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Woman's Gender Identity in Caryl Churchill's Four Plays

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英国剧作家凯瑞·丘吉尔
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Zhu Yanyan 朱岩岩



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谨以此书献给：
我的儿子——路路，
是他为我开启了人生的另一片天空。

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Abstract

The dissertation studies woman's gender identity in Caryl Churchill's four plays, to name them chronologically, *Owners*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine*, and *Top Girls*. In male projection, woman is inferior to man in both her body and mind, biased as "the weaker vessel." She has been silenced in public sphere and submitted to the domestic position because of her inferiority. She is not actively speaking but is spoken and represented by men. Moreover, she is often regarded as man's property and exchanged as commodity in marriage between her father and husband, such as Lady Nijo and Griselda.

However, not all women willingly identify with the subordinate roles prescribed by the patriarchal society. Having realized the oppression imposed by men, some women rise against the projection of patriarchal values. Women characters in *Vinegar Tom* rebel against male expectations, no longer under male gaze of conforming to traditional female roles, the devoted and obedient wives, etc. Joan in *Top Girls* fights for her identity by disguising herself as a man. As a transvestite, she usurps the male privilege by receiving man's education and has realized her talent. Unlike Joan, other women initiate their subversions within the family. Betty in *Cloud Nine* divorces herself from her husband and from her original image of "angel in the house" in order to live an independent life and be nobody's property.

Going one step further than Betty, Marion in *Owners* and Marlene in *Top Girls*, as career women, are more determined to rebel against patriarchal power by achieving social success in their career as men do. Marion reverses the binary opposition of male/female defined in patriarchal values by insatiably possessing everything as her properties, such as houses, children, even her husband. Marlene is a Thatcherite girl who surpasses a male colleague and is promoted to be management director in an employment agency. Both Marion and Marlene believe that women can be as competent and competitive as men or even better than them. All these women have tried to establish the gender identity of women, but none of them has found, in Churchill's notion, a final or perfect resolution.

Key Words: Gender Identity, Identifying, Resisting, Commodity, Tranvestism, Male Gaze, Angel in the House, Career Woman

提 要

论文从女权主义文学研究的角度,以当代英国女剧作家凯瑞·丘吉尔四个剧本为例,以循序渐进的方式讨论各剧本中主要女性角色如何通过对男性价值观的认同和抗拒来寻求自身发展。

论文首先从分析男性价值观中对女性的贬低开始,女性往往被看作“虚弱的身体”;不仅男性,而且女性自己也常将女性在社会和家庭中居于从属地位的原因归结为女性的生育责任和其它生理特征,如月经和子宫等。尼卓和格里丝达正是这样的女性,她们被动地认同男性价值观对女性的界定,屈从于弱势的社会地位,在婚姻中被当作交换的商品和生育机器。女性寻求自身价值的过程总是伴随着对男性定义的女性性别身份的反抗,这种反抗的形式多种多样,结果却往往未尽如人意。《醋汤姆》中的女性直接拒绝成为“男性目光”下的传统女性角色;乔安的反抗则更巧妙,她用“异装”的方式“篡夺”男性垄断的权利,不仅取得接受到良好教育,还凭借过人的学识成为教皇。女性的反抗还在父权社会最基本和核心的单位——家庭内部爆发。《九重云》中的贝蒂不愿意做“家里的天使”,她勇敢地走出家门寻求独立的社会地位和性觉醒,不仅如此,女性对家庭的颠覆还表现在同性恋等方面。更多的女性从对男性社会的直接反抗转向通过个人和事业发展谋求社会的成功和对女性的认可,如《主人们》的玛里恩和《上等女性们》中的玛琳,她们以成功女性自居,已然成为社会的“上等女性”。

至此,通过剧中女性角色的女性身份确立在经历了从认同—反抗的过程后,丘吉尔似乎看到了一条通向女性独立和发展的康庄大道,但是,再细读剧本,我们不难发觉这些女性角色抗拒结果是喜忧参半,而且剧作家在文本的字里行间隐约流露出对女性性别革命的担忧和不确定。比如,在《醋汤姆》中,反抗的女性被污蔑成巫婆,受到父权社会的严厉惩罚;当女扮男装的乔安被识破后,

可怕的厄运如期而至；而玛里恩为了自己的事业没有给丈夫生孩子，却成为丈夫仇恨的目标，不止一次成为他幻想中要谋杀的对象；虽然玛琳凭借在事业上的努力成为“上等女性”，但是，她的成功既不能说服她的姐姐放弃家庭主妇的地位，更没有带动更多女性解放。

这些女性面临的困难不仅验证她们尴尬的性别处境，同时反映出剧作家自身对女性解放事业认识的局限性：女性到底应该如何确定女性自身性别身份和寻求女性社会价值。虽然，在丘吉尔的剧本中以及在现实生活中，女性最理想的性别身份仍然在争论中，我们的这个论题仍具有现实意义，即女性必须首先放弃对男性被动依从的地位，跳出认同男性价值的樊笼，才能发现和寻找自己的社会价值和性别意义。

关键词：女性 性别身份 戏剧 女权主义文学理论

Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One

Male Expectation: the Weaker Vessel 35

Chapter Two

His Property: the Exchanged Commodity 63

Chapter Three

A Transvestite: Usurping Male Power 83

Chapter Four

Witches: Against Male Gaze 107

Chapter Five

Subversion in the Family 139

Chapter Six

Gender Identity of Career Woman 181

Conclusion 225

Works Cited 237

Introduction

Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

Judith Butler (271)

The gradual emergence of many women playwrights in Britain after 1960s happened in line with at least two historical factors: the abolition of theatre censorship¹ by Act of Parliament in 1968, which revolutionized British theatre in many aspects, and the rising of feminist fringe companies,² which concerned particularly with women's status and therefore supplied women playwrights with more free stages. After the abolition of the theatre censorship, great changes have taken place. Michelene Wandor³ in *Drama Today* observes that the abolition of censorship "changed the face of the British theatre in every possible sense" (1). Among those changes, a most striking one is the rising of the new cultural voices of women writers, who undertake writing for the theatre, when encouraged and given opportunities by fringe feminist companies. In that group of women writers, English playwright Caryl Churchill is always a shining star. Since her name is unfamiliar in China, a brief account of her achievement in theatre is necessary.

Answering the irresistible call for theatre that was "not ordinary, not safe" (Kritzer 1), Caryl Churchill entered the theatrical arena in 1960s⁴ for the very reason, as she explained, to "see if I could make things happen" (61).⁵ From then on, she has written more than a dozen plays for the stage, some of which are repeatedly produced around the world.⁶ As one of the most prominent women playwrights in England since 1960s, Churchill, together with her plays, stimulates the profound feminist thinking and the research ardor of a number of critics. In reviewing Amelia Howe Kritzer's academic research of Churchill's plays, John M. Clum recognizes the important contribution of Kritzer's academic research to the criticism of English theatre and points out that a further study of Churchill and her plays is not only "fascinating" but also significant for contemporary critics (131).

Established with international recognition, Caryl Churchill is cited more often as an influential figure than any other woman playwright in the study of contemporary women's theatre. When Churchill received the 1984 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for her play *Fen*, she was praised as "a woman who deserves recognition for having written a work of outstanding quality for the English-speaking theatre."⁷ In *Drama Today*, when Michelene Wandor, a playwright and critic, discusses the contemporary women's writers who concern the theme of sexuality and gender, she admits that among them Churchill is one of the most "successful" and "well-known" playwrights in the mainstream of English theatrical domain (1).

Obviously, Caryl Churchill occupies a very significant position not only for her commercial success in playhouses but also for her admirable capacity for writing, in Colin Chambers and Mike Prior's remarks, "some of the boldest drama" (194). For Chambers and Prior, Churchill's plays are bold not only because she tackles many socially sensitive themes, such as gender reversal in *Owners*, women's success in *Top Girls*, homosexuality in *Cloud Nine* and so on, but also because she employs various theatrical techniques to demonstrate those themes, such as cross-gender casting, juxtaposition of the past and the present, the insertion of songs and so on. Chamber and Prior's opinion is further approved by Frank Rich. In reviewing Churchill's plays, Rich agrees that Churchill "possesses one of the boldest theatrical imaginations to emerge in this decade" (31). By the virtue of the "boldest theatrical imagination," Churchill realizes her promise to "make things happen" and she makes it at least in the theatrical world.

Caryl Churchill's consciousness of challenging the convention and innovation spirit are further discussed by Joseph Marohl

and Amelia Howe Kritzer. Marohl emphasizes on Churchill's skillful combination of comic sense with serious themes, believing that the "deliberate confusion of dramatic roles" and "playfulness about otherwise serious concepts of gender and history" distinguish Churchill's plays from works of the others (307). Kritzer also notices Churchill's impact on theatre and labels her as "an agent of change" and opines that "her works to date stand out as a new kind of drama that not only entered the mainstream but had the potential to change the course of that stream" (Dernastes 113).

With amazing courage, Churchill tackles some of the most difficult questions of contemporary life: the nature of time and space, the relationship of the past and the present, especially the social construction of identity and of gender. In a review, Michael Bloom points out that Churchill embraces "an expanding range" as she deals with the "far-flung subject matter" (64). Among her varied theatrical themes, Churchill has a particular concern about gender issues.

Caryl Churchill's concern about gender is represented firstly by her attempts to readjust the relationship between women and theatre. Women's participation in theatre has long been a controversial issue because historically women as either playwrights or performers are marginalized and often completely excluded. Michelene Wandor in *Post-war British Drama* criticizes the unreasonable exclusion of female performers "from official religious drama, from Greek drama and from the British stage until relatively recently" (22).⁸ She ascribes this social injustice against women's performance to the manipulation of the male power which conducts social and political "taboos." The "concomitant taboos" confine women within domestic sphere and therefore condemn women's performance "in public, outside the confines of family

Identifying and Resisting

Woman's Gender Identity in Caryl Churchill's Four Plays

life" (23). This dominant "male power" is always questioned, sometimes vigorously attacked in Churchill's plays.

Clearly aware of the suppressive male power which dominates women's lives, Caryl Churchill often writes about gender issues and especially highlights women characters in her plays. For example, *Owners* focuses on a strong career woman whose success suffocates her husband; *Vinegar Tom* depicts a group of abused women whose unconventional behaviours offend the male dominance; *Cloud Nine* cares about the consciousness raising and sexual awakening of a common housewife; and *Top Girls*, an all-female play, creates an imaginary celebration party of six women who come from different regions and historical background respectively.

Many critics have noticed Caryl Churchill's feminist consciousness in her plays. For example, sensing Churchill's particular keenness on women, Helene Keyssar acclaims that she is drawn to Churchill's plays because "They surprised me more than any work [...] especially as dramatic illuminations of relationships of men and women," for which she praises Caryl Churchill highly as "a woman in the world, [...] [who] has taught me as much about that dilemma, its triumphs and failures [of being a woman]" (198). Keyssar also finds in Churchill's plays an unquestionable feminist consciousness that, as she observes, "Neither hid its rage nor reduced complexities to dogma or polarities" (199). Keyssar's comment is further illustrated and explained by Amelia Howe Kritzer's remarks that Caryl Churchill holds "playful, startling, and subversively comic" attitude toward questions she asks in her plays (1). Both Keyssar's and Kritzer's observations show that though conscious of gender disparities, Churchill presents the questions in the lives of those women characters, rather than pretends to be an

omniscient authority and offering ready answers for them.

In their critical essay "Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama," Colin Chambers and Mike Prior not only develop Keyssar's ideas but also elaborate on Churchill's feminist consciousness in terms of sexual politics. They comment that "[Churchill's] awareness of writing with women in mind" reflects her determination to move "into certain dramatic areas of great complexity and delicacy that concern sexual politics" (196). Chambers and Prior's commentary that Churchill's writings contribute to the "sexual politics" makes sense if we consider the political slogan that "the personal is political" in the second wave of feminist movement which initiated in 1960s and coincided with Churchill's beginning of her writing career.

Furthermore, Caryl Churchill's political stance is frequently mentioned by other critics. For example, Janet Elizabeth Gardner calls Churchill "a self-described socialist-feminist" (1). Amelia Howe Kritzer also infers that Churchill's plays are related "both to theories of theatre" and "to socialist-feminist analyses of social systems" (2). However, neither have Gardner and Kritzer further explained in what sense Churchill fits for the label and how she represents her feminist consciousness in her plays, nor have they realized the process that she develops the political consciousness of a socialist-feminist and practices it during her career.⁹

In a sense, in an interview with Caryl Churchill, Catherine Itzin undertakes a more serious consideration of the label than Gardner and Kritzer have done. Itzin reveals the fact that rather than as a natural "response to public political events," Churchill's political consciousness has undergone a slow process of development "out of her own personal experience" (279). Here for Churchill, the "personal experience" refers to her domestic life as