Feminist Vision and Audience Response: Tracing the Absent Utopia in Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls

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When the opening scene of Caryl Churchill’s drama Top Girls begins, it is as if Judy Chicago’s famous “Dinner Party” exhibition has come to life. Here the place settings do not remain frozen as tributes to great women of the past, but become fluid in the hands of five real and legendary figures conjured up by the contemporary executive Marlene for a fantasy dinner celebration. This seemingly utopian beginning, however, is soon thwarted as the play moves from the past into the present and ends with “a little girl’s nightmare of the future” (Brown 117).

In considering both the utopic and dystopic elements of Churchill’s Top Girls, I must move beyond the excellent definitions of literary utopias provided by Darko Suvin and Lyman Tower Sargent and look to Ruth Levitas’s use of a broader definition to “encompass a wide variety of approaches and questions” (179). Levitas considers the “distinctions” which can be made “between kinds of utopias on the basis of form, function, location and content” (199). The form and content of the first scene in Churchill’s play, in its interweaving of women’s tales throughout history, is utopian in the sense that Christine de Pizan’s 1405 text, The Book of the City of Ladies, is utopian. As Angelika Bammer has maintained, Pizan’s book, (which she couples with Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman), is “not a utopia in the traditional sense. Yet the agenda in both of these texts and the impulse out of which they were written are fundamentally utopian. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely their freedom from the constraints of a utopia narrowly and traditionally defined that enable them to be utopian in the fullest sense of the word: imaginary spaces in which the meaning and potential of woman has not yet been measured and cut down to size” (27).

Caryl Churchill’s 1982 play, however, turns the initial utopia upside down as it explores the negative consequences of a system that copies the worst traits of male hierarchy by establishing a female hierarchy, and thus fails to offer the feminist utopian vision defined as “women’s refusal to internalize patriarchy” (Pfaelzer 287). It is not merely, as one critic has suggested, that the play points out that “the female perspective is capable, too, of drawing class distinctions and enforcing . . . tyranny” (Marohl 381). It is that Churchill’s women have created their own dystopia by internalizing patriarchy. This danger has been pointed out both by Angelika Bammer in her book (48–66) and Jan Relf, in an insightful article on “Women in
Retreat: The Politics of Separatism in Women’s Literary Utopias.” Relf has noted that, in women’s separatist utopias, there is a “danger of reproducing precisely that antagonistic exclusivity which feminism has rightly deplored as a characteristic of patriarchy” (134). As writer Sally Kempton has pointed out: “It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head” (qtd. in Quotable Women 34).3

Thoughts of the dystopia created in Top Girls were foremost in my mind as I began preparations for directing a production of the play at the University of Maryland. I was aware that the piece had been criticized for not providing a blueprint for social reform. In this, it has something in common with the more celebratory “Dinner Party,” whose creator has been praised for the beauty of the piece, but rebuked for “contribute[ing] nothing to the establishment of an alternative culture” (Bassnet 47).4 As I worked with the play, however, it seemed to me that Churchill not only creates a bleak female dystopia, but hints at the possibilities of female communion. In other words, there is a gap in the dystopia through which can be discerned the dim outlines of utopia.5

In fully exploring these ideas, I was interested not only in my own observations of text and character, but in how audience members react to these elements in performance. Therefore, I decided to conduct a random survey throughout the run of the show. Almost ten years after its original opening, it seems that Top Girls still elicited a great deal of interest—246 completed surveys were returned, and audience members buttonholed me at every opportunity to express their opinions on the production. In examining Churchill’s art, I have interwoven these survey results and excerpts from student reviews with my own analysis.

The remarkable first scene of Top Girls (by far the longest scene in the play) opens on two contemporaries, the executive Marlene and a mute and nameless waitress. They are preparing for the fantasy dinner-party in which Marlene will entertain exceptional women drawn from all ages of history, literature, art. Each of these time-travellers has made it to the top in her own very individual way. During a frantic forty-five minute meal, the waitress remains invisible as a subject, and highly visible as an object. Silent and harried, she is ordered about by everyone and ignored by all. If the utopian outlook is an “expression of the disempowered” (Pfaelzer 287), this dystopia reflects its opposite. Here the disempowered, however sulkily, keeps her place.6

Orchestrating dinner, Marlene pales beside her famous guests. She does not have any dead lovers to boast of; she is unable to claim either Buddhism or Christianity as her religion; and she can only compare a few hours of sadness to her guests’ years of accumulated misery. Still, Marlene continually tries to bond herself to the other women. When her success is toasted, she attempts to include everyone: “To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (Churchill 24). Marlene seems to want to believe that her success will help other women. Later in the play, the irony of this toast is clearly underlined in the interviews conducted by
Marlene and her co-workers at the Top Girls Employment Agency. No job applicant is helped to a better position or life, and the capitalistic “trickle-down theory” is exposed as hollow.

Of Marlene’s dinner guests in the initial scene, the first two offer the clearest splits in their personalities. At first glance, the Victorian lady traveller Isabella Bird seems as independent and lively a character as any feminist utopia could want. And Lady Nijo, who lived in luxury as a thirteenth century Japanese courtesan and then traveled throughout the country for twenty years as a nun, is a figure both feminine and strong. Additionally, both women have written their own travels and poetry.

But these women have so thoroughly absorbed their patriarchal cultures that they suffer extreme guilt for their own actions. Isabella “did no good” in her life and “spent years in self-gratification” (29). Nijo spent half of her life in repentance, taking on the blame of having tempted men, such as the priest Ariake. His love for her, she thinks, condemned him to hell. She also agonizes over her guilt in waking her father before his death because, “had he died saying his prayers he would have gone straight to heaven” (15). Isabella, too, is obsessed with her father, who was the “mainspring of my life and when he died I was so grieved” (14). To enable themselves to act freely, these two women must continually lie to themselves and hide their own natures. Isabella recalls her angry denials concerning suggestions in the
press that she wasn’t feminine. Her descriptions of the continual illnesses she suffered throughout her life have a comic quality, leading observers to view them as at least partially psychosomatic. As she says to Griselda, “I can see you were doing what you thought was your duty. But didn’t it make you ill?” (35). Nijø pretends that she was doing what her father wanted when she entered holy orders, even though, as Marlene points out, he actually meant for her “to stay in a convent, not go wandering around the country” (13).

If Isabella and Lady Nijø represent fragmented feminine subjects—half-subject, half-oppressed object—Pope Joan and Griselda are completely male creations. That is, Pope Joan opted for success by submerging herself and pretending to be male, while Griselda became a full-blown doll, a thoroughly passive feminine object. Joan lives the life of the mind—she is entirely logocentric and longs for absolute answers. She repeatedly emphasizes her detachment from womanhood. As a young woman, she dressed as a boy, and then “forgot I was pretending” (19), and she didn’t know she was pregnant because she “wasn’t used to having a woman’s body” (27). Joan doesn’t understand Griselda’s plight because she didn’t “live a woman’s life” (36). Her life, however, was doomed, because she was a woman, and therefore an inferior who couldn’t communicate with God: “Of course, he knew I was a woman” (25). In the end, her womanhood betrayed her, and she was stoned to death after giving birth during a papal procession.

Griselda, on the other hand, has been rewarded, after unbelievable suffering, with reinstatement by Walter’s side. Griselda views herself as the ultimate female object—a commodity to be exchanged and used up as her owner pleases. In her fairy tale, she asks for a shift to wear home after Walter’s rejection of her, and even maintains that it is a fitting exchange for the maidenhead she gave up to the marriage. Churchill has allowed Griselda to cling to an absurd class-conscious pride in her existence as a commodity. After all, she was desired by a Marquis rather than “a boy from the village” (33).

When audience members were asked who they felt was the most “successful” character in this opening dystopia, they selected Pope Joan (26.6%) and the waitress (21%) as their leading choices (see appendix, table 1). Pope Joan was also voted the favorite historical character, with a strong lead of 42.4% of the vote. Although men and women voted in equal percentages for Pope Joan, their reasons tended to be different. Men particularly enjoyed the Pope’s flaunting of church authority, commenting that “she developed her strength in a way that mocked Catholicism” and “I love anyone who puts something over on the church.” Men often distanced themselves from the character, expressing their doubts concerning her existence; they found her appealing “because she probably didn’t exist” and she was the “most outlandish.” Women, on the other hand, identified with Pope Joan, praising her martyrdom and “great courage to live as a man, the only way to have any freedom in her time,” but also revealing ambivalent feelings about Joan’s sacrifice: “She was smart, but she gave up too much of her womanhood” and “She was Pope, but she was so ignorant of her femininity.”
Significantly more women than men voted for the waitress as the most successful character in the first scene. Women often wrote their own script for the mute waitress: “at least she wasn’t miserable”; “all the others sacrificed part of themselves for what they achieved”; and “she’s successful because she doesn’t realize that she’s not successful.” Men, however, voted more often for Isabella as most successful, contending that she was both “adventuresome” and “a real lady.” Men also voted more frequently for Lady Nijo as their favorite historical character. Several male voters mentioned Nijo’s “poetic nature” and “total repentance” as her most attractive traits. (No women mentioned these!) Finally, although Griselda only garnered a few percentage points of the vote, men and women gave different reasons for their preference. The women admired Griselda for her status as fairy tale character, and the men commented only on her physical attractiveness.10

The ambiguous remarks made by women in response to the question of the success of these characters shows clearly the effects of this first scene in Top Girls as a feminist dystopia. But it is a dystopia with an opening in it. Churchill herself has said that she “quite deliberately left a hole in the play, rather than giving people a model of what they could be like. I meant the thing that is absent to have a presence” (qtd. in Stone 81). This absent presence can be viewed through hints of female communion in the content and structure of the scene. Like the “unspoken, invisible center,” that is at the heart of feminist lyricism according to Joanna Russ (12), the absent center of this scene is the possibility of female union and, hence, of feminist utopia.

The center of this communion resides in the figure of Dull Gret. Churchill has taken Gret from Brueghel’s painting of Dulle Griet, also known as Mad Meg. In this nightmarish depiction, Gret is descending to hell amidst a host of devils and vices, including “a bum with a face,” “and faces on things that don’t have faces on” (Churchill 40). Brueghel is usually interpreted as both making fun of shrewish, aggressive women—an old Flemish proverb states that “she could plunder in front of hell and return unscathed” (Roberts 48, Plate 9)—and castigating the sin of covetousness, of which Griet is the personification. In contrast, Churchill re-visions the figure of Gret in feminist fashion, and creates a heroine who is calling forth all of the women to go “where the evil comes from and pay the bastards out” (Churchill 40). As feminist drama critic Janet Brown has noted, Gret is the figure which calls for a new, third wave of feminism, one that is not as focused on individual concerns as on the fight to end all oppression (128).

Although male and female audience members equally supported Gret as their favorite historical character (she was the second favorite, after Pope Joan), many more women found her also to be the most successful character in the first scene (see appendix, table 1). Men often used the word “fought” to express their admiration for Gret. “She acted and fought,” “she conquered and fought,” and “she fought from the lowest wrung [sic]” were typical responses. They were also amused by her “slobbism” and her “wildness.” Interestingly, only women mentioned Hell, pain, or the objective of Gret’s fight. Gret “confronted pain,” “took over Hell,” “beat demons in Hell,” and
“beat evil.” One respondent remarked that, unlike the contemporary characters in the play, Gret had “a purpose for stepping on people’s faces.”

It is essential to note that, despite class differences, the other characters are affected by Gret. As an audience member commented on the survey: “when Gret spoke, everyone suddenly listened.” Isabella shows initial interest when Gret first enters and later calls for everyone to be quiet and listen to Gret’s description of her descent into hell. It is this description that inspires Isabella to recount her triumphant visit to the Emperor of Morocco. In Pat Barr's *A Curious Life for a Lady*, from which Churchill took most of Isabella’s words, Isabella’s empathy with the working class is stressed in her great pride in having been mistaken for a hired girl on one of her travels (65). And even Lady Nijo, who ignores Gret through most of the scene, joins her in the end with “All the ladies come” (Churchill 40). Earlier in the scene, Nijo mentions with hope a Goddess that “would save all living things . . . even the fishes” (25). These words come from Nijo’s later life as a traveling nun, one in which she changed her aristocratic ways and “crossed paths with a great variety of people and discovered a common bond of humanity with them” (Nijo xix). The other characters, too, begin to respond to their common bond of womanhood as the scene breaks down. Joan confesses that she, the Pope who is presumably capable of all forgiveness, can’t really forgive anything and Griselda suddenly admits that she sometimes thinks that “it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to” (Churchill 39).

This glimpse into a utopian possibility that might have existed if “Walter hadn’t had to” and if Nijo and the other women could join Gret in beating the devils gains power through the collective voice of the women. In a feminist utopian novel, such as Russ’s *The Female Man*, characters from different time/spaces can be brought together to “create the effect of a multiplicity of female histories” (Bartowski 50). But, in the theatre, the multiplicity of female experience can be performed literally simultaneously in time and place. Thus, the use of overlapping dialogue in the first scene of *Top Girls* not only underlines the ways in which the characters are *not* listening to one another; it paradoxically creates a melting together of *all* of their lives by “fractur[ing] the language of the individual subject . . .” (Diamond 189).

The overlaps in the first scene were regarded by student reviewers in the ambivalent manner that Churchill used them—some students thought they emphasized the “selfishness and egotism of each woman who never listened to anyone but herself,” and others thought that the overlap created “a sense of unity between the characters.” Interestingly, it is in the rest of the play, during which overlaps are used only sparingly, that characters more effectively silence each other.

After the long initial fantasy scene, the first act of *Top Girls* includes two briefer contemporary scenes. In the first, Marlene is shown interviewing a young woman, Jeanine, for a job. Encouraging Jeanine to lie about her upcoming marriage, Marlene then cruelly tempts her with a prestigious job, only to instantly withdraw the offer with “You haven’t got the speeds anyway” (Churchill 44). In this scene, the audience is given a taste of Marlene’s
way of doing business. Although the Top Girls’ Agency, “manned” (an apt term!) entirely by women, could be a caring organization with an objective to help women find satisfying work on the job market, Marlene quickly displays her “commitment to the ethic of competition integral to the masculine model of success” (Kritzer 145).

The interview with Jeanine is followed by a visit to Marlene’s “niece” Angie, a troubled and slow-witted girl who has stormy relationships with her mother Joyce and her much younger girlfriend Kit. Although Kit and Angie quarrel incessantly, their love and strong connection is clear, and the intelligent, timid Kit meets her complement in the backward, but brash, Angie. When Kit shows Angie, smearing the blood on her finger, that she has begun her first menstrual period, Angie frightens Kit by grabbing her hand and licking off the blood. To seal their bond, Angie maintains, “You’ll have to do that when I get mine” (Churchill 48). It is in Kit that Angie confides her feelings that Marlene is really her mother, not her aunt. And it is with Kit that she cuddles when she is overwhelmed by the vulnerability which this disclosure has opened up in her. Whether or not Kit, who is clever at school and wants to be a nuclear physicist when she grows up, will extend her hand to Angie in the future remains to be seen. If Kit carries the seeds of a future utopia, her hand will be extended. But, in Marlene’s harsh world, that would not be a likely possibility.

Act two consists of two longer scenes. The first is comprised of a series of vignettes at the Top Girls Employment Agency, where Marlene and her co-workers reject interviewees because of their age or inexperience, and Marlene rebuffs the wife of a male co-worker (over whom she has just won a promotion). In this scene, Marlene and her employees, Nell and Win, demonstrate their complete collusion with a highly competitive and ruthless system. Nell says that Marlene got her promotion over the hapless Howard because “she’s got more balls” (57). When Nell and Win speak of their clients, it is with great disdain. Nell doesn’t want to help her next male client, since he won’t relocate, because “the lady wife” is “going through the change” (58). Nell also refers to her afternoon’s work as including “half a dozen little girls and an arts graduate who can’t type” (60).

When Win interviews an older client, Louise, who is in middle management and can’t seem to go any higher, the audience gets a glimpse at the “glass ceiling” that may affect Marlene’s future. For Louise has clearly followed the patriarchal model: “I don’t care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work” (63). (It is interesting to note that the actress playing Louise doubled in the role of Pope Joan in both the British and American original productions.) Yet, Win tells Louise that she can’t compete for vacancies in which she’ll be up against younger men, and steers her toward a cosmetic company, which may be more friendly to women employees. Thus, even women who have obeyed all the rules in this dystopia cannot hope to maintain prosperity.

Later in this scene, Angie arrives unexpectedly, with the intention of moving in with her Aunt Marlene. Marlene doesn’t even recognize Angie at
first, and, when she does, she clearly doesn’t want to have her work interrupted by this messy reminder of her motherhood. At this point, Howard’s wife, Mrs. Kidd, arrives to beg Marlene to give up her job for Howard. Here, the audience sees a dilemma—Mrs. Kidd is a loyal and sympathetic character, but her insistence that Marlene is a ‘ballbreaker’ for keeping her earned promotion seems irritating and uncalled for. Later, after the audience watches Nell’s interview and rejection of the young and ambitious Shona, who lies on her application, it is announced that Howard has had a heart attack. The blasé reactions of Marlene, Win, and Shona—‘too much butter, too much smoke’ (77)—seem unwarranted in their heartlessness.

Near the end of this lengthy scene at the agency, after a monologue in which Win traces her lonely and restless life as a “high-flyer,” Marlene returns to the office to a sleeping Angie. Win tells Marlene that Angie has expressed a desire to work at Top Girls. Marlene, without hesitation, replies “Packer in Tesco more like” (77—Tesco is a British supermarket chain). The scene ends with these cold pronouncements on Angie’s future:

Win: She’s a nice kid. Isn’t she?
Marlene: She’s a bit funny. She’s a bit thick.
Win: She thinks you’re wonderful.
Marlene: She’s not going to make it. (77)

There is no place in this dystopia for those who, like Angie, cannot keep up with the competition.

The final scene of Top Girls takes place a year earlier, before Marlene has received her promotion. She is visiting her sister Joyce and niece Angie, but, in the sisters’ ensuing argument, it is revealed that Angie is really Marlene’s daughter. Marlene became pregnant when she was seventeen and left her child to be raised by her then-married sister. This revelation makes clear that Marlene has used Joyce as her “wife” in order to facilitate her success in the labor market. As Amelia Howe Kritzer succinctly puts it, “Marlene’s rise to the top has been founded upon Joyce’s willingness to take upon herself, without compensation, the ‘messy,’ female-identified tasks that Marlene does not even want to talk about. Marlene’s labour in the public marketplace, like that of a traditional husband, depends on Joyce’s labour in the home for its profitability” (47). Marlene is slow to understand what Joyce has always understood. As they argue about the situation, Marlene says, “I know a managing director who’s got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because she’s an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money” (Churchill 90). Joyce’s reply goes to the heart of the matter: “So what’s that got to do with you at the age of seventeen?” (90). The scene ends, after a final rift (hinging on Marlene’s support of Thatcher and her politics) between the sisters, when Angie comes running in from her bedroom, in the throes of a nightmare. Her last words to Marlene are “frightening” (98). In this last scene, Marlene’s need and loss are apparent; her success has been an expensive one. In this way, Top Girls presents a dystopia in which “success is often oppression in disguise” (Burk 67–8).
Even without overlaps in dialogue, the characters in the contemporary scenes manage not to hear or communicate with one another. Angie falls asleep when Top Girl employee Win opens up to her. Joyce answers Marlene’s questions to Angie for her, not allowing the child to impart any of her plans or dreams of the future. She is simply cut off with “She hasn’t an idea in her head what she wants to do” (82). Win admonishes Louise for “talk[ing] too much at an interview” (64), even though she is asking Louise the questions. And Nell advises her client Shona not to “listen to the buyer’s doubts . . . [or] consider his needs or feelings” (72).

Survey respondents found it difficult to answer questions about their favorite or most successful contemporary characters (see appendix, table 2). Whereas 9% of the respondents did not answer the question “which of the women in the first scene is the most successful?” 20.8% did not answer “which of the contemporary women is most successful?” Many put the answer “none” on the side of the list. Some did find Marlene to be the most successful because she “had the envy of both men and women,” or was “unhappy, like the rest of us, but with more freedom.” Noticing the conflicts in her life, a respondent remarked that “she got what she wanted because she forgot how to be compassionate.” Those who picked Joyce usually cited her “honesty” and “knowledge of how things really were” as her greatest qualities. More than one respondent said that “Joyce could have made it, but chose not to.” Churchill would say that contemporary society does not allow caregivers like Joyce any choices that could lead to empowerment.

Audience members also found that the contemporary women had less in common than the historical women and were generally more unhappy, but communicated better. Thus, a colder dystopia emerges in the contemporary section of the play. Even though these women understand one another, they remain isolated and unhappy, focused on their own individual pursuits and needs. To Churchill the real world of 1980s Thatcher-style politics is a dystopia. The poor relationships between the women are imitative of Thatcher’s alienation from other women. As Churchill says: “She [Thatcher] may be a woman, but she isn’t a sister, she may be a sister, but she isn’t a comrade” (qtd. in Betsko and Koenig 78).

Does this mean that the window glimpsed in the first scene shuts down for the rest of the play? Does the possibility of utopia become the road not taken? Or are there, instead, multiple possible futures? Jean Pfaelzer has defined the feminist utopia as “a metaphor for potential histories, a metaphor which implies that we can choose our future” (285). As Connie Ramos’ actions in Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time can result in two possible futures (one dystopic and the other utopic), so, perhaps there are two possible futures for Angie. One future is the “frightening” nightmare at the end of Top Girls, a future in which Angie has only the Marlenes of the world to turn to. Another is one of the possibilities that Churchill has suggested herself, “Angie discovers that Marlene’s values are false and realizes that the person she’d indeed like to kill is Marlene, because she’s such a shit. Next, Angie, though stupid, meets up with a lot of feminist women
and becomes politicized, and gets a job as a bricklayer in a feminist collective” (qtd. in Selmon 142). (I should also note here, that this future would tie Angie to Dull Gret—and, as in the case of Louise and Pope Joan, Churchill indicates that these characters are to be played by the same actress.)

It is also possible that Kit could provide an opening into a more utopic future (see appendix, table 2). Although a relativelysmall percentage of audience members voted for Kit as the most successful contemporary woman (8.2%), their reasons for choosing her were the most optimistic. She was “unspoiled”; “all the others were failures, but she had attainable dreams”; “she will do something that will make her happy”; and “Kit is the woman-spirit who can get ahead and still care for her sisters.”

It is the caring for sisters that is the important take-off point for the kind of social feminism that Churchill advocates. When women don’t listen or care about others in this feminist dystopia, the effect may be to urge us on to communal action to change societal structure. Tellingly, 68.8% of the respondents remarked that Top Girls most closely resembles a social commentary (see appendix, table 3). And 42.7% of those surveyed believed an alternate title for the play could be “The Survival of the Fittest,” suggesting that approximately one-half of the respondents noted Churchill’s economic critique.

An optional final question on the survey asked if the viewer thought Top Girls was really a feminist play. Here, it was evident that many audience members identified the liberal feminism which Churchill is critiquing as the only kind of feminism. Respondents said that the show was not feminist because it “trashes the movement”; “it’s anti-individualist, and that frightens me”; it “presented women in a bad light,” and “no, instead of making feminism look good, it makes Marlene look like she doesn’t have her priorities in order.”12 From this point of view, the play becomes even more of a dystopia, as there seems to be no way out of the dilemma that women face.

But Churchill, instead, is warning against the possible dystopic future in which a “Hitlerina” will be considered a successful woman. She believes the future can only bloom in socialist terms and that “there’s no such thing as right-wing feminism” (qtd. in Stone 81). Those surveyed who did read this message tended to look for a sign in the play for a better future. They felt that the play showed a “stage that women will hopefully pass through” and indicated “that feminism must combine with humanism” and “shows how we all need to support each other more.”

Not many students or audience members suggested societal action for communal change. Perhaps we’re not yet on the threshold of that third wave of feminism. And if we are unable to look through Churchill’s porthole into a new utopia on the other side, then, as comedian Lili Tomlin has remarked, “We’re [still] all in this together—by ourselves” (qtd. in Brown and O’Connor 75).
APPENDIX

Top Girls Survey

Table 1  
(NB: Respondent make-up = 65.7% female and 33.1% male)

The historical women in the first scene:
- hated each other (2.2%)
- disliked each other (9.1%)
- equally liked and disliked each other (67.8%)
- liked each other (14.3%)
- loved each other (6.5%)

How did the historical women in the first scene communicate with each other?
- very well (6.4%)
- well (14.4%)
- fair (19.1%)
- poorly (47.5%)
- not at all (12.7%)

The historical women in the first scene have much in common.
- I strongly agree with this statement (32.2%)
- I agree (50.2%)
- I don’t have an opinion (4.5%)
- I disagree (8.6%)
- I strongly disagree (2.4%)

For the most part, how happy were the lives of the historical women in the first scene?
- very happy (0.4%)
- happy (6.7%)
- not so happy (28.7%)
- sometimes happy (39.6%)
- miserable (24.2%)

How much would you have enjoyed dining with these historical women?
- I would have enjoyed it very much (29.4%)
- I would have enjoyed it (18.9%)
- I might have enjoyed it (19.3%)
- I doubt that I would have enjoyed it (21.8%)
- I would have hated it (10.5%)

In your opinion, which of the women in the first scene is the most successful?  
(9% did not answer this question.)
- Marlene (20.1%)
  [34.9% male/62.8% female]
- Dull Gret (13.6%)
  [24.1% male/75.9% female]
- the Waitress (21.0%)
  [27.9% male/72.1% female]
- Pope Joan (26.6%)
  [32.1% male/66.0% female]
- Isabella Bird (9.3%)
  [50.0% male/50.0% female]
- Patient Griselda (2.8%)
  [33.3% male/66.7% female]
- Lady Nijo (6.1%)
  [33.3% male/66.7% female]

(All respondents were given a space to explain the reason for their choice. 47.3% did not provide information.)

Who is your favorite historical character?  
(8.6% did not answer this question.)
- Isabella Bird (17.0%)
  [29.7% male/67.6% female]
- Pope Joan (42.4%)
  [32.3% male/67.7% female]
- Lady Nijo (15.2%)
  [37.5% male/62.5% female]
- Patient Griselda (2.2%)
  [20.0% male/80.0% female]
- Dull Gret (22.8%)
  [32.7% male/67.3% female]

(50.2% did not give reasons for their choice.)
Table 2

**How did the contemporary women in the play communicate with one another?**
- very well (10.4%)
- well (25.1%)
- fair (35.1%)
- poorly (26.0%)
- not at all (3.5%)

**The contemporary women in the play have much in common.**
- I strongly agree with this statement (17.2%)
- I agree (54.5%)
- I don’t have an opinion (6.4%)
- I disagree (18.9%)
- I strongly disagree (3.0%)

**For the most part, how happy were the lives of the contemporary women in the play?**
- very happy (0.4%)
- happy (12.2%)
- not so happy (45.4%)
- sometimes happy (27.9%)
- miserable (14.0%)

**How much would you like to do business with the Top Girls Employment Agency?**
- I would have enjoyed it very much (1.9%)
- I would have enjoyed it (7.5%)
- I might have enjoyed it (20.2%)
- I doubt that I would have enjoyed it (38.6%)
- I would have hated it (32.0%)

**In your opinion, which of the contemporary women is the most successful?**
- (20.8% did not answer this question.)
  - Marlene (38.7%)
  - Win (7.2%)
  - Joyce (16.0%)
  - Nell (3.6%)
  - Angie (3.6%)
  - Shona (1.0%)
  - Kit (8.2%)
  - Louise (1.0%)
  - Jeanine (2.1%)
  - Mrs. Kidd (3.6%)
  - the Waitress (12.9%)

(All respondents were given a space to explain the reason for their choice. 60.4% did not provide information.)

**Who was your favorite contemporary character?**
- (13.9% did not answer this question.)
  - Marlene (22.3%)
  - Win (11.8%)
  - Joyce (21.3%)
  - Nell (1.0%)
  - Angie (20.4%)
  - Shona (1.4%)
  - Kit (5.7%)
  - Louise (0.9%)
  - Jeanine (0.5%)
  - Mrs. Kidd (5.7%)
  - the Waitress (6.6%)

(57.6% did not give reasons for their choice.)
Table 3

To me, the play *Top Girls* most closely resembles:

- soap opera (2.1%)
- tragedy (8.4%)
- situation-comedy (1.7%)
- theatre of the absurd (8.9%)
- political satire (10.1%)
- social commentary (68.8%)

Another possible title for the play *Top Girls* could be:

- “Equal Rights for Women!” (3.3%)
- “Celebrating Women” (23.9%)
- “The Survival of the Fittest” (42.7%)
- “The Woman is Smarter” (10.3%)
- “Nasty Girls” (8.9%)
- “A Woman’s Place is in the Home” (1.4%)
- “Money Makes the World Go Round” (9.4%)

Sex:
- Male (33.1%)
- Female (66.7%)

Do you consider yourself a feminist?
- Yes (53.4%)
- No (44.8%)

How would you characterize yourself politically?
- Radical Left (7.9%)
- Radical Right (0.9%)
- Liberal (54.1%)
- Moderate (24.5%)
- Conservative (12.7%)

Have you ever taken a women's study course?
- Yes (26.3%)
- No (73.3%)

Source: A random sample of 246 members of audiences observing a production of *Top Girls* given in the Pugliese Theatre at the University of Maryland. The show ran for fourteen performances from April 8–21 in 1991. Approximately 1100 people attended.

NOTES

1. Anyone venturing into a study of utopias or dystopias should first consult Darko Suvin’s and Lyman Tower Sargent’s articles on definitions of the genre (see my references list). Suvin defines utopia as “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (132). Sargent adds the need for a utopia to “contain a fairly detailed description of a social system that is nonexistent but located in time and space” (143).

2. This internalization of patriarchy by women is an essential theme throughout Caryl Churchill’s work. As the character Susan in *Vinegar Tom* (1976) accepts the male definition of her as a witch, so Claxton’s wife in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) is unable to shake her own feelings of inherent female uncleanness. In the acclaimed *Cloud Nine* (1979), Churchill uses cross dressing to create a totally male-defined female gender, lacking even in the physical presence of the female body! As the male actor dressed as Betty says:

I am a man’s creation as you see,
And what men want is what I want to be (4).

3. In this respect the absence of any male characters in *Top Girls* illustrates the converse of the ideas explored by Peter Fitting in “For Men Only: a Guide to Reading Single-Sex Worlds.” Here, he notes that in single-sex female utopias, male absence functions as a metaphor. In other words, “it is not men who have been excluded from these visions of an
alternate human future, but male values and male roles” (103). In Top Girls, women can oppress each other by retaining these “male values and male roles” during men’s absence.

4. Indeed, Bassnet’s criticism of the piece can be directly related to some of the important issues raised in Top Girls, especially the question of the worth of achieving success in a male-dominated society. Bassnet notes, “Chicago’s denial of the value of embroidery and ceramics within the domestic context placed her squarely in the field of those who see achievement as measured by success in the male world. Hence an artist succeeds if her work is hung in a city museum and fails if it is hung on her living-room wall” (47).

5. This possible utopia, for Churchill, is one that combines both feminism and socialism. As she maintained in interview, she wanted the drama to “start out looking like a feminist play and turn into a socialist one as well” (qtd. in Betsko and Koenig 82). Dragan Klaić has demonstrated in his book on utopia and dystopia in modern drama that many British plays of this period deal with the “anti-authoritarian argument of the Left in an ongoing debate in the British politics of the Thatcher era” (97). Klaić does not deal with Churchill, whose play does not fit his strict definition of dystopia. (As a matter of fact, Klaić includes no female playwrights whatsoever in his book.)

Just as Churchill’s brand of feminism is closely connected to socialism, her idea of patriarchy is often linked with capitalism. In Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, capitalistic values associated with property ownership ultimately prevent the formation of a utopic society. In the more recent work, Serious Money (1987), Churchill presents a cut-throat world of rampant materialism in which women are equal to men in their devotion to ruthless competition. To Churchill, feminism without socialism is meaningless, “I do find it hard to conceive of a right-wing feminism. Of course, socialism and feminism aren’t synonymous, but I feel strongly about both and wouldn’t be interested in a form of one that didn’t include the other” (qtd. in Betsko and Koenig 78).

In a similar fashion, Peter Fitting has considered the difficulties encountered in analyzing right-wing utopias, for scholars like himself, who “came to the study of utopia as a continuation of an involvement in socialist and feminist politics” (Fitting. “Utopias Beyond Our Ideals,” 95).

6. Churchill’s vision in this first scene can be related to Ursula K. Le Guin’s concept of an imperfect utopia. In Le Guin’s novel, The Dispossessed—originally subtitled “An Ambiguous Utopia”—the cooperative society of the planet Anarres is depicted as a stark and difficult one. This world is not without its problems, but contrasts favorably with the dystopic planet of Urras, where women can only play inferior roles in society. In Top Girls, the flawed utopia portrayed in the first scene is paired with a contemporary dystopia, in which some women have achieved success, but only by adhering to a masculine model.

7. How audience members respond to characters in a performance is an extremely complex and tricky business. Reader-response and reception theories tend to center on the literary text rather than the performative act. Such theory ranges from Norman Holland’s psychological analyses which stress the importance of individual readers’ “identity themes” in their interpretation of a text (see, for example, his study of reader responses to Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” in 5 Readers Reading), to Hans-Robert Jauss’s important work which places a reader’s “horizon of expectations” in a cultural and historical context.

Many theorists in theatre have applied literary criticism to theatre, fruitfully blending reception theory with semiotics. The application of these theories to theatre is fraught with difficulties and complications related to the conditions governing the transformation of a text into a performance. Audience members may interpret the verbal and nonverbal aspects of a text in performance according to an infinite number of variables, including such factors as the differences in actors’ abilities and personal appearance and the effects of reactions of audience members on one another. These factors also can vary significantly from night to night.
I have tried to focus my inquiry on an interpretation of the surveys as they relate to the perception of utopic and dystopic elements in the text and to gender differences that seem to be revealed in these responses.

8. These responses, differing along gender lines, reveal tendencies that have been observed in feminist reader response criticism. In Patricicio Schweikart’s pivotal article, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading,” the author outlines a method of reading which contrasts with the “male” distanced and objective style in that it “construe[s] the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author” (47). In related work, David Bleich has noted that women readers often “enter the world of the novel,” whereas male readers “see the novel as a result of someone’s action” (239).

9. I would like to suggest here a connection to the concept of the “Male Gaze” as put forth in film theory by Laura Mulvey and applied to the theatre by such critics as Jill Dolan. According to such theory, most film and theatre reinforces male “scopophilia,” defined by Freud as the pleasure of looking at other people as objects. Women become the silenced objects in the theatre; men are the subjects and “bearer[s] of the look.”

Women, then, can be seen as having two options in the theatre or cinema: they can either identify with the male point of view, or they can create their own script for the absent female subject. Perhaps the tendency of women viewing Top Girls to write a script for the mute waitress is connected to the latter option and reveals a habit of mind that persists even when the piece being observed is written from the female point of view. In creating a text for the waitress, women audience members were engaging in what Wolfgang Iser views as an essential imagi-native act—filling in the gaps of a text in order create meaning. They are also “engaging in an interactive reading” (Linkin 14), in a manner which they may not have if the character were male.

10. Not only did men tend to focus on physical attractiveness of individual actors, there was also a marked resistance in many of the male audience members to the performance; a resistance which seemed to be based solely on the grounds that the text was written from a female point of view. A small percentage of male viewers reacted with a great deal of anger, covering the survey with hostile and violent comments. (This has also been true in the reception of two other plays by women playwrights produced at the University of Maryland in the last five years.) Judith Fetterley, best known for her exhortations to women to become “resistant readers” when studying male-centered literary works, has examined this resistance of men to women-centered literature. She has noted that women often hide their interest in such work from men, because, “... to the degree that such empowerment contravenes the design of patriarchal culture, women’s reading of women’s texts is literally treason against the state and of necessity must be a covert and hidden affair” (151).

11. Women respondents seemed to enter Gret’s world by justifying her actions; indeed, they almost acted as defendants of Churchill’s re-visioning of Gret in the way that Schweikart writes of the feminist reader as “a witness in defense of the woman writer” (46). Men stood apart from the character, admiring her tenacity and enjoying her slovenly appearance.

12. It is important here to recall Jauss’s emphasis on historical and cultural contexts in understanding the responses of an American audience to Churchill’s play. It is perhaps only natural that American spectators would mistakenly identify liberal feminism as the only kind of feminism, since the contemporary feminist movement in America has concentrated on the achievement of equal rights for women within the existing societal framework. In contrast, the British movement for women’s liberation was dominated from its beginnings by socialist feminists. As prominent feminist Sheila Rowbotham maintained in her 1969 pamphlet on Women’s Liberation and the New Politics, “... real liberation of the oppressed group can only be achieved through the transformation of the economic base and of social relations” (13).

The significance of social relations in Churchill’s plays is often met with resistance by the American viewer. The remark made by an audience member that the play was “anti-
individualist” underlines the tendency of American viewers to react more to individual stories presented rather than the social dimension of the play. In Churchill’s work, the social dimensions are reinforced by the collaborative process and extensive group workshops through which many of her dramas have evolved. Indeed, the process of creation with such groups as Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment can be seen as mirroring the utopian vision that is the other side of Marlene’s harshly individualistic society. Churchill herself has commented on the significance of the group process, “If you’re working by yourself, then you’re not accountable to anyone but yourself while you’re doing it. You don’t get forced in quite the same way into seeing how your own inner feelings connect up with larger things that happen to other people” (Interview with Geraldine Cousin 4).

REFERENCES