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Caryl Churchill's 21st Century Poetics

The second wave of feminism, among many other contributions to late 20th century culture and society, gave rise to a series of radical proposals as to how theatre form could be uncoupled from patriarchy. In the final chapter of her 1988 book *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case summarised the problems posed for feminists by conventional theatre practice and, drawing partly on theory and partly on practical precedent, outlined some potential alternatives. The feminist critique of theatre synthesised by Case extended to some of the fundamental ideas about the form first set down in Aristotle's *Poetics* and, accordingly, her chapter was entitled 'Towards a New Poetics': a title which in its boldness was an expression, as Elaine Aston writes in her foreword to the 2008 reissue of *Feminism and Theatre*, of 'an exciting moment of feminist theorising and performance practice' (Aston, in Case xiv). Significant feminist playwrights working in Britain during this period include Sarah Daniels, Pam Gems, Charlotte Keatley, Bryony Lavery, Timberlake Wertenbaker and, pre-eminently, Caryl Churchill.

As Aston comments, feminist theory moved on in the years that followed, responding to the anti-essentialist thinking of Judith Butler and others, while the status of feminism as a political movement unquestionably declined as the century drew to a close – and both of these developments were reflected in women's writing for the stage during the 1990s and beyond:

> Writing 'beyond' gender categorisation, dramatic worlds were no longer defined and confined by women's issues, but connected to a much larger, social, cultural, and political canvas. That canvas was also responsive to dramatising a contemporary world in which both socialist and feminist agendas were diminished and displaced. (Aston, in Case xvii)

Aston's assertion applies to the work of playwrights such as Sarah Kane who emerged in what has been described as a 'post-feminist' period, and also to the work

during the same period of a number of playwrights previously associated with feminism, among them Churchill.

'Post-feminist' is a problematic and much-debated term. As Janelle Reinelt has written, 'agreeing that we are now living in a post-feminist age involves participating in making it so'. (Reinelt 32) Geraldine Harris also expresses 'severe reservations' about 'postfeminism' as a term, not least because

> there are various, highly contradictory understandings of postfeminism in circulation. It has been defined as a backlash against second-wave feminism, and/or its appropriation and inoculation by conservative forces; a 'progressive' theoretical revision of this politics, and as signalling that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer needed. (Harris 177)

Against the assertion that we are living in a post-feminist age, however defined, can be set the contentions of others that the second wave of the 60s and 70s has been succeeded by a third, fourth and now even perhaps a fifth wave of feminism (see Moran 14), suggesting a movement that can be repeatedly reinvented to match the needs of successive generations of women. Associating the fortunes of feminism with changing trends as much as with victory or defeat in the battle of ideas, Harris felt encouraged enough to write in 2014 of 'a broader cultural context in the UK in which feminism appears to be "fashionable" again'. (Harris 179) One interpretation of this apparent upsurge is that, while feminism of the kind embraced by Churchill in the 1970s may have been consigned to history, at least by some, its very considerable influence lives on, leaving enduring benefits – what Reinelt has called 'the "residue" of the second wave'. (Reinelt 32)

Reflecting the fact that Churchill's drama since the 1990s has been less obviously identifiable as feminist in nature, critical attention has tended to focus on her ongoing formal innovation rather than trying to place her work within any particular movement. Nonetheless, it can be argued that a central characteristic of Churchill's recent drama is the degree to which it contains and expresses the 'feminist residue' described by Reinelt, both in terms of its thematic concerns and of its formal

properties. In this article I hope to advance this argument by referring back to Case's 'new poetics', comparing her 1988 conceptualisation of feminist theatre practice to the actuality of Churchill's 21st century playwriting. In doing so I hope to shed light on the extent to which Churchill's work in the 'post-feminist' period accords with or deviates from a feminist agenda and, more broadly, to consider the wider influence and pervasiveness of feminism, or aspects of it at least, in contemporary playwriting.

The main body of my discussion considers what I take to be the most significant aspects of the 'new poetics' in relation to the six plays Churchill has written since 2000. These works begin with the much celebrated *Far Away* (2000), a compressed epic and dystopian fantasy in which moral compromise is shown to begin at home and to end in global catastrophe. The second is *A Number* (2002), which explores the potential implications of human cloning through the interactions of four characters, three of them biologically identical and played by the same actor. *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) explores the relationship between the US and the rest of the world by personifying that nation as a participant in a troubled homosexual relationship. More political still, *Seven Jewish Children* (2009) critiques Israel's treatment of Palestine through a series of suggestions as to how this might be explained to a child. Churchill's two most recent plays *Love and Information* and *Ding Dong the Wicked* both premiered in 2012, the former comprising a series of more than fifty short scenes exploring the capacities and limits of the human mind as it interacts with technology, the latter offering two apparently opposed perspectives on an international conflict, each of which emerges as a rearranged version of the other. All these plays were first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London.

A particular point to note in relation to *Seven Jewish Children* and *Love and Information* is that, in these plays, Churchill has experimented with what Dan Rebellato has called 'textual openness'. (Rebellato, 'Exit the Author' 27) This is to say that she has adopted a method of playwriting pioneered by Martin Crimp in *Attempts on her Life* (1997) and since used by Kane in *4.48 Psychosis* (first performed 2001) and Simon Stephens in *Pornography* (2007), whereby dramatic speech is not assigned to named characters and setting is not specified; in *Love and Information* she also follows Stephens in allowing some flexibility in terms of the

order in which scenes may be performed. As R. Darren Gobert has commented, Churchill's use of the open text form is particularly appropriate in the case of *Love and Information*, a play in which characters repeatedly attempt to make sense of complex, incomplete or ambiguous data, because it foregrounds the fact that the audience is in an analogous situation:

> *Love and Information*'s most important insight [is] that the play's meanings are inherently indeterminate, established on this or that night and in this or that production only in the context and the moment of performance. (Gobert 198-9)

Looked at in terms of the process of theatre making, the yielding of control represented by the open text passes responsibility for crucial dramaturgical decisions from the writer to the director and, potentially, the cast. This can be seen as a voluntary diminishing of the playwright's authority, making for a more collaborative process and, arguably, a less patriarchal hierarchy within the company; though it might equally be suggested that, in practice, here was a female dramatist ceding authority to a male director (Dominic Cooke for *Seven Jewish Children*, James Macdonald for *Love and Information*). Finally, more immediately, Churchill's use of this mode of dramatic writing has necessitated a degree of equivocation in my discussion of these particular plays.

Having established the main characteristics of the plays to be considered, I now turn to a fuller consideration of Case's 'new poetics' in order to identify the essential aspects of her argument. 'Towards a New Poetics' begins by summarising the critique of conventional theatre practice advanced by feminist theorists in the 1980s, essentially that conventional Western drama, as a product of patriarchal societies, is an expression and indeed a validation of patriarchy: its linearity, its drive towards certainty and a single climax, reflect male priorities and experience, and the point of view which the audience is encouraged to adopt is mostly – some would say always and necessarily – a male one. The purpose of a 'new poetics' is, Case writes, to allow feminist theorists and practitioners to remake the theatre event as a site, not of women's oppression, but of their liberation:

> New feminist theory would abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorisation of the male gender. (Case 114-5)

This is an ambitious aim, and to further it Case draws on theoretical advances in various fields, including psychology, literary study and film studies, and on existing practice as evident in the historical and contemporary work of women playwrights and theatre makers, including Churchill. The crucial role of theatrical precedent in constructing Case's model of a 'new poetics' reflects her desire to maintain a close relationship between theory and practice, and thus to ensure her conclusions are not only considered relevant within 'the male-dominated world of abstract ideas'. (Case 112) This makes it all the more appropriate to revisit her formulations in the light of Churchill's subsequent practice.

At the centre of Case's model of a feminist theatre morphology is the idea of 'contiguity', an 'organisational device that feminists have discovered in both early and modern works by women' (Case 129) which offers an alternative to the linear dynamic epitomised by classical tragedy and Naturalism. Women's drama, Case writes:

> can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete.... Without closure, the sense of beginning, middle and end, it abandons the hierarchical organising-principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse. (Case 129)

Aware that to some such qualities may not always seem compatible with conventional conceptions of theatre, Case seeks, throughout her book, to expand the category of what might be considered women's theatre by including what she called 'personal theatre', encompassing both the eighteenth century salon and what

would now be called live art; however, it is also possible to find examples of contiguity in practice in canonical women's drama from the feminist period. We might think, for instance, of early plays by Churchill: the non-chronological structure of *Top Girls* which leaves the audience, at the play's conclusion, in the middle of the story; or the protagonist's death at the end of *Fen* which entirely fails to provide the closure that she, and most likely the audience, desires. We might think, also, of Hélène Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*, where the action swirls kaleidoscopically between memory, fantasy and dream; or of Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should*, the structure of which encourages the audience to make connections between chronologically disparate events, and to consider its characters as both inextricably entwined within and radically alienated from their historical contexts.[1]

In what some might think an inappropriately logo-centric approach, I have structured my analysis of Churchill's recent drama around what I take to be the four main aspirations of the 'new poetics'. Most relate to the organising principle of contiguity as introduced above, and all help to position feminist drama in opposition to aspects of conventional Aristotelian dramaturgy; each may be considered separately as a discrete component of the ambitious feminist project Case describes. First, feminist drama must break with realism; second, it must construct woman as subject and free her from the 'male gaze'; third, it must deviate from the linear trajectory of tragedy and Naturalism; and finally it must present audiences with multiple and ambiguous meanings. In the discussion that follows I will describe these in more detail, considering each in turn in relation to Churchill's 21st Century work.

Realism, Case writes, acts as a 'prisonhouse of art' for women (Case 124) because it recreates on stage the endemic inequalities of patriarchal society and obliges actresses to internalise the characteristics ascribed to women by male dramatists. In this respect we can see a particularly close match between a feminist dramatic ideal and a Brechtian one, since one of Brecht's chief problems with realism was that in recreating recognisable realities it reifies the familiar as seemingly inevitable, shoring

[1] Keatley's play, exactly contemporaneous with the first publication of Case's book, can neither have been influenced by it nor been an influence upon it; that her method should so closely reflect Case's theoretical model could be taken as evidence that both are expressions of the same moment of feminist consciousness.

up the authority of the status quo even when drawing attention to its flaws. Brecht writes that the spectator of conventional, 'dramatic' theatre says to him or herself, 'Yes, I have felt like that too. – Just like me. – It's only natural. – It'll never change' and is thus reconciled to the situations dramatized even as they are shown to cause human suffering. (Brecht 111-2) Like feminism, Brecht is often cited as an influence on Churchill (see Reinelt, *After Brecht* 85-6), so it is not surprising to find that none of Churchill's 21st Century plays can be classed as entirely realistic.

This is easier to describe in some cases than others. *Far Away* takes place in a dystopian and increasingly nightmarish future and *A Number* is predicated on the existence of futuristic cloning technology. *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* presents a character who is a personification of a nation state, adopts a unique dual chronology and is characterised by highly fractured dialogue which is 'a sampling of phrases from much longer conversations'. (Churchill, quoted in Roberts 162) In *Seven Jewish Children* and *Love and Information*, Churchill's experiments with 'open text', she leaves the setting and the apportioning of lines to the director and cast, so that the degree of realism employed may vary enormously from production to production. It is possible to imagine a naturalistic production of *Seven Jewish Children*, though this might be seen to run counter to the spirit of a play which presents the history of a nation, and it could be argued that each of the short scenes of which *Love and Information* is comprised represents a tiny but fully formed realistic play – the dramatic equivalent of flash or micro-fiction, perhaps. That said, the stage directions do not impose a presentational style on the piece and therefore none of the scenes need necessarily be played as realistic. *Ding Dong the Wicked* recycles the dialogue from the first scene, re-ordered and re-assigned, in the second, thereby insisting to the audience on its constructed nature for at least half the performance, and providing those with long memories with echoes of Ionesco's entirely un-naturalistic *Bald Prima Donna*.

There is one aspect of Churchill's dramaturgy that may consistently be linked to realism, however, and that is her dialogue. In all six plays there are notable examples of Churchill's impressive ear for recognisable speech, with all its

hesitation, repetition and false starts. For example, when Salter is asked about his wife's suicide in *A Number* this is his response:

> She did it under a train a tube train, she was one of those people when they say there has been a person under a train and the trains are delayed she was a person under a train. (Churchill, *Plays: 4* 190)

In *Love and Information*, a character who has revealed a potentially unwelcome truth then says:

> I'm probably imagining things and I shouldn't put ideas into your head because it may all be perfectly all right, I'm sorry maybe I should have kept quiet, oh dear, I've told you now. (Churchill, *Love and Information* 17)

Because she doesn't always punctuate her characters' utterances or begin them with capital letters, on the page Churchill's dialogue can at first look stylised and even poetic; in these plays, however, what she is doing is pushing naturalistic dramatic speech ever nearer to real speech, just as she did when she invented the now ubiquitous (and sometimes misapplied) convention for denoting overlapping dialogue in *Three More Sleepless Nights* (1980). In *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* the lines are, as mentioned, fractured, 'moving swiftly on, giving just a few words and leaping forward to another part of the conversation' (Churchill, *Plays: 4* x), but nonetheless what the audience hears are the edited highlights of realistic conversations, and so there is a kernel of naturalistic speech even in dialogue that initially seems highly experimental. Similarly in *Ding Dong the Wicked* the dialogue is repeated and re-ordered in a strikingly non-naturalistic way, but the raw materials of which that dialogue is formed retain the recognisable feel of overheard speech - for instance, 'Bastard came up on the inside so I cut in front to show him and he nearly drove me off the road'. (Churchill, *Ding Dong the Wicked* 8)

We might ask why Churchill, a playwright who regularly goes against Naturalistic practice in all kinds of ways, should so consistently adhere to Zola's principle that characters in plays should be presented 'with their individual ways of thinking and

expressing themselves'. (Zola 371) Beyond the simple explanation that she is skilled in doing this and that the resulting dialogue is theatrically effective, it can also be argued that there is a fit between Churchill's thematic concerns and her use of realistic dialogue, that, as Elin Diamond has written, Churchill's 'commitment to the apparatus of representation (actor as sign of character; character as sign of a recognizable human fiction) [is made] in order to say something *about* human oppression and pain'. (Diamond 83, emphasis as in original) Churchill's 21st century drama consistently explores questions of personal responsibility in the context of social and political problems that are often ungraspably large or distant, whether charting Joan's journey from questioning sceptic to uncritical combatant in *Far Away*, relating international complicity with US foreign policy to emotional attachment to US culture in *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, or defining the difficulty of facing up to impending environmental catastrophe in *Love and Information*:

> Are you really not going to take it seriously?
>
> I don't know how to.
>
> I don't know how to. (Churchill, *Love and Information* 54)

These thematic concerns repeatedly recall the famous motto of Second Wave Feminism, 'The personal is political'. If the situations in which Churchill's characters are placed are often fantastic, even impossible, then the psychology and behaviour of those characters is generally all-too recognisable, with the result that audiences cannot easily disassociate themselves from what they see on stage or straightforwardly dismiss the critique which the fictional scene enacts. Many of Churchill's divergences from realism serve political ends, maintaining the link between her work and that of Brecht, but her consistent use of realistic dialogue ensures that her drama is always experienced, to some degree, on the level of the personal.

It can be seen, then, that Churchill's 21st century drama retains a representational aspect, specifically in relation to dialogue and character psychology, thus ensuring it

is experienced on a human level despite its often abstract and conceptual aspects. We might recall here that, in Zola's strict original definition, there is no such thing as partial naturalism, because any aspect of a performance that is not realistic undermines the realism of those that are: therefore, he wrote, all aspects of playwriting and dramatic presentation 'must […] march in step along the naturalistic road'. (Zola 369) Considered in these terms, a piece of drama is either naturalistic or it is not and, by this definition, none of Churchill's recent plays can be described as such. Ultimately, it might be said that Churchill uses what she wants to from realism while ensuring that, both for her and for her audiences, it does not become a trap.

The second main tenet of the 'new poetics' to be highlighted is the construction of woman as subject. Classical drama, feminists argued, portrayed female characters as passive objects to be desired and seduced by active male characters with whom audience members, both male and female, were conditioned to identify, so that 'one of the results of the representation of the woman as "Other" in the male gaze is that she also becomes an "Other" to herself'. (Case 120) In addition, on a more practical level, the disproportionate number of male characters in dramatic literature made women underrepresented, and actresses underemployed, on the stage. In contrast, in much classic feminist drama it is men who are absent (as in Gems's *Dusa, Stas, Fish and Vi* or *My Mother Said I Never Should*) or presented as secondary characters whose perspectives audiences are not encouraged to share (as in *Portrait of Dora* or Daniels's *Masterpieces*). Similarly, in Churchill's plays of the 1970s and 80s, female perspectives are foregrounded and audiences are encouraged to identify – insofar as identification is encouraged – with women rather than men (Betty rather than Clive in *Cloud 9*, for instance, or Margaret rather than Pete in *Three More Sleepless Nights*). *Top Girls* has an all-female cast and was written with the initial aim of 'writ[ing] a play for an enormous number of women'. (Churchill, *Top Girls* lii) The intended result of these dramatic strategies was not only that women in theatre would have more, and more meaningful, work to do, but that female audience members would be able to identify with active female subjects on stage and thereby experience the drama from a viewpoint which affirmed rather than undermined their sense of agency.

In relation to this it must immediately be acknowledged that two of Churchill's last six plays (*A Number* and *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*) feature exclusively male characters, and that in two more (*Seven Jewish Children* and *Love and Information*) the gender of those speaking is not specified.[2] In the light of this it would be difficult to argue that this aspect of feminist theatre theory is exemplified in Churchill's 21st Century work, though the fact that *A Number* and *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* are both critical explorations of aspects of patriarchy provides a clear feminist rationale for the all-male cast of both plays.[3]

When considering the extent to which women are given agency in Churchill's recent work, it might more generally be noted that the most active characters in these plays tend also to be the least sympathetic. In *Far Away* Harper effectively corrupts Joan, who goes on to become complicit in and play an active part in a nightmarish global conflict; in *A Number* the venal Salter is responsible for sins of both omission and commission which cause great suffering, and his son B1 murders the sympathetic but largely passive B2; in *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* the bullying and childish Sam is the man of action and Guy plays the conventionally feminine role of supporter and hand-wringing apologist. It is difficult to speak of characterisation in relation to *Seven Jewish Children* since no characters are designated as such, but here initial sympathy with people experiencing genocide is gradually replaced by revulsion at the increasingly brutal acts being justified; *Ding Dong the Wicked* also presents characters who, apparently for a range of personal reasons, support bloody conflict, and here it seems also that women are no less to blame than men.[4] These are plays which may have protagonists but which lack heroes, and identification with any of these characters is a tacit admission of complicity in the corruption and oppression

[2] This said, at least once in *Love and Information* a character is named in the dialogue and thereby gendered – 'Mr Rushmore' in 'Recluse' (Churchill, *Love and Information* 26-9) – and at other times a character's gender is implicit so that, for instance, the speaker of the line 'I'm your mother' must be female if the scene is to function as apparently intended (p. 18).

[3] Some have asked why it has to be a homosexual couple that personify the relationship between the US and ally nations in *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, but it seems to me the explanation is that both partners represent patriarchal states.

[4] In the first scene A Young Woman Carrying a Flower seems more compassionate than the others, stating of a dead enemy that 'I can't help feeling... a bit sorry for him' (Churchill, *Ding Dong the Wicked* 13) but in the second scene it is A Man who Bites his Nails who seems the least harsh: 'I think people should try to forgive each other' (21). In the first scene A Quiet Man shoots someone who comes into the room, and in the last scene A Young Woman with a Cigarette holds a gun in a state of indecision as the door is opened to let someone in.

that is being critiqued. To a large extent this reflects Churchill's longstanding practice as a socialist feminist, showing in *Top Girls*, for instance, how women who are successful within a patriarchal capitalist framework effectively contribute to the ongoing oppression of women generally; a comparable critique is in operation in *Far Away*, described by Aston as 'a cautionary tale, not least for feminism'. (Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage* 36)

Love and Information is rather different in that its (mostly non-gendered) characters are often easier to sympathise with as they struggle to deal with the complex and often all-too recognisable situations in which they find themselves, but in any case the brevity of the scenes mitigates against any real sense of identification between audience and character. It is not easy, then, to present these plays as offering a series of positive characterisations of female characters, and it can be inferred from this that the levelling of the dramatic playing field that was one of the central tenets of Case's 'new poetics' is no longer, for Churchill, the priority that it was. Such a prioritisation, we might further infer, would restrict her capacity to explore the intricacies and complexities of a global situation in which patriarchy and capitalism intertwine to render both women and men simultaneously complicit and, seemingly, helpless. If Churchill cannot be said to be presenting heroic women, then, neither can it be said that she has fallen back on patriarchal norms.

The third main tenet of Case's 'new poetics' is that feminist drama should deviate from the linear trajectory of tragedy and Naturalism; she quotes Gillian Hanna, co-founder of feminist theatre company Monstrous Regiment, who argues that 'linear modes [are] peculiar to male experience' (Case 123) since it is predominantly men who have the luxury of focusing on only one thing at a time and of mapping out a life whose primary focus is career. Case also refers to the notion that 'the form of tragedy [is] a replication of the male sexual experience' (Case 129) in the way it builds steadily to a single cathartic climax. Classic feminist dramas (for example *Portrait of Dora* or *My Mother Said I Never Should*) often find new ways of organising their scenes so that audiences, rather than seeing a succession of objectively observable events, can gain a more sophisticated sense of the complex relationships between different aspects of experience; Churchill's own feminist classics *Cloud 9*

and *Top Girls* do the same and so, arguably, does the more recent *Love and Information*. The latter play presents around sixty short scenes (depending on the production), none of which share characters (with a few potential exceptions) or are related in narrative terms; it retains a sense of progression through its seven thematically-related sections but, since Churchill states that 'the scenes can be played in any order within each section' (Churchill, *Love and Information* 2) there is an inbuilt resistance to any possibility of one scene leading to another as in the classic naturalistic model. In much of her 21st Century drama, however, linearity is not so obviously refuted, though arguably it is brought to the fore and made the subject of inquiry in a new and unsettling way.

In conventional theatre terms, linearity denotes two things: first a chronological structure and second, as in totemic dramas such as *Oedipus Rex* or *Miss Julie*, an uninterrupted sequence of events. Churchill does not give us the latter, the so-called 'unity of time', but in *Far Away*, *A Number* and *Seven Jewish Children* there is a chronological structure; in each case, moreover, much of the effect of the play depends upon the alarming sense of escalation that is created. *Far Away* takes us from the exercise of coercive power in a domestic setting to a totalitarian state and then to a terrifying and absurd global war. Churchill does not provide audiences with information that might allow them to trace how one thing has led to another in conventional plot terms, instead insisting on a more allegorical level that personal behaviour and global destruction are not separable; as Kane said of the relationship between domestic rape and civil war she proposed in *Blasted*, 'one is the seed and the other is the tree' (Quoted in Sierz 101). Churchill has commented that 'the three parts can seem disconnected, linked only by the girl who goes through them and widening hostilities' (Churchill, *Plays: 4* viii) and Aston has observed that the play problemetises cause and effect in a recognisably Brechtian way, ensuring that 'one scene [is not] for the next' (Brecht 65):

> *Far Away* engages its audience in trying to make connections across the scenes… Churchill… undermines the structural logic of a conventional, three-act play by proceeding *as if* this were a drama in three connecting parts, so that the parts do and do not hang together; not then a montage, but a haunting of

> conventional dramatic form reprised to plot the course of capitalism and its predictable, foregone, terrifying conclusion. (Aston, 'But not that' 160, emphasis as in original)

Furthermore, as Aston observes, the play not only takes an audience forward in time but also, in its evocation of the Holocaust, back through 20th century history, creating in performance a 'temporal space' that encompasses both past and future in order to urge reconsideration of the present. (Aston, 'But not that' 161)

A Number provides audiences with a story which is more conventionally fleshed out, and realistic within the logic of its science-fiction scenario, but here too there is a focus on the seemingly disproportionate consequences of human failings in domestic settings: the failure of one man to look after his child leads to the killing of a third, entirely innocent, man. An alarming sense of unexpected and exponential acceleration is also present in the way that Salter's attempt to make one copy of his child leads, without his knowledge, to the existence of an unknown number of biologically identical people. The feeling of one thing leading logically (if startlingly) to another, however, of Salter's evil deeds leading naturally to evil consequences, is disrupted by the play's final scene in which he meets Michael, a well-adjusted individual whose seemingly happy life has been made possible by the same decisions that led to the creation and later murder of B2. *Seven Jewish Children* is comparable to both *A Number* and *Far Away* in that it also shows a horrifying series of escalations – ones that, unfortunately, echo reality – as we go from 'tell her they're good people' to 'tell her we won't stop killing them until we're safe'. (Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*, unpaginated)

Drunk Enough to Say I Love You? is different again, challenging and experimental in its approach to chronology, in that its personal story is structured differently from its political story. The relationship between Sam and Guy is dramatised as a linear narrative of elopement, infatuation, disillusionment, break-up, reconciliation and finally impasse. In terms of its treatment of the post-war history of the USA, however, the play is structured thematically, so that 'the actions [Sam and Guy] are taking are divided into subjects – elections, bombing, trade – and in each scene they can be

taken from any time but are happening now, in the moment, for the characters' (Churchill, *Plays: 4* x). As an example of this, Scene Seven focuses on US treatment of detainees, and in it the situation at Guantanamo following 9/11 is rendered simultaneous with interrogation techniques used under US auspices in Greece, Vietnam, Brazil, El Salvador, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Panama at various times during the post-war period. (See Roberts 158) What is the purpose and effect of this anti-chronological approach?

Peter Buse has argued previously that the structure of *Top Girls* can be aligned with Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. In this document, Benjamin proposes his model of historical materialism as an alternative to a dominant historicist approach which, as he characterises it, envisages history as an ongoing process of transition from one distinct time period to the next, creating a narrative of progress which is inevitably rooted in empathy for history's victors. In contrast to this, 'historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past' (Benjamin 262), making it possible 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'. (Benjamin 255) It could be argued that this is what Churchill is aiming to do when she renders Guantanamo simultaneous with Nicaragua, thereby linking historically disparate events which are illustrative of arguably identical political priorities and motivations, and it might further be noted that Benjamin's historical materialist approach is highly compatible with Case's feminist emphasis on 'contiguity'. For those unconvinced by an admittedly controversial play, the effect of Churchill's tactics in *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* might be to oversimplify the topic by taking US actions out of context and lumping distinct events together. In terms of Case's 'new poetics', however, I believe a strong argument can be made for it as a play whose critique of the actions of patriarchal states is strengthened by its refusal to categorise those actions in a conventional, chronological way so that, as Buse writes of historical materialism, it 'refuses to endorse the notion that history is over or in any sense complete'. (Buse 115)

Even where they adopt a linear or chronological structure, then, none of these plays allows an audience to take the notion of cause and effect at face value, to consider the present an inevitable consequence of the past or any particular imagined future

as an inevitable consequence of the present. All, in different ways, challenge audiences to make connections across time - and often place - in the absence of the kind of detailed information that is essential part of conventional realistic dramaturgy. In this regard Churchill's drama continues to explore the thematic and dramatic possibilities of abandoning or subverting linearity, identified by Case as a fundamental aspect of a feminist 'new poetics'.

Finally, we come to the importance feminists have ascribed to presenting audiences with multiple and ambiguous meanings, refusing closure and 'the hierarchical organising-principles of traditional form'. As with other aspects of the 'new poetics' we can certainly say that this principle has been applied in Churchill's wider oeuvre – though perhaps, given her ongoing commitment to analytical clarity, not as widely as might at first be thought. The same applies to her 21st Century drama, a point which can best be illustrated by drawing a distinction between the more and less political of the plays. *A Number* and *Love and Information*, at one end of the spectrum, seem to fit Case's model well, presenting audiences with the real and imagined consequences of technological advances in ways that deliberately make it difficult to assimilate all that has been presented into a cohesive argument or model of understanding. In the case of *Love and Information*, in particular, it is arguably the audience's experience of trying, and most likely failing, to make sense of an excess of data that provides the nearest thing to an overall statement.

Approaching global politics from an oblique angle and specifying no real-world referent, *Far Away* and *Ding Dong the Wicked* are also ambiguous up to a point. As mentioned earlier, the details of cause and effect are not provided in *Far Away*, and in *Ding Dong the Wicked* audiences must glean the essentials of the international situation depicted from fragmentary dialogue and infer the narrative relationship between the play's two scenes. At the same time, I would also argue that *Far Away*, once audiences have carried out the interpretive and analytical work it requires them to do, is quite consistent and coherent at the level of thematic meaning; as Aston has written of the play, 'nothing makes sense. Except, of course, it does make absolute, perfect sense.' (Aston, 'But not that' 162). *Ding Dong the Wicked*, too, seems clear in intent if surreal in texture, highlighting the way in which troubled individual

psychology may fuel support of nationalistic state aggression, and suggesting an ultimate moral equivalence between any two states in any given international conflict.

The most pointedly political of the six plays are *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* and *Seven Jewish Children*, and here it seems hardest to argue that ambiguity is the intended effect at a fundamental, thematic level. As its first reviews indicate, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* was indeed experienced by many as elusive and did generate multiple interpretations – but this was not regarded by Churchill as helpful, and she has since striven, by changing the name of one of the characters and providing an unusually expansive commentary on her intentions, to increase the level of clarity with which the play is understood. (See Churchill, *Plays: 4* ix-x) The controversial nature of the issues addressed in *Seven Jewish Children* has prompted a range of different responses, one of the most definite being that of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, who denounced the play as blood libel. Referring to its lack of stage directions, named characters and plot, Gobert has written that the play is 'an inkblot [which] guarantees only that disparate meanings will emerge in the imaginations of those that apprehend it' (Gobert 167), but here I think a distinction should be made between different meanings and different responses. One of the last speeches in the play, by far the longest, unambiguously expresses the viewpoint of a hard-line supporter of Israeli action against Palestine:

> Tell her they did it to themselves. Tell her they want their children killed to make people sorry for them, tell her I'm not sorry for them, tell her not to be sorry for them, tell her we're the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can't talk suffering to us. Tell her we're the iron fist now… (Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children*, unpaginated)

It is easy to see how this might trigger different reactions, but less easy to see how it might suggest different meanings. While the play offers more than one perspective (the speech quoted is followed by the line, 'Don't tell her that'), it clearly seeks to show how members of a group that has been the victim of unparalleled historical persecution can, over time, justify their own violence towards a disadvantaged

group. Certainly in the context of its first performances in February 2009, the play functioned as a condemnation of the assault on Gaza by Israel that had begun only weeks before, and this was clearly underscored both by its subtitle ('A Play for Gaza') and by the post-show collections that were made for Medical Aid for Palestinians. The statement being made by the play may be judged to be fair, unfair or even 'beyond the bounds of reasonable political discourse' (as the Board of Deputies declared – see Gobert 166) but that is surely not what we usually mean when we talk of ambiguity.

When she is using drama as a means of political analysis, drawing to some extent upon Brecht's model of a theatre of argument, Churchill is working in a mode in which ambiguity is not always compatible with the achievement of the playwright's aims. As Harold Pinter said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

> When we look into a mirror we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror – for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us. (Pinter 300)

Churchill might or might not appreciate comparison with the Pinter who, as an ageing political firebrand, was accused by some of betraying his artistic principles in order to make simplistic political points; at the same time there does seem to be a moral urgency behind *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* and *Seven Jewish Children* that is reminiscent of political Pinter at his most forceful.

This might be thought to raise a point about the status, and more precisely the limits, of ambiguity within feminist drama more generally. It might be asked whether Churchill's classic feminist dramas *Cloud 9* and *Top Girls* can ultimately be considered ambiguous pieces of work. Each raises questions that are not definitely answered, so it is true to say that closure is resisted but nonetheless, in terms of the plays' analysis of the socio-historical conditions they examine, the questions posed are both clear and exact. It might also be said that other canonical feminist works, for

instance *Masterpieces*, *My Mother Said I Never Should* and even *Portrait of Dora* are not ambiguous in terms of their central thrust. When it is explicitly political, which is not infrequently, it might be said that for feminist drama ambiguity may be a means but not an end, part of a play's mode of enquiry but not necessarily operative at the centre of its argument. This is true, I would argue, of at least some of Churchill's 21st Century drama.

To move now towards an overall conclusion, my survey of Churchill's recent work through the prism of Case's 'new poetics' has revealed an ongoing but complex engagement with the dramaturgical principles of feminist theatre. Of course, it shouldn't be any surprise that the plays deviate at times from the model of feminist drama that Case set out in 1988: for one thing the 'new poetics' were never intended to be prescriptive, and nor did Churchill declare allegiance to them as a model of future practice; for another, many aspects of the 'new poetics' which are not prominent in Churchill's recent plays are exemplified, sometimes definitively, in her earlier work. What is perhaps most striking, however, is the extent to which Churchill's recent drama, while tending to explore concerns that are not explicitly feminist in nature, has kept faith with the radical approach to theatre form formulated by Case and others in the heyday of Second Wave feminism. By and large these plays are not realistic, they deviate from and often subvert notions of linearity and, while often advancing clear and identifiable arguments, they insist on the active involvement of directors, performers and audiences in the interpretation and, ultimately, the creation of their meaning. Only in their lack of emphasis on woman as subject do these plays seem to break with the ideal of the 'new poetics', reflecting Churchill's belief that patriarchy and capitalism are enmeshed, perpetuated in each case though the complicity of both women and men. Terry Eagleton writes that 'the paradigm of classical morality in our own time has been feminism, which insists in its own way on the interwovenness of the moral and political, power and the personal'. (Eagleton 144) This moral insistence has been a continued feature of Churchill's work even while writing in an apparently 'post-feminist' context.

Before I conclude, there is a point to be made in relation to Churchill's oft-cited influence on subsequent generations of playwrights. Dan Rebellato, writing 'On

Churchill's Influences' in the 2009 *Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, draws on various sources to demonstrate near-universal admiration for Churchill from British and American dramatists of more than one generation, among them Moira Buffini, Martin Crimp, April de Angelis, David Hare, Tony Kushner, Lucy Prebble, Mark Ravenhill, Sam Shepard and Simon Stephens. (See Rebellato 'On Churchill's Influences' 163-6) Among the many virtues they identify, the most widely commented upon is Churchill's capacity for formal innovation, her restless search for new forms which, while surely an expression of her individual creative identity, is also at least in part the legacy of her immersion in a feminist movement that insisted on taking nothing for granted and on remaking from scratch the rules of dramatic form. Moreover, Churchill's continuing emphasis on the inter-relation between the personal and the political, which is at least in part the legacy of her immersion in Second Wave feminism, is also to be seen in the work of many younger playwrights, whether we think of now-classic plays of the 1990s like *Blasted*, *Shopping and Fucking* or *Attempts on her Life*, or whether we look to examples from the present century such as debbie tucker green's *stoning mary* or Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London* and *13*. In both their formal experimentation and their readiness to make connections between our individual lives and the wider social and political problems and structures within which we live, these are plays which bear the influence of Churchill, which is to a significant degree the influence of feminism.

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