Brecht’s Gestus within a Churchillian Context: Top Girls’s ‘Gestic’ Characters

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Abstract

Predominant cultural customs can work as means of oppression for women due to their patriarchal orientations. Yet, these codes are even more dangerous when they are internalized and normalized by women themselves. In this case, women become the embodiment of their victimizer’s ideology, henceforth, they are unable to correct their submissive situation or achieve social equality. As a suggestion, Top Girls brings to the fore all these complex issues through the exploitation of Brecht’s dramatic pattern Gestus. This technique focuses on the manner the presented characters in the play are extremely affected by their prevailing social assumptions. These domineering assumptions exert certain powers upon women’s identities and mindsets. They tear down a female’s own character and substitute it with another already-made identity. Gestus tries to project to what extent cultural values may blind women and be the real cause behind so many misogynous acts in society. This paper is, then, an attempt to scrutinize the way Churchill adopts and adapts Gestus (through dresses and cross-dressing) to tackle her feminist themes in a fresh dramatic fashion.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, Top Girls, Gestus, Culture, Predominant Ideologies, Patriarchal codes, Dresses and Clothes, Cross-dressing.
Introduction

Much has been said about Caryl Churchill’s influence by Brecht’s dramatic strategies. Her resort to the Brechtian form permeates her to submit fresh tools in her play. It helps her reproduce and expertise these epic patterns in order to appear innovative and non-classical. For instance, feminist Critic Janelle Reinelt asserts that “of all of Brecht’s tools, however, the one that Caryl Churchill most expertly uses for” her thematic and stylistic “ends is the social gest” (91 After Brecht). Reinelt here alludes to the third major practical artistry underpinning the epic theatre called Gestus. This concept can be summarized as the piling up of actions, movements, and gesticulations that carry social functions and trigger specific meanings (91 After Brecht). Gestus like any other Brechtian notion tends to convey a social message and hamper emotional assimilation in favour of intellectual responses.

Within her text, Churchill declares the necessity of this Brechtian device. Frankly, Top Girls executes Gestus in an attempt to scrutinize gender roles and shed lights on the absurdity of some predominant ideological doctrines. These dogmas ensure that in a society, tasks and requirements, rights and duties are ought not to be equally distributed. They are classified in terms of economic and sexual notifications. This final chapter discusses, thence, some aspects of the exploitations of the ‘gest’ technique in the play. It scrutinizes the gestures and attitudes displayed by characters in a way to show the absurd nature of social and cultural divisions. The first part will be devoted to the depiction of the concept. The following parts will exhibit how Churchill adapts the notion in her piece to reveal women’s cases within society. Maybe here, the most prominent ‘gestic’ signs exhibited by characters will be studied as a manner to detect the biased practices exerted on a female’s body and mind.

I. Definition of Gestus and its Various Dimensions

As a focal point in Brecht’s dramaturgy, just like other previously mentioned Brechtian principles, Gestus has to be firstly defined and analyzed. According to The Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis, Gestus is a German term which has Latin origins. It refers to an individual’s gestures or deeds (Pavis and Shantz 164). It can hint at the tone of the voice, way of talking, manner of addressing others, or any other possible expressive form. Within the epic theatre, the technique seems to center primarily on the presented characters’ conducts within the play. The protagonists’ attitudes, according to Bertolt Brecht, are to be made remarkable and crystal clear (83). In general, Brecht does not provide a discreet well-defined definition to Gestus. He only assumes that this concept would not be materialized unless it is attached to an attitude. For instance, he interprets that “a language is gestic when it is grounded in a gest 1 and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men” (104). A character’s utterances may not be significant if they do not show and refer to some ideas about the character himself/herself or about the whole scene.

Therefore, in few words, Gestus can be illustrated as a theatrical practice based on the examination of a character's striking behaviours, opinions or vocal displays. In this case, Brecht appears to insist on the importance of these remarkable signs for the construction of meaning. He explains further that “the arts have to begin paying attention to the gest” (86). These references can be very important for the enhancement of the play’s themes and transmission of ideas about characters. Critics Carol Martin and Henry Bial pinpoint that these triggered signs should be assembled and linked to the overall context of the play. They reinforce that “eventually, Gestus became to be understood by

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1 ‘Gest’ is used by Brecht in order to refer to a sign that suggests a social attitude (Brecht 104).
Brecht...as the total process, the ‘ensemble’ of all...behavior” (41). ‘Gestic’ elements can neither operate solely nor be separated from their context.

Furthermore, and within the same line, Martin and Bial continue to remind that Gestus may possibly be incarnated by many elements such as “movements and gestures, the face and its mimetic expressions, the voice and its sounds and inflections, speech with its patterns and rhythms …” (41). Perhaps, Brecht proposes that it is the role of readers/audiences to detect the desirable signs” and determine their sense. It looks really fundamental that these clues should be “memorable” for readers/audiences “and, consequently, quotable” (Martin and Bial 41). Brecht himself intensifies the impact of these ‘gestic’ references upon readers/audiences. He outlines that “the gest stays in the memory” (83). He asserts that these striking clues can easily capture the attention better than other introduced elements. The playwright is able to convey his/her messages through these gestures since they are loaded with significations.

The notion of Gestus, thence, encapsulates two ideas: gesture and gist. Apart from the tangible clues and gestures, Gestus aims at reaching some conclusions about the play. Brecht notifies that “‘gest’ is not supposed to mean [mere] gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes” (104). Again, as epic theatre requires purposeful gestures, not all references are “gestic” and thus crystallized. For example, a wave by the hand, a wink, or a choked voice are all supposed to be bound to a meaningful context. If not, they cannot be considered meaningful or focal. “Among all the possible signs certain particular ones are picked out” (Brecht 94). These selected clues, according to Brecht, ought to uphold the meaning of the scene. Hence, the play’s didactic side is triggered by certain disclosed hints that can be kept in mind by readers/audiences.

As readers/audiences are left to figure out the essence of some introduced signs, Brecht insists on the notion of critical detachment. Gestus can in its turn function as an alienating factor. For instance, in an attempt to prevent the reader/audience from being emotionally assimilated with characters, Brecht puts forward the need for the destruction of the psychological descriptions of protagonists. According to him, depicting characters’ psyche is an old invalid tradition (248). It distracts the public’s attention into some characters’ private sentiments and inner cogitations so that there would be no space for the apprehension of other elements. The dramatist discards the idea that one of the readers'/audiences’ role is to search for the characters’ latent world. He claims that all what matters in a play are people’s attitudes and opinions (248). Thereupon, he recommends that theatre ought to intrigue its readers'/audiences' intellectual reactions.

As long as one of epic theatre’s prior goals is to keep the readers/audiences alert and impede their emotional empathy with the presented agents and actions, Gestus shares a responsibility in this distancing process. As Brecht supposes, “everything to do with the emotions has to be externalized, that is to say, it must be developed into a gesture” (139). Focusing on the attitudes, utterances, thoughts, etc., of central figures and the absence of psychological illustrations may help in keeping the readers/audiences intellectually attentive. Their concerns would be directed into the characters’ external presentations and attitudes. In this fashion, the need for staying rationally active to decode signs held by characters may probably leave no space for moral identifications.

Yet, it is essential to note that epic theatre does not completely reject the exhibition of feelings. An epic play does not exhibit a non-emotional context. It only demonstrates that sentiments have to signify a set of social codes. “Every emotion” when treated under the rubric of Gestus, Elizabeth Wright
explains, “manifests itself as a set of social relations. The empathy that the Brechtian [character] solicits will thus not be an end in itself, but a means to an end” (27). Feelings are expressed with gestures. Brecht commands that the playwright “has to find a sensibly perceptible outward expression for his [/her] character’s emotions” (139). Inner feelings have to be related to its wider context. The German dramatist attests that “the emotion in question must be brought out … so that it can be treated on a big scale” (139). A protagonist plots to show how human emotions are manufactured by social norms. For instance, when, for what purpose and how do people laugh, grin, get angry, etc, are to a certain degree agreed upon by culture. In other words, an epic play ought to “exhibit the outer signs which accompany these emotions and identify them” (Brecht 92). A reader/audience may in this sense evaluate the way different sentiments are expressed in the dramatic work and try to connect them within a web of social and cultural codes.

_Gestus_ displays the linkages and ties attaching characters’ feelings, thoughts and behaviours to specific social grounds. For example, it can depict how a character belonging to a “specific social strata” acts, dresses, thinks and feels (Brecht 100). Examining society from a given protagonist proves very significant for the playwright. Brecht reminds that “the epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another” (86). Theatre can trace back and visualize individuals’ behaviours in society. However, all conducts are envisaged within their social scopes.

The _Gestus_ technique, therefore, appears “coloured by the social connotation of an attitude toward others” (Pavis and Shantz 164). The device depicts to what extent social norms can influence individuals’ deportment toward each other. A man from a working class origin may not eat or greet people the same manner as a bourgeois man does (Pavis and Shantz 164). These differences are all emphasized in order to show how people act according to social divisions. They expose the influences brought on individual’s attitudes due to certain social or cultural factors. The meaning, here, is detected from the characters’ “behaviour and … speech” (Pavis and Shantz 164). Epic theatre, through _Gestus_, stresses the idea that people are the products of their own culture and society. As a consequence, their deportments or behaviours are adjusted by these social norms (Brecht 98). Observing actors’ deportments can deduce the way society operates and detect the impact of ideology upon human beings’ conducts and opinions.

In this frame, the whole concept of _Gestus_ centers on the idea of drawing the attention toward the observation of peoples’ behaviors in society, the driving forces behind such deportments and their leading consequences. Alienated readers/audiences are more able to visualize the whole introduced situation neutrally. Through emphatic gestures, people’s relations to each other can be assessed and criticized (Payne and Barbera 93). This process allows the readers/audiences to understand something specific about the social circumstances presented in the play. Likewise, Carol Martin and Henry Bial underscore the connections between _Gestus_ and society. They proclaim that “equally important was that _Gestus_ defined a social position, the character’s status and function in society, and that it yielded an image of a socially conditioned behavior that, in turn, conditions the functioning of society” (41). Martin and Bial explain how studying an individual within his/her social context would give insights about the influences exerted upon individuals by social values and regulations. Moreover, they underline that a ‘gestic’ play can detect how society operates by manifesting the ideological dynamics dominating a specific culture.

_Gestus_ discloses the impact of ideology not only on peoples’ attitudes but also on the way they feel and perceive things. It “allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances” (Brecht
105). Human beings’ deportments and attitudes, according to Brecht, are not steady or permanent. They are only the outcome of the predominant social doctrines. As a consequence, and within the Brechtian context, bourgeois beliefs are the causes of some unfair social realities (104-5). Once people feel the need to change these existing norms, society would possibly alter and change. These ideas will be supported if *Gestus* functions within its stylistic and thematic spheres. The play should emphasize specific physical signs to both alienate characters and study their social attitudes. It can refer to the possibility of surpassing existing absurd or illogic realities. Within this scope, alternative resolutions may prove to be needed and urgent for some marginalized social categories like women. For this purpose, the second part of this paper will aims at studying the notion of *Gestus* within Churchill’s play. It will shed lights on the manifestations of this notion as demonstrated by different characters. Simultaneously, it will look for the ways these ‘gestic’ references could trigger the impact of cultural norms on women’s thoughts and disposals.

II. The Exploitation of *Gestus* in *Top Girls*

Similar to Brecht’s description of *Gestus* and its objectives, the ‘gest’ scheme is also applied in *Top Girls* to highlight women’s conditions within capitalist patriarchal societies. It is utilized to visualize the arbitrariness of social classifications. Obviously, the play tends to explore women’s states within a community, reveal their behaviour and study their interactions with the surrounding environment. *Gestus*, within this frame, is useful as it can show and stress upon women’s social realities with remarkable and meaningful signs. Lynda Hart confirms that within the Churchillian context “language, space, and the body are loci for the woman playwright to dramatically challenge the images of women determined in dominant discourses” (13). Hart notes that a woman is repressed by dominant powers because of her body. Notions of femininity and masculinity are designed in line with certain ready-made sexual accounts (13). They seem to be predetermined and settled alongside being presented as fixed and unbreakable.

Therefore, *Top Girls* can enhance the representation of women through the attitudes and gestures of characters as it may be expressed from language and verbal clues. Janelle Reinelt highlights Churchill’s reliance on Brecht’s *Gestus*. Yet, she admits that the artist directs the principle toward a close focus “on gender and sexuality as well as economic and social issues” (23 “Navigating Postfeminism”). Demonstrated codes should be related to the material and social descriptions of women. They can detect how culture discriminates and controls women through a number of social restrictions and assumptions. These unjust treatments are introduced as normal and sound mainly because they are justified by certain biological and economic distinctions. Reinelt illustrates that “Churchill became expert at the feminist gestus, what Elin Diamond has described as those moments in the play text when social attitudes about gender and sexuality conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology” (23 “Navigating Postfeminism”). Churchill tries to draw the complexities of women’s lives and experiences within these harsh social rules in an attempt to prove them absurd. On the whole, the major striking models of *Gestus* within the play appear through the recurrent theme of clothes alongside the double cast scheme. Therefore, the next section will start by dealing with clothing as a theme and style.

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2 The study of *Gestus* will depend at a large scale on the analysis of language for two main reasons. The first reason is that the play is essentially based on conversations and narration with the absence or scarcity of incidents, descriptions or stage directions. Secondly, this paper focuses on the written script of the play at the expense of the performed version.
II.1. Clothes and Dresses as Themes and Tools: We are Wearing our Culture!

Perhaps the most palpable example of the Gestus technique lies in the recurrent emphasis on costumes and dressings. Clothes and garments are prior elements in Top Girls as they work on two levels: thematic and stylistic. The stylistic level concerns the cross-dressing scheme and will be dealt with in later stages. But at this level, the analysis will consider the thematic side of these elements. To start with, it is remarkable that the mentioning and depiction of uniforms are very frequent in the text. In the first opening scene, Lady Nijō, who is probably the chief embodiment of this phenomenon, appears so obsessed with talks about costumes. Whether in recounting her story or commenting on others’ responses, her speech is usually about dresses and tissues. For her, clothes are a substantial tradition in her society. Dresses, as they may become plausible from her utterances, reflect the social position of a person. For instance, she portrays that the emperor often wears “a green robe with a scarlet lining and very heavily embroidered trousers” (Churchill 3). Her descriptions refer to the fact that the more heavily the person is dressed, the higher in position he/she is. In particular, her obedience to and respect for the emperor are expressed through her fascinating descriptions of his robes.

Equally noticeable, Nijō’s fondness of clothes explains her desire to reach a high status in society. She even acknowledges that “what I enjoyed most was being the Emperor’s favourite / and wearing thin silk” (Churchill 4). From the expression, the connections between living in the castle, being close to the emperor and wearing decent gowns look more remarkable. She connects wearing silky clothes to being a ‘privileged’ woman who is chosen by the emperor himself to be his personal servant. Uniforms tend to take a great part in the Japanese social structure in that period.

Clearly, as appearances epitomize the social position of a person, Nijō’s dialogue is heavily dominated by the register of clothing. Even when she is overwhelmed by feelings of grief after the emperor’s death, she wonders if she would be allowed to wear a full mourning dress (Churchill 26). Costumes become the loop through which she can perceive other people or ideas. She considers that putting on that mourning dress may indicate her feelings of distress since her culture recommends and insists upon these practices. As part of the domineering cultural system, Nijō is deeply absorbed by these values. Her emotions and ways of thinking are designed and reflected by and through clothes. Yet, robes and gowns become part of her life the moment she enters the palace, precisely when she is forced to get off her own dress and get used to another. She says that the emperor “sent me an eight-layered gown … my thin gowns were badly ripped” (Churchill 3). The lady has to give up her original clothes and dresses as the norms dictate. Layers and tissues are symbols for a new character to be put on. In order to get into the mainstream (the palace), she is obliged to obey her society’s orders at the expense of her real desires. Again, these cultural orders are described as thick, tough and multilayered to tear down or completely cover her original character.

Similar to Nijō’s story, patient Griselda is forced to change her clothes before being part of the highest social structure by marrying the marquise. During her wedding, she recounts that a group of servants “undressed” her and gave her other dresses (Churchill 22). For both women, changing garments and dresses work as a change in character as well as in the social status. As if they are asked to put off their true selves and embrace other layers or identities. This time, these new personalities are formed by cultural dictations just like customs are constructed by social orders.

Victoria Bazin explains how costumes tend to play the role of a social “gest” in the play. She interprets that Churchill links uniforms to customs, conformity and conventions (123). They do signal
aspects about each character’s society. Each introduced woman seems to wear her social codes and imbeds them (as clothes differ from a culture to another) (Bazin 123). Lady Nijo’s persistent use of expressions like silks, layers, embroidery, tissues and colours manifest her deep attachments to social ideals and prescriptions. Clothing functions, then, as a striking sign. It not only exposes the characters’ social and cultural belongings, but also shows to what extent are these characters influenced by conventions. The emperor in Nijo’s story is set as the one who is heavily dressed and thence he is the one who mostly symbolizes the system (Bazin 123). Even more, he represents the supreme authority. The one who is responsible for the respect of order and perhaps the manufacturing of cultural dispositions. Thereupon, the central figures, such as Griselda and lady Nijo, may demonstrate the view that an individual’s identity heavily clings to the prevailing culture. People’s conducts and thoughts are adjusted by their social systems.

As a remark, among Marlene’s guests, Nijo and Griselda undergo very harsh experiences of discrimination because of their fathers and then partners. They are taught that a decent lady must blindly obey and serve her husband (or the emperor in the case of Nijo since she is his concubine). The acceptance of repression and patriarchal commands situate main parts of the newly embraced character (or cloth) for the two girls. Victoria Bazin accentuates here that “Churchill emphasizes the ‘social gest,’ the learned patterns of behaviour, the social codes and structures underpinning gender and reproducing gendered differences” (123). Women’s positions and images are outlined by the way they dress, perform their social rituals and obey cultural rules. The recurrent emphasis on describing clothes could possibly attract the attention into the social and cultural values these dresses expose and hint at.

Maybe slightly in the same fashion, the resort to clothes as a stylistic device designates the bonds between an individual’s attitudes and predominant social orders. Churchill exploits the cross-dressing style as another way to materialize Gestus. But before the embarking on the exploration of this pattern in the text, few words about cross-dressing shall be pointed out. Scholar G. G. Bolich interprets that cross-dressing can be attributed to the “act of dressing in clothes typically associated with a gender other than the one assigned the wearer” (2). It originally implies wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. Bolich explains in details that cross-dressing establishes some ties between dresses, gender and culture. He postulates that the “culture dress is a chief way of presenting _ perhaps enacting _ gender. Because gender is so rigidly paired with sex, and because both stand so central to our sense of self and relationships, clothes garners significant meaning” (17). Maybe Bolich aims at highlighting that a robe can epitomize the culture’s perception of gender. The same, it can refer to the biological and social division between individuals.

Similarly, Jean E. Howard comments on how robes portray cultural understanding of masculinity and femininity but this time in connection to drama. She admits that cross-dressing is a recurrent scheme in theatre (Howard 47). It is a form of disguise that may interpret a character’s desire to hide himself/herself maybe out of fear or weakness. Or on the contrary, cross-dressing could in a way or the other function as an act of resistance directed into any form of cultural commands and dictations (Howard 50). As far as Churchill is concerned, the playwright employs cross-dressing as a ‘gestic’ reference to the illogic state of social divisions between men and women. She seeks to challenge and subvert these unsound differences. In Top Girls, the act of cross-dressing is put into relief through the character of Joan who lives a ‘manly’ life.

Pope Joan is introduced as the reference that casts light upon how costumes epitomize customs. Quite interesting, this figure appears to point at the absurdity of gender role within society and the
unfixed nature of masculinity and femininity. Joan disguises as a man and lives a manly life in an attempt to achieve intellectual aspirations. Masculine clothes work as an armor which protects her in a patriarchal community. This appearance allows her to become a pope, an upper and outstanding state. Being accustomed to men’s ‘cloth’ (or body) compels her to forget her reality. To a certain degree, she announces: “I think I forgot I was pretending” (Churchill 9). The female Pope seems to become completely immersed within the personality she is playing. Though with the exception of some differences, she has undergone the same experience as Griselda or Nijo: Having taken off her original suits and replaced them with other uniforms. This new outfit follows cultural and social demands (for she symbolizes religious supreme authorities). However, in this case, the devoted girl chooses herself to embrace a manly character and succeeds to certain extents at becoming a man. Through this disguise, Pope Joan proposes, or even concretizes, the idea that masculinity is not innate. It is a cultural construct maybe like any other custom (Howard 48). Society teaches people how to act and understand things. Therefore, it imposes rules to prescribe the role and behaviour of each person.

Joan is born a woman. Still, she successfully manages to embrace a masculine character. She has no idea what does a woman’s body mean. In response to her pregnancy, for instance, the pope remarks: “I didn’t live a woman’s life. I don’t understand it” (Churchill 24). Her comments disclose that an identity is acquired. It is not that universal or stable. Joan presents an interesting figure, for apart from her masculine apparition, she talks and thinks as a man. Scholar Dimple Godiwala ensures that “at the dinner, however, Joan is almost a token man, in that her point of view is more detached from the intimate female confessions surrounding her” (Godiwala 10). Joan actually behaves and speaks in a different way from other female guests. “Linguistically, she occupies a traditionally male discursive space especially at the end of the scene…being apart and removed from the oppressions and confessions of female victimization which she scarcely identifies with … Joan is the male in the gathering as she speaks in a language pervasively masculine, a phallocentric language” (Godiwala 10). The critic examines Joan’s contributions to the others’ speeches. Throughout the scene, her reactions are a bit indifferent and cold. Her register is of course full of religious terminologies and quotes. But more importantly, she appears in many instances not willing to understand other women or share their feelings. She outlines: “I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me” in order not to identify with others’ feelings of victimization (Churchill 21). She does not accept her biological body as she perceives herself a man, or sometimes, the symbol of social and religious superiority.

Within the text, Joan confirms that a woman can behave and view things like men if she gets used to masculine norms. From the characters’ portrayals, gender appears to be dictated and arranged by culture. Individuals learn how to interact, judge and behave. Joan’s expression “I wasn’t used to having a woman’s body” summarizes the Churchillian definition of gender (Churchill 15-7). People, in society, are mainly classified according to their biological makeup. Therefore, the majority of cultural norms and arrangements are formed according to gendered scales. Likewise, social relations are controlled by predominant ideologies.

Through these ‘gestic’ references (clothes and dressing), Churchill attempts at giving insights on how society operates. To intensify these conceptions, the British artist ‘placed her characters as social subjects at the intersection of economic, religious and political forces which disciplined their sexuality and prescribed their gender’ (Reinelt 175 “Caryl Churchill”). The impacts of these authorities are made palpable for readers/audiences. Individuals cannot be studied outside their contexts. Top Girls’ characters are victims of capitalist, patriarchal or conservative forces. Influences of their fathers’ or husbands’ instructions and commands are exhibited from their attitudes and language.
Gayle Austin indicates that “we cannot separate questions of gender stereotyping from their material conditions” (134). Within this frame, Gestus is applied in the first place to portray the way the predominant culture measures tasks, rights and social values according to biological makeup. What men or women must or must not do is determined by customs. In her turn, materialist feminist scholar Elin Diamond defines gender in relation to the Churchillian text. She proposes that “gender refers to the words, gestures, appearances, ideas, and behavior that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity” (84). Diamond correlates the individual identity with its wide social scope. In this sense, Churchill aims at highlighting the idea that differences based on gendered connotations can be blurred and disrupted.

Furthermore, being forged by bourgeois and patriarchal principles, society would be an incarnation of these standards. Diamond indicates that “when [reader/] spectators ‘see’ gender they are seeing (and producing) the cultural signs of gender, and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture” (84). Annexes between culture and ideology are made emphatic in the play. According to Diamond’s descriptions, readers/audiences would probably conclude that gender is only schemed by the domineering ideologies. Thus, one-sided treatments can no longer be justifiable or accepted. Evidently, Diamond estimates that Churchill’s play reflects modern women drama’s understanding of gender, or more specifically, materialist feminism’s belief that gender is culturally built and founded. Diamond additionally proves that “gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work since ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ behavior usually appears to be ‘natural’ _and thus fixed and unalterable_ extension of biological sex. Feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender usually uses some version of the Brechtian” scheme of ‘gestic’ signs (84). Gestus in *Top Girls* is exploited to explain Churchill’s analysis of gender and her strong belief that the body is designed according to a set of ideological articulations.

Notwithstanding, the playwright seeks to transgress these imposed codes within her play. Dresses and costumes in the dramatic text situate an efficient device that makes manifest the non-stagnant status of women’s social positions. “By foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the [reader/] spectator… gender is exposed as a sexual costume, a sign of a role, not evidence of identity” (Diamond 84). Society shows individuals how to perceive their bodies and decides what values they should put on. Perhaps as a result, their authentic identities are either hidden or substituted and effaced. Diamond hints at this illogic and nature of these ideologies. In *Top Girls*, the unnatural sides of certain conducts are made visible in order to be evaluated and calculated in an objective manner. Elin Diamond confirms:

> When gender is “alienated” or foregrounded, the [reader/] spectator is enabled to see a sign system as a sign system _ the appearance, words, gestures, ideas, attitudes, etc.,_ the comprise of gender lexicon become so many illusionistic trappings to be put on or shed at will. Understanding gender as ideology _ as a system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of females and males, which reinforces a social status quo _ is to appreciate the continued timeless of [the Brechtian device], the purpose of which is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable. (84)

The use of the themes of robes and outfits offers significant indicators about the strong ties between ideology and gender roles. Gestus functions as an alienating tool at this stage. The dramatic text has to distance the already established depictions of gender as universally outlined by nature. Since gender is fabricated, thence, can be transformed and reversed. Janelle Reinelt agrees with Diamond’s
opinions. She shows that an artist like Caryl Churchill uses the *Gestus* as a generator of the alienating effect to deconstruct the fixedness of identities pictured by society (25 “On Feminist”). Social structures do not respond to women’s diverse characteristics and feelings. It only illustrates them according to a static stereotypical framing.

These framings ought to be brought down to the fore and then deconstructed. Churchill sounds to “have spotted the potential of Brechtian *Gestus* to undermine stereotypical representations of women” (Smith 495). If these representations are shown as transient, women’s situation in the community would find its way to switch. The play, at this level, offers other alternative dimensions for women. As a result, *Gestus* is also responsible for encouraging the readers/audiences to keep thinking about these raised issues. The unequal nature of social relations between different categories is now made plain. “By means of *Gestus*, epic theatre draws the spectator away from the well-made play, with its closed forms and consumer ideologies, breaking the play’s conventions open to view and leaving them open at the play’s conclusion. *Gestus* attempts to energize the readers/audiences to continue the text outside the theater” (Smith 493). This technique intends to contribute to the didactic function of the play. Different clues introduced in the text, which are underlined and intensified, are unforgettable. Readers/audiences can start thinking and maybe evaluating the rationale of these realities. Changing the status quo does not look that impossible to achieve.

In reference to the play, for instance, the travelling figure Isabella Bird appears liberated as she is allowed to wander the world when it is only a privileging practice for men in a Victorian context (Godiwala 12). Yet, Isabella manages to break up her social constraints only after her husband’s and father’s deaths. This attained “freedom comes late” (Godiwala 12). Only in later stages, she gets rid of patriarchal control. She clarifies how her trips make her see “a new world … no dressing” (Churchill 8). She is able thanks to her adventures to escape the chains of culture. Consequently, she learns how to be free and act according to her will. This Victorian woman stands as an example of a revolutionary figure who throws away social dictations in order to fulfill her personal interests (Godiwala 12). Even later, Isabella implies how the rigidity of conventions and ideologies can eliminate one’s identity. She enquires: “How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady” (Churchill 26). To be a lady in a capitalist patriarchal system means accepting certain commands that can encapsulate a woman’s own choices and decisions. The wandering woman is now able to criticize her society. She becomes conscious of the “hideous” values society imposes on individuals. Women cannot be faithful to their authentic selves as long as they are jailed within the confinement of cultural or domestic requirements.

Isabella dares comment on the social system mainly because she steps out the mainstream. She strips the character of the ‘lady’ with all its complexities. Being within the system necessitates and means being kept blinded by dominant ideologies. Patriarchal capitalist ideals dominate society and control people’s opinions and relations. As explicit models, the majority of *Top Girls*’ women agree on the superiority of men. They even tend to associate the masculine outfit to security. When Isabella asks Joan: “you dressed as a boy?” her question is quickly answered by Marlene: “of course, / for safety” (Churchill 8). Femininity (or women’s clothes) embeds meanings of inferiority, insecurity and weakness.

Marlene, maybe like Joan, puts on manly traits and characteristics in an attempt to live in a patriarchal capitalist world. To succeed at work and raise a sum of money, the twentieth century woman starts to mimic masculine modes until her personality totally infuses in them. The newly promoted
manager turns into a person inhabited by predominant codes. Liza Merrill examines the transformations done to Marlene when she puts off her femininity. Throughout the play, Marlene’s relations to others (especially at work) are marked by discrimination and indifference (Merrill 70). She believes in the laws of dominance and authorial control. “Marlene’s model of power is having power over others rather than being empowered to perform some social action … this hierarchal model of success has a particularly male-identified dimensions” (Merrill 70). At the “Top Girls” agency, Marlene and her colleagues, being successful and rich, are exercising power and dominance over working-class women.

Power and wealth are the criteria according to which society is divided. In this context, powerful and prosperous ladies control those who are at the bottom of society. The play, at this stage, examines “what it means to be ‘on top’ and have power in the present day” (Merrill 70). For instance, the waitress, the three interviewed girls as well as Joyce are all illustrated as inferior and incompetent in a discriminatory bourgeois world. The working class girls are there to serve those at the top of society. Furthermore, in order to be on top, one has to oppress others. Society is divided according to sexual as well as economic principles. To define success, Marlene states: “you’ll be in at the top with new girls coming in underneath you” (Churchill 32). Apparently, women who take over the predominant values strongly defend this hierarchal structure. Churchill demonstrates that accepting the social order without questioning it would not only efface women’s identities, but also fathom their ways of thinking since successful ladies become as cruel to other women as men.

Within this context, the play accentuates two types of women existing within society. Though they are classified in a hierarchical manner, critic Dimple Godiwalla comments that sarcastically both bourgeois and working women are subjects to the same patriarchal discriminating treatments. The collection of characters in the play “brings into confrontation two opposing types of women, but both, ironically, living by the same” capitalist and patriarchal “norms” (Godiwalla 13). Godiwalla objects the great differences between these two groups of women saying that “both are occupants of the same patriarchal system within which each has made a choice,” while the first group opts for “an internalization of masculinist rules,” the other remains “in compliance to her position as a married woman in a patriarchal society” (Godiwalla 13). In both cases, women’s situation is still critical and therefore needs significant transformations.

For Churchill, attaining high positions at work does not seem to ameliorate the state of women in society. Through the character of Marlene, Top Girls sheds light on the position of feminist movements within the twentieth century Britain. Janelle Reinelt interprets that “Churchill, with her finger on the pulse of contemporary culture, wanted to address how material success for a few women did not build solidarity or foster change for the majority” (30 “On Feminist”). As a remark, the British playwright concludes that the achievements made by Marlene and her colleagues are futile chiefly because they do not have the desire for change as well as they embody themselves their oppressor’s values. Churchill intends to criticize the adoption of bourgeois ideals by some women in Britain with the access of Margaret Thatcher (a capitalist woman) to power. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris undertake that

Feminism in the 1980s was in danger of overturning the co-operative and collaborative ethos of the 1970s in favour of a selfish, materialistic creed favouring a minority of already privileged women at the expense of the majority. In theatre, Caryl Churchill's Top Girls (1982) famously illustrated the dangers of this new style of “right-wing” feminism, showed the dangers and consequences for future generations of women of not pursuing a political agenda that took account of both feminism and socialism. In Top Girls “superwoman” Marlene’s success is at the
expense of her slow-learning “daughter,” Angie [and working-class sister Joyce].

(71-2)

Marlene and her fellow ladies need this type of capitalist atmosphere to achieve their material profit. They are not ready to engage in any process that may lead to a change in the situation. Top Girls’ main figure is aware that the system is harsh for certain girls including her own daughter. Nevertheless, she appears to be careless for her child’s future. She predicts that Angie is “not going to make it” (Churchill 66). Within Marlene’s capitalist world, unintelligent girls will have no place in society, they are not going to succeed. Angie is “a bit thick,” hence would be put at the margin (Churchill 66). This cruelty and heartlessness of the mother is so striking and irritating. For these noted reasons, “Top Girls shows the dangers of feminism without socialism” (Aston 20). Collective actions and solidarity between different women can help redress some of the unequal conventions imposed by capitalist patriarchal standards. Society must be reconstructed again with divisions according to biological or economic norms have to be stopped (Aston 20). Churchill’s attempts at foregrounding the lack of significant evolutions in women’s position in society continue to be consolidated and demonstrated by her exploitation of the double casting technique. Henceforth, the following section examines this dramatic pattern with its remarkable manifestation in Top Girls.

II.2. Churchill’s Double Casting Scheme

Despite the fact that this article originally studies and focuses on Top Girls as a text, it seems essential to talk at least in a brief way about this acting style chiefly because the written script of the play contains a production note on the way the play is generally enacted. These notes clarifies that when Top Girls is performed for the first time at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1982, the sixteen introduced characters are played by only six actresses (Churchill ii). With the exception of the main figure Marlene, other characters are either doubled or trebled. Janelle Reinelt expresses that the cross-casting scheme is one of Churchill’s “most arresting device” (89 After Brecht). She inaugurates that Churchill manages to a degree to master this acting technique and rework it to reinforce her ideas. As a possible definition, the double-cast style hints at “giving an actor [actress] two (or more) parts to play within a given production” (Wise and Walker 660). Interestingly, Caryl Churchill doubles her players’ roles within the frame of Gestus in order to suit her feminist quests.

In the first place, Top Girls is presented as an all-female cast. All characters are played by females. Chantal Cornut-Gentille describes that “all sixteen characters” in the play “are women, and no men appear on stage at all” (105). Top Girls announces from the beginning that demonstrated events would only center on women. It tries to convey a more authentic representation of women and their concerns. Gayle Austin talks about the play as being only performed by females in an endeavour to concentrate on the portrayal of the female in drama (135). Perhaps, Churchill tries to send a message through her play about women’s position in society. Top Girls, in this sense, can prove the ability of women to control theatre. It is projected to talk about women’s experiences on a male-free stage (Austin 135). It intends to create an atmosphere fully controlled and elaborated by women. Presumably, the double cast technique is not only deployed to enhance this established atmosphere, but rather to serve as an alienating pattern.

One of the objectives of this mentioned acting scheme is to impede emotional assimilation with characters. It appears as one of the basic alienating tools. Helen Keyssar postulates that “Churchill divides our attention among … characters, refusing hierarchy of interest or role … so as to avoid sustained concern for any character” (205). Churchill intends to surpass the tradition of focusing on or
sympathizing with one sole character. Each demonstrated character contributes in a way or the other to the unfolding of events and takes a substantial part in the exhibition of certain ideas (Keyssar 205). The multiplicity of protagonists reflects the desire of the playwright to represent different images for women. She attempts to manifest the idea that women’s concerns cannot be voiced by a single representation. Each brought in woman in Top Girls develops a discreet identity and experience. These personalities may diverge as the characters’ social and cultural backgrounds differ (Merrill 68). The play displays a variety of images and voices for women that can be rationally examined and evaluated.

Maybe within this complex atmosphere due to the blend in players and roles, any attempts to identify with characters would fail. Marvin Carlson takes on the idea that a modern playwright like Caryl Churchill seems to share Brecht’s claims that “theatre language should be always directed toward action, not realism, or psychological expression, it must demand gesture” (398). Top Girls does not focus on its characters’ psychological portrayal or even try to reflect inner feelings. Rather, it stresses the relations between different characters and the way they behave. Women’s conducts within society are what matter for the spectators. The latter would remark the reality that the person they are watching is going to appear in another role the following scenes (Reinelt 90 After Brecht). The physical changes brought on the player in this shift of role would attract the audience.

Churchill makes use of the double-role technique to highlight “the economic rather than the psychological circumstances of her characters … this double casting, besides diffusing identification with an individual character’s unique experience, functions to effect comparisons between the various conditions presented by the several characters portrayed by each performer” (Merrill 70). Concentrating on the body of characters prevent the digging for the figure’s psychological sides. The fact that they are performing different roles on stage becomes evident. Players in Top Girls have to perform historical guests and then shift into being modern women. They may appear working-class girls and in the next scene, they would represent employees from the “Top Girls” agency.

Equally, characters of little girls like Kit and Angie would be performed by grown up women. The female body is depicted within its various manifestations. The same figure could be poor, rich, modern, adult, child, from the past, etc. Every role has to expose distinct personality and concerns. Janelle Reinelt interprets that the multiple casting pattern aims at “recognizing the necessity of deconstructing subjectivity as an unchanging gendered essence” or alienating “character and reveal social construction” (89 After Brecht). Differences are not universal. Economic or sexual distinctions can be blurred. Here, nothing appears fixed and stable. In the course of time, social values may alter. “Top Girls double casts the historical women as present day women and calls for adults to portray the children’s part” chiefly to highlight the impossibility of historical fixedness (Reinelt 90 After Brecht). At this level, changes in roles lead to the idea of the presence of alternative solutions for women’s social situation. Reinelt continues her analysis of the connections between Churchill’s acting form and theme of change. She insists that

Multiply cast roles … represented the different subject positioning the depicted society, and historized the events of the narrative to enable spectators to see how these events were similar to and different from the present-day circumstances, similar to and different from the received historical traditions. While her narratives constituted logical outcomes of a series of events, these were not portrayed as inevitable – it might have been otherwise: therein lies the “hope” for the future borne on the back of the failure of the past. (176 “Caryl Churchill”)
The female body is constructed under the pressure of dominant ideological traits. This interjected image is not eternal since other representations appear possible on stage. Ideology changes throughout history, therefore women’s conditions are variable. Gender roles are illogically prescribed since they are only transient and not stable. Perhaps, as means of oppressions are now recognized, feminist efforts should direct into reforming the social system with its ideological creeds.

Conclusion

*Gestus* proves to set a favourable ground for the representation of a number of ideas throughout the play. It add aesthetic qualities to the dramatic work as well as helps probe many crucial themes. Among these topics appears the identification of the relation between women and their cultural environment. Within this relation, the female body and even mind are illustrated by predominant social ideologies. The latter are fashioned by capitalist patriarchal outlets, therefore do not respond to women’s needs and cogitations.

In *Top Girls*, however, the characters’ concerns about dresses and clothes unveil the deep influences done by culture on these women. They tend to embrace their societies’ norms though at the expense of their original personalities. Besides, the double casting technique functions as a distancing factor that may encourage the critical assessment of the way each woman is influenced by her culture. As a drawn conclusion, *Gestus* proposes that women cannot attain their freedom and ameliorate their social conditions unless they take off these ideologically knitted gowns.
References

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Secondary sources


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