



Brechtian Epic Elements in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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Abstract

Since Aristotle's response to Plato's attack on poetic imitation as being twice removed from reality, the concept of mimesis has pervaded the drama. Aristotle's all arts, epic, tragic, comic and dithyrambic, regardless of their different media, subject matter, and manner of imitation, involve mimesis. Aristotle argued that mimesis provided fictional distance from the things being presented on stage, and allowed the audience to get emotionally involved leading them to catharsis, the purgation of emotions. In the mid-nineteenth century, mimetic representation became the core of the drama in a movement known as realism which presenting an illusion of reality by concentrating on human behavior, accurate settings, and natural speech. In the twentieth century, playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht started to oppose mimetic representation because they believed that it encouraged spectators to accept and conform to the dominant social conventions. In this article, the researcher traces Brechtian epic elements in *Top Girls*, Churchill's most acclaimed play, and examines the aspects in which she follows and/or deviates from Brecht. In this sense, the researcher explains some of Brecht's epic devices and then applies them to Churchill's *Top Girls*.

Keywords

Mimesis, Epic Theatre, Anti-Illusive, Alienation Effect

Subject Areas: Literature

1. Introduction

As a twentieth-century German playwright, Bertolt Brecht broke away with the traditional way of representation which was based on Aristotle's ideas and introduced his own theory known as the epic theatre. Since the Berliner Ensemble's first visit to England in 1956, Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre has had a strong influence on many

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playwrights. By using anti-illusive devices known as alienation effects, which included special scenic, technical and acting methods, the epic theatre created a distance between the audience and the action on stage, and prevented the spectators from getting emotionally involved in the story line. As a result, the audience was allowed to think rationally about the events which happened on stage and to reconsider the social conditions which they had taken for granted.

Caryl Churchill is an example of a British woman-playwright, who has also been concerned with the form of drama, experimenting with different structures and shapes to convey her ideas. In producing her unconventional techniques of representation, Churchill has followed and expanded on Brechtian epic devices. According to Kritzer, like Brecht, Churchill avoids “the Aristotelian evocation of pity and fear in favor of stimulating new understandings of specific social situations through ‘astonishment and wonder’” ([1], p. 3). He continues that the most important similarity between Churchill and Brecht is their artistic intention of empowering the audience “against oppression” rather than encouraging “serene acceptance of an apparently inevitable fate” (ibid).

2. Brechtian Epic Elements in *Top Girls*

Brecht’s epic theatre aimed at provoking social change by enabling the audience to see social conditions they have taken for granted with a new gaze. This was put forward by the alienation devices. In “Short Organum for the Theatre” Brecht stated that by using V-effect he intended to “free socially conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protests them against our grasp today” by a defamiliarizing representation “which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” ([2], p. 190). As Woodruff puts it, unlike Aristotelian theatre which “makes you accept what you see as inevitable” by producing the feelings of pity and fear in the spectators, the epic theatre suggests that the situations presented on stage “can and should be prevented” and instead of pity and fear it creates a feeling of “outrage, anger, and an urgent desire to change the society for the better” ([3], p. 169).

The concept of *Gestus*, which appeared in a theatre review by Brecht in 1920, was a key technique in epic theatre which played an important role in producing the V-effect. As Carl Weber puts it, *Gestus* is “an ensemble of the body and its movements and gestures, the face and its mimetic expressions, the voice and its sounds and inflections, speech with its patterns and rhythms, costume, makeup, props” and whatever the actor uses to present the character he/she is performing ([4], p. 41). It was important that *Gestus* would be “memorable” and consequently, “quotable” for the audience (ibid). In an essay on Brecht’s epic theatre, Walter Benjamin explains the quotable property of *Gestus*: “just as a particular sentence or paragraph can be quoted to point out the thrust or message of a text, a particular gestural detail of an actor’s performance should be quotable, demonstrating the social *Gestus* of his performance, of the scene, or even the play” (see [4], p. 42). Benjamin gives an example referring to the “frozen frame” in cinematography, when the action is stopped at a particular gesture: a mother raising an object to throw at her daughter, “while the father is opening the window to call for help, at this instant a stranger appears at the door. *Tableau*—as they used to say around 1900. This means: the stranger is confronted with the [family’s] situation” (ibid).

Carl Weber explains that “a moment frozen in this manner would establish a quotable *gestus* that invites speculation, provokes critical thinking, and may result in a specific conclusion which then would activate the spectator as to forming an attitude or opinion and thus influence his future behavior versus society” ([4], p. 42).

But *gestus* had to have a social dimension. The *gest* of a man “cringing” from a dog does not have social content until it is revealed that he is “a tramp who is constantly harassed by watchdogs” ([5], p. 131). Also the *gest* of “uniformed fascists” only becomes social when they “Stride over corpses” (ibid). In his essay *On Gestic Music*, Brecht states that “the social *gest* is the *gest* relevant to society, the *gest* that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances” ([2], p. 104-105). As Carl Weber puts it, *Gestus* “defined a social position, the character’s status and function in society, and that it yielded an image of a socially conditioned behavior that, in turn, conditions the functioning of society” ([4], p. 42). In fact, *gestus* means a “socially encoded expression” ([6], p. 53).

Churchill uses Brecht’s *gestus* to show both the individual relations of the character, and the social conditions which make him behave as he does ([7], p. 43). Tycker brings an example from the play and says: “from a Brechtian perspective, the way Gret eats her soup does not just say something about her as an individual, but shows her peasant class, the scarcity of food during war time, and her economic relation to those around her” (ibid). Churchill also uses *gestus* as a device to make the audience “rethink their own gender identifications” ([8], p.

88]. At the end of the first act, pope Joan's vomiting is a gestus which represents the "female body's revulsion towards the mystification and misogyny of Western religion" (ibid, p. 89). Another example of gestus is the dress Marlene brings for Angie as a gift which reveals "the gap between Angie's world and Marlene's world". Furthermore, the fact that the dress is too small for her signifies that "history has become marked out on Angie's body" ([7], p. 43).

One of the devices which Brecht used in his epic theatre was presenting the action in a non-linear manner. In contrast to the "linear sequential action" in Aristotelian theatre; the epic theatre was made up of episodes which were each a complete narrative unit. Brecht argued that "the individual episodes" had to be "knotted together in such a way that the knots" could be noticed easily. In this way, the audience could participate by connecting the play's plot line and therefore, concentrate on the course of the events rather than the ending of the play ([2], p. 201).

In *Top Girls* the play is displayed in a non-linear fashion which corresponds to Brecht's concept of epic theatre. By presenting the incidents before Marlene's promotion in the last act, whereas if organized chronologically, it should come at the beginning of the play, Churchill encourages the spectators to compare and contrast recent and historical moments.

Historization was another of Brecht's key concerns which alienated the audience from the action. Brecht believed that presenting the actions as if they had happened in the past, produced a distance between the action and the spectators and enabled them to take a critical look without getting emotionally involved. According to Mumford this technique intends to "provoke an inquiring attitude towards the present through the past, and challenge dominant versions of history" ([6], p. 71).

Historicization is another of the elements which links Churchill's play to Brecht's epic theatre. In *Top Girls* by bringing notable women from history to the present and revealing their different social classes Churchill creates a critical attitude in the audience by allowing them to make connections between a previous historical moment and their own. As Reinelt puts it, Churchill "historicized the events of the narrative to enable spectators to see how these events were similar to and different from present-day circumstances, similar to and different from received historical traditions" ([9], p. 176).

Double-casting and cross-gender acting are innovative techniques which Churchill used in addition to Brechtian devices. In double-casting, each actor is given multiple roles. For example, the same actor who played the role of Pope Joan appeared in act two, playing the part of Louise, a forty-six-year-old woman who comes to the *Top Girls* Employment Agency as a client, and reappears in the third act as Angie. This technique prevented the audience from identifying with the characters and made them focus on the oppressive nature of gender distinctions ([10], p. 213). Furthermore, as Patterson explains "such a fluid approach to casting, which challenges the conventional identification of actor with role, is not only playful and expedient; but it also focuses attention, in a Brechtian manner, on collective events rather than individual fates" ([11], p. 162). According to Joseph Marohl what distinguishes Churchill's plays from mainstream playwrights in Great Britain and the United States is her "deliberate confusion of dramatic roles and playfulness about otherwise serious concepts of gender and history" ([12], p. 20).

In Cross-gender acting, the role of a man is played by a woman actor or the role of a woman is played by a man. Since what we understand of feminine identity is a result of the gender ideology of a culture or society, by using Brechtian alienation devices, Churchill exposes the strictures of gender, to reveal gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices" ([8], p. 46). In fact, by cross-gender acting, actors become alienated from their character, calling the spectator's attention to the concept of gender and its underlying ideology. Diamond elaborates, that "by alienating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator" (ibid, p. 46). She continues that when gender is alienated from the body, "the spectator is able to see what s/he can't see" (ibid, p. 45).

In the first act of *Top Girls*, the character named Pope Joan, a lady who had disguised herself as a man in order to become pope in the ninth century, is the clearest example of cross-gender casting. In the diner party Joan explains to the women that in order to continue her education she lived as a man from the age of twelve. After becoming famous by teaching at the Greek School in Rome she was made Cardinal and soon after she became pope. Through an affair with one of her chamberlains she gets pregnant and unexpectedly gives birth to her child during a procession where being revealed as a woman, she is stoned to death. The following dialogues which are uttered by Joan show the sexual tyranny in her culture and the prevalent ideologies considering gender:

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

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

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

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

Marlene: I don't know, you're the pope.

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

Marlene: Other popes had children, surely.

Joan: They didn't give birth to them.

Nijo: Well you were a woman.

Joan: Exactly and I shouldn't have been a woman. Woman, children and lunatics can't be pope.

Another device which Churchill uses in addition to the epic devices used by Brecht is an all-female cast. Marohl explains that “in *Top Girls* an all-female cast of seven play a total of sixteen different characters, five of whom do not exist in the present” ([12], p. 20). In *Carry on, understudies: Theatre and sexual politics* Micheline Wandor states that: “single gendered play may be ‘unrealistic’ in the sense that we all inhabit a world which consists of men and women, but it does provide an imaginative opportunity to explore the nature of the gendered perspective (male and female) without the complexities and displacements of the ‘mixed’ play” ([13], p. 69). Marohl explains that by leaving out male characters, *Top Girls* “manages to escape the pitfall of sexism that is, allowing the audience to mistake the class struggle which is the basis of the dramatic plot for a battle of the sexes” ([12], p. 23). He continues that the action of the play proves that the “female perspective” is also able to draw class distinctions and enforce “a patriarch-like matriarchy based on tyranny and division”.

3. Caryl Churchill and Politics

In Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, Tycker notes that “the clearest parallel between Churchill and Brecht is their commitment to socialist politics” ([7], p. 44). She believes that Churchill aimed to “mobilize the public by portraying working-class communities and highlighting the disparity between the rich and poor” (ibid). Critics take the works of both playwrights as political “because they work to counter prevalent capitalist values, within the theatre world, and society at large” (ibid). According to Elaine Aston, in the 1980s the “analysis of intra-sexual class oppression became a dominant feature of socialist-feminist playwrighting” in which the feminists had to deal with “a new oppressive factor: the ‘Superwoman’” ([14], p. 72). When Margaret Thatcher was elected as Britain's first female prime minister, many women thought things were going to change for the better. As Rowbotham puts it, after Thatcher's election “the fact that women could become Prime Minister had a symbolic meaning; modern women, it seemed could do anything now” ([7], p. 19). In addition, Thatcherite politics “promoted the image of the highflying female achiever who was capable of transcending class boundaries and of attaining material success at home and in the workplace” ([14], p. 72). But not all women “were in a position to gain access to paid positions of power which would enable them to combine work and family life” (ibid). Therefore, women who could enter well-paid jobs or start their own business got along fine, but “their lower paid counterparts had increasingly low security” ([7], p. 21).

On her visit to America for a production of *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill confronted women who believed that the Women's Movement was doing well since “more women were getting high-paid and powerful jobs” ([9], p. 180). But on the contrary, Churchill argued that with Thatcher's policies things had gotten worse for women and she felt urged to a “socialist correction of this mistaken emphasis on bourgeois individualism and personal achievement” (ibid). Tycker points out that what worried Churchill was “Thatcher's right-wing politics” which only “benefited a minority of Britons” leaving “the less fortunate behind” ([7], p. 2). In fact, Churchill saw the 1980s shift from a socialist mindset to a capitalist emphasis as an ominous change” (ibid, p. 13).

Churchill wrote *Top Girls* in opposition to Thatcherism in which the main character Marlene has a Thatcher-like character. It should be noted that the word “top” in the play's title that implies middle and a bottom, reveals to be critical of social stratification and the hierarchical capitalist economy. In fact, as Aston puts it, *Top Girls* directly critiques “the ‘Superwoman’ ethos by demonstrating that the success of ‘top girl’ Marlene is achieved at the expense of oppressing her working-class sister Joyce” ([14], p. 72).

As Tycker explained, though the play was “first produced at the beginning of the 1980s, it foresees the class

antagonism that characterized the decade" ([7], p. 18). With the aim of confronting the era's "broad ranging political dilemmas", Churchill "compares and contrasts the lives of two sisters" (ibid, p. 2).

In the last act of the play which is a flashback of Marlene and Joyce's conversation before Marlene's promotion, it is revealed that her parents were common workers who lived wasted lives without meaningful employment ([12], p. 22). In spite of her family circumstances, in a Thatcher like manner, Marlene leaves her class markers behind and escapes the life she has "envisioned in the future—that of entering into a working class marriage and subsequently becoming subordinate to her husband's demands" ([7], p. 52). Marlene also abandons Angie, her illegitimate daughter, to be raised by Joyce in order to find a job in the city. In fact, Marlene "decides to follow a path that emphasizes her career at the expense of her family life" (ibid, p. 2). In their conversation, when Joyce says: "I don't know how you could leave your own child" Marlene's answer illustrates how she portrays Angie "in market terms, as an object of exchange" since instead of using the word baby she says: "you couldn't have one so you took mine" (ibid, p. 52). As Marohl ([12], p. 22) puts it, "Marlene persists to endorse a system that values profits over the needs of people" and she accepts that in order to be successful in business her family must be sacrificed. Unlike Marlene, Joyce lives in the community where she grew up and supports Angie and her mother by cleaning houses. Hence, while maintaining "close familial ties" she continues "to lead a life of economic drudgery" ([7], p. 2).

Through the sisters conversation we understand that they have different political views. Marlene has a positive view to the future:

Marlene: I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

Joyce: Who for?

Marlene: For me./I think I'm going up up up.

Joyce: Oh for you. Yes I'm sure they will ([4], p. 1629).

Marlene believes that she will make progress in the future and "ascend the career ladder" ([7], p. 55). On the other hand, Joyce "sees the 1980s as a time of class uprising" (ibid, p. 57). Furthermore, she warns Marlene that at that time all the people who know Marlene will "see her as an outsider and implicated in their oppression":

"So don't be round here when it happens because if someone's kicking you I'll just laugh" ([4], p. 1629). While Marlene believes in "middle-class individualism", Joyce's politics are "Marxist and pro-Labor" ([12], p. 22). Marlene asserts her support for Thatcher's Conservative government with phrases such as: "First woman Prime minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on", yet Joyce portrays Thatcher as a fascist: "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" ([4], p. 1628).

By using the title Ms, Joyce maintains that a female prime minister behaves as cruelly and destructively as Hitler did could only have a negative impact on the lives of the majority of women. Then Joyce maintains that their parents had been oppressed by the upper classes and explains that Angie "will also be a victim of monetarism and class prejudice" ([12], p. 22).

Joyce: Because nothing's changed and it won't with them in.

Marlene: Them, them./Us and them?

Joyce: And you're one of them ([4], p. 1630).

In the words of Tycker:

Joyce represents the world as being broken down into a clear dichotomy between "us and them". "Us" represents the working class since Joyce is a member of this group, working multiple cleaning jobs. "Them" represents the group of economic oppressors, which Marlene joined once she gave up responsibility for her daughter and viewed life as a capitalist venture ([7], p. 56).

The two sisters' argument comes to an end with the result that they can't consider each other as friends. Churchill does not idealize any of the two different paths the sisters have taken, but "her portrayal presents an opportunity for her audience to examine their opinions regarding gender and class ([7], p. 2). In the end of the play, Angie stumbles in half-awake after a nightmare uttering the last word of the play: "frightening". According to Tycker ([7], p. 58), "Angie repeats herself: 'frightening', implying that the real world that she faces is at least as disturbing as any nightmare". Also, in the words of Marohl ([12], p. 22), this single word can suggest "an unknowing indictment of her mother's self-interested individualism or perhaps an apprehension of her own mi-

serable future. Tycer ([7], p. 58) argues that by giving the last word of the play to Angie, Churchill wants to make the audience think about “how the next generation will be affected by the political conflict expressed in the sisters’ debate”.

The fact that the last act of the play happens a year prior to the first act, focuses the spectator’s attention on the social change which takes place through this time gap. In the last act, which if put in sequential order would be the first act of the play; Marlene refuses to accept that Angie will not succeed in the job market:

Joyce: She’s stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?

Marlene: You run her down too much. She’ll be all right.

Joyce: I don’t expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had ([4], p. 1628).

But in act two which takes place a year later, when Marlene sees Angie at the *Top Girls* agency, she agrees with what Joyce had predicted. Observing Angie while she’s taking a nap Marlene says: “She’s a bit thick. She’s a bit funny...She’s not going to make it” ([4], p. 1624). Also, Tycer ([7], p. 59-60) points out that if the narrative was presented in a sequential order this would be the plays final line, leaving the audience to try to “envision ways they might contribute to a less ‘frightening’ future, where circumstances become more hospitable to the next generation”.

4. Conclusions

By finding Brechtian epic elements in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, this research revealed that Churchill used the stage as a vehicle for social change and sought to empower the audience against oppression. The present research also shows that by using a Brechtian way of representation, Churchill wants to draw the audience’s attention to the gender ideology that governs sexual representation. Whereas Brecht insisted on the link between capitalist ideology and the conventional mode of representation, Churchill focused on the fact that the dominant gender ideologies were a result of culture. Therefore, by alienating gender from the body, Churchill questions the dominant gender ideologies in a society and makes the audience think about the oppressive nature of gender distinctions.

Also the researcher shows that in *Top Girls*, Churchill analyses the intra-sexual class oppression which became dominant with Margaret Thatcher’s election as the first British female prime minister in the 1980s. Churchill illustrated that under Thatcherism, the prevailing conditions became worse for the majority of women. By portraying the success of “top girl”, Marlene is achieved at the expense of oppressing her working-class sister Joyce, *Top Girls* can be considered as a critique of the superwoman ethos.

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