



Subverting the Male Gaze on Stage: A Feminist Critical Approach to Caryl Churchill's *Theater*

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Abstract

This article examines Caryl Churchill's theatrical oeuvre through the lens of feminist critical theory, with particular attention to Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and its subsequent elaborations in performance studies and gender theory. Churchill's drama constitutes one of the most sustained and formally innovative critiques of patriarchal structures in twentieth and twenty-first-century English-language theatre. Through close readings of Top Girls (1982), Cloud Nine (1979), Vinegar Tom (1976), and A Number (2002), this study analyses the dramaturgical strategies that Churchill employs to dismantle, expose, and redirect the visual economy that undergirds conventional representational regimes. The article argues that Churchill's use of cross-gender casting, temporal and spatial fragmentation, collective theatrical forms, and the deliberate disruption of narrative pleasure constitutes a coherent and radical poetics of counter-spectatorship. By repositioning the female figure as a site of political contestation rather than aesthetic consumption, Churchill's theatre performs what this study terms a "dramaturgy of refusal" — a systematic rejection of the visual and ideological conventions through which patriarchy reproduces itself on stage and in society. Drawing on the frameworks of Laura Mulvey, Jill Dolan, Elin Diamond, Sue-Ellen Case, and Judith Butler, this article situates Churchill's theatrical practice within broader debates concerning feminist epistemology, performativity, and the politics of the visible.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, Feminist Theatre, Gender Performativity, Dramaturgy, Counter-Spectatorship, Top Girls, Cloud Nine, British Drama.

Introduction

The concept of the male gaze, first articulated in Laura Mulvey's landmark 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," has proven to be one of the most generative and contested frameworks in feminist cultural criticism. Originally formulated as an analysis of the psychological structures that organize spectatorship in classical Hollywood cinema, the male gaze quickly became a transmedial concept applicable to literature, visual art, advertising, and, significantly, theatrical performance. The gaze, in Mulvey's formulation, is not simply a matter of who is looking at whom; it names a fundamental asymmetry of power in which the feminine is constructed as spectacle for the masculine subject's visual and ideological gratification. The female figure is, in this economy, an object of the look rather than its subject; she is to-be-looked-at rather than looking. As Buckland has recently reaffirmed, Mulvey's essay remains "a foundational text that frames mainstream narrative cinema as a type of discourse that disseminates patriarchal ideology." Its conceptual architecture continues to generate productive analytical frameworks across media, including theatrical performance (Buckland, 2025, p. 1).



Theatre, as a liveness-dependent medium in which presences occupy shared physical space, presents a uniquely complex site for the operation and subversion of such gazing structures. The theatrical apparatus — the proscenium arch, the darkness of the house, the lighting that isolates performers, the conventions of character and narrative — has historically organized the spectator's gaze in ways broadly analogous to those of the cinematic apparatus described by Mulvey. Feminist theatre scholars, including Jill Dolan, Elin Diamond, and Sue-Ellen Case, have demonstrated at length that the dominant tradition of Western theatre has been structured around a masculine viewing subject and a feminized spectacle. Dolan's foundational text *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) extends Mulvey's apparatus theory to performance, arguing that mainstream theatre positions women characters as reflections of male authority rather than as autonomous subjects. In theatrical contexts, as in cinema, the male gaze operates through multiple representational mechanisms — character positioning, lighting, and narrative framing — that collectively construct the female body as a site of aesthetic consumption and ideological containment (Batobara, 2021). It is within this critical context that the work of Caryl Churchill acquires its full significance. Churchill, born in 1938 and still active as a playwright, is widely regarded as the preeminent feminist playwright of the British stage. Over a career spanning more than six decades, she has produced a body of work remarkable for its formal experimentation, its political acuity, and its sustained interrogation of the structures through which gender, class, and power are produced and naturalized. From her early radio plays through to her recent short works for the Royal Court Theatre, Churchill has consistently refused the representational conventions that make the theatre a comfortable vehicle for dominant ideology.

This article undertakes a systematic feminist critical analysis of Churchill's theatrical strategies, arguing that her dramaturgy constitutes a coherent and sophisticated response to the problem of the male gaze on stage. The analysis proceeds in four principal stages. First, it theorizes the relationship between the male gaze and theatrical spectatorship, drawing on the established feminist performance scholarship. Second, it examines Churchill's formal innovations — particularly her use of cross-gender casting and overlapping dialogue — as techniques of counter-spectatorship. Third, it analyses the politics of female representation in Churchill's most significant works, with sustained attention to *Top Girls* and *Vinegar Tom*. Fourth, it considers Churchill's engagement with questions of temporality, history, and the construction of femininity as ideology. Throughout, the article situates Churchill's dramaturgy in relation to Butler's theory of gender performativity, arguing that Churchill's theatre performs and exposes the theatrical nature of gender itself.

The Male Gazette and Theatrical Spectatorship: Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the significance of Churchill's counter-strategies, it is necessary to establish with some precision the theoretical terrain that her theatre traverses. Mulvey's argument, in its original form, proceeds from a structural framework derived primarily from psychological theory. The cinema, Mulvey argues, activates two interrelated forms of visual pleasure: the pleasure of looking at another as a subjugated object, and narcissism, which involves identification with an ideal ego-image on screen. Both of these pleasures, in the classical Hollywood text, are structured to serve a masculine subject position. The male protagonist functions as the active agent of the look and the narrative; the female character is feminized, marginalisedfeminisedmarginalised, and made the object of his and the audience's gaze. Mulvey's famous prescription — “destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon” — calls for a cinema that disrupts these structures of visual gratification.



The application of this framework to theatre requires careful adjustment. Theatre differs from cinema in several respects that are relevant to the politics of spectatorship. The theatrical performer is present in the space; the audience's gaze is not channelled and controlled by a camera but, in principle, is free to roam the stage. The theatrical presence cannot be edited, slowed, or zoomed; it remains irreducibly human, perishable, and co-present with the spectators. Performance theorists, including Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), have argued that this liveness constitutes a fundamental ontological difference between the theatre and film, with significant implications for theories of spectatorship and the gaze.

Nevertheless, as Dolan convincingly demonstrates, the theatrical apparatus has its own mechanisms for disciplining and directing the spectator's gaze. The proscenium stage, the convention of the fourth wall, the use of lighting to frame and isolate the performer, the narrative organization of dramatic action, the system of dramatic character — all of these function to position the spectator in a relatively fixed and ideologically determined relation to what they see. The feminist spectator, Dolan argues, is constructed by mainstream theatre as an "ideal spectator" who is implicitly masculine, white, and socially orthodox. The female spectator is invited to identify with a femininity that is constructed for and by the masculine gaze.

Sue-Ellen Case's feminist revision of theatre history in *Feminism and Theatre* (1988) extends this argument by examining the historical exclusion of women from theatrical production — as writers, directors, and performers — and the ideological work this exclusion performs. When women have appeared on the Western stage, Case argues, it has been in roles and representations defined by masculine authority and anxiety. The great female types of dramatic tradition — the servant, the submissive wife, the mother, the Witch — are not representations of autonomous women but of masculinity's projections and structural demands.

Elin Diamond's contribution to this theoretical tradition is particularly relevant to Churchill's theatre. In *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (1997), Diamond develops the concept of "feminist mimesis" — a theatrical practice that does not abandon mimesis altogether but critically inhabits and subverts it. Diamond draws on Luce Irigaray's strategy of mimicry, in which the feminine subject adopts the roles assigned to her by masculine discourse but deploys them with a difference that exposes their constructed and contingent character. Churchill's theatre, as this article will argue, exemplifies this strategy.

Cross-Gender casting and the Defamiliarisation of gender in *Cloud Nine*

Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) represents one of the most radical deployments of cross-gendercasting in the history of British theatre. The play is structured in two acts: the first set in colonial Africa in the Victorian era, the second in contemporary London. In each act, the casting choices are deliberately counter-intuitive and politically charged. In Act One, Betty, the Victorian wife, is played by a male actor; a white actor plays Clive's young African servant Joshua; and Edward, the young son, is played by a woman.

Churchill's prefatory note to the play specifies the rationale for these choices with characteristic precision. A man plays Betty because she is what men want her to be. A white man plays Joshua because he has internalised the coloniser's values. A woman plays Edward because he does not conform to the rigid social norms of his environment. The casting thus functions as a visible, theatrical literalization of ideological construction: it shows the audience that the identities on stage are not natural expressions of inner essence but



performances shaped by strict hierarchies of power. Churchill's cross-gender strategies have been recognized across recent scholarship as constituting a sustained dramaturgical critique: Churchill "challenges traditional gender roles and uses theatrical techniques to make her points," deploying cross-gender casting in *Cloud Nine* as the most radical manifestation of this practice (Almaarroof and Zaid, 2024, p. 163).

This strategy has direct implications for the operation of the male gaze. In conventional theatrical representation, the male gaze is naturalized — the audience does not see it as a gaze but as simple visual reality. The female character on stage appears to be what she is; the conventions of realistic theatre conceal the labour of her construction as an ideological spectacle. Churchill's cross-gender casting makes this construction visible. When the audience sees a male actor embodying Betty's femininity — the self-effacement, the decorativeness, the absolute domestic compliance — they are compelled to recognize it as an institutional performance rather than a biological essence.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, elaborated most fully in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), provides the most illuminating theoretical framework for understanding this theatrical strategy. Butler argues that gender is not an expression of a pre-existing inner identity but a performance produced through the repetitive citation of gendered norms. Gender is not what we are but what we do — and more precisely, what is done to us through the disciplinary repetition of socially mandated acts. The category of biological destiny itself, Butler argues, is not a given but a regulatory fiction that naturalizes and enforces normative social hierarchies. Churchill's dramaturgy thus enacts on stage precisely what Butler theorizes philosophically. As scholars have demonstrated, Churchill "employs dramatic narrative in an episodic style instead of using a linear structure" to create "temporal disturbances" that defamiliarise the very social and psychological normativities that Butler's theory seeks to deconstruct (Bayrakcı, 2023, p. 44).

Churchill's theatre performs this Butlerian insight with remarkable theatrical economy. *Cloud Nine's* Act Two, set a hundred years later but involving characters who have aged only twenty-five years, creates a temporal dislocation that serves to defamiliarise the present. The contemporary characters, now played by actors of the appropriate gender and ethnicity, are nevertheless haunted by the ideological formations of the Victorian past. Lin, a politically independent woman; Gerry, a social nonconformist; and Victoria, Betty's daughter, now played by a woman, navigate a landscape of social liberation that has not fully escaped the authoritative structures it has ostensibly repudiated.

The second act's relative naturalism, contrasted with the first act's theatrical artifice, is itself ideologically significant. When gender is performed by the "right" person, it becomes invisible as performance — it appears natural. Churchill's structural juxtaposition forces the audience to carry the insight of Act One into their reading of Act Two: to see the "natural" performances of contemporary gender as equally constructed, equally theatrical, equally the product of institutional power.

Vinegar Tom and the Witchcraft of Patriarchal Violence

If *Cloud Nine* addresses the mechanisms of gender construction through theatrical alienation, *Vinegar Tom* (1976) stages the lethal consequences of patriarchal power in its most naked and violent form. Written for the socialist-feminist theatre company Monstrous Regiment, the play is set in seventeenth-century England and deals with the persecution of women accused of witchcraft. A specifically materialist feminist analysis informs Churchill's dramaturgical choices in this play: the witch trials are presented not as superstition or



aberration but as a systematic mechanism of social control directed at women who fall outside the boundaries of acceptable domestic subservience.

The play's structure alternates between dramatic scenes and anachronistic songs performed in contemporary style and costume, with the deliberate Brechtian effect of interrupting emotional absorption and insisting on the historical relevance of the institutional violence depicted. The songs-caustic, darkly comic, politically direct-function as a form of feminist metalanguage, commenting on the action and its ideological implications in a register unavailable to the seventeenth-century characters. This formal device, which owes something to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, is also a specifically feminist technique: it refuses the consolations of historical distance and insists that the violence done to Alice, Joan, Ellen, and the other women of the play is continuous with the systemic economic and social marginalization of women in Churchill's own time.

The play's engagement with the male gaze operates at multiple levels. Most obviously, the witch accusation is itself a form of hostile spectatorship: the accused woman is subjected to an invasive, violating, and ultimately lethal scrutiny by the male authorities who define her social presence, independence, and behaviour as deviant. The scene in which Ellen and Joan are subjected to examination for signs of witchcraft — their lives inspected, their social compliance interrogated — dramatizes with visceral clarity the way in which patriarchal power operates through the regulation of the female figure as a spectacle of insubordination.

Alice's story is particularly illuminating in this respect. Her economic desire and agency-modest and ordinary by contemporary standards—are constructed by the men around her as threatening and unnatural. Jack's agricultural and financial failures, for which he seeks a supernatural explanation, are displaced onto Alice as evidence of her maleficence. The male inability to control economic outcomes is projected outward as witchcraft. Churchill's analysis here anticipates and dramatizes arguments that would be developed in feminist historical scholarship, including the work of Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), which argues that the witch trials functioned as a proto-capitalist mechanism for the disciplining of female labour and social mobility. Churchill's portrayal of Alice enacts what Mustafa describes as a crisis of female identity precipitated by patriarchal social structures that deny women the basic conditions for autonomous self-definition, rendering their ordinary desires and social presence criminally transgressive (Mustafa, 2025, p. 592).

The play's anachronistic songs are themselves a subversion of the dominant gaze. Songs such as "Evil Women" and "Nobody Sings" are performed directly to the audience, refusing the fourth wall and the passive spectatorship that the dramatic scenes might otherwise encourage. The singer looks back at the audience, refusing the position of object and claiming the position of subject who analyses and judges. This reversal of the gaze is consonant with what feminist performance theorist Jill Dolan calls "the feminist spectator" — a position of active, critical, politically engaged looking that refuses the passivity conventionally assigned to femininity.

Top Girls: History, Ambition, and the Spectacle of Female File

Top Girls (1982) is widely regarded as Churchill's masterpiece and one of the most significant political plays of the twentieth century. Its ambition is commensurate with its achievement: in a single work, Churchill manages to stage a critique of Thatcherite individualism, a historical survey of the costs of female ambition across cultures and centuries, and a searching analysis of the contradictions internal to feminism itself. The play's



first act, the famous dinner party scene in which the contemporary character Marlene celebrates her career success with a group of historical and fictional women—including Pope Joan, Patient Griselda, the Japanese courtier Lady Nijo, Dull Gret from a Bruegel painting, and Isabella Bird, the Victorian explorer—is one of the most formally inventive scenes in modern drama.

The first act's formal organization is itself a critical act. The decision to bring together women across historical periods is not merely a theatrical device for exposition but a political argument: it insists on the structural continuity of women's oppression over time, while simultaneously affirming the diversity of its forms and the variety of women's responses to it. The conversations that unfold among these women—overlapping, interrupted, non-linear—stage a feminist counter-history that challenges the masculine narratives of progress and individual achievement that underpin Thatcherite ideology.

Churchill's stage direction specifies that the dialogue overlaps in complex and carefully notated ways. Characters speak across and through each other's speech; the individual voice is never fully audible, never fully uninterrupted. This formal technique has several ideological implications relevant to the politics of the gaze. Conventional dramatic dialogue — the well-made play's careful alternation of speeches — enacts a fiction of rational, individuated subjectivity. Characters speak and are heard; their words carry meaning; their interiority is expressed and communicated. Churchill's overlapping dialogue refuses this fiction. It insists on the cacophony of women's experience, the structural difficulty of making oneself heard, the way in which other stories, other histories, other forms of systemic hardship always speak across individual women's stories.

The play's second and third acts perform a devastating structural reversal. We learn that Marlene, whose career success the first act seemed to celebrate, has in fact abandoned her daughter Angie to her sister Joyce — a working-class woman whose labour and poverty are the invisible underside of Marlene's individual achievement. The dinner party of the first act, which appeared to be a feminist celebration of female success, is retrospectively exposed as an ideology: a celebration of the few women who have succeeded within patriarchal capitalism at the expense of the many who have not. Churchill's structural argument is Brechtian in its force: the pleasure of the first act is systematically undermined by the political revelations of the second and third acts. Recent critical readings have emphasized that Churchill's dramatization of Thatcherite ideology constitutes a formal indictment of liberal-feminist individualism: Marlene's ascent within the existing hierarchical order perpetuates rather than dismantles the structural conditions that subordinate working-class women to economic and social exploitation (Almaarroof and Mahmood, 2022, p. 57).

The figure of Angie is particularly significant for the play's engagement with feminist spectatorship. Angie, aged sixteen, dreams of becoming like her aunt Marlene — of achieving the individual success that Marlene represents. Her dream is presented with a mixture of tenderness and devastating irony: we know, because Churchill has told us through the play's structural argument, that Angie is exactly the kind of girl who will not make it. The social and economic structures that Marlene's individual success does not disturb will continue to exclude Angie. The play's final image — Angie waking from a nightmare, saying “frightening” — is one of the most haunting curtain lines in modern drama.

From the perspective of feminist spectatorship, the play's formal strategy is one of progressive discomfort. The audience is invited to take pleasure in the first act—the wit of the historical figures, the bravura theatricality of the overlapping dialogue, the apparent feminist



statement of women's solidarity across time-and then to have that pleasure systematically interrogated. Churchill's dramaturgy performs the critique of what Dolan calls "liberal feminism" — a feminism of individual achievement and equal opportunity within existing structures — by seducing the audience into its assumptions and then exposing their political inadequacy.

Gender Performance and Theatrical Performance: A Theoretical Synthesis

The relationship between Butler's theory of gender performativity and Churchill's theatrical practice is one of remarkable theoretical consonance, even though Churchill's dramaturgy preceded and in some respects anticipates Butler's philosophical argument. The central insight shared by both is that gender is not a natural given but a cultural production — a set of acts, gestures, and citations that constitute the appearance of a stable, essential gender identity while concealing the regulatory mechanisms that enforce this appearance.

Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* proceeds through a critical reading of Foucault, Lacan, and feminist theory to argue that the category of biological determinism is itself a performative construction. The regulatory norms of compulsory social conformity, Butler argues, produce the fiction of a natural, fixed destiny that then provides the ideological ground for enforcing normative behaviour. Gender is not the cultural expression of an innate reality; social reality itself is produced through the performative reiteration of hierarchical norms.

Churchill's theatre stages this insight in ways that are both intellectually rigorous and theatrically compelling. The male actor playing Betty in *Cloud Nine* does not merely illustrate Butler's argument; he enacts it, making visible through live performance the process by which femininity is constructed as institutional spectacle. The overlapping voices of *Top Girls'* dinner party do not merely represent the difficulty of female self-expression; they perform the structural conditions that make individual female subjectivity always already partial, interrupted, and contested.

The concept of "citation" is particularly productive in this context. Butler argues that gender performances do not originate in an individual subject but cite and reiterate previous performances. The female subject performs femininity by citing the social norms that precede her; her performance always quotes a prior performance, which in turn quotes another. This structure of citation — which is also a structure of constraint, since one can only cite the available norms — is dramatized in Churchill's historical plays, where the continuity of women's oppression across time is shown to be precisely a matter of the reiteration of hierarchical structures.

Churchill's formal innovations — cross-gender casting, temporal dislocation, structural irony, the Brechtian refusal of emotional identification — are not merely aesthetic choices but epistemological strategies. They create the conditions for a feminist spectatorship that sees through the naturalistic illusion to the constructed, political, contestable nature of gender as it is performed on stage and in life. Diamond's concept of feminist mimesis is apposite here: Churchill inhabits the conventions of dramatic theatre in order to disrupt them from within, deploying mimesis against itself in the service of a feminist epistemology.

A Number and the Policies of Reproduction

A Number (2002) represents Churchill's engagement with the politics of genetic reproduction and the commodification of human identity. The play consists of a series of two-hander dialogues between a father, Salter, and several sons, all of whom are genetic clones of an original child. The play raises profound questions about identity, authenticity,



and the ethics of scientific mass production. However, it also, more obliquely, engages with questions of institutional dominance and the politics of control that are continuous with Churchill's earlier feminist preoccupations.

The play's world is one in which human lives are subject to reproduction, commodification, and replacement. The father's treatment of his sons as interchangeable and replaceable constitutes a form of violence against the individual subject's claim to uniqueness and selfhood. The emotional violence that the play explores — the sons' horrified discovery that they are copies, that their father's love for them was premised on a deception — dramatizes the consequences of treating persons as objects, as commodities that can be produced and reproduced according to the desires of the powerful.

The feminist dimensions of this argument are apparent when we note that the reduction of persons to assets that can be reproduced and consumed according to the powerful's desires has historically been the condition of women rather than men. Churchill's deployment of this logic in a scientifically-centred narrative is itself a form of feminist argumentation: it exposes the structures of objectification and commodification that feminism has long analyzed in relation to the female labourer by staging them in relation to cloned humanity, making their violence visible to spectators who might otherwise be too familiar with their application to women to see them clearly.

The play's formal economy — the repetition of similar but different dialogues between the same father and variant sons — formally enacts the logic of cloning that it explores thematically. The audience experiences the discomfort of repetition-with-difference, of recognizing familiar patterns in altered configurations. This formal experience is itself a kind of feminist education in the structures of normativity: to recognize how the same fundamental pattern — of power, of objectification, of the denial of autonomous subjectivity — repeats itself across different contexts and individuals.

Dramaturgy of Refusal: Towards A Poetics of Feminist Theatre

Across the range of Churchill's work examined in this article, a coherent dramaturgical philosophy emerges that this study has termed a "dramaturgy of refusal." This term names a systematic theatrical practice of refusing the conventions—formal, narrative, visual, affective—through which dominant ideology reproduces itself in theatrical representation. Churchill's theatre rejects the well-made play's organization of narrative pleasure; it rejects the realistic character's claim to coherent, unified interiority; it rejects the proscenium stage's disciplining of the spectatorial gaze; it rejects the comfortable emotional identification that mainstream theatre offers as its primary product.

This dramaturgy of refusal is not merely negative — it does not simply destroy the pleasures of the theatre without replacement. Churchill's theatre offers its own pleasures, of a more demanding and politically alert kind. The pleasure of formal innovation — of watching *Cloud Nine*'s casting conventions dismantle gender essentialism, of following *Top Girls*' structural argument through its three acts, of experiencing the tonal complexity of *Vinegar Tom*'s alternation of dramatic scene and anachronistic song — is a pleasure that engages the critical faculties as well as the emotional.

This engagement of the critical faculties is itself a feminist political strategy. The feminist theatre, in Dolan's formulation, seeks to transform the spectator from a passive consumer of dominant ideology into an active, critical, politically engaged subject. This transformation requires the disruption of the automatic, unreflective pleasures offered by mainstream theatre — the pleasures of emotional identification, of narrative resolution, of the



compliant, subjugated female figure available for the spectator's consumption. Churchill's theatre disrupts these pleasures systematically, in the service of a different kind of engagement.

The relationship between Churchill's dramaturgy and the Brechtian tradition is important but requires careful qualification. Churchill is not simply a Brechtian playwright; her formal experimentation draws on a wider range of theatrical traditions and feminist theoretical resources, giving it a distinctive character. The Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, as Churchill deploys it, is not primarily concerned with the production of a rational, clear-eyed class consciousness but with the defamiliarisation of social hierarchy as a category-with making visible the constructed, performative, contestable nature of the civic identities that both society and conventional theatre present as natural and inevitable.

Furthermore, Churchill's theatre is notable for its rejection of the didacticism sometimes associated with feminist and left-wing political theatre. Churchill does not tell her audiences what to think; she creates the formal and dramatic conditions for a particular kind of critical seeing. The open endings of her plays — the haunting irresolution of *Top Girls*, the uncanny repetitions of *A Number*, the deliberate comfort denial of *Vinegar Tom* — are not failures of dramatic resolution but principled refusals of the false consolations that narrative closure offers. Churchill's theatre has been characterized as cultivating in audiences a mode of “anti-adaptive, resistant feelings towards a capitalist order” combined with a “utopic sensing that an alternative future is desirable and still possible” — a simultaneously critical and generative theatrical practice that exceeds conventional political dramaturgy (Aston, 2025, p. 12).

The Female Figure as Political Theatre

A central preoccupation across Churchill's work is the representation of the female condition as a site of political contestation. In a theatrical tradition that has routinely deployed the female form as spectacle, Churchill insists on the woman's life as the locus of ideology's inscription, the possibility of resistance, and history's material record. This insistence takes different forms in different plays, but it constitutes a continuous thread across her work.

In *Vinegar Tom*, the female presence is the target of a systematic patriarchal violence that operates through the discourse of witchcraft. The life of the accused woman is not simply an innocent object of false accusation; it is a site on which the anxieties of a patriarchal order struggling to maintain its coherence against the disruptive forces of female autonomy, female agency, and female solidarity are projected and punished. The examination of the Witch's life for social nonconformity - the invasive, humiliating scrutiny to which Alice and the other women are subjected— dramatizes with historical precision the relationship between the authoritative gaze and patriarchal violence.

In *Top Girls*, the female struggle appears in a different but related form. The historical women of the first act dinner party have all, in various ways, experienced violence against their lives and autonomy as the price of their various forms of distinction or nonconformity. Lady Nijo was given as a captive courtier to the Japanese Emperor; her children were taken from her. Patient Griselda was subjected to the systematic humiliation of her husband's tests of her obedience. Pope Joan was killed when her true identity, concealed beneath her papal robes, was discovered. The lives of these women — their domestic capacity, their physical labour, their social vulnerability — have been the instruments through which patriarchal power has controlled and punished them.



Churchill's staging of these stories in the context of a contemporary celebration of female career success creates a powerful structural argument about the persistence of patriarchal violence in new forms. Marlene's individual success has not abolished the conditions that made Lady Nijo's life the property of an emperor or Patient Griselda's existence the testing ground for her husband's will to power. It has merely displaced them, made them less visible, attributed them to individual failure or choice rather than structural constraint.

The feminist critical tradition offers several frameworks for analyzing this relationship between female existence and patriarchal power. Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) argues for a feminist philosophy that refuses both the Cartesian equation of the physical with passive matter and the idealist dismissal of material reality in favour of an immaterial subjectivity. For Grosz, human presences are not simply the inert matter on which culture inscribes its meanings; they are themselves active, volatile, resistant-capable of disrupting the scripts that would confine them.

Churchill's theatrical subjects are, in this sense, Groszian volatile forces. They do not simply illustrate or embody the ideological arguments that the plays make; they perform, resist, and disrupt. The male actor embodying Betty's femininity does not illustrate the argument that femininity is socially constructed; his performance enacts its construction and, in doing so, exposes and contests it. The overlapping voices of the Top Girls dinner party do not represent the difficulty of female expression; they enact it, making it audible and visible in ways that analysis alone cannot achieve.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Caryl Churchill's theatrical practice constitutes a sustained, formally sophisticated, and politically coherent feminist critique of the authoritative gaze as it operates in theatrical representation and in the broader social production of hierarchy. Through the analysis of *Cloud Nine*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Top Girls*, and *A Number*, this study has demonstrated that Churchill's dramaturgy is organized around what it terms a "dramaturgy of refusal" — a systematic subversion of the formal and ideological conventions through which the theatre reproduces dominant gender ideology. Churchill's strategies of counter-spectatorship— cross-gender casting, temporal and spatial dislocation, structural irony, overlapping dialogue, the Brechtian interruption of narrative pleasure, the direct address that refuses the passivity of the spectatorial gaze—constitute not merely a set of formal innovations but a coherent feminist epistemology. By making visible the constructed, performative, and historically contingent nature of social roles, Churchill's theatre creates the conditions for a feminist spectatorship that sees through the naturalistic illusion to the power relations it conceals. The theoretical frameworks provided by Mulvey, Dolan, Diamond, Case, Butler, and Grosz have been shown to illuminate different dimensions of Churchill's theatrical practice without reducing it to any single theoretical schema. Churchill's theatre exceeds its theoretical analogues: it does not merely illustrate or dramatize feminist theory. However, it performs it in ways that engage faculties—emotional, social, theatrical—that theoretical prose cannot reach. The live encounter between Churchill's formally experimental theatre and its feminist audiences constitutes, at its best, a transformative political experience — a mode of feminist education that operates through the collective conscience as well as the intellect. In the current moment, when feminist politics continues to be contested and when the representation of gender on stage and screen remains a site of political struggle, Churchill's theatrical practice retains its urgency and its exemplary



force. Theatre reminds us that the stage is not merely a mirror of social reality but a machine for the production and reproduction of social meaning — and therefore a site where the struggle over representation is also a struggle over the conditions of social life itself.

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