

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ATTEMPTS ON (WRITING) HER LIFE: ETHICS AND ONTOLOGY IN PRO-FEMINIST PLAYWRITING¹

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Feminist critical writing offers the potential to re-write the past. Writing—as an historic action, contemporary product or process of production—illuminates the absence of women from culturally produced Western art-forms, despite the constant, physical presence of women in centuries of cultural practice; Teresa de Lauretis terms this the ‘paradoxical status of women in Western discourse’ (1984, 13). Particularly in the work of Peggy Phelan, the paradoxical state that de Lauretis notes femininity occupying is reflected in the potential of live *performance*—the only medium that ‘implicates the real through the presence of living bodies’ (Phelan 1993, 148), whilst also depending upon the ‘act of writing toward disappearance’ (1993, 148). Performance and writing are presented here with different reproductive logics, with writing seen as reliant on reproductions of meanings, and performance on a kind of ‘tracelessness’ (1993, 149). Playwriting, in its bridging position between the fixity of written language and the live presentation of linguistic meaning, is a challenging addition to this interplay of discursive absence and the temporal possibilities of performance, but is also crucially significant to reflections on feminist critical writing.

From the classical canon to contemporary drama, plays by men largely do not feature female protagonists; yet, in the last 25 years, the output of male playwrights in contemporary British drama has variously demonstrated the complexity of representing female characters on stage. Phelan’s work is perfectly placed for analysing the output of these representations because of its intimate knowledge of the ontological mechanisms of performance, but also due to Phelan’s hints toward an emerging ethical framework.² If we take Phelan’s ‘implication of the real’ to suggest a form of ethical representation, where stark realities are brought to light by the inter-subjective encounter of audience and physical performer, the significance of ‘disappearance’ writing appears almost an opposite: a discourse that must demonstrate an absence (of feminist histories). Is the

satisfaction of these conditions an ethical or ontological matter? This essay seeks to suggest that the paucity of female protagonists in male-authored plays may be a new stimulus for asking questions about the potential for Performance/Philosophy to intersect with gender studies in new, cross-disciplinary ways.

This analysis will focus on the work of Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens and Tim Crouch—three contemporary playwrights whose outputs have not only had strong theatrical influence, but whose themes reflect concerns in both feminist theatre scholarship and ‘post-millennial’ British plays, largely through their encounters with globalization. As Elin Diamond perceptively argues in *Staging International Feminisms*, feminist theatre performs ‘a demystifying labour’ (2007, 20): uncovering the social and economic conditions that make already-vulnerable subjects further marginalized by subjecting them to globalization’s increasing demands on human labour. Such ‘demystifications’ become at the least more ethically complex (if not, from a radical feminist perspective, impossible) when women’s gendered realities are presented by a male writer. As this paper will later show, Crimp, Stephens and Crouch are theatre-makers who have engendered questions of complicity and responsibility in their audience through re-configuring theatrical forms and styles of dialogue. Such theatrical exposition reflects Diamond’s view of performance as ‘dialectically intertwined with what contradicts it—the flows of people, good and images generated by, and reproduced in, the global market’ (12). This sentiment echoes Phelan’s ontology of performance, and registers its operation in the political contexts that contemporary British plays are written in, in which Crimp, Stephens and Crouch have been formatively innovative.

To summarise Phelan’s account here, we have a triadic relation between representation, discourse and form—three elements that collectively provide a framework for judging the ethical possibilities of a play and that can also be read as methods of philosophically-performing sexual difference. Live performance that is built upon feminist critical writing seems to require *ethical-representation*, a *negating discourse*, and a crucial union of these elements within a ‘nonreproductive’ ontology (Phelan 1993, 148): *ephemeral performance*.³ In Part 1, through the question of whether male playwrights can offer ethical representations, I will consider how the notion of ‘objectification’ functions in the dramaturgy of the three playwrights I have named. In Part 2, in considering whether male playwrights can write ‘toward disappearance’, I will uncover some of the methods by which the playwrights have produced the feminine as a negative force. In Part 3, in addressing whether the writing of female characters has the ontological potency of Peggy Phelan’s account, I will use Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of ‘fecundity’ to suggest a fundamental responsibility the male playwright has to convey a female character with agency.

Ethical Representations

Clare Wallace notes an ‘intensified consciousness’ (2014, 117) around ethical dilemmas in the dramaturgy of post-millennium playwrights, which she describes in terms of ‘representation, proximity and violence’ (119). Central to the ‘responsibility’ (118) these plays question—toward

audiences, playwrights and wider society—are the ethics of Levinas, who speaks of an ethical regard the self has for ‘the Other’. This Levinasian notion allows Wallace to identify subjectivity as perennially shaky in her post-millennial examples—however, by identifying ‘Otherness’ with disparate societal trends (such as capitalism and news media), her account seems to implicitly suggest that the relationship between playwright and character is simply another expression of this relation to the ‘Other’. I would like to suggest that the work of Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens and Tim Crouch has collectively engaged with this question of ‘Otherness’, and has done so through the disjuncture of gender between playwright and character.

In Stephens’ 2003 play *Port*, the audience follows the journey of Rachel Keates through snapshots of 13 years of her life, each presented through naturalistic dialogue. In contrast to such structural linearity, Crimp’s 1997 play *Attempts on Her Life* features (in Martin Midekke’s concise phrase) ‘seventeen opposing or unrelated outlines for the life of someone’ (2014, 102). The “someone” of Crimp’s play is an indeterminate identity: a presence detectable in the various mini-narratives of the play only by characters whose names resemble ‘Anne’: Anya, Annie, Annushka and Anny. Theatre scholars, in identifying the play as ‘post-dramatic’, assimilate Crimp’s suspension of structural and narrative forms within a broader contemporary concern for the fluidity of identity. As Zimmermann has noted, at the heart of the play is an ‘absence’ (2003, 79) of identity. Yet, as the pronoun ‘her’ in the title alludes to, this ‘absent identity’ is not so fluid as to be gender-less: Crimp’s ‘character’ (if the word is even appropriate) is ostensibly female. Finally, in Tim Crouch’s 2013 play *Adler & Gibb*, the theme of ‘representation’ is overtly investigated by various layers of narrative: the story focuses on a film crew visiting a location in which two female artists had attempted to live a self-sufficient life; on top of this, a PhD candidate is narrating Adler and Gibb’s story to an academic panel. Negotiating all the layers are two children, seen to be constructing and deconstructing the set of Crouch’s play at the Royal Court. It is the first of Crouch’s adult plays in which he himself does not appear, and its relationships are almost exclusively women interacting with women.

Jill Dolan names a basic assumption of feminist critique ‘that all representation is inherently ideological’ (1988, 41), encouraging us to explore the extent to which the gender difference between playwright and character affects the ethicality of the theatrical representation. To do so, I will first turn to an absolutist position (in which sexual difference is a fundamental ‘otherness’), and then to a pragmatic position (where characters can be ‘objectified’, or not). The concept of sexual difference as an ‘othering’ was most notably expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 book *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir draws our attention the dubious ontological weighting of the notion of ‘otherness’: presented initially in no uncertain terms, we are told by de Beauvoir that the characterisation of woman as profoundly, unreachably ‘other’ is a characterisation done by a masculine perspective. When she notes that ‘man *represents* both the positive and the neutral... whereas the woman *represents* only the negative... without reciprocity’ (1953, 14, my emphasis) the woman-as-Other corollary is only maintained by re-iteration. I would suggest that de Beauvoir’s blurring of the ontological and ethical in her explanation of sexual difference is reflected in the significance of *theatrical* representations to society’s understanding of gender difference. At the level of knowledges and experiences, feminist critiques generally possess (in Jill Dolan’s words) ‘a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse’

(1988, 3). On this reading, portrayals of feminine identity (in how they are read by the play's audience) were likely to be incomplete and undeveloped, but still had the potential to be ethically permissible.

If de Beauvoir's account implies that 'difference' functions at the level of ontology, there are problematic implications for a representative medium such as theatre, as ontology is central to its representative process. For those of a masculine identity to explicate a feminine identity in dramatic writing, the parameters of what constitutes an 'otherness' must be carefully explored. *Port's* conversational dialogue and nods to naturalism arguably presents no meta-theatrical layer of tension between Stephens and Rachel Keates' gender. In *Attempts on Her Life*, the narrative indeterminacy of the character can be interpreted as Crimp's concern for the possibility of writing women. In *Adler & Gibb* the processes of representation in film, theatre and academic discourse are critiqued almost exclusively in relation to women, and allude to themes in feminist art theory. To understand these tensions in a more pragmatic way, we may turn to the potential for unethical representations in terms of a philosophical notion that has gravitated from the nuances of feminist discourse to general parlance: 'objectification'.

Martha C. Nussbaum defines the act of 'treating as an object' (1995, 257) in at least seven configurations, and concludes that the term is 'morally problematic' (251). I will consider how the work of Crimp, Crouch and Stephens intersects with Nussbaum's definitions of objectification (as fungibility in this section, and as the 'denial of autonomy' (257) in the next section) to see whether the notion of complicity is significant. Nussbaum uses 'fungible' in the same breath as 'interchangeable' (257), suggesting that an object is either replaceable by others of its kind, or with objects in further contexts. The antithesis of fungibility (which we might describe as a quality of uniqueness or stability) is a dramaturgical feature that governs many forms of theatre, perhaps exemplified in naturalism: metaphysical laws suggest that a dog cannot transform into a child, and then into a deer, and remain dramatically coherent. Yet, fungibility functions exactly in this way in *Adler & Gibb*: in the layer of narrative in which two children construct and deconstruct the set of the play, they appear to stand-for several characters (including a dog and a deer) to which others on stage seem not aware. As Stephen Bottoms comments, in relation to Crouch's earlier work, these 'yawning gaps between signifiers and signifieds' (2009, 66) seems to make the audience 'aware of their own processes of spectatorial meaning-seeking' (68). Just as Nussbaum's essay considers the ethical ambiguities within objectification-as-fungibility, Crouch's narratives often play with seemingly innocuous gaps between sign and reference. In performances of *An Oak Tree*, we are an audience of a show 'in a pub a year from now' (Crouch 2011, 60)—both valuable as the only audience of this particular live event, and already cast (ahead) as a predicted, fictional audience.

In Crouch's previous work, fungible character transformations are almost exclusively female: *An Oak Tree* dramatizes this disjuncture of sign and reference by focusing on a man who believes his daughter has become a tree; in *ENGLAND*, the audience is transformed into a female transplant patient. *Adler & Gibb* not only enacts fungibility more physically than Crouch's other plays, but does so through the use of children. Contrasting tones of innocence and violation surround these children: one 'plays' the dog who is later killed by Louise; Gibb describes having her personal letters

read as akin to being 'butchered by ... a cartoon rapist' (Crouch 2014, 50). *Adler & Gibb's* world of inter-changeability may not be gendered, but it investigates objectification in such a way that, as Libby Brooks notes, children become 'the crucible into which is ground each and every adult anxiety' (Freshwater 2013, 170).

In *Attempts on Her Life*, fungibility takes on a more overtly gendered dimension, putting a darker tone to the ethics of being interchangeable, and alluding to further instances of societal abuse that stem from this. References to the interchangeable nature of the 'her' character scatter the first half of the play, evoking discordant images. In Scene 2, a young woman's face is held by her male lover like a 'chalice' or a 'rugby ball' (Crimp 1997, 15); Anya is described as a 'tree'; in Scene 6, a female character 'would like to *be* a machine' (32), a car or a pistol. The fungibility of Annie comes to a head in Scene 16—provocatively entitled 'Porno'—in which the 'principle speaker' (a young woman) recites an extensive list of descriptions about a 'She' that are simultaneously translated. The descriptions collectively bridge fundamental divisions in society, such as the suggestions that Annie will 'usher in an age in which the spiritual and the material.../ [...] the wave and the particle.../ will finally be reconciled!' (79). Crimp instructs the actors to perform the section with 'growing elan' (79), reflecting joy at the prospect of bridging such divisions. Yet, the messianic Annie's vitriolic dialectical thinking seems to drain her of any individuality: she is, like the Annie represented as a car in another scene, merely the vehicle for ideas.

Negating Discourse

The perceived fungibility of these female characters traces them back to being constituted as objects. Yet, the objectifications have so far been recognised as taking the logical form of a positive equation of two items: for example, when Annie is being compared to a 'pistol', this seems to read like a metaphoric comparison of two objects. I would like to suggest that objectification is also explored in these plays through two layers below that of affirmative objects: that the characters are presented neutralised of any autonomous power, and that this can even lead to female characters being considered a negating force, an incomplete space that drags other images in to fill itself. Phelan speaks of 'the central "absence" integral to the representation of women in patriarchy' (1993, 164), wherein the feminine is not fully shown but alluded to, 'to perpetuate and maintain the presence of male desire as desire—as unsatisfied quest' (164). Phelan's description of the female 'absence', despite using the term 'desire' as both verb and noun, suggests some limit to this 'quest': it will be 'unsatisfied', but presumably could have an end. In this section, I would like to argue that we may re-emphasize the *active* nature of 'absence' as a negation—that themes run throughout these plays to reflect the representation of female characters as an insatiable, continuous appetite.

One of Nussbaum's most intriguing definitions of 'objectification' is the 'Denial of Autonomy'—how an object is presented as stripped of agency. In the dramaturgies of Crimp, Crouch and Stephens, the most prevalent form of heteronomy is economic dependence. This theme reflects both a significant Twentieth Century societal change in Western societies (the developments in women's economic independence), but also how the global expansion of market economies has legitimized

'women' as one of its saleable commodities. As Saskia Sassan notes, 'in global cities and in survival circuits, women emerge as crucial economic actors' (2007, 274) in the growing demand for low-wage jobs, to which their gender 'lends cultural legitimacy to their non-empowerment' (258).

In each divergent presentation of character I am discussing, the female character attempts to assert self-sufficiency against this backdrop of bodily valuation. Stephens has commented that *Port* questions what it is 'to be a woman at the start of this millennium, from a town like Stockport... and how you can take agency for your own life' (Stephens 2013)—yet this agency, which clearly drives Rachel Keates' characterisation, is stalled by economic dependency. The audience witness her assaulting and stealing from her grandmother to accrue enough money for a flat deposit, as a means to escape living under the same roof as her abusive father. The use of double casting (wherein Rachel's mother and grandmother are played by the same actress, and her father and husband by the same actor) indicates a circularity to Rachael's experiences, a threat that makes the desire for economic independence akin to a classical notion of 'freedom'.

In dramaturgies where characterisation is less realistic, as in Crimp and Crouch, the heteronomy of female characters is expressed by a social context in which bodies are reduced to currency. In Crimp's work, as Luckhurst notes, there is 'a consistent interest in representing women as victims of patriarchy, as misunderstood, sexually exploited, emotionally abused' (2003, 53). Even in the ambiguous place that 'Annie' sits in *Attempts On Her Life*, the metaphors of violation make it clear that exploitation for women is considered almost exclusively sexual: in Crimp's satire of an advert, in which 'Annie' is reduced to a new model of car, a selling-point for the vehicle is its resistance to forms of degradation, wherein men are 'disembowelled' but women are 'raped' (Crimp 1997, 18). In the same vein, the character of Gibb in *Adler & Gibb* construes the crime of inhabiting the body (which Louise is committing by pretending to be her deceased lover) as akin to the crime of 'rape' (Crouch 2014, 48). Even in *Port*, there is barely a scene in which Rachel is not made aware of the context of sexual expectation she is part of, and that seeks to preemptively label her behavior: she is called a 'slapper', a 'tart', a 'whore', viewed as a sexual being throughout her growing up. All three plays reference contexts of expectation and dependency—economic and sexual—that acutely affect women.

To posit a female character as an interchangeable theatrical sign, against a context of sexuality in which they are constantly referred and inevitably denied autonomy from, is almost indistinguishable from treating the female character as currency. This theatrical simile underpins much of *Adler & Gibb's* satire of the monetisation of the artworld. In the penultimate scene, Louise (a young, glamorous film-actress) and Gibb (an older, slightly dishevelled performance-artist) re-enact Adler and Gibb's first meeting, presenting a visual contrast that reflects the hierarchy of art economies: youth and glamour as saleable, particularly in film. Crouch has previously stated the significance of 'form' to his theatrical endeavours, suggesting that 'form is a uniquely contemporary expression' (Crouch 2015) and that his work is always grounded in a reason that the story needs to be told theatrically. Thus, the chosen medium for *Adler & Gibb's* satire (film) is not to be overlooked: were the form to reflect upon how contemporary society expresses itself, the problematizing of bodily commodification in the play may be read as something that has

intensified in the post-millennial era. Whether the gendered element of the hierarchy of art economies is realised in the play or not, Crouch's dialogue signposts the *particular* effect that the monetisation of the art-world has on women. When Louise pronounces, with a vision of her importance as the star of the future film 'I am the money' (Crouch 2014, 23), connotations surround the comment of the status of women's bodies as bought-and-sold commodity on the global market.

The content of these plays highlight certain perceptions of women in modern, global economic contexts: either denied of economic autonomy, or considered marketable commodities. This latter position has rather uncomfortable associations with 'credit'—that, in contexts of debt, the marketability of women's bodies has historically been used to settle what is owed. The implications of this for the presence of female characters in male written plays are hugely significant if, in taking Phelan's phrase, we consider representation to be itself an 'economy' (1993, 164). When the agent in that economy (the male playwright) has power over representation, the relationship that femininity has to credit is complicated by their histories with male power. Urs Stäheli, in a history of market economies, states that:

The discourse of femininity used to describe credit sheds light on the ways in which the emerging financial sphere was represented... The highly fictional and volatile trading on the stock exchange could not be grasped with traditional economic categories—particularly not with notions of causality... Credit, in the form of obligations, stocks, or lottery tickets, required an abstract and fictional notion of ownership. (Stäheli 2013, 175)

This extraordinary analysis demonstrates that femininity was conceptualised as 'credit' to justify the instability of a market based on predictions, promises and debt—all immaterial features of a system of exchange.

Phelan described the task of feminist performance as making 'counterfeit the currency of our representational economy' (1993, 164), by means not of women refusing to be part of it, but by demonstrating the loss of women's occlusion within it. Phelan's notion of 'counterfeiting' representation echoes the second axiom of feminist critical writing I derived from her in the introduction: that such writing requires a negating discourse. In the dramaturgies I have discussed, women's potential position in markets has been variously explored by showing some female characters to be stripped of autonomy by their economic dependency. Going a step further, a conceptualising of characters as akin to how credit functions in currency has occurred: as involved in contexts of debt (their sexuality indebtedness) that can only ever be temporarily satisfied (by their sexual availability). The question arises here: do these demonstrations constitute Phelan's notion of 'writing toward disappearance' (1993, 148), and do they have a positive value?

Ephemeral Performance

Phelan's response to the question of the representational economy is to 'counterfeit' it. This solution is pushed to breaking point if it is to accommodate the very specific indignation I have described in the negation of female characters: wherein the female subject is not just expressed as a commodity (to be counterfeited or not) but as an indebted force, extolling credits by her sexuality to even bring her back up to the level of quasi-autonomous subject. As the male lover says to Annie in *Attempts On Her Life*, 'everything must be paid for, even your ideals' (Crimp 2014, 16). In this section, I would like demonstrate how this negating style of discourse—and the questionably ethical representations in Part 1—are held together in Crimp, Crouch and Stephens through an awareness of the temporality of theatre as an artistic form.

Writing the script that will determine a character's words and actions, the playwright's written control culminates in the live enactment of a performance. The performer of the character will at once unite the corporeal presence of their body with the rigidity of the written, planned narrative. In Wallace's reading of the increased ethicality of contemporary British theatre, she uses Levinas' notion of 'responsibility' to examine the effect of the live enactment on the audience: Wallace notes the confrontation of the 'ambivalence of looking, listening and speaking *as* action' (2014, 132) in recent plays. The live encounter of bodies is shown to emphasise responsibility as an ethical imperative that concerns the 'other' before ourselves. Levinas' notion of 'otherness' is that which is thoroughly unknowable, 'infinitely foreign... an absolute difference' (Levinas 1969, 194). Such a description does not seem to fit so well with the relationship of playwright to character, particularly in our consideration of the ontological possibilities of writing another gender—the controllable, written element of the playwriting process suggests there is more to this relation than intractable 'otherness'. I would like to suggest that there is another of Levinas' intersubjective relations that is better placed to illustrate the playwright/character relation: fecundity. This relation presents some stark choices for how male playwrights might engage with feminist critical writing.

Fecundity is Levinas' description of the parent/child relation, which can act as an analogy for the mixture of live, ephemeral risk, and written creative control, contained in the act of character creation. This relation is unlike any other logical identification, for the child is 'not only mine, for he *is* me' (Levinas 1969, 267): the child contains both the parent and itself, constituting 'a duality of the identical' (68). The birth of the child stems from an erotic encounter with 'the Other as feminine' (267), an encounter with a feminine presence who embodies an 'alterity' (269) that cannot ever be breached. The notion of the other as 'feminine' is one of many allusions to the heteronormativity of Levinas' account: as Lisa Guenther points out, 'birth would seem to be a wholly masculine affair' (2006, 75) for Levinas, stated as a 'relation between *father* and *son*' (76), given the father is the pattern by which the child is dual-identical.

As feminist critics of Levinas, such as Luce Irigaray, have claimed, Levinas' account appears to completely side-line the significance of the 'feminine other', who appears merely peripheral to the father/son relationship (Irigaray 1991). This occlusion of the feminine derived from an 'otherness' is not a temporary event; rather, the fecund child produces 'ever recommencing being' (Levinas

1969, 268), linking son to father in a repeating chain of becoming, all the while relying on the otherness of the feminine. As Irigaray states, the male subject 'makes use of the support of the feminine ... for its own becoming (1991, 180)—a thought we can trace from de Beauvoir's identification of otherness as defined against 'the Subject ... the Absolute' (de Beauvoir 1953, 16), with 'man' seen as the guardian of both positive and neutral forces. Woman, being 'without reciprocity' (de Beauvoir 1949, 15), becomes a repelling force amongst the propellant, self-bonding forces of men. Levinas does not appear to acknowledge the male-centric notion of this version of fecundity.

Out of this description, I would like to draw two points of congruence between fecundity and the relation of playwright and character. The first concerns the dual-identity of the 'child' as both self and other. From this perspective, our reading of the indeterminacy of the reference 'Annie' in *Attempts On Her Life* connotes that the female characters of these plays are at once both coherently realised by the playwright, and seemingly difficult to write. This mixture of recognisability (from the self, re-born) and alterity (from the feminine Other) thickens-out Luckhurst's observation that *Attempts On Her Life* would seem to be almost entirely concerned with the difficulty of 'representing the feminine on stage' (2003, 49). Several of Crimp's images demonstrate this tension: when 'photos' of Annie are discussed in Scene 6, they are at once both pictures of her smile, and 'just these little dots' (Crimp 1997, 27). The photo both coherently presents a face, and shows the face to be a construction.

Fecundity illustrates this relation between playwright and character, and alludes to the gendered element to this tension. This is the second point of congruence I would like to draw from fecundity to the question of the male playwright's ontological possibilities. Levinas' connection between ontology and ethics goes as far as to say we are *defined* by our ethical concern for the Other, such that a being with no ethical responsibility effectively does not exist. This has problematic implications for Levinas' unwillingness to speak of fecundity as involving a female child, and analogously for how the ethicality ascribed to female characters by male playwrights might impact on their presence. Feminist writers—Irigaray and Guenther among them—have noted the incoherency of Levinas's account of fecundity, on the basis that if Levinas wishes to speak of the child as a mixture of the profoundly 'other', and the self re-born, a *daughter* would seem to be a significantly stronger image, if the 'self' is defined as masculine. In Simon Critchley's summation of Derrida's second text concerning Levinas, the daughter is 'a crypt, an entombed, perhaps still born, daughter... [over which] the edifice of Levinas' work is built' (Critchley 2015, 99). The notion of 'crypt' is particularly significant because, by not acknowledging the female child of the male father, Levinas is refusing to acknowledge the female child as an ethical being.

Ethical responsibility requires free will, such that (in Guenther's words), the description of someone as 'ethical by default' renders them 'not really ethical at all' (2006, 75). *Attempts On Her Life*, *Port* and *Adler & Gibb* all variously avoid constructing female characters who are ethical-by-default—yet, in the examples of objectification I have demonstrated, these plays often inscribe their female characters in positions where ethicality is still impossible. In the context of heteronomy, the protagonists are either economically dependent, or reduced to the currency in an economy.

Fecundity transfers the parent's ethical responsibility onto the child; to deny the daughter any chance of responsibility is to deny her existence. On my analogy, attempts by male playwrights to demonstrate the restricted positions of women never fully articulate femininity as anything other than ethically impotent, and thus ontologically incomplete. Crimp's awareness 'that he is part of the culture he satirizes' (Zimmermann 2003, 83) fails to hit its target, on this reading. Crimp's refusal to allow his protagonist any ethical autonomy encourages those who may feel their own responsibility toward her (in the audience) to view her in the same deeply problematic terms in which Levinas describes the feminine other: an 'amorphous non-I' (Levinas 1969, 259). As Luckhurst observes of Crimp, only in moments of 'magnanimity' is his protagonist 'imagined to be an authority herself' (1997, 51).

I argue that fecundity allows us to see the ethical damage of a form of presentation in which a male playwright presents female characters trapped in contexts where they cannot be regarded as ethically autonomous beings. The criticism that could be immediately raised here is that my analogy conflates a child—a corporeal being, capable (at some point in its life) of ethical decision—with a written character. To treat both equally worthy of the same ethical consideration would be ludicrous—effectively, it would conflate ethics with ontology. However, my response to this would be that, for Levinas, ethics *proceeds* ontology. The consistent thread running through all Levinas' intersubjective relations is our terrible binding to the Other's insatiable need for protection. The face of the Other, in Levinas' eloquent phrase, 'calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question' (1969, 83). Fecundity is liberation from this ethical binding, to which the self will never fully attest, because by becoming a parent the self's responsibility is carried forward. The fact that the writing of a character culminates in a live enactment brings the character into the realm of other beings—those who, for Levinas, suffer equally with their inability to be as truly ethical as their ontology demands.

If the writing of a female character could be ethically comparable to the fecund child, then a character who is seen to be capable of ethical autonomy takes-on the responsibility of the writer (parent). A kind of reciprocity can be identified here: the freedom exuded by the female character reveals something of the ethical responsibility of the writer. Whenever the character is shown not free to choose, the responsibility is thrust back onto the writer. *Port*, as stated earlier, does not obviously explicate tensions between the gender of its (male) writer and (female) protagonist. Whilst Rachel is shown to have a difficult social context in which to grow, she still presents as a being with ethics: the scene in which she assaults her grandmother, for example, is an interesting escalation of a typically ethical act (feeding someone) into a violent act (force-feeding someone), interpretable as a failure to respond to the 'call' of the Other. At the other end of the spectrum, the narrative indeterminacy of the protagonist in *Attempts on Her Life* would seem to be ethically problematic: Crimp may have a concern for the possibility of writing a female character, but what is produced (at least in the text of the play) are very few instances in which Annie, Anya, Annie, Annushka or Anny are perceived to act as characters that can freely choose to act.

The possibilities for the male playwright who wishes to authentically contribute to feminist critical writing through performance are, at once, both ethical and ontological. As a temporal medium, the physical act of bodies performing for a set period of time can re-enforce (in practice) what feminist critical writing does in theory: it can demonstrate the tensions between the 'categories of analysis' (Phelan 1993, 164) of presence and absences. In the first section, I suggested that the male playwright can reflect this 'absence' through processes of objectification, but that this reinforces the view that he is unable to fully transcend the alterity of the Other. (Male playwrights rarely write from a female perspective.) In the second section, I identified a negating discourse in the presentation of female characters, through their heteronomy. This discourse was not necessarily seen as an example of Phelan's notion of counterfeiting the representational economy: just as counterfeit coins often pass for real money, satires of representation can look a lot like their object of critique. Luckhurst identifies a feature like this in Crimp's work, problematizing that Crimp's 'repeated suggestion of women's complicity in male abuse of them' (Luckhurst 2003, 59) could not achieve full irony as it was mentioned too often. If we accept de Lauretis' characterisation of the 'paradoxical state' (1984, 13) of women in Western discourse, the male playwright wishing for ethical representations of female characters hits an impasse at this point.

I concluded this essay with a model of fecundity to provide a pragmatic approach to regulating the objectifying-otherness of Part 1, and the trend toward negating representation in Part 2. On my analogy with Levinas, the child/character is made up of both the self and (feminine) other, and presents a responsibility that is both the character's own, and that of the playwright. This model of 'responsibility' being transferred does not absolve the male playwright of his ethicality, but presents the potential to transcend his ethical limitations. How could this ethical transcendence occur? Guenther strives for us to reinstate the significance of the feminine other into Levinas, so as to create a new 'feminist past... that never *was* but that *will have been* thanks to a future transformation of the past' (Guenther 2006, 76). By writing with the confidence for a time when femininity will not be understood so 'paradoxically', the male (now, pro-feminist) playwright can contribute to this re-envisioned past, endowing his female character with an ethical autonomy, and resources for change, that reflect his own.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Chris Megson (Royal Holloway, University of London) for his support in the writing of this article.

² This interest is reflected in current theatre scholarship, most notably in the 2014 publication *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary Theatre*.

³ Whether this framework is an ontological one emerges primarily because our topic—as distinct from Phelan—is *playwriting*. Written characters may be merely judged as ethical or non-ethical representations, but also as the result of a creative selection of choices (on the part of the playwright) that determine the ontology of a being. The absolutism of reading character-creation as ontology may seem out of place in discussions of theatre, but as de Lauretis identifies, a pervasive feature of 'the story of male desire' has been nothing less than 'producing woman as text' (1984, 13). This suggests that the creation of a character is akin to determining the life of a (fictional) being; an assumption I acknowledge.

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Biography

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