

Brechtian Dramatic Strategies in the plays *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill.

Estrangement in Betty in *Cloud Nine* and Marlene in *Top Girls*

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This article focuses on analysing the plays *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982) and contrasts them with Bertolt Brecht's estrangement theory.

One of the aims of this article is to study both plays and describe in detail the playwright's use of estrangement devices in order to illustrate gender inequalities. This is why firstly the use of estrangement in feminist theatre and some of the motives for the conjunction between feminist theatre and estrangement will be reviewed superficially.

A second phase will set out the estrangement devices applied to two female characters in the plays. The characters are Betty in *Cloud Nine* and Marlene in *Top Girls*. Churchill uses role reversal in both women as an estrangement device. Later it will seek to elucidate the suitability of the use of Brechtian devices in the two plays by Caryl Churchill by comparing them and the Brechtian elements in the aforementioned female characters.

Finally, the comparison will show the evolution in the use of devices and their adaptation and development in the different periods of the playwright, whereby Churchill's plays align with the idea formulated by Bertolt Brecht that affirms that each audience requires its own theatrical form and that led him to elucidate his epic theatre in opposition to Aristotelian dramatic theatre.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, feminist theatre, *Top Girls*, *Cloud Nine*, Bertold Brecht, estrangement

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Bertolt Brecht in Feminist Theatre

A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.

Brecht, 1949, translation 1988: 191-192

In capitalist societies, there are a number of systems of oppression that act at different levels. In the systems of 'representation' — such as the theatre —, and approaching the context of the genre, the way they work aims to create the construct 'Woman'. One of the objectives of feminist theatrical practice will, therefore, be to show and deconstruct the aforementioned construct, subvert and challenge the implicit masculinity in it and assert a position of subject for it.

Monforte, 2005: 12, own translation

Bertolt Brecht distances himself from the dramatic theatrical form because he feels incapable of creating a transformative theatre with it, a new political theatre that invites the audience to reflect. For Brecht, the dramatic form immerses the spectator in an illusion, in a self-explanatory “whole”, making the dissemination of his ideas and reflection in the spectator impossible.

This linear theatre model, heir to the ideas of Aristotle, began to be broken in the early 20th century with the different theatre avant-gardes. The rupture of the classical and linear plot would be the basis of contemporary theatre and would also be used to strengthen a new feminist theatre poetics.

If feminism challenges the heteropatriarchal status quo and seeks to value the woman and her experience in society, feminist theatre of the most protesting discourse is used by Brecht's aforementioned epic theatre form because of its groundbreaking character and its fracture with classical theatre. Therefore, it is understandable that a theatre that seeks to highlight the injustice of a genre adopts formulas of poetics that have tried to break with what is established.

The reading of Brecht's theory from a feminist point of view involves a paradox, as, on the one hand, Bertolt Brecht's plays are full of "masculine viewpoints"¹ and, on the other, we find that his theoretical writings provide valuable tools for theatre creation that demands equality for women. Moreover, these tools are certainly useful for protest theatre as a whole (Diamond, 1996: 121).

Moreover, estrangement can be a great ally for the representation on the stage of gender as a social, historical and cultural construct. We attribute to gender a series of behaviours, body language, appearance, ideas or forms of expression that help us to recognise masculine or feminine identity. The differentiation of one gender or another reflects society, culture and politics in that moment. Although it is a construct, we tend to think that gender is something natural and inalienable as we relate it to biological sex.

Studying the two plays shows us how Caryl Churchill plays with the spectator's expectations of gender. She takes gender and its iconicity and uses it in the opposite sense, thereby unleashing many dilemmas in the characters about their identity while encouraging reflection on the gender issue.

In the two plays discussed in this study, Churchill uses cross dressing to highlight the problem of identity suffered by women who have sought to fight for their freedom throughout history. Churchill's characters' cross-dressing dress or attitude resembles what we identify as masculine and that also has traditionally been related to freedom.

Feminist theatre that tries to highlight this disjunction usually uses estrangement to underline the problem of gender, as Churchill does in *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*. These plays commonly try to use the audience's expectations of gender and its iconicity in the opposite way. Clothing leads us to role and from there a problem of identity develops (Diamond, 1996: 123).

Cloud Nine

Cloud Nine is a farce that sets out how society and politics affect people's sexuality and identity. With this play Caryl Churchill questions both the characters and the audience about the interferences of society, culture and politics in individuals.

*Plot, temporality and structure*²

Cloud Nine (1979) is a play with a dual approach and a plot developed in two independent acts. It is dual because it poses a plot development and at the same time seeks to appeal to the audience directly. It is the story of a British family living in an African colony under the tyranny of the father, Clive. He imposes his thoughts on the family, on the native slaves and on his workers, with his attitude accepted as an inalterable hierarchical order despite the discomfort for the rest of the characters.

1. The *masculine viewpoint* is the way in which women and the world are described in the arts and literature.

2. See table in Annex 1.

The first act takes place one Christmas in the Victorian era (late 19th century) while the natives prepare a revolt against the colonisers. The first act sets out the unequal power relations between the different groups, showing the lack of equality in terms of gender, class, race or sexual identity.

The second act takes place in London in 1979, almost a hundred years after the first. It shows once again the life and relations of the same family, although for them only twenty-five years have passed. If in the first act there was a minimal dramatic urgency in the characters thanks to the imminent rebellion, in this second act the dramatic tension is absent and the play focuses exclusively on personal relations and their experiences in terms of their acceptance of their identity.

Time plays a key role in the play as the lack of harmony between the passage of dramatic time and that of the characters gives meaning to the actions that occur: how society thinks evolves slowly. In the second act we see an ideological opening, even though with the new context new oppressive systems and new prejudices related to sexuality appear. Thought progresses, as sexual identities are no longer completely concealed, but the characters are still uncomfortable with new injustices and lack of acceptance.

Estrangements within Cloud Nine

Cloud Nine impedes fluid access to theatre illusion. In the prologue and the dramatis personae Caryl Churchill makes clear her express desire to perturb the audience (Churchill, 2010):

Act one	Act two
CLIVE, <i>a colonial administrator</i>	BETTY
BETTY, <i>his wife, played by a man</i>	EDWARD, <i>his son</i>
JOSHUA, <i>his black servant, played by a white</i>	VICTORIA, <i>her daughter</i>
EDWARD, <i>his son, played by a woman</i>	MARTIN, <i>Victoria's husband</i>
MAUD, <i>his mother-in-law</i>	LIN
ELLEN, <i>Edward's governess</i>	CATHY, <i>Lin's daughter aged 4 and 5, played by a man</i>
MRS SAUNDERS, <i>a widow</i>	GERRY, <i>Edward's lover</i>
HARRY BAGLEY, <i>an explorer</i>	

This organisation of the dramatis personae shows the playwright's clear interest in pointing out gender, race, class or identity inequalities. Caryl Churchill does not dictate how actors should double roles, but imposes certain characteristics that resignify some of the characters giving them extradiegetic elements that, as well as launching political ideas, become pretexts for comedy. The discordances between character and actor are less frequent in the second act.

The discordances between actor and character occur for different reasons. Betty is played by a man because, as Churchill writes in the prologue, she wants to be the kind of woman that Clive wants her to be. This idea is also expressed in the words of Clive at the end of the play when Betty takes the reins of her life:

CLIVE: You are not that sort of a woman, Betty. I can't believe you are. I can't feel the same about you as I did.

(Churchill, 2010: 87)

Joshua, the black slave of the house, is played by a white man for similar reasons to Betty: he is the black slave that the whites want to have, a person who does not question the authority or legitimacy of the white coloniser. Joshua accepts his condition of inferiority in the same way that Betty does with respect to her gender.

The son, Edward, is played by an adult woman. In this case the gender reversal between actor and character satirises the idea that homosexual men are effeminate or desire to be women. The Victorian normativity associated sex with gender and, therefore, Clive and the whole family separate Edward from everything that for them means being a girl.

The breaking of the fourth wall is another estrangement effect presented with songs. The play starts with Clive's song, with which he introduces the members of his family and their respective roles. Churchill transfers all the aims of the dramatis personae to the verses of the initial song (Gobert, 2014: 91).

The monologue as a formula for setting out and narrating life experiences is also used to accentuate breaking the fourth wall. Gerry's first appearance in act two shows a new character now played by an actor we have already seen in another role. This is a new unidentified space and breaks the fourth wall to tell the audience about his sexual experiences.

The change of gender from the first to second act is another of the key elements in the construction of estrangement in the play. The first act has a farce style and the second softens it by introducing a certain realistic tone in the dialogue. The realism of the second act is blurred at different moments because of the profusion of dramatic incidents and the frequent entrances and exits of the characters.

Certainly, the most striking effect has to do with the passage of time between the first act and the second, but the alteration of time also happens within the act itself through the way time passes for the characters. These temporal upsets are used by the playwright to emphasise the different speeds at which societies as a whole and their individuals in particular advance.

The first act has temporal linearity and the ellipses between scenes are short, and we understand that each scene takes place on a different day. In the second act the treatment of time approaches the episodic. This act takes place in winter, spring and summer, seasons that occupy different temporal spaces. The passage of time also serves as a justification for the evolutions or involutions in the different relationships established between the characters. Some of them accept social changes, like Betty, and others defend themselves from them, like Martin, Victoria's husband.

In the first act the plot might have a more pressing effect on the characters; however, the characters do not show any concern about the imminent rebellion. There is no urgency to leave, to confront or defend themselves against the rebels; on the contrary, the urgency seems to have disappeared to

prioritise the dialogue, showing the power mechanisms established between the characters.

The text abounds in supplementary and parasitic actions that impede the progress of the action because Churchill wants to situate the characters in the moment in which the context needs them. For example, Maud is forced to return home because she has been bitten by an insect and due to her return she witnesses her daughter Betty's adultery with Harry. Maud judges her daughter for not being faithful to her husband and taking initiatives in her sexual life. Maud's bite is not developed as it was only used to put her in a specific place and time and to make her witness and judge of her daughter's adultery.

Another estrangement effect is the total lack of verbal economy. The characterisation is done through words as well as illustrating the action on different occasions. The dialogue is plagued with double meanings that use both the diegetic and the extradiegetic, which causes comicalness that pulls the audience out of the theatre illusion and can also include comicalness as another resource for estrangement.

This can be better illustrated with the following lines by Betty, played by a man, which occurs during Clive's introduction of his family in act one scene one:

BETTY: I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.
I am a man's creation as you see,
And what men want is what I want to be.

(Churchill, 2010: 1)

Joshua, the black slave played by a white man, speaks similarly:

JOSHUA: My skin is black but oh my soul is white.
I hate my tribe. My master is my light.
I only live for him. As you can see,
What white men want is what I want to be.

(Churchill, 2010: 2)

Bearing in mind this introduction that places the action at a very precise historical moment in which these characters accepted their situation of inferiority — one in terms of men and the other in terms of white men —, the contrast provided by the contradictory behaviour of both later on is interesting. On the one hand, we will see Betty try to strengthen a relationship with her lover, Harry, as well as her almost lesbian experience with Ellen, the governess. And, on the other, we will notice the change experienced by Joshua when aiming the shotgun at his master.

In the first part of the play the characters are ruled by strict social and economic codes. Women adopt the attitudes accepted by heteropatriarchal normativity, which they accept in different degrees: slaves as slaves, and men as men, all according to the role that society has given them. However, there

are characters that at some point rebel against the established order: Mrs Saunders and Edward. Mrs Saunders is a widow who has lived independently since the death of her husband and so Clive categorises her as a woman who is like a man because of her independence, revealing her masculine characteristics:

CLIVE: Mrs Saunders is an unusual woman and does not require protection in the same way.

(Churchill, 2010: 37)

On the other hand, Edward confronts what it means to be a man and homosexual. In the first act he plays with his doll and is laughed at because he doesn't know how to throw a ball. In the second he argues with his partner, Gerry, because he behaves like a "woman" as he is too concerned with household chores, also conferring a normative pattern from the heteropatriarchal point of view: a homosexual couple in whom we can also identify the roles of man/woman or independent/dependent.

Finally, if on the one hand Churchill seeks to create two differentiated spaces between one act and the next, doing so with a change of period, a change in the characters, both physical and ideological, the past is also present in the second act through the appearances of characters from the first act. Thus, we see how Maud, Clive and Betty from the first act appear in the last scene of the play to remind us of where all those characters come from and show the discordance that exists in the progress of societies in the public sphere and of individuals in the private.

Estrangement in Betty

Cloud Nine is a choral play, in which Betty is one of the characters that becomes more important due to the evolution she experiences and the change in her perception of the world, her family and herself.

Betty is a middle class married woman who lives under the protection of her husband. She has not questioned her situation as she has internalised the idea that there is a separation of genders in society that is natural and unshakeable.

We can deduce from Maud, Betty's mother, that she has grown up in a conservative atmosphere, but Betty is slightly different from her mother as she adapts more flexibly to the changes of society and understands the sociological evolution taking place in her time.

During the first act Betty is played by a man. In addition to the added comicalness, this obliges a rethinking of many of the character's retorts and the effect they come to have on the audience. The "man" Betty receives comments from her husband like "So today has been all right? No fainting? No hysteria?" (Churchill, 2010: 4). It is also interesting to observe the comic effect of the scene in which Ellen, the governess, declares Betty to be a "man" and rejects her because a relationship between two women is not appropriate.

Later, while the family is playing ball there is a “game of enchained estrangements”. Edward, the son (played by a woman) and Betty (played by a man) play ball. After seeing that Betty knows how to throw a ball, her son prevents his mother from playing because women don’t know how to throw a ball. Finally, it is Edward who does not know how to throw it.

Another event that characterises Betty is her deep acceptance of society and her lack of desire to change it despite clearly disagreeing with it and an obvious oppression.

If in the first act what causes the estrangement in Betty is mainly the fact of being played by a man and her acceptance of the status quo, in the second what disconcerts us is precisely the opposite: the concordance of gender between actress-character. Betty is now a woman who is beginning to make her own decisions even though there is still some acceptance of her inferiority because of her gender.

Betty gets divorced and becomes financially independent because it is what the new society allows her to do. Maud, her mother, anchored a hundred years ago, appears in 1979 to reproach her for her behaviour as she thinks that women need the protection of a man. Maud compares her daughter Betty with the widow Mrs Saunders from the first act:

MAUD: Let Mrs Saunders be a warning to you, Betty. I know what is to be unprotected.

(Churchill, 2010: 82)

In this second act, Betty continues to believe in social differences between men and women, but she does not conceal minor rebellions. In fact, if Betty no longer disturbs anyone with her appearance, when she addresses the audience directly she creates an estrangement effect, such as when she confesses her sexual discovery of masturbation (Churchill, 2010: 82-83).

With the divorce, Betty gains new portions of freedom such as solitude, lack of domestic and family burdens or entry into the world of work. For her, these changes are almost a game that men themselves have allowed her to play. This antiquated conception that women are what men allow them to be provokes an added estrangement in the audience. Her new life is like a game, as she explains to Lin’s daughter, Cathy:

BETTY: Look what a lot of money, Cathy, and I sit behind a desk on my own and I answer the telephone and keep the doctor’s appointment book and it really is great fun.

(Churchill, 2010: 80)

The play ends with a hug between the Betty-man of the first act and the Betty of the second. This last estrangement effect sends a conciliatory message between the two women. The Betty of the 20th century who has managed to get away from Clive’s tyranny is reconciled with the Betty of the first act still marked by her female role, but from a male imposition.

Top Girls

*Plot analysis, Temporality and Structure*³

The main character of *Top Girls* (1982) is Marlene, a woman who focuses her life on her career despite being from a working class family outside London. Churchill's play shows us a Marlene who is only concerned with her career and completely dissociated from her family.

The three parts show us Marlene's social, work and family environment. The first part is a celebration, the second centres on aggressiveness within the work environment and the third reveals Marlene's abandonment of her daughter, having left her in the care of her sister in order to focus on her work.

Estrangements in Top Girls

Although the estrangement devices that are used in *Top Girls* are observed in the different text layers, the Brechtian estrangement exercise is more conscious and premeditated in *Cloud Nine*.

Once again, temporality is central in Caryl Churchill's work. "Time can be used as an architectural element of drama" (Bobes Naves, 1997: 364) and in this case it is clear that the lack of a chronology gives a different perspective and a progression to the play that it would not have if it followed a chronological order. The final scene is presented as a flashback that moves the action to a year before the beginning of the play and forces us to rethink Marlene's behaviour throughout the play. This re-evaluation of Marlene's actions, despite the chronological alteration, contributes to the advancement, progress and final tension of the play.

Once again, the *dramatis personae* is a fundamental element of estrangement in the play. Although Churchill does not impose the doubling of the actresses, she does suggest that the sixteen characters are played by a minor cast, and the only character that cannot be doubled is the main character herself. In the *dramatis personae* there are clear resonances with *Cloud Nine* since it includes two under-age characters that will have to be played by adult actresses.

First act

The plot is disturbing because within the dramatic action it encompasses women from different historical periods (real and fictional women) in the 1980s. This estrangement effect can lead us to think that we are faced with something closer to dream or fantasy. The clothing of all the women also helps to distance the spectators from what they are seeing. This effect does not reach the reader with the same intensity as it does in the staging, but by having a verbal characterisation, which is channelled through the ideolect and the experiences narrated, the result as an estrangement device is similar.

The dialectical development of these women eclipses the hostess, Marlene, who becomes less prominent than the rest of the characters in the first

3. See table in Annex 2.

act. The opinions of the woman Marlene are not as radical as those she will express later. She identifies the oppressions and all the sacrifices of the guests and is aware of the price paid for a different life from the rest of the women of her time:

ISABELLA: I did wish marriage had seemed more of a step. I tried very hard to cope with the ordinary drudgery of life. I was ill again with carbuncle on the spine and nervous prostration. I ordered a tricycle, that was my idea of adventure then. [...]

NIJO: There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor's favour. The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk.

JOAN: There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with the pursuit of the truth. [...] The day after they made me cardinal I fell ill and lay two weeks without speaking, full of terror and regret. But then I got up.

MARLENE: Yes, success is very...

(Churchill, 1990: 65-66)

Marlene, at a peak in her career, does not identify with an oppressed and sacrificed woman like the rest of the guests, since she has appropriated the tools of the oppressor and become an oppressor. According to Marlene, oppression and inequality are linked to the physical violence suffered by Griselda. She cannot bear her submission: "Walter's a monster. Weren't you angry? What did you do?" (Churchill, 1990: 79). This opinion is matched by Marlene's opinion of her own abused mother. In the third act she insinuates on several occasions that her mother bore part of the blame for her own abuse:

JOYCE: You couldn't get out of here fast enough.

MARLENE: Of course I couldn't get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed? Don't you fucking this fucking that fucking bitch.

JOYCE: Christ.

Marlene: fucking tell me what to fucking do fucking.

(Churchill, 1990: 133)

And in the next speech we read:

MARLENE: [...] I had to get out, [...] I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, never let him, make my own way, out.

(Churchill, 1990: 139)

It is significant that in the first scene, as the hostess, she is the one with the least dialogical importance. Marlene's reasons for hiding her life experience from her guests will be deduced in the last act upon finding out the family

sacrifices she has suffered. Certainly Marlene has little dialogical importance but is indicated as a protagonist precisely because of that, and because of her status as a hostess and the fact that she is the only one who corresponds with the dramatic time.

The waitress is another resource used by Churchill to signify both gender and class oppression, since she does not speak and only receives orders. Churchill gives her a unique and exclusive role as a servant for the other women, none of whom, either passively and submissively or by accepting and copying the male model, sees the possibility of changing the model that oppresses them, because they are unaware of it and imitate it from their status of privilege. In the waitress (and later in Joyce) Churchill personifies the working class woman doubly silenced because of her status as a woman and her social class.

Overlapping dialogues are a substantial motif in the play, as well as being innovative. Overlapping dialogue was an element that the playwright described as Brechtian since it hinders understanding and forces greater effort. Overlapping is also employed as a character depicting tool (Monforte, 2000: 159).

The structuring of language is also a characterising and submission element throughout:

The play shows how the way we speak gives information about us, in the same way as our name can also be used as a tool to control our lives. Some of the working-class characters in the play show through their speech the impossibility of articulating a minimally coherent discourse that allows them to escape from the material and ideological constraints of their everyday lives.

(Monforte, 2000: 159)

Second act

The passage from dinner to the workplace is also understood as an element of estrangement as the only continuity we have is the character of Marlene, who goes from being drunk in the first scene to sober in the second. Moreover, the scene becomes sharply realistic, unlike the first act, which adds another point of estrangement since there is no continuity in the dream ingredient constituted by Marlene's friends in the first act. We go from a realistic abnormality to total normality, from the oneiric to the real.

However, this act also has temporal and spatial leaps. The move from the office to the backyard is an estranged element. The Angie and Kit scene in the backyard arrives abruptly without providing elements related with the rest of the play. This scene has a slight temporal regression in the girls' scene since it happens a day before the office scene, but as it is inserted in another scene, that of the office, it breaks the continuity. As an estrangement effect, this break is very powerful, as it changes place and time, accentuating the estrangement by concealing any link that allows the girls to be related to the play.

This suspense left in the first scene is broken by Angie's appearance in the office to visit her aunt, Marlene. The elided information is immediately reconstructed.

The temporality of the play and all the omitted information are the most powerful estranged elements since they force the plot to be reconstructed. This effect is strengthened by Angie's lies as it also has to include doubt about what is true and false.

Finally, the sudden appearance of Mrs Kidd in defence of her husband is another element that takes us away from the illusion. That conversation is absurd and farcical because of the histrionic defence she makes of her husband in which she uses anachronistic didactic ideas:

MARLENE: What has happened?

MRS KIDD: You should know if anyone. I'm referring to you being appointed managing director instead of Howard. He hasn't been at all well all weekend. He hasn't slept for three nights. I haven't slept.

MARLENE: I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs Kidd. Has he thought of taking sleeping pills?

MRS KIDD: It's very hard when someone has worked all these years.

MARLENE: Business life is full of little setbacks. I'm sure Howard knows that. He'll bounce back in a day or two. We all bounce back.

MRS KIDD: If you could see him you'd know what I'm talking about. What's it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he'd get over it as something normal.

MARLENE: I think he's going to have to get over it.

MRS KIDD: It's me that bear the brunt. I'm not the one that's been promoted. I put him first every inch of the way. And now what do I get? You women this, you women that. It's not my fault. You're going to have to be very careful how you handle him. He's very hurt.

(Churchill, 1990: 112)

Third act

The third act consists of a single scene and takes place in the kitchen of Joyce's house one year before Marlene's promotion. The playwright has played with the audience's expectations throughout the play since it is here when Marlene's humble origins and the voluntary distancing of her family is revealed. This puts Marlene's attitude to the other women, who we have seen her interviewing and judging in an underhand manner, in another perspective:

JEANINE: I want a change.

MARLENE: Soy you'll take anything comparable?

JEANINE: No, I do want prospects. I want more money.

MARLENE: You're getting — ?

JEANINE: Hundred.

MARLENE: It's not bad you know. You're what? Twenty?

JEANINE: I'm saving to get married?

MARLENE: Dos that mean you don't want a long-term job, Jeanine?

JEANINE: I might do.

MARLENE: Because where do the prospects come in? No kids for a bit?

JEANINE: Oh no, not kids, not yet.

MARLENE: So you won't tell them you're getting married?

JEANINE: Had I better not?

MARLENE: It would probably help.

JEANINE: I'm not wearing a ring. We thought we wouldn't spend on a ring.

MARLENE: Saves taking it off.

JEANINE: I wouldn't take it off.

MARLENE: There's no need to mention it when you go for an interview.

(Churchill, 1990: 84-85)

In the third act we discover that Marlene has given up taking care of her daughter to enter the workplace. What is surprising is not her origin or her sacrifices; it is more striking that she has reproduced in her work environment such aggressive attitudes with other women. Marlene has accepted neoliberal ideas and these are summarised in the following statement:

MARLENE: I hate working class which is what you're going

JOYCE: Yes you do.

MARLENE: to go on about now, it doesn't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid.

(Churchill, 1990: 139)

The alcohol that the two sisters drink throughout the entire act makes their opinions more extreme. If Mrs Kidd's ideolect in the second act was an absurd element that helped the estrangement, in this scene something similar happens in Marlene with her political ideas. When she is intoxicated, Churchill turns her into a puppet of Thatcherite neoliberalism:

MARLENE: I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

JOYCE: Who for?

MARLENE: For me. I think I'm going up up up.

JOYCE: Oh for you. Yes, I'm sure they will.

MARLENE: And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. She just needs to hang in there. This country

JOYCE: You voted for them, did you?

MARLENE: needs to stop whining. Monetarism is not stupid.

JOYCE: Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

MARLENE: It takes time, determination. No more slop. And

JOYCE: Well I think they're filthy bastards.

MARLENE: who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico.

Aces. Right on. You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

JOYCE: What good's first woman if it's her? I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. Great adventures.

(Churchill, 1990: 137-138)

The act and the play end with a significant fright for Angie that anticipates the terrifying future that awaits women if they continue in a society like the one these three are perpetuating.

Estrangement in Marlene

When we talk about the disappearance of gender roles, it is rare to hear someone who suggests that children should wear pink or that the male managers of a company should wear floral prints so that they can be “taken seriously”. What a ridiculous thing, we would think. However, very often a woman with a high position in the business world is still expected to dress soberly. If she appeared in a frilly multicoloured dress, she would be exposing herself to the comments of her colleagues. She has to dress neutrally; that is, in a masculine way. Adapt to a pre-existing model that revolves around the body and figure of men. But it must also not be too masculine either. She must remain a woman; but a woman who accepts that she is doing a traditionally male activity.

Marçal, 2016: 133-134, own translation

Marlene’s main objective is to get on. “I think I’m going up up up,” she says at the end of the play (Churchill, 1990: 137).

In *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill wanted to question the image of the liberated woman model that follows the guidelines of the masculine capitalist model and takes advantage of her privileged situation to progress without seeing her own sacrifices or those of other women. Marlene has internalised and accepted the discourse of the neoliberal right, which argues that individuals are responsible for everything that happens in their life, without taking into account the context in which they were born. Marlene admires and votes for Margaret Thatcher, a woman who encapsulates all of her neoliberal ideas. Churchill confronts Marlene’s ideas with Joyce’s socialist ideas and in this way adds not only gender bias but socioeconomic bias to the inequality of women.

Marlene’s neoliberal ideology is so ingrained in her that she does not even feel the slightest empathy for her own daughter, Angie, who has a hopeless future as she is low class and unintelligent. Marlene does not consider that Angie is experiencing inequality because of her social class since she sees in her own case the irrefutable proof that individual will is enough to achieve success. Marlene believes that these difficulties (being a woman and poverty) should be an incentive to progress.

Marlene denies the terrifying future that Angie’s dreams augur:

ANGIE: Frightening.

MARLENE: Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well you’re awake now, aren’t you pet?

ANGIE: Frightening.

(Churchill, 1990: 141)

Marlene moves away from the male model she has seen in her family and approaches another with a different aggressiveness towards women. This is how her fellow workers see it:

NELL: Howard thinks because he’s a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene’s got far more balls than Howard and that’s that.

(Churchill, 1990: 100)

Marlene's father was an alcoholic and he abused her mother. In this environment, Marlene distanced herself from her family because she considered that it was a burden for her that prevented her from progressing. That decision meant that the family responsibilities (her own daughter and the care of her parents) had to be taken on by her sister, Joyce. Her professional success is also due to her family but Marlene is unable to see this, since she expurgates her guilt by trying to give Joyce financial support.

The lack of empathy towards her daughter can be transferred to all the women on Marlene's social ladder. The rejection of less advantaged and less successful women extends to all women interviewed in her placement agency. She steamrollers the interviewees with questions that attack their private life to find out how far they fit into the world of work and if their personal life is the right one to participate in the public life of which she sees herself as a representative.

The way in which Marlene confronts her world is male because it lacks female success models. Her ambition has forced her to adopt these attitudes and make life decisions since they are the ones that have opened the doors to the world of work. Marlene forgets that the work environment, or her power environment, has forced her to align with the masculine, which normalises the idea that only by "being a man" can success be achieved.

This change of gender role is externalised in diegesis and with the use of estrangement devices. Churchill places Marlene alongside a series of historical and fictional characters that have embraced the masculine as right and ideal. By sitting all these women with Marlene, Churchill makes them the same, with the difference that Marlene is in a historical period in which women already have certain freedoms and the ability to appreciate that equality between men and women is not sustained only by the professional success of some. The significant thing is that none of the women in the dinner has shown solidarity with others who are less fortunate. They form a successful women's club without remembering the disadvantaged, but they immediately recognise their own losses (Reinelt, 2009: 30).

The structure of the play reveals Marlene's selfish behaviour, with which the playwright positions herself in Joyce's experiential sphere. Joyce criticises her sister for perpetuating sexist and capitalist attitudes:

MARLENE: I don't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.

JOYCE: And if they haven't?

MARLENE: If they are stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?

JOYCE: What about Angie?

MARLENE: What about Angie?

JOYCE: She's stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?

MARLENE: You run her down too much. She'll be all right.

JOYCE: I don't expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. Because nothing's changed and it won't with them in.

MARLENE: Them, them. Us and them?

JOYCE: You are one of them.

MARLENE: And you're us, wonderful us, and Angie's us and Mum and Dad's us.

(Churchill, 1990: 140-141)

Once the reading is finished, Marlene's character shows little evolution. However, Churchill puts it in perspective through the temporal disorder and location in the different spaces of the drama. The use of time shows that Marlene's individual actions affect her sister and the group of women as she silences the experience of her companions:

MARLENE: Bosses still walking on the workers' faces? Still Dadda's little parrot? Haven't you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.

(Churchill, 1990: 138)

Comparison between Betty and Marlene

I have the feeling that the intense emphasis on female spirituality at this time is the direct result of so many women embarking on the male heroic journey, to finally realise that it was personally empty and a danger to humanity. Women emulated the masculine heroic journey because there were no other images to emulate; either the woman "was successful" in a masculinised culture or dominated and dependent as a female.

Murdock, 2014: 23, own translation

Marlene is a successful woman in a masculine culture and Betty is the model of a dominated and dependent woman.

Marlene is the woman who follows the male heroic model, choosing a "hero's journey" through life similar to that described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero of the Thousand Faces*. Campbell's hero is the protagonist of a narrative pattern repeated in most fictions (Campbell 1949, translation 1959). This pattern is also repeated in our daily existence since the models to be followed are not only real ones but also those that appear in fiction.

Marlene criticises men but not the system. She internalises and learns the mechanisms of success without taking into account all those who remain on the path. She fits into business society and achieves a privileged situation from which she emulates men and silences women who do not reach her position.

Betty is a woman completely subordinated to men, both her husband Clive and her lover, Harry, or even her son, Edward. Unlike Marlene, Betty's ideas do change throughout the play, since the perception of her own oppression changes and she positively observes certain advances in society.

What the two characters do share is the role reversal. The normative feminine role of the heteropatriarchal system has been imposed on Betty. This feminine role that Betty takes on silences her true desires and her individuality. It is a role that society imposes on Betty and that Caryl Churchill translates through the estrangement device of transvestism. The man who

plays Betty in the first act seeks to represent the entire patriarchal oppressor system by turning her into the woman moulded by men.

The second Betty, the one played by a woman, is closer to Marlene because both already know feminism and the battles it has won, from which they benefit. Both are aware of the oppression suffered, although they still see traditionally masculine values as positive values.

On the other hand, Marlene is a woman who assimilates masculine success models to meddle in spaces of freedom; she moves away from the feminine because it is the opposite of self-sufficiency. In addition, Marlene abhors her own gender because her traditional idea of a woman does not fit in with the success or freedom she wants.

It is paradoxical that Marlene sees her own success as proof that equality already exists, without taking into account that, in order to obtain it, she has had to give up her daughter and her entire family life. Marlene has paid a price for being a high-flying lady (Churchill, 1990: 137), like all her colleagues in the first scene. The strange thing is that to all of them giving up their family life in exchange for those supposed freedoms seems a fair price.

Marlene's role reversal is not a Brechtian mechanism, since she represents a type of recognisable woman. She presents herself as a successful woman who represents materialistic feminism whereby "everything is acceptable" as long as there is a benefit to the individual. Churchill portrays Marlene to point out that material and personal success shows little solidarity with other women while dynamiting the struggle of socialist feminism (embodied in her sister Joyce), which sought a change for most women (Reinelt, 2009: 30).

In contrast, Betty's transvestism has to do with an idea imposed by the playwright and has a clear purpose of drawing attention to her heteropatriarchal domination.

Cloud Nine shows a Betty who develops her thinking, moving from accepting her inferiority to divorcing and rebuilding her life as well as changing her way of seeing her son's homosexuality and her daughter's family disorder.

In contrast, Marlene does not evolve and maintains her ideology throughout the play. Marlene's evolution is related to her passage through different contexts. Marlene's attitude is the same, but that same attitude in different environments positions her as a clear collaborator with the heteropatriarchy. In other words, in the first act we see Marlene with other women having dinner, her attitude is relaxed and we get little from her other than that she has received a promotion. In the second act Marlene is aggressive with the women around her, and we can see that she has adopted that attitude as a shell in order to function in the work environment. The third act reveals to us that Marlene indeed thinks the way she acts and her *modus operandi* is on the side of neoliberal individualism.

Betty also collaborates with the heteropatriarchy but in another way since she accepts its iron structures both in Victorian and modern times. Her lifestyle involves accepting the system in which she lives and incorporating changes into her life as society accepts them. She benefits from these

changes but does nothing to foster them and her passivity is her way of collaborating with the heteropatriarchal system.

Marlene does not stop to observe or analyse the socioeconomic bias between her and other women who have not achieved her success and ignores the fact that not all of them start from the same economic or social conditions. She follows the path of ascending progress that is imposed within the business and social world, believing that women have the same possibilities as men. She even believes that she does not need them anymore other than for sex:

MARLENE: There's fellas who like to be seen with a high-flying lady. Shows they've got something really good in their pants. But they can't take the day to day. They're waiting for me to turn into the little woman. Or maybe I'm just horrible of course.

JOYCE: Who needs them?

MARLENE: Who needs them? Well I do. But I need adventures more. So on on into the sunset. I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

(Churchill, 1990: 137)

Conclusions

The study of Caryl Churchill's dramaturgy is inextricably linked to its context and the playwright's own experience. She spent a great period of her life raising her children before entering into playwriting. This period defined the subjects she would write about. The two plays included in this article were written just after a period working at the BBC, where she wrote radio scripts.

Establishing a direct relationship between the use of Brechtian estrangement and feminist theatre is the task of a more extensive study and it is possible that it is related to Bertolt Brecht's widespread influence in contemporary theatre, as well as the use that has been made of his theory of estrangement in political and protest theatre. The influence Brecht's theory has had on feminist theatre may have been simply because Brechtian estrangement has impregnated the whole of contemporary theatre in general.

The utility of estrangement devices within feminist theatre is evident when the practice is analysed: if on the one hand Brecht designed his theatre to shake the ideologies of his time and, on the other, feminist theatre's purpose is to show the situation of women and change society to make it a more egalitarian place, it is logical that feminist theatre adopts strategies of a protest theatre.

In the same way that Brecht considered that theatre art and its form had to evolve with society, his theory of estrangement has had to evolve along with the different social demands that have taken place. In Churchill's theatre there is also an evolution between the estrangement devices of the two plays. *Cloud Nine* deals with an aesthetic and poetic closer to the Brechtian and *Top Girls* has elements of estrangement, but they are more veiled. *Top Girls* disturbs us and draws us into that magic that Bertolt Brecht wanted

the audience to avoid, since when reading or seeing the play one enters the story told. This is because in *Top Girls* there is a plot in the classical manner: we can reconstruct Marlene's story. Throughout her dramatic path, Caryl Churchill manages to make her theatre both estranged and dramatic, stripped of the didacticism of theatre that is essentially Brechtian. This evolution is observed between *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* but we can also see the leap that Churchill makes in more recent plays like *A Number* (2002) or *Far Away* (2000) and the evolution of the estrangement devices used, mostly related to the unit of time.

Therefore, in these two plays we can observe an evolution in the estrangement devices that Caryl Churchill uses to indicate the oppressive social systems, ranging from the most archaic in *Cloud Nine* to a personal rereading of Brechtian poetics in *Top Girls*. Churchill's theatrical form has evolved with the theatre of her time because she has managed to create a political and protest theatre while divesting herself of Brechtian assertiveness.

In both cases, the playwright uses Brechtian estrangement devices to represent the differences between sex and gender. Betty is constructed as a character that struggles between the socially demanded appearance and her own desires and Marlene appropriates a sphere that traditionally does not belong to her in order to enter the spheres of freedom.

Although they are older plays, *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* show the foundation on which Churchill's current work was cemented. Protesting about the situation of women and denouncing oppressive systems and power are the leitmotiv of Churchill's work.



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Annexes

Annex 1

Structure		Character	Space	Time	Action	
Act I	Scene I	Clive, Betty, Edward, Victoria, Maud, Ellen, Joshua, Harry and Mrs Saunders	Exterior of the colonial house	Victorian era Africa	A few days before Christmas	Clive introduces his family to the audience: Betty, his wife; Edward, his son; Victoria, his daughter; Maud, his mother-in-law; Ellen, Edward's governess; Joshua, the black servant. Clive announces to his wife the arrival of the family's explorer friend, Harry Bagley. Seeing him in the distance, he goes after him, but returns with Mrs Saunders, who has fainted. Clive leaves Mrs Saunders in the care of his wife Betty. Edward and Harry arrive and the women and child go to sleep. Clive warns Harry that he has to sleep with a gun because of the imminent attack of the natives. Clive calls his wife to go out and keep Harry company. Clive goes out and it is revealed that Harry and Betty are lovers. Joshua sees them, Betty leaves and, to silence him, Harry suggests to Joshua that they have sexual relations in the barn and he accepts.
	Scene II	Clive, Betty, Edward, Maud, Ellen, Joshua, Harry, Mrs Saunders and Victoria	Open space some distance away from the house		Christmas Day	Mrs Saunders and Clive are having sex away from the house; they run out to avoid being seen by the rest of the family while they are having a picnic. Everyone starts playing hide and seek. Harry and Clive count to one hundred to give the others time, and Joshua reports that the stable workers are not to be trusted. Harry hides and finds Betty, who confesses she loves him and would run away with him. Maud suspects their affair and keeps watch, but she has been bitten by an insect and has to leave. Clive chases Mrs Saunders. Edward, the son, gives Harry a necklace because they are in love. Betty confesses to Ellen that she is in love with Harry but that he is not very receptive. Ellen mistakes Betty's intentions and kisses her. The others arrive, playing magic games. Joshua sings a Christmas song to the rest of the family.
	Scene III	Clive, Betty, Edward, Maud, Ellen, Joshua, Harry, Mrs Saunders and Victoria	Inside the house with the windows closed		A few days after Christmas	While the men are whipping the rebellious natives, the women and children are in the sitting room in the dark. Edward is playing with a doll and they tell him off for it. The men return to the room and Betty takes the opportunity to confess to Clive her affair with Harry. Clive forgives her as Harry is his friend and a man.

Structure		Character	Space	Time		Action
Act I	Scene IV	Clive, Betty, Edward, Ellen, Joshua, Harry, and Mrs Saunders	Inside the house with the windows closed	Victorian era Africa		While the men are whipping the rebellious natives, the women and children are in the sitting room in the dark. Edward is playing with a doll and they tell him off for it. The men return to the room and Betty takes the opportunity to confess to Clive her affair with Harry. Clive forgives her as Harry is his friend and a man.
	Scene V	Joshua, Edward, Maud, Clive, Betty, Ellen, Mrs Saunders and Harry	Exterior of the house, in the porch		Ellen and Harry's wedding day	Joshua tears up Edward's doll. The bride and groom enter and Clive kisses Mrs Saunders. On seeing this, Betty fights with Mrs Saunders. Mrs Saunders is asked to leave. Edward falsely accuses Joshua of stealing his mother's necklace. They toast the wedding and, while Clive is giving a speech for the bride and groom, Joshua points a rifle at him.
Act II	Scene I	Gerry, Lin, Victoria, Cathy, Edward and Betty	Unspecified place and park in London	Contemporary era	Winter afternoon	In a monologue, Gerry explains his sporadic sexual experiences with men on trains. Lin and Victoria watch over their children in the park. Lin flirts with Victoria. Edward, Victoria's brother and a gardener in the park, arrives to warn that their mother is in the park. Betty arrives and announces that she is going to divorce her husband. The scene ends with Lin proposing a sexual fling to Victoria.

Annex 2

Structure in three acts	Characters	Space	Time and chronology		Action	Structure in two acts	
				Chronological order			
Act I	Marlene, Isabella, Nijo, Joana, Griselda and Gret	Restaurant	Saturday night	2	Marlene celebrates her promotion at work with a dinner. Marlene is the first to arrive and checks the table with the waitress. Isabella, Nijo, Gret and Joana arrive. They sit at the table and tell their life stories. They drink and talk a lot. Griselda turns up late and also tells her story. In this scene, Marlene is a little distant from the others, she does not talk about her life, but does observe the price the others have had to pay for having a different life.	Act I Scene I	
	Marlene and Jeanine	"Top Girls" employment agency	Monday morning		4	First interview in Jeanine's agency. Marlene has to decide what kind of post is right for Jeanine based on her character, skills, training and experience. Marlene's questions delve into the private; she is very sharp and does not let Jeanine finish her sentences. Finally, Marlene ends by deciding what she thinks is best for the interviewee.	Act I Scene II
	Angie, Kit and Joyce	Joyce's backyard	Sunday afternoon		3	Angie and Kit are hiding in a shelter in the backyard of Joyce's house. Joyce, Angie's mother, is looking for them. Kit wants to invite Angie to the cinema. Angie confesses that she thinks Marlene is her real mother. Joyce finds them and makes Angie tidy her room before she goes to the cinema. Angie goes upstairs and puts on a dress that is too small for her.	Act I Scene III
Act II	Nell, Win, Louise, Marlene, Angie, Shona and Mrs Kidd	"Top Girls" employment agency	Monday morning	5	In the scene there are several simultaneous events. Nell and Win arrive at work, talk about their weekend and Marlene's promotion and their admiration for her. Marlene arrives and organises her day's work. Win interviews Louise, an applicant. She is a 46-year-old woman with a lot of experience who wants to change her job because she has already reached her glass ceiling. Angie enters her aunt Marlene's office. Angie wants to stay with her aunt a few days. Mrs Kidd appears asking Marlene to give her the position she just got for her husband because he is depressed. Nell interviews Shona. Shona is young and tries to deceive Nell about her experience in order to get a job.	Act II Scene I	

Structure in three acts	Characters	Space	Time and chronology		Action	Structure in two acts
				Chronological order		
Act III	Joyce, Angie, Marlene	Joyce's kitchen	One year later	1	Marlene arrives at Joyce's house by surprise and brings gifts from her trip. She has brought perfumes and a green dress (which Angie was wearing earlier and now is the right size). The conversation between Joyce and Marlene during Angie's absence leads us to understand that Marlene is Angie's mother and that she gave her to her sister. She left behind her lower class past and has not fulfilled her family obligations. Two types of women in opposition: a capitalist and a socialist. After going to bed, Angie goes downstairs and we will see that she has heard the conversation.	Act II Scene II