(Dis)Arming a Genealogy: *Top Girls* and the Critique of Progression

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Abstract

This study will attempt to approach the play *Top Girls*, by Caryl Churchill, to examine how, based on dramaturgical strategies, there is an amendment to the notion of progression that forms the basis of the story of capitalist emancipation in which a certain liberal or bourgeois feminism participates. Attention will be paid, above all, to the consequences of the presuppositions of this notion when outlining a genealogy, as well as to the elements that the playwright puts into circulation to highlight the issues of this model and the contradictions that sustain it. Finally, the study aims to show how a political critique can be undertaken from the field of formal innovations, focusing on the indissoluble link established between ethics and aesthetics.

Keywords: *Top Girls*, progression, genealogy, Brecht, Szondi, experience

Reception: 31/3/2021 | Acceptance: 3/7/2021

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She's not going to make it

"Frightening" (2013: 235): this is how, like a shudder that was to be projected over a whole decade ruled by the political consolidation of prophetic Thatcherite neoliberalism, *Top Girls* ends. It opened in 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and was one of the first plays to bring international renown to the British playwright Caryl Churchill. Not for nothing, this last image — in which a still half-asleep Angie, wearing the dress that her aunt/mother Marlene has just given her,[1] seems to refer to a nightmare she just had — has been compared to "the angel of history" described by Walter Benjamin in *On the Concept of History* (Bazin, 2006: 130-131): inexorably pushed into the future by the forces of progress, the angel keeps his face turned to the past, where "he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin, 2018: 193). Churchill, by dislocating the chronological time of the play through the epic procedure of the montage,[2] and introducing an analepsis between the third and preceding acts, locates Angie *literally* in a past that is no longer governed by the edict of absolute causality characteristic of the historical narrative (and of the "absolute drama" described by Szondi [1988: 13-16]), a past that appears *later* and that, when always presented at the wrong time, plays down the absolute present claimed by the dramatic form, which becomes, from the beginning, *debris*. In fact, Angie is not just "the angel of history" that, from the ambivalence that his position gives him, looks at the catastrophe but rather stands as the detritus — a remnant that acquires the quality of a material *trace*, elevated almost to the

1. Angie, at first, introduces herself as Joyce's daughter and therefore as Marlene's niece. In the last act, however (2013: 221), we discover that, in fact, she is the daughter of Marlene, who left her in the care of her sister to be able to leave the suffocating village where she grew up and thus promote her professional career.

2. For a detailed explanation of the epic implications of the technique of the montage in the performing arts and the relationship to configurational or formal issues at the dramaturgical level, see Szondi, 1988: 91-95.

category of Brechtian *gestus*,[3] or spectre[4] because of the presence of a dress that performatively signals the coexistence of two fractured temporalities, as well as the contrast between the social classes of the two characters — that the progression celebrated by Marlene, and sinisterly evoked by the figure of Margaret Thatcher, leaves behind, just as Marlene herself asserts at the end of the second act: "She's not going to make it" (2013: 201).

The tableau that closes the play can serve as an indication and starting point for grasping the dramaturgical strategies that Churchill uses to articulate a systematic critique of both the notion of progress associated with the philosophy of Hegelian history — which has been protected, as a metanarrative, by enlightened reason and the conviction of a progressive emancipation of human beings, as well as the advance of technocapitalism with the myth of the gradual enrichment of all humanity (Lyotard, 1987: 29) —, and the consequences that this idea of homogeneous progress, measured only under the paradigm of socioeconomic success or failure, entails for a certain liberal or bourgeois feminism (established, above all, in the United States).[5] The playwright, however, also rejects the naiveté of a certain orthodox Marxism — and here the influence that Foucault's notion of "power" exerts in her plsy is evident —, which, again succumbing to the attempts of the progressive historical narrative, places the axis of oppression exclusively in the economic or "superstructural" field and overlooks the complexity (and complicity) of the relations of domination established between gender, class, culture or race. Thus, *Top Girls* opens up to a conception of feminism that favours discontinuity and contradiction over the homogeneity of a single "subject", subsumed under the sign of (only) capitalist or (only) patriarchal oppression, to a feminism whose movement, as Teresa de Lauretis explains, "therefore, is not that of a dialectic, of integration, of a combinatory [...] but is the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy" (1987: 26). By presenting and emphasising these discontinuities — by means of an artistic medium that

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3. The concept of Brechtian *gestus* is difficult to define, and its scope depends more on its use in the various scenic realisations than on a definitive and isolated theoretical statement. In any case, as Brecht himself speaks of it in his *Schriften zum Theater*, the *gestus* has to do with the "social behaviours that men assume in relation to other men" (1963: 50), through which "the actor appropriates the character at the same time as he appropriates the story" (1963: 54). In this respect, although the dress is not, properly, a gesture (although the act of wearing it is), it works as an index and as a condensation of the *social* relationship between Marlene and Angie (of their [non] family relationship and class difference), and is suspended — like the Brechtian *gestus* — between the individual/intimate dimension and the social/historical dimension.

4. I refer, here, to the notion of spectrality developed by Derrida based on the reading of *Spectres of Marx*: Derrida insists on the stark distinction that Marx makes between *spectre* (*Gespenst*) and *spirit* (*Geist*), where the former has incorporated the latter, given it body (Derrida, 1995: 174). In this respect, one can read the appearance of Angie as that of an embodied spirit (first and foremost, for the actress), a spectre that would dislocate a present that cannot be contemporary with itself, a present besieged by the future that has *already* come. Similarly, the spectral advent of the girl with the dress — which is directly linked to the old dress we saw in the second act (2013: 159) — also breaks with the pretension of absolute presence that the dramatic form bears, a form that depends on the illusionist and a problematic succession of presents contemporary with each other and causally linked (Szondi, 1988: 15-16).

5. America is presented, in the play, as the symbol of success, as the link between the Marlene of the past — suffocated in an environment of poverty and inter-family violence — and the Marlene-executive, emancipated, the paradigm of a self-made woman. In fact, Churchill places the genesis of the play precisely in her travels to the United States, and in the contrast between the feminism she found there and that of her closest spheres. "I had been to America... and had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I'd met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder" (2013: 37).

depends, to a large extent (if not completely), on the performativity inherent in a series of bodies-on-stage and effectively formulated statements —, Churchill's play seems to approach an intersectional paradigm that would eventually become hegemonic a decade later.

What we are interested in highlighting in this study, however, are the links established between the critique of this notion of progress — with the complexities and issues that it entails for the different political operations that have been carried out from the field of feminist thought — and the *formal* strategies used to (re)present it, linked to the specificity of a medium, also in conflict with itself: political subversion is thus revealed as an aesthetic subversion, as a transgression of a realistic formulaic drama (whether bourgeois or social) that appears as the legitimate heir of the "absolute drama" that prevailed in the Renaissance and that degenerated, in the nineteenth century, into the *pièce bien faite* (Szondi, 1988: 66), a form based on illusion, certainty and transparency of interpersonal relationships, and the abstraction of historical and social circumstances. Churchill, following Brecht, renounces the ideological naiveté of conceiving the form as a mere vehicle for a previous "content" and places the political action of theatre precisely in the field of dramaturgical innovation. As Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond state, "for Churchill, dramatizing the political is not just a question of content, but also of form. With the renewal of form comes the renewal of the political: new forms *and* new socially and politically relevant questions" (2009: 2).

We've all come a long way

One of the most unique operations carried out by the play — and that would eventually become its hallmark within the dramaturgical heterogeneity of Churchill's production — is the "meeting of famous women" that constitutes the first act, which, in this respect, is situated on a completely different plane from the other two.[6] It is in this act, structured around a single scene, where the Brechtian strategies of historicization, distancing (*Verfremdungseffekt*) and *gestus* become more apparent, and where the *duplicity* of the different performative acts — that is, the discontinuity between a phantasmatic "referent" of (re)presentation and its effective assumption by a particular body — is more evident. Moreover, it is also in this scene where Churchill works most intensely with the different techniques of dialogical superposition, procedures that open up a whole set of possibilities for dramatic *writing* and which will become famous in later British playwriting.[7] All of these procedures can

6. In fact, although the first act seems to differ markedly from the others — there are critics who place it as an "introduction" to what would correspond to the true "body" of the play, as a Brechtian presentation to generalise the effect of distancing/estrangement required by epic theatre (Reinelt, 1996: 87) —, it can be argued that, beyond the purely thematic aspect, all the acts have fundamental discontinuities with each other: the second act is almost entirely determined by the technique of the montage and the third is deeply marked by the spectrality derived from the aforementioned analepsis. Thus, the second act mainly presents a series of spatial discontinuities, while the third is anchored in a significant temporal dislocation.

7. *Top Girls* is the first of Churchill's major plays where this technique is used extensively (symbolised mainly by a slash [/] indicating the time when another character's speech begins, while the former continues to speak); in any case, it seems that the British playwright was the first to formalise this resource (see, for example, the following article: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/03/caryl-churchill-collaborators-interview>, where it is explained

be related to (in other words, they can be read as a function of) a reflection on the possibility or impossibility — as well as the method and objectives — of establishing genealogies. They can also highlight the assumptions underlying their construction (such as, for example, what the common substrate that must ensure their continuity is based on and what the solidity of this substrate is), as well as bringing out the distance between the initial, Foucaultian, conception of genealogical projects and some of their later uses, which perform a series of almost monumental operations, and not only replace critique with celebration, but also take for granted a unity that, in any case, must always be considered problematic. In this respect, as Rebecca Cameron shows in her study "From *Great Women* to *Top Girls*" (2009: 143-166), the motif of the "meeting of famous women" has a certain recurrence in English theatre tradition, but Churchill's proposal subverts this tradition (it subverts it: that is to say, in a way, it refers to and dialogues with it) not only through technical innovations — which allow it to create both estrangement effects and unfold a multitude of rhythmic possibilities that accentuate a certain autonomy of signifiers, making language a kind of "soundscape" and emphasising its alienating dimension —,[8] but because of the position that these innovations adopt, which ends up bringing about a decomposition — which becomes, almost, *literal* at the end of the act — of tradition itself, which shows the issues and contradictions on which it is based.

The theatrical environment — in a much more obvious way than the narrative — allows for two operations that are crucial to the critique of certain female genealogical projects, as well as the notion of progress that lends them a purported coherence: the fact of being able to transfer the genealogy from the diachronic plane, where it is usually located, to a synchronous plane — moving from a temporal paradigm to a spatial paradigm and thus causing a collision between the different historical times that play down each other and nullify the causality of progressive narrative — and the possibility of repeating the same genealogical gesture by establishing the right distance to avoid confusion: in other words, highlighting, by means of the aforementioned performative duplicity,[9] both the artificial dimension (that is to say, historical, contingent and, to a certain extent, arbitrary) of the project in itself and the presuppositions and issues that cross it without ruling out, quite rightly, the configuration of a genealogy. In this respect, although Churchill articulates an obvious critique of the coherence of a subject of feminism based on the validation of the position of victim in the patriarchal system, as

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how Churchill and her editor had the idea of using the slash to symbolise this particular type of interruption) which has become canonical in later playwriting (used by playwrights such as Martin Crimp, Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane).

8. Before the premiere of *Top Girls*, Churchill wrote several pieces for the radio (*You've No Need to be Frightened*, *The Ants*, *Lovesick*, *Identical Twins*, *Abortive*, *Not... not... not... not... not enough oxygen*, and so on). The influence that the radio medium has exerted on the linguistic and rhythmic treatment of her later plays is evident: in most of her output, the sound dimension is of paramount importance as a scenic sign.

9. One of the clearest examples of the discontinuities that occur between the phantasmatic referent of the (re) presentation and the performative event itself is the presentation of the character of Lady Nijo: although, in theory, she must (re)present a 13th-century Japanese courtesan, the actress who plays the character is European (since she also has to play Win, who is British, in the following acts). Estrangement, distance and discontinuity will be further accentuated if one tries to reproduce the "typical" attire and makeup of the time to portray the character and differentiate her from the rest.

well as on its apparent victory over oppressive mechanisms, her approach is ambivalent: in the end, *Top Girls* does not give up the "genealogical impulse" but recovers it critically and comes closer to Foucault's original approach to it; that is, as a "constitution of a historical knowledge of struggles [also including in this knowledge the operations of feminism subject to critique] and the use of this knowledge in current tactics" (Foucault, 2003: 7). Thus, *synchrony* and *duplicity* emerge as the means to play down and, at the same time, test and contrast — or confront, since the various "famous women" will coexist and take shape in the same spatiotemporal framework — the validity of a series of genealogical projects that have domesticated their critical power by embracing a monumental and celebratory use of historical memory and that have acritically assumed the (closely related) paradigms of genealogy as *affiliation* and as *progress*: "The critical discourse often describes [feminism's history] in generational terms as being a family affair. [...] the generational model carries within it an assumption that the history of feminism is progressive and somehow natural" (Bazin, 2006: 115, 116).

In the first place, the historical status of the women who take part in the dinner is already problematic: properly historical characters (Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo) are mixed with apocryphal (Pope Joan) or directly fictional characters (Dull Gret and Patient Griselda). The fact of giving the same treatment to all the characters, regardless of the degree of fictionality of their historical reference, is already a critique of this official historiographic narrative anchored in the same logic of causality as the absolute drama described by Szondi, and approaches the strategies and reflections deployed by what Linda Hutcheon describes as "historiographic metafiction": "what postmodern novels teach is that, [in History and in fiction], [referents] actually refer at the first level to other texts: we know the past (which really did exist) only through its textualized remains" (2004:119). What these types of proposals, which are based on the contributions of the linguistic shift to thought on history, show is not only the link it maintains with the narrative strategies of fiction but also emphasise the fact that any access to the past is inevitably mediated by language and that, therefore, any historical attempt — including, and this is what is intended to be emphasised here, genealogical projects — is the result of an *interpretation* that has nothing to do with the so-called "naturalness" of the paradigm of progress-affiliation, of the aproblematic succession of presents that are causally engendered by each other. In addition, *Top Girls* does not rewrite history like the novels Hutcheon analyses, but condenses — in the epic manner of Dante's *Inferno*, or in the dramatic manner of Sartre's *No Exit* — both the diachrony of a whole life experience and that of different historical times in a dinner that will highlight the abyss and discontinuities that emerge between a series of experiences that cannot be reduced to a common denominator, as well as the difficulty — and imposture — involved in making a lifetime the exemplary (and, paradoxically, ahistorical) *figure* of a story of victimisation and emancipation. As Victoria Bazin notes, "rather than dramatizing feminism in terms of progression [...] Churchill examines the feminism of her own historical moment as a constellation of what Walter Benjamin would describe as a 'configuration pregnant with tensions'"

(2006: 119-120), since what ends up being highlighted in this confrontation, in this "constellation of tensions", is precisely the historical interpretation and presuppositions on which this hypothetical "genealogy" of contemporary feminism is based and that the playwright sets about problematising.

The reason why all these "famous women" gather for dinner is the celebration of the promotion of Marlene, who will be the new executive of the company Top Girls. Hence, the protagonist — who, as we shall see later, is the only character present throughout the play, and the only one who is not doubled up — at first feels like the inheritor of the legacy of these women ("We've all come a long way" [2013: 117]), and what supposedly unites them, the common nexus that ensures the continuity — and progress — of their respective experiences, is, according to Marlene herself, "our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements" (2013: 117). To begin with, although the genealogical spirit of a return to the knowledge of the past to organise the current struggles is maintained, in some way a first dislocation has already taken place: critique has become celebration, the struggles to be examined (as well as the struggles of the present, crystallised in Marlene) are already presented as consummated *victories*, and the "local, discontinuous knowledge" posited by Foucault (1997: 18) appears, here, in a transhistorical and transcultural dimension sheltered under the homogenising umbrella of the "extraordinary achievements". It is this paradigm of success — the capitalist paradigm in which Marlene is located, and that she invariably *projects* on all her "predecessors"—[10] that, in theory, must ensure the dialogue between the women and be the basis for the exchange of the experiences that will take place during the dinner. As Harry Lane rightly observes, "celebration is based on mystification of the facts: that Marlene's promotion is in some way the end result of a unified historical process of which all women have been part" (1998: 63). And it is this purported unity, sustained by a linear and equivalent conception of historical time[11] — based on a hypothesis of a progressive emancipation measured in economic or technical terms — that the meeting will dismantle to show us the incommunicability and radical lack of equivalence of experiences that, being discursively produced, cannot be held up as universal categories, experiences that do not lend themselves to the essentialisation that involves thinking about them as something *immediate*, outside their historical contexts and their

10. This projection by Marlene leads her, constantly, to judge the stories of the rest of the characters from her own perspective and evidences, globally, the discursive and historical character of the experience: "Nijo: [...] So when the time came I did nothing but cry. [...] / Marlene: Are you saying he raped you? / Nijo: [...] No, of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby." (2013: 100); "Griselda: Walter found it hard to believe I loved him. He couldn't believe I would always obey him. He had to prove it. / Marlene: I don't think Walter likes women. / Griselda: I'm sure he loved me, Marlene." (2013:130); "Nijo: [...] would I have been allowed to wear full mourning? / Marlene: I'm sure you would. / Nijo: Why do you say that? You don't know anything about it" (2013: 137).

11. The homogenisation fostered by the capitalist metanarrative not only reaches the experience of the various women who belong to different historical times and cultural frameworks, but also leads to a homogenisation — in the form of competition — between the experience of men and women: here, under the auspices of success, the illusion is created that *equality* is possible between the sexes (although it is more difficult for women), measured in terms of economic emancipation, and it ends up eradicating, implicitly, any difference beyond the institutional political possibility of accessing certain socioeconomic spheres. Marlene, in adopting this paradigm, ends up reproducing the logics of domination of the system that she has supposedly confronted, and relegates the responsibility for emancipation to the purely individual sphere: "Marlene: Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes. / Joyce: And if they haven't? / Marlene: If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?" (2013: 233).

relations with other constructs such as social class or race: as Joan Wallach Scott shows, "[experience] is in itself an interpretation and *at the same time* something that needs to be interpreted" (1999: 112).

Consequently, dialogue becomes impossible, and is fragmented into a series of self-referential monologues that cloister the characters and do not allow them, strictly speaking, to "meet", or generate any type of knowledge, or draw bonds of *affiliation* with each other[12] — links that should be fostered, in theory, by synchrony, and that could then extend beyond the dual filial and progressive paradigm.[13] Szondi, with reference to Chekhov's plays, reflects on the implications underlying this kind of "dialogue of the deaf" that the monologic reflections in the form of dialogue entail, and attributes this to the self-alienation of individuals who, in remaining isolated in the midst of society, reject the present time in favour of memory or longing (1988: 26-31). What in Chekhov, however, was an irresolvable contradiction between this "thematic" impulse — which, according to Szondi, would need epic treatment — and the dramatic form — with its requirements of absolute space and time, of trust in the transparency of the inter-human sphere — a contradiction that had to be covered by making the "dialogue of the deaf" *literal* (in other words, disguising the formal issue through thematic motivation), Churchill finds a *formal* consolidation that is not limited to the inclusion (and subsequent denial) of an authorial epic 'self' through the procedure of the montage[14] but penetrates the dialogue itself (dissolving, totally, any form/content opposition) with the constant superposition of the lines:

> NIJO: I shouldn't have woken him.
> JOAN: Damnation only means ignorance of the truth. I was always attracted by the teachings of John the Scot, though he was inclined to confuse / God and the world.
> ISABELLA: Grief always overwhelmed me at the time.
> MARLENE: What I fancy is a rare steak. Gret?
> ISABELLA: I am of course a member of the / Church of England.*
> GRET: Potatoes.
> MARLENE: *I haven't been to church for years. / I like Christmas carols.
> ISABELLA: Good works matter more than church attendance.[15] (2013: 103)

12. For the difference between and implications of the concepts of "filiation" and "affiliation", I refer to Edward Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, pp.16-24.

13. The fact that we can think of an alternative paradigm (in this case, that of affiliation instead of filiation) based on the same situation that is criticised, is part of the Brechtian spirit that emanates from the whole play: as explained by Brecht himself, "singular events have to be linked in such a way that the modes of action make an impact. Events must not happen inadvertently; instead, the spectator must be able to intervene with his judgment between the different stages of the action" (1963: 56). Brecht insists on teaching "modes of action"; that is, the "knots" that link events so that the spectator can discern with judgment, because one of the crucial features of epic theatre (which Churchill adopts here) is to underline the *optativity* of the actions: to point out what could have been to understand, on the one hand, the *process* of the action and, on the other, to show the historicity and contingency of the path that the fable has laid out. In this respect, synchrony not only reveals the issues of a certain way of assembling genealogies, but also hints at *other* possibilities (such as leaving behind the paradigm of filiation and progression to understand the "contradictory and historical constellation" of the various positions of female subjects).

14. "And the montage is that epic form of art that the epic author denies. While the narration perpetuates the narrative act, and does not break the link with its subjective origin, the epic author, the montage, at the very moment it is constituted, immobilizes and gives the impression of forming, as the drama, a whole in itself. It refers to the epic author as its trademark — the montage is the manufactured product of the epic" (Szondi, 1988: 95).

15. As mentioned, the slash (/) indicates the beginning of the next line in the middle of the previous speech; the asterisk (*) indicates that several lines (in this case, "Potatoes" and "*I haven't...") begin at the same moment.

Thus, on the one hand, the insurmountable nature of the monologues takes on more consistency than in the mere "dialogue of the deaf" (since they are now not constructed successively throughout the lines but we witness their deployment simultaneously), and, on the other, this monological dialogue is perfectly integrated into the dynamics of the celebration and the dinner (in this sense, paradoxically, the scene becomes, apparently, more "realistic"). In fact, the abyss between the experiences of the various women — an abyss that will eventually show Marlene's inability to act as a mediator and, therefore, the fallibility of her genealogical model — heightens as the dinner progresses, and is thematically justified by the effects of alcohol. At the end of the meeting, Gret and Joan's lines will explicitly take the form of monologue — the latter in Latin, which further emphasises the characters' distance, incommunicability and alienation —,[16] Nijo will isolate herself in an incontinent cry over her loss of status at the imperial court, Marlene will end up drinking all she can to avoid attending to her guests and Isabella will remain lost in thought remembering the last trips she made after the death of her beloved sister and her husband; and the whole scene is framed by silence — a silence that becomes extremely relevant both for the contrast with the diners and the physical *presence* of an actress who almost only watches — of the waitress, who is the only character, throughout the play, who remains anonymous.[17] Not even the full deployment of the characters' sorrows, which, in theory, are linked by a shared patriarchal violence, is able to bring about dialogue: it thus becomes clear that the different degrees of oppression that run through the experiences of the various women gathered together are not equivalent to each other or subsumable into the same essential category (being-woman) that can group them regardless of their particular contexts, contexts that, due to their alien, complex and contradictory nature, end up becoming unattainable (or, in any case, as Joan Wallach Scott argues, would need an interpretation that cannot be produced when the continuity and immediacy of the experience is taken for granted).

I think the eighties are going to be stupendous

The technique of the montage — which displaces space and time to shape various scenes whose common nexus is precisely this "constellation" full of tensions condensed in the first act — and the continuous doubling up by the actresses — which shows, in the Brechtian manner, the distance between the actor and his/her characters — allows everything examined thus far to resonate during the rest of the play, bringing to light the contradictions of the

16. Joan, after her speech in Latin, ends up vomiting; E. Diamond sees in this gesture another Brechtian gestus that would emphasise the estrangement and distance of the whole encounter: "Pope Joan's vomiting (the representation of her vomiting) is a sentient gesture announcing the female body's revulsion at the mystification and misogyny of Western religion — whose authority Joan nevertheless impersonates" (1997: 89).

17. The waitress already anticipates the conflict that Churchill will present in the second and, above all, third act of the play, a conflict that will confront Marlene's capitalist feminism with the socialist conscience of her sister Joyce. The class conflict is subtly announced during dinner, and makes clear that all the diners (except Gret and Griselda, who are fictional characters) are, in fact, upper-class or well-to-do: "Isabella: There are some barbaric practices in the east. / Nijo: Barbaric? / Isabella : Among the lower classes. / Nijo: I wouldn't know" (2013: 106).

different historical times within the narrative present. All of this reveals one of the political aims of the play, which is materialised through specifically theatrical strategies (such as the game between actor and character or the sonorous and rhythmic use of overlapping dialogues): the historicization of the historical present — paying attention to the complexity of the relationship between gender and social class — with the consequent distance that enables critical reflection on what appears in the scene. As Janelle Reinelt, following Brecht, argues,:

> Brechtian historicization actually works in three modes simultaneously. In representing the past, the specificity of its conditions, its "Otherness" from now, and the suppressed possibilities through which it might have been otherwise are presented. Then the relationship of the past to the present is shown to consist of analogous conditions, unchanged and/or unexamined legacies that make the latent possibilities of the past act as a springboard to present possibilities. Finally, the representation of the present must be such that it is seen from a distance similar to the way the "past" is seen, that is, historically (1996: 87).

Here, the past is not only presented with "analogous conditions" but is *literally* present in the last acts of the play, the (anti)genealogy invades the eighties and remains there as a *trace* or as a spectre in the body of the actresses who play the different characters: there can be no absolute and definitive progression, no victory, no final summary of the tensions between the various discursive and material positions.

This intervention of formal strategies to show the otherness of the present itself — as well as its concomitance with a past that can no longer be framed in the progressive narrative that safeguards the epic of capitalist individual emancipation — is what drives *Top Girls* away from what Szondi calls the "conversation piece", that kind of play that tries to save the dramatic form through a dialogue that, by splitting from the problematic subject to take on the appearance of the present without compromising the form itself, becomes conversation and, therefore, "the involuntary parody of classical drama" (1988: 66). In my opinion, however, Churchill radicalises Brechtian ideas and stresses, above all, the pedagogical model of the German playwright, which, in essence, is based on the conviction of a Marxist scientism that ends up relegating to the background one of the foundations on which Churchill works. The fact is that the British playwright does not articulate an exemplary fable (one of the pillars of the Brechtian pedagogical project): the choice of "famous women" does not allow a map of clear and well-defined positions to be established, nor can Joyce represent a paradigm of class, and Marlene, no matter how much she takes a clear stand on capitalist individualism, cannot be completely assimilated into the emblem of Margaret Thatcher. In short, the discontinuity, complexity and opacity of the first scene extend throughout the play and impede its exemplarity. After all, Angie's prophecy, the final "Frightening", in addition to being a diagnosis of this "progression" celebrated by a feminism indistinguishable from the most aggressive capitalism, also confirms the impossibility of closing the fable, of

a unique and reassuring response: the end of *Top Girls,* in this sense, instead of being pedagogical, encourages us to continue to be critical, applying a critique that — detached from any metanarrative — will not be able to hold up as universal, and must always be provisional and localised.

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