From Great Women to Top Girls: Pageants of Sisterhood in British Feminist Theater

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Caryl Churchill’s groundbreaking play Top Girls (1982) opens with a fleeting fantasy of transnational, transhistorical sisterhood as an eclectic group of eminent women, historical and fictional, gather to celebrate an apparent feminist victory—the promotion of a contemporary, high-powered businesswoman to a management position previously held by men. Sixty years earlier, at the height of the British women’s suffrage movement, similarly fantastic gatherings of notable women from various nations and centuries were staged in support of women’s rights. Like Top Girls, Pageant of Great Women (1909) and the Women’s Coronation Procession (1911) revived famous women from history and drew them into a contemporary feminist cause. By bringing together women from different time periods and geographic locations, all three productions present their audiences with a spectacle of female solidarity extending across national, cultural, and class boundaries. These pageants of sisterhood enact a fundamental feminist principle; as feminist theorist Rosi
Braidotti observes, “the recognition of a bond of commonality among women … is the foundation stone that allows for the feminist position or standpoint to be articulated.”¹ In dramatizing this “bond of commonality,” however, these productions express a feminist ideal more than they do a material reality; all three performances of united sisterhood show signs of strain, though with different degrees of self-awareness.

My purpose in this essay is to consider how British feminist productions with largely female casts from both ends of the twentieth century appropriated elements of pageantry to create a vision of sisterhood responsive to the feminism of their day. I begin with two suffrage-era productions that exploit the modern pageant revival to garner support for a feminist cause: Cicely Hamilton’s pageant play Pageant of Great Women, first performed in November 1909 at a large fundraising event for the Actresses’ Franchise League, and the massive Women’s Coronation Procession of 17 June 1911, whose purpose was to “show the strength of the demand to win Votes for Women in Coronation year.”² I then turn to a more recent feminist play, Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls from 1982, whose opening act incorporates elements of pageantry reminiscent of the suffrage pageants as colorful historical women gather around a dinner table in a spectacle that might at first appear to represent female solidarity across cultures and history, but which soon dissolves into conflict and chaos. Placing these somewhat disparate moments in British feminist theater in dialogue with one another brings out revealing convergences and discrepancies in their uses of women’s history, particularly their representations of women’s power and martyrdom, and in their constructions of sisterhood. Anticipating some of the concerns of transnational feminism, Churchill’s dystopian vision of fractured sisterhood throws into relief the suffrage pageants’ fantasy of universal, united sisterhood by encouraging attention to the national, ideological, and class differences that must be elided to achieve such idealized visions of female solidarity. Despite her attentiveness to differences among women, however, Churchill does not deny the possibility of sisterhood altogether, but uses Brechtian methods to suggest its possibility beyond the social conditions represented in the play. All three productions, to varying degrees, reveal the tensions between the potent feminist ideal of united sisterhood and the material differences and disparities among women that the ideal seeks to overcome.
I. Cicely Hamilton’s Pageant of Great Women, 1909

Pageant of Great Women exploited for feminist purposes the pageant revival sweeping Britain and the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century. Launched by Louis Napoleon Parker’s large-scale historical pageant celebrating the twelve hundredth anniversary of the town of Sherbourne in 1905, the modern pageant movement was a deliberate return to Renaissance pageantry inspired by the late nineteenth-century arts and crafts movement.3 In 1909, as the women’s suffrage movement was gaining momentum, feminist theater director Edith Craig (daughter of the actress Ellen Terry and sister of the theater designer Edward Gordon Craig) commissioned playwright Cicely Hamilton, one of the founding members of the Women Writers’ Suffrage League, to write a pageant in support of women’s suffrage.4 First performed at London’s Scala Theatre on 12 November 1909, Pageant of Great Women was reproduced several times for suffrage rallies and fundraisers. Hamilton’s play, written in blank verse, opens with an allegorical tableau re-creating a well-known suffrage cartoon by W. H. Margetson, in which a woman kneels at the foot of a winged and blindfolded figure of Justice while Sir Prejudice attempts to pull her away. As the tableau comes to life, Woman—hampered by jeering, condescending Sir Prejudice, the only role played by a man—supports her appeal for freedom by introducing a sequence of “great” women who “fought their way to achievement and to fame.”5 As she speaks, actresses wearing colorful period costumes present themselves onstage, embodying fifty or more historical women chosen with a “spectacular effect in mind,”6 including such diverse figures as Sappho; Deborah; Jane Austen; Lakshmibi, Rani of Jhansi; and Tsze-Hsi-An, empress of China. The exact number of historical characters included in the pageant fluctuated between about fifty and ninety as the play circulated through various local suffrage societies across Britain and beyond, some of which incorporated historical figures of local interest. (In America, Hamilton’s resistance to American suffragists’ bid to incorporate great women from American history led to a separate American pageant featuring exclusively American women from Pocahontas to Julia Ward Howe.)7 Despite the London production’s bias toward historical figures of British and aristocratic descent, the accumulation of historical characters onstage ranged across nations, races, and classes, suggesting widespread international, transhistorical support for the movement.
Historian Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented traditions” helps to explain the advantages of extending the reach of the feminist movement backward through history in this way. As Hobsbawm suggests, history serves as “a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion” that can “give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history.”8 As we will see again with the Women’s Coronation Procession, two historical types proved especially useful in performing the functions of legitimation and unification in the suffrage pageants: powerful women who have succeeded in roles traditionally held by men and women martyrs who have been victims of male oppression or cruelty. The structure of Hamilton’s play emphasizes women’s successes in occupations associated with men. The historical characters are introduced in six sets—learned women, artists, saintly women, heroines, rulers, and warriors—each of which is produced in response to Sir Prejudice’s attempt to exclude women from a particular virtue or sphere of expertise. The learned women, for instance, disprove Sir Prejudice’s accusation that woman has never “[s]tood god-like in her wisdom, great of soul,” and the saintly women, his belief that women’s family-centered lives leave room for “no wide love of the outer world” (25, 33). The introductions to individual women likewise stress their ability to compete with men: Woman introduces Marie Curie by asking, “And where is the man / Stands higher in the ranks of science to-day?” and Catherine the Great with, “who ruled more kingly?” (29, 39). Female martyrdom, though less prominent, emerges in Woman’s introduction to the group of heroines led by Charlotte Corday:

See where they come,  
Those who have loved a cause, been loyal to it,  
Striven and suffered nobly rather than fail  
In a hard duty  

(35)

These lines are clearly calculated to resonate with the contemporary suffrage cause, but the play’s emphasis lies more on women’s strength than on their common oppression or victimization. In contrast to the Women’s Coronation Procession treated in the next section of this essay, the historical characters in Hamilton’s pageant serve primarily as models of women’s ability to contribute to a wide range of human activities, pointing the way toward the future rather than reminding spectators of women’s past or present subjugation.
Pageant of Great Women also uses history to lend weight and dignity to the contemporary suffrage movement by transforming the “shrieking sisterhood” (as deriders referred to them) into a noble alliance of great women serving a just and honorable cause. As Katharine Cockin and Penny Farfan have noted in earlier treatments of this pageant, one of its most interesting features is the parallel it sets up between the suffragists who mounted the production and the historical characters they played.9 The pageant was written with the expectation that the historical figures would be performed by suffrage activists; these characters had no speaking lines, thus facilitating production by amateurs. The affinity between suffrage activists and their historical roles was often a consideration in casting. For example, in the original production (which, as a fundraiser for the Actresses’ Franchise League, could make use of professional actors), the hotly contested role of Joan of Arc was played by Pauline Chase, an actress best known for her role as the youthful, androgynous warrior Peter Pan. In another production, Saint Hilda was played by Charlotte Despard, a prominent suffragist known for her austere lifestyle and her involvement in the theosophy movement. The text exploits this association between performer and character in a self-referential joke made by the only historical character with a speaking part, the seventeenth-century actress Nance Oldfield, played by actress Ellen Terry in the original production:

Nance Oldfield: If you, Sir Prejudice, had your way,
There would never an actress on the boards.
Some lanky, squeaky boy would play my parts:
And, though I say it, ther’ed have been a loss!
The stage would be as dull as now ‘tis merry—
No Oldfield, Woffington, or—Ellen Terry!

(31)

Through this correlation between performer and character, the production links the suffragists who perform these roles to a group of highly accomplished women of historical distinction, imbuing the suffrage movement with a dignity, grandness, and historical significance that directly counters suffrage opponents’ dismissal of the movement as a ridiculous and short-lived aberration.

Through its impersonation of historical characters, Hamilton's pageant
seeks to strengthen the British women's suffrage movement by claiming solidarity with women outside of its national boundaries and by presenting a vision of cohesive sisterhood united across classes, cultures, and times. As transnational feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty has pointed out, such feminist claims to "universal sisterhood" are often "produced ... through specific assumptions about women as a cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives and goals." Pageant of Great Women shares these assumptions, but it also shows signs of strain in its attempt to unify female experience under a transcendent conception of Woman able to subsume multiple forms of difference. The pageant's careful arrangement of silent historical women in six categories of "greatness" serving Woman's argument creates an impression of ordered unity that keeps differences in check. This homogenizing effect is compounded by the use of Woman, an allegorical figure implicitly standing for all women, as the spokesperson for the diverse historical figures onstage. However, a tension exists between Woman and the historical characters, whose strong visual appeal would likely draw attention away from her; it seems no accident that the published text of the pageant does not even include a photograph of Woman among its numerous photographs of the historical figures. This strain of unification is most evident in the last historical group to appear onstage, the women warriors, who finally succeed in silencing Sir Prejudice, causing him to slink off, dumbstruck. On the one hand, this group demonstrates how the ordering and silence of the women elides national and ideological differences, as women who fought for England (Boadicea, Christian Davies, and Hannah Snell) stand readily alongside women who fought against the English (Joan of Arc, Black Agnes, and Rani of Jhansi) with no recognition of potential conflict. On the other hand, this grouping also destabilizes the very category represented by the allegorical figure of Woman. At this climactic moment in the pageant, the audience is presented with a group of characters whose gender is conveyed ambiguously and variously. More than half of the warriors are cross-dressed as men, some suggesting youthful androgyny (such as Pauline Chase as Joan of Arc) and others, female masculinity (such as Frances Wetherall as Agnes of Dunbar and Cicely Hamilton as Christian Davies). Marjorie Garber has argued in Vested Interests that cross-dressing not only challenges gender categories but also introduces
a crisis in the categories themselves by opening up a third “space of possibility.” Particularly through the inclusion of the transvestite women warriors, *Pageant of Great Women* presents a spectacle in which gender is expressed multiply, defying classification within a simple binary. Woman’s final speech supports a conception of gender as an open space in which to forge new possibilities:

*Woman: The world is mine, as yours,*  
The pulsing strength and passion and heart of it:  
The work I set my hand to, woman’s work,  
Because I set my hand to it.

These visual and verbal signs that the category of woman is unfixed and still evolving point to a more flexible, expansive conception of Woman that exists in tension with a more homogenizing understanding of Woman as a single allegorical figure who stands for—and speaks for—all the diverse women onstage. Woman’s final words also suggest that the utopian performance of transnational, transhistorical sisterhood presented in Hamilton’s *Pageant of Great Women* addresses the future more than it does the past, using history to present a fantasy of what women could be.

**II. The Women’s Coronation Procession, 1911**

Two years later, another major British suffrage event made use of pageantry to present a magnificent spectacle of united sisterhood. By far the largest procession of the women’s suffrage campaign, the Women’s Coronation Procession of 17 June 1911 was a highly theatrical event staged on the streets of London, in which forty thousand women from at least twenty-eight different suffrage societies “march[ed] seven abreast in a line some five-miles long.” Its organizers, appropriating a long tradition of English civic pageants for their own distinct political purposes, preempted the official coronation processions for King George V scheduled for the following week, which they predicted would be “to an overwhelming extent representative of the manhood of the Empire” with no place for “women as one half of the people who are the King’s loyal subjects” (6–7). In a subversive departure from traditional coronation pageants, which usually celebrated and confirmed the political power of the honored ruler, the
Women’s Coronation Procession claimed political power for the marchers themselves.

Despite this radical departure from tradition, the Women’s Coronation Procession made use of many of the same theatrical techniques that David Bergeron identifies in Renaissance civic pageants, including iconography, emblematic costumes, and allegory, to “make manifest its ideas about politics and government.”¹⁵ The pageant’s organizers, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), sought to overwhelm spectators with their vibrant spectacle of female solidarity, buttressed by more than one thousand banners and the “inspiring music” of one hundred bands. They hoped that “bystanders [would] marvel and their eyes [would be] dazed with colour, and their sense satiated with the never-ending pageant.”¹⁶ The procession enacted the utopian vision of sisterly solidarity articulated in the descriptive memento program published for the occasion:

No section of womanhood in the United Kingdom is unrepresented in its [the procession’s] ranks. Women engaged in organised industries and trades; women whose sphere of labour is the home; women who hold a honoured place in professions; women whose lives have been spent in the service of humanity; daughters, mothers and grandmothers, widows and wives and single women, with diverse responsibilities, and various duties to fulfill, are united in the demand for the political emancipation of their sex. For to-day all barriers as between women and women will be swept away. Differences of party will be forgotten, differences of creed, differences of rank, differences of fortune, differences of age will be as though they were not; so intense will be the realisation of the solidarity of womanhood and the bold union in which women are held by their common destiny, their common service to humanity, their common burden, their common vision, and their common hope, faith, and high endeavour. (2)

As this passage suggests, the spectacle of universal, unified sisterhood presented in the Women’s Coronation Procession required that many forms of difference and disagreement be “swept away” or “forgotten.” Indeed, the organizations included in the procession represented diverse and sometimes conflicting interests, including, for example, the Lancaster Women Workers’ Representation Committee, the Conservative and Unionist Women’s Franchise Association, the Church League for Woman Suffrage, and the Order of Universal Freemasonry led by Annie Besant. Because the event was organized by the WSPU, a militant suffrage organization known for its use of civil disobedience, the moderate National
Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies agreed to take part only after heated debate and protest within its membership. As the program suggests, the Women’s Coronation Procession suppressed these contentious political differences in order to present the suffrage movement as a united front. The Procession incorporated several famous women from past centuries who marched alongside their contemporary counterparts. The Historical Pageant (fig. 1), led by Saint Hilda, included “groups of historical women summoned to Parliament, women governors and custodians of castles, women high sheriffs, and women justices of the peace.” Abbesses and queens marched side by side with women members of various London Liveries including the Fishmongers’, Grocers’, and Clothworkers’ Companies, followed by the “voteless women of modern times, including Florence Nightingale, Grace Darling, and others who nobly served their country” (2). Whatever their politics might have been in life, these theatrically resuscitated historical figures effectively became participants in the contemporary suffrage movement as they marched in company with various suffrage organizations holding placards and banners and joined in the rally at Royal Albert Hall. Hobsbawm’s point about the precedent-giving role of history is directly supported by the program’s
description of the Historical Pageant: “The public rights and duties to which they [women] lay claim to-day have to some extent been exercised by women in the older organisations of national life. The Historical Pageant … furnishes proof of this fact, so little realised by those who dread everything that is untried and new” (2). Like Pageant of Great Women, the Historical Pageant featured several women who had succeeded in occupations traditionally associated with men, including, for instance, Mary Somerville, a scientist, and Grace Darling, a rescuer of shipwreck survivors. A separate Pageant of Queens, featuring women rulers from Boadicea to Victoria, served as a reminder that “the highest political function has been ably fulfilled many times over in the World’s history by Queens who have been as powerful and as successful as any men rulers have been” (6). In the absence of King George V, whose entry normally would have constituted the theatrical climax of a coronation procession in his honor, the Pageant of Queens laid claim to a role of male primogeniture both politically and theatrically.

The historical type most favored by WSPU organizers, however, was that of the female martyr. As Braidotti notes, feminist consciousness often begins with the “recognition of a common condition of sisterhood in oppression.”19 By invoking female martyrdom, past and present, the Women’s Coronation Procession could make visible this common bond of oppression, thereby reinforcing feminist cohesion. Martyrdom figures prominently in the procession’s opening, in which Flora “The General” Drummond, a Scottish suffragette who “suffered imprisonment three times for the cause of women’s enfranchisement,” led the procession on horseback wearing her customary quasi-military garb, accompanied by a color bearer, Charlotte Marsh, honored with this prominent position because she endured forcible feeding in prison.20 Behind these contemporary martyrs rode their historical counterpart, Joan of Arc—by far the most popular historical icon of the suffrage era—played by Marjorie Annan Bryce dressed in silver armor and riding a white horse. Joan led a contingent of “New Crusaders” played by WSPU members clothed in purple mantles and carrying helmets and lances, which, according to the program, “symbolis[ed] the militant and idealistic organisation of women in a Holy War to re-assert the right to possess the Sacred Places”(3). The foregrounding of women’s martyrdom continued with the Prisoner’s
Pageant, in which seven hundred women who had been imprisoned for the suffrage cause, some of them played by proxies, marched under a banner reading “From Prison to Citizenship.” This fusion of past and present martyrdom calls upon history to legitimate the present cause by stressing both the persistence of female oppression and women’s continued willingness to martyr themselves for a worthy cause.

Like Pageant of Great Women, the Women’s Coronation Procession shows signs of strain as it attempts to subsume differences to create an impressive spectacle of international, transhistorical female solidarity. The most obvious example is the Pageant of Empire, which embodied the program’s claims to represent “the greatness and unity of the British Empire” by bringing together women from “all corners of the earth” (5, 2). One of the most striking segments of the procession, the Empire car invoked unity, harmony, and balance with its symmetrical arrangement of women wearing elegant white robes suggestive of classical Greece and
Fig. 3. Indian Women, the Women’s Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911. Museum of London Picture Library, ref. no. 001489.

bearing garlands of roses emblematic of England (fig. 2). At the top of the car were seated “two figures representing the East and West,” at whose “feet rest[ed] the Islands of the East and the West symbolised by children sheltered under a tree (the Emperor King’s roof tree)” (5). Below them, around the edges of the car, stood women representing India and the British dominions, whose rose garlands were linked to the figures at the top of the car to indicate that “[t]he four corners of the earth are bound in unity of the Crown” (5). Groups of women representing the nations of the Empire marched at the base of the stratified Empire car, signaling their diverse national identities through traditional costumes, emblems, and music. The Irish contingent, for example, was headed by a piper in national dress and included a group of Dublin women “wearing ‘colleen bawn’ cloaks in emerald green and carrying gilded harps” (6). The Colleen Bawn costume, popularized on the Victorian stage, was by this time criticized in Ireland for perpetuating an Irish stereotype.21 Such innocuous, decoratively feminine signs of national identity reflect the extent to which militancy,
nationalist or feminist, was avoided in order to achieve a spectacle of sisterhood united across the British Empire. The India contingent (fig. 3), led by the radical suffragette Jane Cobden Unwin (a supporter of Irish home rule and the rights of native peoples), marched under a banner reading “Crown Colonies and Protectorates.” The group included several Indian women, some of whom are identified in the program as “Mrs Roy, one of the most emancipated of Indian women; Mrs Mukerjea, President of the Indian Union Society; [and] Mrs Bhola Nauth, Hon. Secretary of the Indian Women’s Education Fund.” These designations, particularly the reference to Mrs. Roy as “one of the most emancipated of Indian women,” suggest that the women were selected for their compatibility with British feminists’ values and causes.

In its attempt to present an expansive vision of female solidarity extending across both hemispheres, the Pageant of Empire ends up reinforcing a Western, imperialist bias not only by taking place on the occasion of King George V’s coronation as emperor but also through its hierarchical arrangement of figures, its softening of national differences, and the dominance of classical Greek and English imagery. Particularly in the context of a procession that places such emphasis on women’s martyrdom or oppression, the Empire car exemplifies much the same problem that Mohanty finds in feminist claims to universal sisterhood of the 1980s—the assumption that “[w]hat binds women together is an ahistorical notion of the sameness of their oppression and, consequently, the sameness of their struggles”—a premise that “effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women, especially between First and Third World women.” Mohanty’s critique of such universalizing gestures as ahistorical brings out an irony in the suffrage pageants’ use of historical figures, which serve to bolster women’s shared interests at the expense of their historical and material differences. Whereas the implied homogeneity of women in Pageant of Great Women is destabilized to some extent through the tension between Woman and the diverse historical figures onstage, the massive scale of the Women’s Coronation Procession, along with its strategic downplaying of ideological differences among participating suffrage groups, served to create a spectacle of unified sisterhood in which differences among the heterogeneous constituencies of women involved in the procession.
were quite deliberately erased. The procession’s emphasis on unity and harmony may partly be responsible for its placating effect on its audience; according to a review of the pageant in the *Daily Sketch*, the “greatness and beauty of the pageant” made spectators “forg[et] the protest by which it was inspired.”

III. Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, 1982

Whereas the suffrage-era pageants presented spectators with utopian fantasies of female solidarity, Caryl Churchill’s play *Top Girls*, written over a half-century later, makes use of historical pageantry to critique easy assumptions about universal sisterhood. First performed at the Royal Court Theatre on 28 August 1982, *Top Girls* resembles the earlier feminist pageants in that it gathers together in its famous opening act an assortment of great women from history, some of them fictional, dressed in a colorful array of costumes indicating their different professions, nationalities, classes, and historical periods: the nineteenth-century traveler Isabella Bird; the thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan and nun Lady Nijo; the apocryphal ninth-century Pope Joan; Dulle Gret from a sixteenth-century painting by Brueghel; and the Patient Griselda from a range of medieval literary works. The scene presents the audience with an enticing visual spectacle of sisterhood from which one might well expect, as Amelia Howe Kritzer notes, “a grand synthesis of these women’s transhistorical experiences, strengths, and strategies of resistance as inspiration to the struggling women of the present.” In contrast to the suffrage-era spectacles of transnational, transhistorical female solidarity, however, Churchill soon dismantles this tantalizing vision of unified sisterhood by showing the historical characters’ interactions with one another. The women’s forced, dissonant relations, heightened by Churchill’s innovative use of overlapping dialogue, suggest that a common gender does not easily overcome cultural, political, and class differences. As Kritzer observes, the historical women “remain locked in their own, singular perspectives”—perspectives that lead them to misunderstand or to judge others. For instance, Lady Nijo and Isabella Bird refer to one another’s cultures as “barbaric,” and Pope Joan accuses Isabella Bird of “heresy.” The women’s interactions often reveal frustration over the absence of a shared cultural framework:
Marlene’s superficial attempt to sympathize with Lady Nijo suggests an unwillingness or inability to understand cultural values other than her own, as does her dismissal of the emperor as a “sod” and Griselda’s husband Walter as a “monster” (26, 25). Throughout the first act, Churchill draws attention to the fissures and frictions within her gathering of great women from history, rather than presenting them as a cohesive whole. The 1991 BBC/Royal Court Theatre televised production of Top Girls, directed by Max Stafford-Clark (who also directed the 1982 production), accentuates the women’s strained relations by inserting several awkward pauses, only some of which appear in the published text. The subsequent acts likewise draw attention to differences among women, as the relationship between Joyce and Marlene, two contemporary women who are literally sisters, breaks down over ideological differences. Sisterhood, as represented in the play, appears doomed to failure. Through her skillful use of Brechtian techniques, however, Churchill encourages her audiences to seek alternatives beyond the play’s representational frame. The play does not altogether reject the possibility of unified sisterhood, but posits it as an absent ideal whose realization depends on societal change.

Churchill’s more questioning stance on sisterhood can be attributed, in part, to contemporary developments in national and feminist politics. Margaret Thatcher’s prime ministership presented an immediate obstacle for any idealized notion of universal sisterhood by exposing sharp ideological differences among women. As Churchill commented in one interview, Thatcher “may be a woman but she isn’t a sister, she may be a sister but she isn’t a comrade.”29 Within the contemporary feminist movement, easy assumptions about universal sisterhood also were being questioned. As Christine Bolt notes, feminists of the sixties and seventies began to recognize that “the sisterhood of women could not be taken for granted” and that middle-class, white, Western women “had falsely assumed that they could speak and set the agenda for all women.”30 Churchill likewise resists taking sisterhood for granted; her play recognizes that any hope for female solidarity lies in acknowledging and overcoming, not suppressing,
the differences among women.

Churchill’s cacophonous, disorderly dinner party contrasts sharply with the suffrage pageants’ orderly, symmetrical groupings of women. The suffrage pageants achieved an impression of solidarity partly through their use of a unifying structure that placed the famous historical women firmly in the service of a contemporary British feminist cause. In Top Girls, this function at first appears to be served by Marlene, the organizing force behind the opening act’s dinner party and the link between past and present action. Unlike the Woman figure in Cicely Hamilton’s Pageant of Great Women, however, Marlene does not maintain control of the gathering, and her attempts to establish common ground with the other women seem dubious at best. The assertion of shared experience in her toast to “our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” is immediately preceded by a cliché, “We’ve all come a long way,” and by her ridiculous, self-flattering comparison, “Well it’s not Pope but it is managing director” (13). A little later in the scene, Marlene articulates a more convincing common ground: “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?” (18). In fact, the rare moments in the first act when the women’s dissonant voices harmonize are bleak: one after another, the women repeat that they felt their lives were “over” and yet they went on, and three of them repeat the phrase “there was nothing in my life” (7, 11–12). If any unifying female experience binds these women, it is not an empowering one.

Whereas the suffrage pageants revived “great women” from history to legitimate their cause and to inspire group cohesiveness, Churchill’s historical “top girls” function in almost the opposite way, challenging apparent victories for women and questioning the idea of an inherent, natural bond among women. Top Girls uses the same historical types found in the suffrage pageants—powerful women who succeed in men’s roles and women martyrs—but in a more self-conscious, critical fashion. Several critics have recognized Churchill’s resistance to measuring women’s greatness in terms of their success within an individualistic, competitive, capitalist model.31 As Churchill says herself, “I wanted to show that just to achieve the same things that men had achieved in capitalist society wouldn’t be a good object.”32 In the first act, Churchill exploits the theatrical power of cross-dressing to critique, rather than to celebrate, powerful
women whose authority stems from assuming a traditionally masculine role. Whereas cross-dressing in *Pageant of Great Women* was empowering and expansive, in *Top Girls* it exposes the societal restrictions that force women to succeed on men's terms by denying or endangering their bodies. Pope Joan’s masculine attire, for example, comes to signify her society’s revulsion with the female body. While at first her robes and her language might suggest enlarged possibilities for women (“I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything”), her story soon becomes a cautionary tale against transgressing gender boundaries (“They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death”; 12, 17). When Joan vomits during her drunken, stumbling recitation of a Latin text by Lucretius, her own body rebels against the masculine role she has adopted, as Elin Diamond suggests in her perceptive Brechtian-feminist reading of that moment as “a sentient gestus announcing the female body’s revulsion at the mystification and misogyny of Western religion—whose authority Joan nevertheless impersonates.” 

Similarly, Churchill’s woman warrior, Dulle Gret, seems far from empowered by her masculine role, unlike her warrior counterparts in Hamilton’s *Pageant of Great Women*. Gret barely speaks until the end of the act, and she adopts her warrior role defensively rather than heroically, in angry and helpless revenge against the Spanish: “I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards.... I've got a sword in my hand from somewhere.... You just keep running on and fighting / you didn't stop for nothing” (28). By emphasizing the disturbing, disempowering consequences of assuming a masculine role, *Top Girls* shows how such achievements can serve to reinforce gender restrictions rather than to disrupt them. Churchill’s use of fictional and apocryphal figures from art and historical works created by men acts as a further reminder that their power remains circumscribed within a patriarchal framework.

*Top Girls* also questions the value of another historical type celebrated in the suffrage pageants— the female martyr. Whereas the suffrage-era productions championed the heroic aspects of female martyrdom, particularly women’s willingness to make sacrifices for a collective cause, Churchill represents female martyrdom as the product of a misogynistic society that requires women to make unreasonable sacrifices in exchange for limited social power. Churchill’s female martyrs are characterized less by greatness
than by oppression or acquiescence. Her critique of female martyrdom emerges most distinctly in the character of Patient Griselda, whose entrance she delays until near the end of the first act. The unexpected inclusion of an obedient wife who submits herself entirely to her husband’s masochistic wishes in a gathering of “extraordinary,” “courage[ous]” women invites the audience to consider what common bond might exist between Griselda and the others. Although Griselda has achieved her standing through obedience rather than disobedience, the sacrifices she has made—particularly in giving up her children—are similar to those of the other women. Yet, despite their shared sacrifices, Griselda’s presence exacerbates the friction among the women, who listen to her story with varying degrees of sympathetic horror but are unable to comprehend her extreme, masochistic sense of duty and forgiveness. Marlene cannot bear even to sit at the same table, first excusing herself with “I can’t stand this. I’m going for a pee” and then ordering “Six coffees. Six brandies. / Double brandies. Straightaway” (23, 24). By the time Griselda finishes telling her story, the already strained dinner party has disintegrated into chaos and confusion, with Marlene drinking heavily, Lady Nijo crying, Joan reciting garbled Latin, and Isabella continuing to relive past moments of glory. Whereas the suffrage pageants used women’s martyrdom to promote group cohesion by invoking women’s willingness to make sacrifices for a collective spiritual or political cause, Churchill stresses a different aspect of the martyr role, one whose complicity with the status quo undermines the potential for collective feminist action. Griselda’s status as a fictional character constructed by multiple texts by men—Marlene introduces her as “in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage” (20)—suggests the extent to which her role is defined and supported by patriarchal ideology.

Especially when juxtaposed with the spectacles of female solidarity from the early twentieth-century suffrage pageants, Top Girls seems to present a grim view of the possibilities for united sisterhood. The failures of sisterhood within the social and ideological conditions represented in the play, however, do not necessarily indicate a rejection of sisterhood altogether. Elin Diamond, in Unmaking Mimesis, counts Churchill among the feminist playwrights who make use of Brechtian alienation techniques—“the Brechtian ‘not … but’”—through which “[t]he audience
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is invited to look beyond representation—beyond what is authoritatively put in view—to the possibilities of as yet unarticulated motives, actions, or judgments.” In *Top Girls*, Churchill repeatedly gestures toward sisterhood as a value that is palpably missing from women’s relations, thereby encouraging her audience to consider alternatives beyond the limiting sociopolitical conditions represented in the play. The fleeting spectacle of transnational, transhistorical sisterhood that opens the play serves as a reminder of an ideal that becomes increasingly elusive as the play unfolds. In the midst of the cacophony and chaos of the dinner party, brief moments of convergence, often unspoken, gesture toward an unrealized potential for female solidarity. In the BBC televised production directed by Stafford-Clark, the women respond to the most horrific revelations—Pope Joan’s death by stoning and the return of Griselda’s children—with empathetic silence. After Joan’s revelation, Churchill’s stage directions call for the women to “stop laughing” and then to “pause” (17-18), after which they resume their conversation more intimately, sharing stories about children or beloved horses. Similarly, in the last act, the sisterly bond between Marlene and Joyce emerges most strongly when words break down:

*Marlene:* I was afraid of this.
    I only came because I thought you wanted ...
    I just want ...
*Marlene cries.*

*Joyce:* Don’t grizzle, Marlene, for God’s sake. Marly? Come on, pet.
    Love you really. Fucking stop it, will you? (81)

For a few moments after this exchange, the play offers a glimpse of affectionate relations between the sisters, before their political differences drive a wedge between them once and for all. Perhaps even more than these sympathetic moments of shared silence, though, the women’s shared laughter hints at an unarticulated common bond. Churchill’s most frequent stage direction in the first act is “they laugh,” often in response to the more ridiculous forms of female oppression: the Chinese selling girl babies to Europeans for cameras, a cardinal naming Pope Joan the Antichrist, the Church introducing a pierced chair after Joan’s execution. Women’s laughter in these moments has the same subversive quality that it does in Helene Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which laughter (a metaphor for women’s writing) represents a transgressive bodily
disruption of phallocentric discourse. But while the women's laughter and silences in the first act of Top Girls suggest the potential for subversion and solidarity, these remain latent possibilities within the frame of play—possibilities that could only be realized through sociopolitical change outside of the play's bounds.

The play's lack of resolution likewise assists in positing cohesive sisterhood as an unrealized alternative. Churchill manipulates chronology so as to end the play with the prolonged argument between Marlene and Joyce, whose antagonistic politics, class attitudes, and personal values ultimately reach an impasse. During the final scene, Churchill repeatedly gestures toward reconciliation as a possibility that remains unrealized. In the final moments of the play, the sisters recognize that a chasm has opened up between them—though they come from the same family background, their present socioeconomic and political differences place them on opposite sides of the divide between “us” and “them” (86). Churchill keeps these positions in dialectical opposition, resisting synthesis or resolution, through Joyce's repeated rejections of Marlene's attempts to gloss over their differences:

Marlene: I didn't really mean all that.
Joyce: I did.
Marlene: But we're friends anyway.
Joyce: I don't think so, no. (87)

The expectation of reconciliation remains frustrated right through the sisters' final exchange:

Joyce gets blankets for the sofa.
Joyce: Goodnight then. I hope you'll be warm enough.
Marlene: Goodnight. Joyce—
Joyce: No, pet. Sorry.
Joyce goes. (87)

The contradiction between Joyce's seemingly conciliatory gesture and her stark refusal to continue the conversation encourages the audience to look outside the play for possibilities that remain unrealized and unarticulated within its frame. As Kritzer suggests, the final clash between the two sisters, both of whom represent unacceptable positions, requires that “audience members ... create for themselves an alternative.” By placing such emphasis on the failures of sisterhood within a play that foregrounds
women's relations through its use of an all-woman cast, Churchill invites the spectator to imagine, and ultimately to create, conditions under which a more constructive and cohesive form of sisterhood could thrive.

Churchill's all-woman cast likewise helps her to suggest possibilities for sisterhood that her characters fail to realize. In *Top Girls*, none of the groupings of women represented in the play—the famous historical women of the first act, the women who work with Marlene at the Top Girls employment agency, or the biological sisters Marlene and Joyce—provides a successful model of sisterhood. The group of women actors who perform the play, however, go some way toward filling that void. Churchill's use of character doubling as a Brechtian alienation technique not only discourages the audience from "over-identifying with the characters," but also allows them to see the performers as an intimate, cohesive group. According to Churchill, "you get the pleasure of ... knowing it's a compact company there under your eyes doing a show, and also, it makes for a more closely knit company if you've just got a few people or everyone having a good evening with plenty of work to do, which it wouldn't be if each person just played a part." The fact that this "closely knit" company is composed entirely of women would certainly call attention to itself, particularly when the play was first performed in 1982, given the relative scarcity of all-woman companies at that time. The group of women who work together to perform the play provide a constructive model of sisterhood that otherwise remains conspicuously absent from women's relations as they are represented in the play, which are constrained by the historical conditions of Thatcher's Britain in particular and patriarchal ideology in general. Through this Brechtian distinction between character and actor, Churchill suggests possibilities for sisterhood that remain unrealized within the play's representational frame, whose conception and fulfillment require the active participation of the spectator.

All three theatrical productions discussed in this essay make use of pageantry—including historical characters, emblematic costumes, and iconography—to present a fantasy of united sisterhood that invokes a possible rather than a past or current state of affairs. Whereas the suffrage pageants make imaginative attempts to transcend cultural, national, and class differences with magnificent and inspiring spectacles of female solidarity across time and space, Churchill exposes the gaps and fissures that
underlie such displays of unity. Responding to an increased recognition of the importance of differences among women within the feminist movement of her day, Churchill disrupts idealized notions of universal sisterhood by making visible—and audible—the significant ideological and power differences that exist among women. Yet she does not abandon the ideal of female solidarity altogether, recognizing its centrality to feminism. Instead, unified sisterhood becomes a palpable absence in the play, an unarticulated alternative to the fractured status quo all the more powerful for its indeterminacy. In this respect, Churchill anticipates Mohanty’s call for a new form of sisterhood, one that recognizes that “the unity of women is best understood not as a given ... ; [but as] something that has to be worked for, struggled towards—in history.”

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NOTES


2 Memento of Women’s Coronation Procession to demand Votes for Women, Saturday June 17, 1911, Order of March and Descriptive Programme (London: Woman’s Press, 1911), preface.


5 Hamilton, Pageant of Great Women, 27.

6 Cicely Hamilton, unpublished letter to Iska Teleki, quoted in Cockin, 102.


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12 My reading of the final scene as opening up a transgressive third space that defies conventional gender categories is compatible with Penny Farfan’s reading of these cross-dressing moments as ways for the performers to make visible a newly emerging lesbian identity, though I would resist reading these moments as fixing women’s identity in some way.

13 Memento, preface. My description of the procession also is indebted to Lisa Tickner’s detailed historical account of this and other suffrage processions in The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907–1914 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987).


16 Memento, 2.

17 Tickner, 123.

18 Memento, 4.

19 Braidotti, 163.

20 Memento, 3.


23 Memento, 6.

24 Mohanty, 80, 83.


27 Ibid., 145.


34 Ibid., 49.


36 Kritzer, 148.

37 Quoted in Fitzsimmons, 61.


39 Aston, 44.

40 Mohanty, 84.