“Top Girls” by Caryl Churchill

Top Girls is structured in three acts and was written by Caryl Churchill between 1980 and 1982. The première was on August 28, 1982 at Royal Court Theatre in London. The production was transferred to the Joseph Papp’s Theatre in New York in the same year. There the production was so successful that it was on for months, instead of two weeks, which were planned. It also was produced as a film by the BBC for their programme ‘Performance’ and broadcasted in November 1991. The play is regularly performed around the world and has quickly become part of the canon of women’s theatre.

Critics:

- “Top Girls has been praised by some reviewers for its innovative dramaturgy and denounced by others for creating too much confusion for the audience:”
- “The apparent bubble is difficult to follow. […] It is a bold dramatic device achieving an almost complete disorientation and sense of historical chaos […].”

The plot

Act 1, Scene 1
The play starts in a restaurant where Marlene has invited five friends to a dinner party. Marlene has recently been promoted at work. The five guests are all women that are either long-dead or are fictional characters from literature or paintings. Her first guests that appear are Isabella Bird and Lady Nijo. Nijo and Isabella discuss their lives, including their family lives. In this scene also Dull Gret and Pope Joan appear. The conversation is about different topics, including religion and the love lives of Nijo and Isabella. Isabella talks about her travel experiences. Joan reports about dressing and living as a male from the age of twelve so that she could receive a good education. Marlene wants to make a toast to her guests but her guests insist on toasting her and her career. Joan tells that while she enjoyed being the pope, she also had a secret affair with a chamberlain and became pregnant. Joan gave birth to a child and was stoned to death. Nijo tells the other women that she has given birth to four children, and only being able to see one of them after birth. During the confusing conversations, Isabella talks about that she never had children. The final guest Griselda arrives and tells her life story. Although she was the daughter of a poor farmer, she was asked to be the wife of a local prince, but only if she obeyed him without question. Griselda agreed, what later meant losing the two children she had with him. Her husband has taken the children from her as infants. Then Griselda was sent back to her father with nothing except a slip to wear. Her husband called her back to help him prepare for his next wedding to a much younger girl. The girl was her daughter. Walter, her husband, wanted to test her loyalty with these actions. At the end he took Griselda back. Marlene is upset by Griselda’s story. Nijo is outraged because she saw her children never again after they were taken away from
her. Gret speaks about her journey through hell, where she fought with devils. The scene ends with Isabella talking about the last trip she took.

**Act 1, Scene 2**
The second scene opens in the Top Girls employment agency in London. Marlene is interviewing a secretary named Jeanine to find possible employers for her. Marlene tells Jeanine that she must not tell a possible employer that she is getting married or might have children. Marlene evaluates Jeanine and suggests her companies she could apply at.

**Act 1, Scene 3**
This scene takes place in the evening in Joyce’s backyard. Joyce is Marlene’s elder sister. She calls for her sixteen-year-old daughter Angie, but Angie and her friend Kit ignore her. Angie says she wants to kill her mother. Both children discuss going to the cinema. Angie wants to leave home and wants to travel to London to visit her aunt Marlene. She has a big secret, because she believes that Marlene is her real mother. Joyce says she will not let them go to the cinema until Angie cleans her room. Angie leaves, and when she returns, she is wearing a nice dress that is too small for her. Joyce becomes angry because Angie has not cleaned her room. It starts raining and Joyce and Kit go inside the house. Angie stays outside.

**Act 2, Scene 1**
Act Two opens in the "Top Girls" Employment Agency at Monday morning. Win and Nell, who work at the agency, are chatting. Win tells Nell about her weekend that she spent at her married boyfriend’s house while his wife was out of town. The conversation turns to office gossip. They consider changing jobs as Marlene has been promoted over them, limiting their prospects. Still, Nell and Win are glad Marlene got the job over another male colleague, Howard. Marlene enters late. Win and Nell tell her that they are glad she got the promotion rather than Howard. Win interviews Louise, a forty-six-year-old woman who has been in the same job for twenty-one years. Louise has done everything for her company, but has spent twenty years in middle management with no opportunities to go higher, while younger male colleagues became promoted. Win believes there will be only limited opportunities for her, when she leaves her old company. Now Angie has arrived in Marlene’s office on her own to see her aunt. She intends to stay for some days. Angie becomes sad when Marlene does not seem to like her plan. It is not clear if Joyce knows that Angie is in London. Their conversation is interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Kidd, Howard’s wife. Mrs. Kidd is very upset because Howard cannot accept that Marlene got the promotion to managing director and not him. Partly he is disturbed because she is a woman. Mrs. Kidd wants Marlene to turn down the promotion so that he can have it. Mrs. Kidd leaves when Marlene is rude to her after she was very patient during the conversation. Angie admires Marlene for her behaviour. In another interview Nell talks to Shona, who claims to be twenty-nine and to have worked in sales-business. She tells how successful she is. As the interview progresses, it becomes clear that Shona has been lying. She is only twenty-one and has no real work experience. In the main office, Win sits down and talks to Angie, who was left there by Marlene. Angie tells Win that she wants to work for the agency. When Marlene returns, Win tells her about Angie wanting to work at Top Girls. Marlene does not think Angie has much of a future there. Nell comes in and informs her that Howard has had a heart attack.
Act 2, Scene 2
This scene takes place a year earlier in Joyce’s kitchen. Marlene gives presents to Joyce and Angie. The gift for Angie is the dress that Angie wore in act 1. While Angie goes to her room to try it on, Joyce and Marlene are talking. Joyce had no idea that Marlene was coming. Marlene believed Joyce had invited her. Both didn’t know that Angie was inviting Marlene without telling Joyce about it. Angie returns to show her new dress. Angie reminds Marlene that the last time she visited her was for her ninth birthday. Marlene finds out that Joyce was left by her husband. It is getting late and Angie is sent to bed. Joyce and Marlene continue their discussion about their lives. The sisters’ conversation turns into an argument. Marlene believes that Joyce is jealous of her success. Joyce criticizes the decisions Marlene has made, including leaving her home and leaving her child Angie. Marlene offers to send money for Angie, but Joyce doesn’t want it. Marlene is excited about a future under the new prime-minister, Margaret Thatcher, while Joyce doesn’t like the prime minister and her politics. They talk about the bad and difficult life their mother had, because their father was an alcoholic. It becomes very clear the sisters have very different views of the world and their family situations. As Marlene wants to sleep, Angie walks in, having had a bad dream.

Speech

- Churchill works a lot with overlapping dialogues. That means the characters keep interrupting each other in their conversations. Those interruptions have two ambivalent functions. First, they help to create “real life” elements in the play and create a growing tension. Second, they show a disturbed communication between the characters, the fate of the individual is more important than the fate of others. E.g.: Act 1/ scene1, page 3 or act2/ scene2, page 85
  When one character starts speaking before the other has finished, the point of interruption is marked / Characters also sometimes keep talking through somebody’s speech.

- The differences of cultures and eras are not indicated by the characters’ language. All characters speak modern day English.

- Many characters use technical terminology when they speak. Joan for example talks about abstract theological problems using sometimes Latin. The women at the employment agency use business jargon when they talk to each other. Their speech is meritocratic.

- It is important that Marlene and her colleagues use a lot of language that is considered to be typical for their male colleagues. They say Marlene is “a ball breaker” or a “smashing bird” and mix very polite sentences with bad language: “Could you please piss off?”

Churchill the playwright

- Churchill’s career can be divided in three main periods:
  1. Period of solitary writing, mostly for the radio, which began with student productions in Oxford in 1958 and culminated in her first major theatre
production, Owners. Churchill’s first works were of small amount, written in a small period of time.

2. Period of collaboration with Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment between 1976 and 1979, when they wrote, for example, Cloud Nine. The second period was Churchill’s experimental stage, when she developed her ‘voice’ and was offered commissions, for example from Max Stafford-Clark.

3. Period since 1979, when she had her greatest successes in all genres, amongst others, Top Girls. In contrast to the strong feminist themes of the second period Churchill now started to write also about commercialism (Serious Money) and the concept of democracy (Mad Forest).

Historical Context

In the early 1980s, Great Britain was ruled by women. Queen Elizabeth II was a royal figurehead, real political power was held by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. A member of the Conservative Party, Thatcher had been elected in 1979, and proceeded to put her own stamp on British life. She held office until late 1990, when she received a vote of no confidence and was replaced by fellow Conservative John Major. Thatcher had been the longest serving prime minister in Great Britain since the nineteenth century.

To improve the British economy, Thatcher dismantled the socialist practices that were put in place in the post-World War II era. She privatized major industries, like coal mining and telecommunications, which had been run by the British government, and she cut down on the power of trade unions. Because Thatcher’s revolution benefited the middle-and upper-classes and seemed to hurt the working-and lower-classes, she was very unpopular among the latter groups. Unemployment continued to rise, and by 1982, over three and a quarter million people were unemployed. With cuts in both welfare and other social programs, such people’s lives were becoming much harder. Though the economy was strong and interest rates and inflation were down, real living standards had been falling slightly for several years.

In the 19801, Thatcher was a symbol for powerful women in England. There was a concrete change in the position of working women. In Great Britain in the early 1980s, women made up forty percent of the labour force. Marriage rates fell in the 1980s. Those that did marry gave up working after having a child. Most women who worked were employed in service, and industrial occupations. The number of professional women was still small, but more women were becoming lawyers than ever before. These professional women often had equal pay for equal work, but working class women did not. Despite the success of Thatcher, many British women were anti-Conservative, though they did not necessarily support Labour either. To these women, Thatcher may have shared their gender, but her political prominence did not necessarily make her their heroine.

The historical and fictional characters of act I

Patient Griselda
Patient Griselda is a fictional character, appearing in "The Clerk’s Tale". Griselda was a peasant girl who was asked to marry a local prince, but only if she would obey him without question. She agreed and has born him two children who were taken away from her while they were still infants. She did not question the decision. Her husband
sent Griselda back home with nothing more than a slip to wear. She went without question. He sent for her to help him plan his second marriage to a young girl. Griselda came back. At a pre-wedding feast, he revealed that the girl and her page were her children and all these incidents were tests of her loyalty.

**Lady Nijo**
Lady Nijo is a thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan to the Emperor of Japan, whose historical basis is the autobiography “Confessions of Lady Nijo”. She later became a Buddhist monk. Like Isabella, Nijo is self-absorbed. Nijo tells the others about her life, including information about her father, her lovers, her four children (only one of whom she ever saw), symbolic clothing, and her time as a travelling monk. But she also listens respectfully to the stories of others and acknowledges her limitations. Nijo liked her silk clothing and easy life with the Emperor.

**Pope Joan**
Pope Joan is a woman from the ninth century who allegedly served as the pope from 854 to 856. Pope Joan is somewhat aloof, making relevant, intelligent declarations throughout the conversation. When the topic turns to religion, she cannot help but point out heresies - herself included - though she does not attempt to convert the others to her religion. She began dressing as a boy at age twelve so she could continue to study; she lived the rest of her life as a man, though she had male lovers. Joan was eventually elected pope. She became pregnant by her chamberlain lover and delivered her baby during a papal procession. For this, Joan was stoned to death.

**Dull Gret**
Dull Gret is the subject of a painting by Brueghel entitled "Dulle Griet." In the painting, she wears an apron and armor and leads a group of women into hell to fight with devils. Gret is generally quiet through most of the dinner, answering questions only when directly asked and making a few comments on the side. Near the end of the scene, Gret makes a speech about her trip to hell and the fight with the devils.

**Isabella Bird**
Isabella is a Scottish woman who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who travelled extensively later in life. In *Top Girls*, Isabella is the first to arrive at the party and dominates the conversation in a self-absorbed manner. She talks on and on about her travels; her complex relationship with her sister, Hennie; her clergyman father, and husband; her illnesses; religion; and her lack of children. While Isabella does listen and respond to the others, she mostly tries to figure out her own life and what it meant. She could never be as good as her sister, but her adventures made her happy.

**Modern Characters**

**Marlene**
At work Marlene is an emancipated, competent and efficient worker, her personality is based on the laws of career and she does not accept human weakness. She judges people as to their future chances of success, in short, she’s a top girl. Marlene’s social life in contrast, is quite sad. She seems not able to have relationships in any way, interpersonal or familiar. “They’re waiting for me to turn into the little woman. Or maybe I’m just horrible of course.” (p. 83) She had some
abortions and her only child Angie, born when Marlene was seventeen, was adopted by her sister, with which she has little to no contact. Though having gotten somewhere despite being a woman, she unconsciously accepts and enforces patriarchal attitudes towards her women employees and Angie. Although she herself has made her way at work, Marlene doesn’t help her clients to get top jobs, but tries to make them small and take jobs as personal assistants or similar. She treats her slow-witted daughter as firmly as her clients and does not want to help her. To that respect Marlene is a typical child of the Thatcher era, believing that everybody can make it if he only wants to and in a society where moving from one social class to another is possible. She herself made her way up in society on the back of her family, leaving her sister and daughter where she came from. Marlene’s emancipation is the product of a liberal, individualistic, bourgeois feminism.

Joyce
In contrast to Marlene, Joyce is a bottom girl. She stayed on the same area and social class where she grew up in. Although she needs money, and cares for Angie and herself by cleaning houses, Joyce has class pride and does not take money from her sister and argues with her when Marlene starts praising Margaret Thatcher. Joyce has been hurt by Marlene’s behaviour very much and can’t forgive her leaving the family. For her Marlene does no longer belong to the family or even the same class. “And you’re one of them.” (p. 86) Unlike Joyce and Marlene’s mother, who stayed with her alcoholic husband and had nothing, Joyce told her husband to leave when she could no longer take his controlling nature and numerous affairs. Joyce regards Thatcher as evil, comparing her to Adolf Hitler, for her attitudes towards working-class people. Joyce believes that Marlene thinks she is too good for her. In a very different way than her sister, Joyce also accepts society’s patriarchal structure. She passively accepts the traditional role models. From a political point of view hers is social feminism.

Angie
As her adopted mother, Angie is a bottom girl. Due to her sex-class, appearance and low intelligence, she has little chances in life. Additionally, she is dull and lazy and has no interest in her future, having left high school without any qualifications. Angie hates Joyce, whom she wants to kill, and adores Marlene, her great paragon. She visits Marlene in London and wants to work for her after having arranged a meeting between Joyce and Marlene previously.

Multiple Casting

Often when Top Girls is performed—including its premieres in England and the United States—several parts are played by the same actresses. Only the actress who plays Marlene, the central character in the play, has only one role. Thus guests at the dinner party are played by actresses who also play contemporary characters. Such casting decisions create visual links between seemingly disparate women. In the original production, for example, the same actress played Dull Gret and Angie, implying that these characters might have something in common. Similarly, another actress took on the roles of Pope Joan and Louise, drawing another parallel. This casting technique further emphasizes how alike the concerns of the historical characters and contemporary characters really are.
“Top Girls” a history play

“Top Girls” is a history play in so far that it does not tell about a historical event, but show the influence of, from our point of view, history on people’s every day life.

For that purpose Churchill uses two methods.
1. She takes historical and fictional figures from different eras and stages their meeting at a neutral place.
2. Within the play she goes back in time for the period of one year.

Bibliography

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Class Conflict

Marlene and Joyce’s differing definitions of success stem in part from a class conflict. Marlene has moved beyond her working-class roots to a middle-class life by education and persistence. She holds a management position in a demanding field, an employment agency. She even lived and worked in the United States for several years. Marlene supports the political agenda of Great Britain’s female prime-minister, Margaret Thatcher, even though she is perceived as anti-working-class.

Joyce remains firmly working class, leading a life only slightly better than her parents. She works as a cleaning lady to support Angie. Unlike Joyce and Marlene’s mother, who stayed with her alcoholic husband and had nothing, Joyce told her husband to leave when she could no longer take his controlling nature and numerous affairs. Joyce regards Thatcher as evil, comparing her to Adolf Hitler, for her attitudes towards working-class people. Joyce believes that Marlene thinks she is too good for her. Marlene says she does not like working-class people, but she does not really include her sister as one of them. The pair never comes to an understanding on class.

Success and Failure

Success is an important part of Marlene’s life in Top Girls, defining who she is and whose company she enjoys. The dinner party is meant to celebrate her promotion to
managing director as well as the successes of her guests. Joan became the pope. Isabella travelled the world. Gret fought the devils in hell. Griselda survived her husband’s extraordinary tests of loyalty. Marlene sees these women as successful, though they are not in her real, everyday life. Marlene’s personal life is a failure because of her success in business. She has no real friends in the play, and she has not seen her sister or biological daughter in seven years. At the dinner party, she moans at one point, “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?”

Yet, Marlene believes that Joyce is mostly a failure because she did not grow beyond her neighbourhood; instead, she got married and raised a child. Joyce cleans houses for a living, and she is not impressed by Marlene’s life. Joyce does not really see her world in the same terms of success or failure. She does what is necessary to survive and to rear Angie. However, both sisters agree that Angie has no chance of being a success in life. Angie has no education, no ambition, and is regarded as dumb. The best she might do is menial work and marry. While this describes Joyce’s life, both Joyce and Marlene perceive that Angie might not be able to take care of herself. This would be the ultimate failure in their eyes. They agree that one should support oneself.

**Sex Roles and Sexism**

Throughout the text of *Top Girls* is an implicit discussion on what society expects women to be. Each of the guests at the dinner party defines womanhood in a particular era, either by what they are or by what they are not. Isabella, for example, could not live up to the standards of femininity defined by her sister, Hennie. Yet Isabella was a traveller who saw more of the world than most men. Marlene also breaks out of the traditional roles for women, by virtue of her career.

While Marlene has benefited economically from her career, her disregard for sex roles has its problems. She is not married, and it does not seem like she is in a long-term relationship. Joyce does not really like her