119). Angie is caught between her biological mother and the woman who raised her as her own. Instead of retreading the debate between bourgeois-feminism and socialist-feminism, Churchill employs the element of fantasy, through Angie’s nightmare, to question the debate itself.

Angie’s dream, her foray into the world of fantasy, is interrupted by the argument between Marlene and Joyce. When she awakes from her dream, wandering into the final moments of the play in the liminal space between dream and reality, she is alone and frightened. Whereas the women in act 1 participate in a communal fantasy, Angie’s fantasy is isolated and interrupted. Bazin relates Angie to Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” in his “On the Concept of History.” Referencing Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus,” an angel’s face “is turned towards the past ... but a storm is blowing from Paradise ... the storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm” (Benjamin). The angel casting her gaze on the past while being flung into the future represents progress, albeit a “frightening” kind. Bazin relates Angie to Benjamin’s philosophy of history as an emblem of progress, the tension between past and present. However, within the play itself, Angie emerging from her dream-state, like an angel or a ghost, recalls the elements of fantasy from the play’s first act—the collapse of time that happens in dreams mimics the first act’s collapse of time. The play begins and ends by invoking fantasy as a necessary condition for a historical narrative.

Before considering the unique relationship between fantasy and feminist historiography, it is important to note the introduction of feminist historiography to formal academic scholarship in Joan Kelly’s essay “The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History.” In the essay, Kelly announced her dual goal: “to restore women to history and to restore our history to women” (Kelly 809). Kelly defines feminist historiography, a term for a historical practice that centers women, as a disruptive scholarly tool, unsettling accepted narratives and accounts of social movements. Before, the domain of “womanhood” went relatively unregarded by historians; history was an account of great men, as Hegel writes in his introduction to *Philosophy of History*: history followed great men and the wars they started, the battles they fought, the intellectual revolutions they spurned. After “The Social Relation of the Sexes,” which argued for women to be included as a historical category, thus

rendering earlier histories incomplete, the effort to sift through the past became a part of the feminist movement of the time. Centering women as social and historical characters in well-tread historical stories, like the Renaissance or the French Revolution, became a commonplace feminist-scholarly practice. Situated among this academic movement in feminist scholarship and women's studies—to consider women in history in relation to other historical categories like race and class—Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* emerged.

Churchill uses the element of fantasy to present and complicate historical narratives. This accords with a model of feminist history proposed in Joan Scott's book *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Scott proposes fantasy, through a psychoanalytic framework, is key to understanding feminist histories. Scott untangles the project undertaken by writers in the '70s and '80s to construct feminist histories, as in Churchill's *Top Girls*. Many feminist historians were resurrecting old historical narratives, finding the lost woman in traditional histories, and placing her center stage in the drama, rising above the great men. Referencing Judith Butler's landmark philosophical revelations in *Gender Trouble*, Scott reckons with the category of "women" being a fundamentally unstable and pluralistic term. That it is unstable is what makes it a useful historical category, Scott writes:

It is precisely the futile struggle to hold meaning in place that makes gender such an interesting historical object, one that includes not only regimes of truth about sex and sexuality, but also the fantasies and transgressions that refuse to be regulated or categorized. Indeed it is fantasy that undermines any notion of psychic immutability or fixed identity, that infuses rational motives with unquenchable desire, that contributes to the actions and events we narrate as history. From this perspective, fantasy becomes a critically useful tool for historical analysis. (Scott 5)

For our purposes—that is, thinking about a feminist history play like Churchill's *Top Girls*—Scott's linking of fantasy to historical analysis is useful. The pluralistic category of womanhood, the fact that it often signifies multiple realities or ways of being in one historical period, let alone many different historical periods, allows for fantasy. In both fantasy and performance, invention occurs: this is key to understanding Churchill's contribution to the tradition of feminist historiography. Through dramatic intervention, Churchill conjoins fantasy and history, drawing on women across time and place for a feminist convention à la Seneca Falls. While *Top Girls* is engaging with the practice in the '70s and '80s to create feminist histories—the "knowledge-producing arm of a broad-based feminist movement devoted to radical social change," as Scott characterizes it (Scott 27)—Churchill places her feminist-historiographical work outside of the academy. By doing so, she manages to create a form of feminist-

history while criticizing its limitations as a political tool. Although, as Scott writes, feminist history is fundamentally progressive as it challenges “the impulse to reproduce what is already known” (37). “What continues to make feminism’s history so exciting is precisely its radical refusal to settle down, to call even a comfortable lodging a home” (37), writes Scott. The characters in *Top Girls*, while gesturing to the past, remain anxiously fixated on the future: How will Angie’s future look? How will Angie’s children, if she has children, think of their mother? Will the eighties be “stupendous” (140)? Will Jeanine live to see the next decade?

If feminist history engages in a constant process of refusal and revision, then the story, history, and legend of Pope Joan, arguably the most prominent force in the dinner party scene given that she has the majority of the dialogue, is a clear articulation of the aims of feminist historiography. Craig Rustici, in *The Afterlife of Pope Joan: Deploying the Popess Legend in Early Modern England* traces the murky genesis of the story, which he argues is “probably not” true (Rustici 2). Joan, the woman, may never have existed. But Joan as a figure wielded by various cultural, political, religious, and artistic movements for real consequences has existed. Indeed, with each revival of *Top Girls*, the figure continues to exist. That she never lived and breathed, at this point, is irrelevant. It is her afterlife, as Rustici’s title suggests, that is of interest: “the history of the legend and its retelling constitutes a tale of more sustained and radical resistance to absorption into master narratives” (Rustici 156). Pope Joan’s legacy, in and outside of *Top Girls*, makes her an ideal figure for Churchill to animate and theatricalize. Historically, Pope Joan’s story floats between the real and the surreal, making her a tool for early modern Protestants and feminist socialist artists alike to wield. Since Pope Joan cannot be classified as “real” or “not real,” “fact” or “fiction,” “truth” or “fantasy,” she embodies a feminist type of resistance to the “master narrative” of history. In the final act, Joan recites from the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*. Spoken in Latin, a dead language, the speech brings the ancient text into contemporary consciousness. In materialist history, Bazin writes, “use of quotation becomes one way of resisting the notion of a progressive, continuous account of history” (Bazin 131). In this context, the speech made in Latin revives first century BC text for modern times, creating a schism in the linear “master narrative” of history. Joan’s recitation, as Bazin suggests, references a materialist history as the “historical materialist collects lost or forgotten objects and images, textual extracts that speak of a past hidden from history” (131). Thus Pope Joan’s recitation exemplifies materialist-historical practices, by excavating and quoting historical text, and feminist-historical practices, by engaging in a fantastical reenactment of her history.

The theoretical combination of materialist historiography with feminist historiography would result in a socialist-feminist historiography. As defined by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her essay “Socialist-Feminist American Women’s History,” “socialist-feminists combine allegiances to feminism with allegiances to historical materialism as central to any understanding of women’s oppression” (Fox-

Genovese 182). At its germination, socialist-feminist history primarily focused on the middle-class white woman and secondarily focused on working-class woman; in the 1980s, socialist-feminist historians more deeply engaged with “relations among women of different classes and races” (182).⁵ Churchill defined herself as a socialist-feminist, and *Top Girls* examines class exploitation through the lens of women’s lives. Churchill examines both class and gender through the dramatic form, which invests her inquiry into feminist and materialist philosophies of history with a fantastical element. By explicitly playing with both fantasy and history, fact and fiction, *Top Girls* successfully presents the argument that a history cannot exist without fantasy due to its narrative structure. In act 1, the text requires actors to revive and embody women from the historical and artistic past. By placing historical women side by side with fictional women, Churchill emphasizes the fictionality of history and its fundamental mutability. Feminist and materialist philosophies of history provide a structural framework through which to consider the past. *Top Girls* never pledges allegiance to either philosophy of history. Instead, the play explores both philosophies of history in tandem by centering women and their stories of reproductive labor and wage labor.

Fox-Genovese traces the genealogy of socialist-feminist historiography and writes of the “renewed attention to class political economy, and historical specificity” in current scholarly work which embodies “a determination to move beyond the universalistic claims of sisterhood in the interests of understanding specific women’s experience and of forging a more effective politics” (Fox-Genovese 198). Like this trend in socialist-feminist histories, *Top Girls* dramatizes specific women grappling with their material conditions. While Churchill was a socialist-feminist who staunchly opposed Thatcher’s politics, her main character, Marlene, supports and mimics Thatcher; we feel sympathy for Marlene despite her politics, which ultimately prompts us to “accept the fact that feminism refers to a multiplicity of often conflicting movements” (Scott 79). The fantastical elements of the play, notably in act 1 and the alienating interview scenes, combine the real with the surreal, the history with the mythic, to destabilize the practice of history. For contemporary audiences of *Top Girls*, nearly thirty years after its first performance, act 2 and act 3 also play with history, albeit a more recent and recognizable history. As *Top Girls* lives on, still “alive after ten years” (Churchill 86), its concern with feminist and materialist philosophies of history only grows more palpable.

⁵ On the choice to use the word “socialist” rather than “Marxist,” Fox-Genovese highlights the American tendency to shrink from the word Marxism or communism while still drawing on its theory: “In this respect, the very choice of the term socialist-feminist (rather than marxist-feminist) apparently has more to do with a characteristic American edginess about communist politics than with the place of gender in marxist political economy on which most socialist-feminists continue (more or less rigorously) to draw” (183).

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