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# **“Frightening”**

**Women’s Road to Success in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls***

**B.A. Essay  
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## **Abstract**

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* was premiered in 1982, but the ideas it brought forward are still relevant to the status of women today and the current political climate.

In this essay, the intersection of class and gender is looked at in the context of *Top Girls* through Engels's assertion that private property is the source of women's oppression, as it forces them into marriages where men control them, as they control property. In Engels's view this creates a relationship between men and women which is analogous to the relationship between the proletariat and the bourgeois, in which women are doubly oppressed. Further, issues surrounding women's careers and success in *Top Girls* are explored through Edwin Ardener's theory of muted groups and Sherry Ortner's theory of public and private spheres.

The questions of what success means for a woman in a system where the very definition of success is framed by male ideals, and whether women's successes can perhaps serve to further oppress other women rather than empower them, are raised through the play's themes of competition, motherhood and the idea of success as a male discourse.

The play is put in context with the political landscape of the time of its premiere under Thatcher's government and with Thatcher herself, who models the type of denial of femininity Churchill seems to believe is necessary in order to succeed in a world where the definition of success in general is derived from traditionally male templates. The central relationship of the play, between the protagonist, Marlene, and her sister, Joyce, is thus viewed as a political allegory: the struggle of the upper classes to accept that their success is built on the backs of the lower classes they oppress.

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## 1.0 Introduction

“Playwrights don't give answers, they ask questions,” Caryl Churchill once said (The Guardian). The questions she has asked in *Top Girls* (1982) seem to center around women's careers: what one woman's success means for women as a group, whether success for one woman is beneficial for the whole or simply serves to obscure the realities of the majority—or even worse, to further oppress them. The play, despite having first been performed thirty-five years ago, can still be seen as pointing a finger at today's politics of class and gender. The play aptly raises the question of how far we have actually come, through an exploration of women's roles in history, literature, art and politics.

The play is feminist in the same way “the personal is political”; the play has sixteen characters, all of them women, in some way sharing their stories of struggles they have had to face because of their gender. Their personal stories become a vessel for the shared experiences of women and big ideas are explored through the lives of individuals. Through the women's telling of their experiences at the dinner party in Act One, Scene One, we can see that none of them has truly managed to transcend the boundaries imposed by their sex. This idea is brought up again and is particularly pronounced in the relationship between the main character, Marlene, and her sister, Joyce, in later acts. Through Joyce's lower-class status and life within what Ortner would call the “domestic sphere” (Moore 14-16), she is set up in contrast to Marlene's “smart world” in the public sphere where Joyce is keenly aware her sister would be ashamed of her (Churchill 95). Through their disagreements we see the effect Marlene's ruthless individualism has had; Joyce, as it turns out, is in the situation she is because she is raising Marlene's illegitimate child, a clear echo of the Marxist idea of the upper classes building their success on the backs of the proletariat. Tied in to this is Marlene's staunch Thatcherism, her character echoing the Thatcherite idea that with hard work anyone can do anything, while ignoring, or simply being unable to see, the oppressive effect the competitive nature of the capitalism she so strongly believes and participates in has had on her sister.

In this essay, I will focus on how the play links individual experiences and situations with the deployment of ideology in different ways through the three acts. I will explore how Churchill has intertwined the idea of class with the status

of women in society through a Marxist reading. In order to support my claims and support some of the ideas of the intersection of class and gender I will be using Ortner's theory of domestic and public spheres as well as Ardener's theory of muted groups. I will also be situating *Top Girls* within the context of standpoint feminism through the theories of Arlie Hochschild. I will argue that class and gender are linked in the play, through the idea that class society forces women to partake in their own oppression in order to gain "success" in a world where the very concept of success is defined by power relations built on the oppression of women.

### **1.1 *Top Girls*, Marxist Feminism and Labor**

Work is integral to any person's self-understanding according to Marxist theory. As a philosophy, Marxism looks at social change throughout history in relation to the changing modes of production of each era, although the focus is on the capitalist system. Within the capitalist system, profit drives the upper classes (the bourgeois) to force the lower classes into wage labor through turning land into commodity and moving away from the agrarian system where the home functioned as the main site of production. According to Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), the concept of private property is the source of women's oppression, as men control the property. This line of thinking draws a parallel between the status of upper classes, the bourgeois who control the means of production, in relation to the working classes, the proletariat, and the status of men, who also control the means of production, to the status of women. Men's capability to generate capital thus, according to Engels, turns the nuclear family form into a patriarchal one where women become a form of property, as they are economic dependents of their husbands. Thus it follows that the definition of success is built on the subordination of women and the lower classes. Under the patriarchal capitalist system, opportunities are created for women to participate in wage-labor and become economically independent, but this often requires them to either turn their backs on traditional female traits and roles, or to outsource them, thus in a way entrapping other women in the situation from which they have escaped.

As Hochschild (2000) has pointed out, career women often pay working-class women to take over the roles they would otherwise fulfill, such as child-rearing and housework. This allows upper-class women to avoid unpaid domestic labor, but it also incentivizes them to keep working-class women's wages as low as possible in order to keep the surplus for themselves and thus retain more of their wages. This is one of the reasons many contemporary Marxists believe that in order for women to be liberated, feminists will have to unite their fight with the working-class struggle against capitalism; that the two are in fact inseparable (Cliff).

Despite Edwin Ardener's background in anthropology, his theory of Muted Groups seems particularly relevant to the idea of women's success in *Top Girls*. The theory was originally intended to take on the built-in male bias in anthropological research. Ardener's original "muted group" is women, but, as Moore explains in the first chapter of *Feminism and Anthropology*, the term can be used to describe any sub-dominant group, such as minorities, children and the working class. Ardener states that dominant groups in society "generate and control the dominant modes of expression" and that "muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves, they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies." Furthermore the theory states that women "are forced to structure their understanding of the world through the model of the dominant group" (Moore 3-4).

In the context of women and wage labor, this means that success is a male-dominated discourse, which women can only express through the dominant mode of the expression of success, which is always a masculine one. The only way for women to achieve their own success, according to the theory, would be to redefine the expression of success or womanhood.

## **1.2 *Top Girls* and the Thatcher Era**

*Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill was premiered in 1982 in the Royal Court Theatre in London, in the third year of Margaret Thatcher's stint as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Despite its very current themes, the play was not an immediate success according to the director of the first installments, Max Stafford-Clark. In

the postscript to the 1991 version of the play produced for the BBC, Stafford-Clark tells an interviewer that “it was not an immediate box-office hit. We then took it to America, to Joseph Papp’s Public theatre, where it was billed as a huge London success and played to a large audience and was very successful. We then returned to the Royal Court with it where it was billed as a huge American success and the play was very successful” (Stafford-Clark).

The timing of the play within the era of Thatcher- and Reaganism was no coincidence, as many of the play’s themes are directly relevant to liberalist policies being implemented at the time, as well as to Thatcher as an individual: her gender, politics and her public attitudes. Growing liberalism and big changes in the area of labor law defined Thatcher’s years in office, but her gender was arguably no less important than her policies. Elected in 1979, she was the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, sitting for the Conservative party, and her enactment of her gender was an area of much speculation. In some ways, Thatcher represented a new kind of woman: one who had left the domestic sphere behind and could compete with the proverbial “big boys.” In a 1987 article in *Marxism Today*, commentator Ros Brunt said that Thatcher “became known to her colleagues as ‘the best man in the cabinet’, and masculine attributes were grafted on to her femininity in ways that made her doubly superior. The soviet epithet ‘Iron Lady’, and her own slogan, ‘The Lady’s Not For Turning’, displayed her as a woman with more guts for a desperate political gamble than any wimpy man” (Brunt 23). In the context of *Top Girls* this juxtaposition is important, as its protagonist’s success is set up as parallel to Thatcher’s. The quote shows us that Thatcher was regarded as a woman, but one who had strong masculine traits to counterbalance her womanhood; in much popular discourse, her success seems to have been seen as a result of her being able to overcome her gender. Thatcher never claimed to speak for, or represent, women. In the same *Marxism Today* article, Brunt claims Thatcher cannot be “regarded as the outcome of the feminist movement. She set out to make it in a man’s world and was never interested in even negotiating the terms of patriarchy” (Brunt 23). In other words, Thatcher expressed her success through the dominant discourse about what that success meant. However, it is debatable whether Thatcher really could have had any choice in the matter of her gender

expression. In her essay “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” Sherry Ortner explores the ways in which gender is constructed worldwide. The question she wants to answer has to do with why certain notions of gender appear across cultural lines, despite other major differences in cultural understandings of gender. At the start of the essay, Ortner says that “[t]he secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.” The answer, according to Ortner’s theory of private versus public life, is that the fact that women bear children means that they are seen as being more closely associated with nature. That is, child-rearing and family life, or the “private sphere,” is seen as the woman’s domain and this is given naturalistic explanations because of her biology. Men, in turn, are seen as connected to the social and cultural public sphere of culture and employment (Moore 4-49). One way women can be seen as full-fledged members of the public sphere, then, and possibly the only way, is to detach themselves from the private sphere and anything seen as connected to it, which seems to have been exactly what Thatcher did.

Many ideas about both Thatcher as a person and Thatcherism as policy are echoed in *Top Girls*. The figure of the woman who needs to disavow femininity or womanhood in order to gain success is reflected in many of the characters, such as Marlene herself, who gives up her daughter and traditional family life, or Pope Joan, who is forced to live as a man in order to walk her own path. Political ideologies are also reflected through the characters. These ideas, which largely deal with the issue of class, are set up as responses to the situations the characters are in, and are especially pronounced in Marlene’s relationship with her sister, Joyce. Their relationship is set up as opposite ends of the political spectrum, with Marlene, representing conservatism, almost acting as a stand-in for Thatcher herself. Meanwhile, Joyce can be seen as emblematic of the more socially liberal working class.

## **2.0 Expressions of Success in *Top Girls***

Through my analysis I will interweave Ortner's theory of gendered spheres with Ardner's theory of muted groups, allowing the latter to take over. In Ortner's theory, domestic labor and child-rearing belongs to the feminine discourse of the private sphere and high culture and professionalism are delegated to the masculine public sphere.

Ortner's premise is that we look at women's subordination through an analysis of gender symbolism. According to Ortner the domestic sphere of women, associated with nature, is devalued in societies, where the public sphere associated with culture and universally associated with men is more highly valued (Moore 13-15). In his theory of muted groups, Ardener supposes that if a member of a marginalized group wants to express something, they have to do it through the modes of expression or ideologies of the culturally dominant group in order to be heard. This means that in a society where men are the culturally dominant and more highly valued group, as Ortner claims they are, women have to choose to express themselves through male modes of expression. If Ardener and Ortner's theories are used as a looking glass for the expression of success by women, Ardener would tell us that this expression would have to be done through the dominant modes of expression, or the modes of expression associated with men as a dominant group. Within the context of Ortner's theory, the mode of expressing success could be either male or female, or "public" or "domestic." Since the domestic sphere is associated with women, who are a muted group, women are forced to express success through the available public, male modes of discourse associated with culture and labor.

*Top Girls* largely focuses on Marlene's expression of her success, which she must, according to Ardener, express through the dominant structure of male discourse, be it the court or the market. In order to do this, she, alongside the other women in Act One, distances herself from Ortner's domestic sphere in order to gain credibility in the public sphere of her workplace.

In Act One of *Top Girls*, Marlene has invited a group of historical and fictional, imaginary, women to dinner. She has chosen the group of women because she sees something of herself in them, including, among other things, their expression of success through whatever modes were available to them.

Their expressions of success are communicated through the discourse of the dominant group, men, and they have been forced to distance themselves from the domestic sphere. According to Ardener, they have no other choice, as they all live in patriarchal societies. The fact that they are from so many disparate times and places emphasizes the permanence of this patriarchal system throughout time and space, which becomes clearer as the women discover experiences they all have had in common because of their gender, such as the loss of children. The waitress, who has no name, is another manifestation of the idea of the permanency of this oppressive system. She comes and goes throughout the scene: emptying the table, bringing food and wine, taking orders, never saying a single word. The waitress has two traits that make her different from the other women in the scene: she is not a “Top Girl,” so to speak, but a member of the working class, and she is not situated in any specific time, making her the most universal character in the scene, a woman who could be placed anywhere in history or the present day. The fact that the women ignore the waitress so completely, only acknowledging her to order food for themselves, speaks to their blindness of the way in which they partake in the oppression of others. The idea reflected is of the universality of the situation of women from history to the present day: silent supporting characters in the play of a more publically successful main character. Marlene’s experiences in the later two acts are situated in the present, or at least they were when the play was written. The absence of the constraints of time and place in Act One asks a question that is underlined by the waitress’s silence: Has anything truly changed?

The dinner party scene is a somewhat chaotic one. Churchill uses her hallmark overlapping dialogue throughout the play. This is particularly prominent in the first act and gradually develops throughout the scene to the point where the guests at the dinner party are not really speaking to each other towards the end. The characters interrupt each other’s sentences, each one only hearing the piece of the other’s story that is directly relevant to themselves and then expanding on that point. In this way, all the women at the dinner party, like Marlene, embody individualism, a hallmark of the political ethos of the time of the premiere of *Top Girls*. The overlap of dialogue is symbolic of the women’s isolation in their positions: even when trying to reach out to other successful

women, they are alone in their positions and experiences, unable to connect. Much like Thatcher herself—who, in her eleven-year reign as Prime Minister, appointed only one woman to her cabinet (Brunt 23)—the women have reached the top and find themselves structurally isolated.

Through this narrative technique we learn surprising bits of information from the women and start to understand who they are, although they do not seem to be reaching each other in the same way. The overlap of speech is also tied in with the idea of women being pushed into competition with each other, which is reiterated throughout the play. Like all “Top Girls” they are competing with their supposed allies, speaking over them and drowning out their voices to get their own stories told.

The first act of *Top Girls* is set in a restaurant, where Marlene is celebrating her recent promotion to manager at the Top Girls Employment Agency. As the group of historical and fictional women trickles in to the restaurant, orders and eats, each woman tells her story to the group. The idea of a dinner to celebrate a promotion is of course not a groundbreaking one, but in the case of *Top Girls* it begs the question of why Marlene has not invited any real, living people. Marlene seems to have no friends to invite, and we learn later in the play that she has not seen her family for six years. As a result of her estranged labor, Marlene has had to accept that she is also estranged from relations with friends and family. Her only close, living relatives are women; we learn that her mother is in an institution and that her father has died. Marlene’s sister, Joyce and the daughter she is raising, Angie, still live in Marlene’s hometown (Churchill 87-90). Within the framework of Ortner’s theory of public and private spheres, it would follow from the start of the play that in order to gain public success, Marlene has been forced to give up “private” success, such child-rearing and family, in order to gain “public” success. It becomes increasingly clear throughout the play that Marlene has been forced to pay an unreasonably high price for whatever success she has achieved; she has given up her child and distanced herself from her family in order to make it in the public domain of the workplace. Ros Brunt’s assessment of Thatcher sums up Marlene’s situation quite nicely: “Such isolation from other women is of course still a structural 'given' for most 'top women', but it has been accentuated by

Thatcher's personal choice" (Brunt 23). Marlene is in this way an echo of Thatcher and Thatcherite ideas. Structurally isolated from other women and forced into competition with them for the seat of "Top Girl," Marlene only has imaginary friends to invite to the celebration of her own success.

The women of the dinner party are a varied group, in many respects. They are all, in some way, "Top Girls," but they differ in class, from Dull Gret, a working-class woman, to a former pope, to Patient Griselda, a peasant's daughter who moves up a few social classes through her marriage to a marquis. The women are white, presumably, with the exception of Lady Nijo, who is Japanese. They have different experiences; some have travelled the world, others have stayed in the same village their whole life. Dull Gret has even travelled to hell. Religion differs between the women as well, from Catholicism to Buddhism; as Marlene tells Lady Nijo: "I don't think religious beliefs are something we have in common" (Churchill 6). The one thing the women all seem to have in common is that they have strived to express success in their lifetimes, in whatever way the societies and environments they lived in allowed them to. The women's "public" success seems to have come at the expense of "private" loss. In a way, the women have all been forced to give up the feminine domain of childcare in order to maintain their class status, most through having been forced to give up their children, or through losing them in some other way. The women in Act One are all a reflection of Marlene and her own experiences in some way. In the first act the themes of childbirth and loss of children, masculine modes of expressing success and class reflect Marlene's own struggles. As will be demonstrated below, these struggles are demonstrated through Marlene's interactions with the real world in the second and third acts.

## **2.1 The Theme of Children**

Almost all the women at the dinner party have had children and subsequently lost them, had them taken away or been forced to give them up. The two women present who claim not to have had any children at all are Isabella Bird and Marlene, although we later learn that in Marlene's case, this is not true. A common motif in the women's stories about having children is having been forced to part with them in order to maintain their status. Through Ardener's

mutated group theory we know that in order to express an idea, an oppressed group must utilize the dominant modes of expression in order to be heard. The “Top Girls” at the dinner party all wish to express success, but as members of a marginalised and powerless group, they must do so through the dominant modes of expression. The dominant expression of success, in the patriarchal societies the women live in, is defined in male terms.

According to Ortner’s theories women are more associated with the private, domestic sphere, while men are associated with public life and culture. Thus, in order to express success, the women must do so by partaking in the public sphere and distancing themselves from the domestic sphere of child-rearing, which society, and in turn the women themselves, look down upon. In this way the loss of children and distance from the feminine becomes the price they must pay for their success. The more they can distance themselves from the private sphere, the more credibility they gain in the public. This is clearly expressed through Pope Joan’s story, which is a tale of a woman who lives as a man in order to be able to choose her own path. After years of pretending, Joan claims she “forgot” (Churchill 10) that she was a woman, placing her completely within the public sphere of men. She achieves a success so firmly implanted in the public sphere that it is off-limits to women, which is why it is dangerous for her when she becomes pregnant. Joan herself does not realize she is pregnant, having no knowledge of the female body and having not spoken to a woman since she was twelve (Churchill 17). Like Marlene and the other “Top Girls,” she is isolated from other women. Her lack of knowledge of female anatomy leads to her giving birth in a public place during a religious ceremony. Pope Joan’s story of giving birth under these unfortunate circumstances is funny, right until we realize she is immediately punished, in the most literal sense, for being a woman. She is outed as an impostor through childbirth; proof that she is a woman in a position reserved for men. Joan herself is stoned to death while her child, the representation of her sex and status—according to Ortner a representation of the sphere she belongs to—is taken and, as far as anyone knows, killed (Churchill 9-21).

The other women have similar and disturbing tales of having their children taken away. Griselda describes how she had two children by her

marquis Walter, and how he had both of them taken away from her eventually, letting her believe for years that he had them both killed. She explains his reasoning, how he told her that the people hated her because she was “just one of them”—a peasant’s daughter. Griselda herself has no status, but is in many ways an extension of her husband and his status and is thus a perfect vessel for the feminist-Marxist idea that women and the proletariat have similar standings in relation to men and the bourgeois respectively. Griselda tells the women that she needed to prove her obedience by giving the children up, and that she did so without protest, as they were “Walter’s [...] to do with as he pleased.” Her own feelings about the matter do not come in to play at all; she sees herself only as a vessel for taking whatever action the men in her life demand of her. In Griselda’s world, the only hope for social mobility for women is through marriage. She does very well in this system, but it leads to her husband second-guessing her commitment to him. She explains that Walter only really took the children as a way for her to prove her love for him, as a test, which she passed; she was willing to give up her “domestic” role and everything associated with it in order to maintain her status within the public cultural domain of high society (Churchill 24-28). The very individual who enables her to be successful in the public sphere through the merits of his class status, demands that she give up her private domain, her children, in order to prove her worthiness.

Most of the women at the party are shocked by Griselda’s story, Marlene even leaving the room because she “can’t stand this” (Churchill 25). The only woman at the party who is understanding of Griselda’s decisions and demeanor is Lady Nijo, whose background is also in the court, serving a man of higher status than herself. Nijo, we learn through her telling, was forced to part with her children, four all in all, right after their births in order to preserve her status within the court. She was the Japanese emperor’s favorite concubine, and takes pride in having held this position. Nijo’s first child, which died during, or shortly after birth, was the emperor’s. The other three were the children of other men and as a result she was forced to give them away. Of one of them, a little girl, she tells the women, “it was only a girl but I was sorry to lose it” (Churchill 18).

Dull Gret, when she finally speaks, reveals she had ten children. It is unclear whether all of them died, though it is clear that some did, as she tells the

women: “my big son die on a wheel” (Churchill 31). The loss of children for these women serves a dual purpose: they reflect Marlene’s own situation, as well as showing the reader what the common experiences of women really are and how an individual story can reflect a structural reality. While it is true that all the women at the party share experiences with Marlene, Isabella and Marlene’s bond stands out from the rest. Isabella stands out as the only character who never had children and who, at Marlene’s age, was not married. Marlene claims to have never had children (Churchill 15), but it is later confirmed that this is not the entire truth; like other women present she gave birth to a child and gave it up in order to maintain her path to success. Marlene’s child was left with her sister, Joyce, who still lives in their hometown. As a working-class woman and a single parent, Joyce’s options for getting out or expressing success are limited. Marlene has left her behind in a significant way. Marlene’s success has been achieved because her sister took over her domestic role. Their relationship is allegorical; Marlene has built her public success on the invisible labor of Joyce as the bourgeois build theirs on the backs of the proletariat.

Marlene is reflected in Isabella as the other characters. Despite the close bond between Isabella and her sister, Hennie, Isabella has traveled the world alone, leaving her sickly sister at home. Isabella, like Marlene, has left her less able sister behind to pursue her own goals. While Isabella realizes that she could not sacrifice her own happiness for her sister, she openly talks about the guilt she feels over having left Hennie behind and her attempts to bring Hennie with her (Churchill 1-17). Marlene’s interactions with her sister in Act Three never admit any guilt—she is fiercely defensive of her choices and of Thatcherism—which reflects her individualism, as will be discussed below. The scene leaves the impression that Marlene is trying to convince herself as much as Joyce that she has done nothing wrong. Isabella’s presence at the dinner party indicates that her guilt over her relationship with her sister is a reflection of Marlene’s own buried guilt.

## **2.2 Success on Male Terms and the Absence of Top Women**

When Pope Joan enters the party scene, she is introduced as “by way of an infant prodigy” (Churchill 4). Her status in her former life arguably makes her the

person at the party with the most male authority and the most outward “public” success, as well as being the character who least identifies with femininity. Her career built up to a point where she achieved a position where she was literally not allowed to be a woman anymore; the ultimate success in the male discourse of the public sphere. Griselda, in juxtaposition, seems to have almost no personal authority. The very first line she speaks in the play is an apology (Churchill 21), and her presence is all in all a very feminine one; it is clear immediately that she is not comfortable with taking up much space, she does not want a fuss to be made on her account. Her appearance, food and self-denial are focal points of Griselda’s character, made more understandable by the introduction she is given by Marlene: “Griselda’s in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage” (Churchill 22). She is a creation of men’s fiction, amplified by the fact that it is her husband’s class status that seems to be her main claim to fame.

As Pope Joan tells her story of living as a man in order to obtain an education and be able to travel freely, we realize that she has entered the public domain of the masculine so thoroughly that she has lost all connection with the feminine; in her own words, “I think I forgot I was pretending” (Churchill 10). Her relationship to her sex is a complicated one. No doubt influenced by her Catholic faith, she sees her sex as a problem and at least half-believes that plagues and destruction during her reign as pope were her own fault—God’s punishment for her womanhood. When God does not speak to her despite her papal state, she assumes it is because God knows she is a woman, even if she hardly knows it herself (Churchill 10).

Griselda arrives late to the party, and one of the first things we learn about her is that she was married at fifteen, to a marquis, Walter. The former peasant girl tells the other women the story of how the marquis asked for her hand in marriage and she accepted, promising to always obey him. Her marriage allows her to move up in class, above almost everyone else, but this success comes without power over her own life.

Griselda’s story is one that the women have a very strong reaction to; Marlene even stating plainly that she doesn’t think “Walter likes women.” When the issue of her promising to obey her husband is brought up, the other women

are incredulous, but Griselda simply tells them she would “rather obey a marquis than a boy from the village”—a refreshing moment of clarity, where Griselda is keenly aware that men hold the same power over her as those of higher rank, as her class status is tied to her gender. Pope Joan tells her, “I never obeyed anyone, they all obeyed me,” (Churchill 23-25) which brings the reader back to the analogy of men in relation to women and the bourgeois in relation to the proletariat; Walter holds power over Griselda, both as a member of the court and as a man. Joan, who never lived as a woman, never had to partake in this system and is in turn blind to it.

The idea that a woman’s main qualifications for any position have to do with her physical appearance is brought forward at many points in the play. Both Lady Nijo’s and Griselda’s attachment to men of the court means that their social standings are directly tied to them. One way this is expressed is through the women’s clothing, which is emblematic of their status at any given time, an idea we see echoed in later acts of the play. When Griselda tells the women how she was reunited with the marquis, Lady Nijo immediately asks about the clothes she wore for the occasion. Griselda proudly replies that he dressed her in “cloth of gold” (Churchill 28). This is really the third time in the story that Griselda’s status is determined by her clothing. As Margaret Rose Jaster argues, in dressing her up in the clothes of the court, Walter transforms Griselda. She is no longer a peasant’s daughter while wearing her cloth of gold. Instead her dress now reflects her husband’s status, and she has become an extension of him and the court he serves (Jaster).

Lady Nijo’s status, like Griselda’s, is a result of her relationships with men. The emperor prefers her to other women, which puts her above them, at least in her own mind. Her special place with the emperor is what makes Nijo a “Top Girl”—she is proud of the fact that she is the preferred one and is fine with her place serving the emperor. She never compares her status to that of the men in the court, but sees the other women as her only competition. Out of the women at the dinner party, Lady Nijo is the most focused on clothing. She tells the women how she was allowed to wear colorfully layered silk dresses reserved for women of higher classes, because her grandfather, who adopted her, was the prime minister. When describing the one time she saw the daughter she was

forced to give up right after her birth, Nijo describes the plum dress the girl wore. She asks the other women whether, if she had still been at the court when the emperor died, she would have been allowed to wear full mourning (Churchill 13-28). The idea of women's dress being linked to their status is something Nijo is aware of on a conscious level, thus she knows that her status was stripped away along with the clothes and privileges of the court and her ability to live the life she wanted.

We learn in the second act that the play gets its name from the employment agency where Marlene has just been promoted, the eponymous Top Girls agency. The name is not insignificant. It is an employment agency for women, who presumably are all adults, yet the word "Girls" is used. What we, and the women in the play, are being told by this is that in the male-dominated public domain of the workplace, there is no such thing as a woman because a woman will never be seen as, treated as or given the responsibility of a full-fledged adult. A woman in the public sphere is in this way a "girl" in a world of men, and the best she can hope for is to be a "Top Girl"—above the other girls, but still not quite fully realized as a successful professional in the same way a man would be. The message the name sends is essentially this: The best any woman can hope for is to do better than other women. Thus, other women become the competition and women are pitted against each other. This idea is seen in various parts of the play: in the competitive, overlapping monologues of the women in Act One, as well as in Kit and Angie's conversations, and in Marlene's interview in the second act.

In the second act of *Top Girls*, the ideas that have already been introduced as concepts in the first act manifest through the lived experience of the characters. This act happens in distinct scenes, unlike the first act. The first scene of the second act starts in the office of the Top Girls employment agency, where Marlene has just been promoted and the idea of commercial success as a male domain is emphasized.

At the start of the second scene, Marlene's coworkers Win and Nell discuss Marlene's qualifications when it comes to her recent promotion in preference to another coworker. Nell states, "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 47). Nell equates being qualified in the workplace with having male anatomy here, and it is clear that the women believe that being a man is how to get ahead. Later in the conversation, when discussing job prospects, they agree that there's not much "room upward" because "Marlene's filled it up" (Churchill 48). Once more, women are competition for other women and one's success means the end of the road for another. The women are careful to express their intentions for success by rejecting the domestic in this scene as well, with Nell telling Win, "Derek asked me to marry him again I told him I'm not going to play house, not even in Ascot," to which Win replies, "Mind you, you could play house." Nell agrees with this: "If I chose to play house, I would play house ace" (Churchill 50). The repetition of the expression "playing house" shows us the women's outlook on married life and domestic labor. They see it as trivial; they could do it better than most, but it is unimportant.

In the scene where Marlene interviews a job candidate, Jeanine, ideas about competition resurface. Though the interruptions and overlap of dialogue are less jarring than those in the scene directly preceding it, they are still prominent enough to give the reader the sense that Marlene is not at all interested in what Jeanine has to say. Despite her own ambition, Marlene does not understand Jeanine's. This is tied to the fact that Jeanine is engaged to be married, and Marlene thus sees her as having chosen the domestic sphere over the public sphere. Marlene at one point during the job interview asks Jeanine where she would like to be in ten years. Jeanine tells Marlene that she might not be "alive in ten years" to which Marlene responds, "Of course you will. You'll have children" (Churchill 52-56), again emphasizing how despite the setting, Marlene assumes that since Jeanine plans to marry, her ambitions are domestic. Jeanine, who is younger than Marlene, represents a new generation of women, a generation that aspires to "have it all." The idea of women "having it all" was being born at the time of the publication of *Top Girls*. The then-editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Helen Gurley Brown, is credited with coining the phrase, but perhaps not the idea, in her book *Having it All: Love, Success, Sex, Money, Even if You're Starting With Nothing* (1982), which came out the same year as *Top Girls*. This new order of having both work and a family, to be able to travel and get decent wages, is unthinkable to Marlene, who belittles Jeanine's ambitions.

Once more in this scene we see the Top Girl Marlene taking up the role of the oppressor, laying down rules that she herself perhaps regrets having had to follow. When Marlene eventually decides to recommend Jeanine for a job at a lampshade company, she tells her, “You’ll be at the top with new girls coming in beneath you” (Churchill 55). Again we see the idea that winning over the other “girls” is the best a woman in the workplace, or in any other domain for that matter, can hope for, which rhymes well with Marlene’s open hostility towards Jeanine.

The scene reiterates many of the ideas of the first act, but also serves to show us that despite Marlene being a woman herself and sharing in Jeanine’s struggles, she has internalized dominant attitudes about what it means to be a woman in the workplace.

### **2.3 Marlene and the Private Sphere**

The second scene of the second act takes place in the countryside, in the backyard of Marlene’s sister, Joyce. Two girls, Kit, who is twelve, and Angie, who is sixteen, are talking. An immediately recognizable pattern emerges and it is obvious that like all the other women in the play, the girls are not really listening to each other in any real way.

The conversation is contentious and quickly turns mean, with Angie trying to scare Kit with half-threats and ghost stories (Churchill 33-42). This tension between the friends is emblematic of what is to come. In *Top Girls*, women cannot truly be allies to each other because their own success depends on besting the other, and Angie and Kit are not too young to have internalized this idea. Angie establishes herself in this scene as a character who longs for the social mobility she has seen through her aunt Marlene. Like Marlene, Angie has internalized negative attitudes towards the group she herself belongs to; in Marlene’s case it is women, in Angie’s case the working class. Angie’s hatred of her status has soured her relationship with Joyce, the woman she knows as her mother, who is an emblem of the working class throughout the play. Joyce has been stuck in the domestic sphere by her sister and is bitter over the lack of acknowledgement of her sacrifices, even telling Marlene “Listen when Angie was six months I did get pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking after

your fucking baby” (Churchill 90). Angie’s idolization of the woman who left her also seems to bother Joyce, knowing from experience that in order for Angie to go on to be a “Top Girl” she will have to sacrifice their mother-daughter relationship.

In the second scene, Angie decorates herself in a beautiful dress that does not quite fit her. We learn later that the dress was given to her by Marlene, and thus it becomes a symbol of the class status Angie strives for. The fact that it does not fit is telling: even Joyce does not have much hope for Angie’s future, telling Marlene, “She’s not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get [...] She’d better get married” (Churchill 44). Angie, meanwhile, has told Kit, “I put on this dress to kill my mother” (Churchill 46). Angie, we know from her conversation with Kit, does not want marriage or children, only commercial success. Angie goes so far as to tell Kit, “If I don’t get away from here I’m going to die” (Churchill 36). She is so desperate to transcend that she attempts to kill her connection to the domestic sphere in order to escape it. The idea is reiterated in the third act, when she sprays the perfume Marlene brought on herself, Joyce and Marlene and proudly announces, “Now we all smell the same” (Churchill 75), as if she can wipe out the structural differences between the three women’s status by simply masking it.

It is in the third act of *Top Girls* that the underlying ideas of the play are stated most plainly. Marlene and Joyce become figureheads: Marlene for the capitalist career woman and Joyce for the working class upon whose back the former builds its wealth. Up until this act, when we are taken back a year, time is linear in *Top Girls* as far as we can tell. The last scene of the play takes place in Joyce’s kitchen, in the town where she and Marlene grew up. Marlene has come for a visit, her first in six years, to the house in which Joyce and Angie live. Marlene claimed during the dinner party to never have had children, but we learn here that this is not true. Much like the successful women that preceded her, she had a child but gave it up out of fear of not being able to “escape” the oppressive private sphere if she kept it. This child is of course the daughter Joyce has been raising, and the reader finally understands Angie’s suspicions about Marlene really being her mother. We learn that Marlene has not been able to achieve the success she has on her own, but rather she has depended on the

private, domestic labor of her sister, who has cared for her daughter and their mother all these years. This idea is illuminated by the argument about politics the sisters have, in which Marlene defends Thatcher, and the system that has helped her get ahead (Churchill 93-96).

The last act, because of its placement in the timeline, informs the way we look back on the first two acts. Marlene no longer seems quite the independent successful woman she did before, and we learn that the cost of her success was even greater than her isolation, both personal and professional, and did not only affect her. We see the destructiveness of Marlene's capitalist success in everything around her, including the family she has distanced herself from. Joyce's oppression is dual: she is stuck in the private sphere of domestic duties in order for her sister to be able to gain commercial, capitalist success in the public sphere; on top of this, Joyce's job is cleaning other people's houses (Churchill 91). As Arlie Hochschild points out, this type of work can be a clear example of how successful women must partake in their own oppression. Housework as a job often means that the person typically responsible for domestic duties, classically a woman, has gone out to achieve some degree of success in the public sphere. As Hochschild points out, in order for the system to pay off, working women are incentivized to keep domestic worker's wages as low as possible in order to be able to retain the surplus for themselves (2000). Joyce is the perpetual victim in the cycle of other women's success and thus one of the few characters whose eyes are truly open to the true nature of the system of oppression.

It is in Joyce's kitchen that Marlene really voices her dilemma of success, and her disdain for the domestic sphere, telling Joyce about how she "had to escape" in order to not end up like their mother, who spent her life taking care of her family and home. Marlene stated opinion that their mother had a "wasted life" (Churchill 94) clearly tells her sister that she does not value the kind of work she does—the very work which has allowed Marlene to gain her public success. Her claim that she "could wear trousers at the office" but doesn't (Churchill 9) is an interesting attempt to demonstrate that she has not entirely turned her back on the feminine domain.

### 3.0 Conclusions

The world which Caryl Churchill presents in *Top Girls* is one where there is no such thing for women as “having it all.” Despite being thirty-five years old at the time of the compilation of this essay, the play has not lost its sharp resonance with the political climate and the role of women in positions of power. The finger Churchill points at all of us, for partaking in everyday oppressive discourse and consumption, is arguably no less relevant today than it was at the time of the premiere of *Top Girls*. The questions raised about what one woman’s success means for the whole are still just as relevant in a world where class and gender are little less intertwined than they were in the 1980s. The hypothesis that a woman in power could, and perhaps needed to be, just as oppressive as a man is brought forward through class struggles under Thatcherism. This idea has been brought in to a whole new light in the decades since *Top Girls* premiered and is perhaps now more relevant than ever: thirty-five years later, the United Kingdom finally has another woman prime minister. The fact that Theresa May is a childless member of the Conservative party is perhaps a coincidence. Alternatively, it is a clue to the permanence of the world Churchill wants us to open our eyes to.

In the very last scene of *Top Girls*, Angie wanders from her bedroom in to the living room where Marlene asks her, “Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well you’re awake now, aren’t you pet?” Angie’s response is a single word, the very last one of the play: “Frightening” (Churchill 97). Angie is awake, but her nightmare is not over. What is frightening to her is not what has happened in her dream, but what happens when it is over. “Frightening” is the reality she has opened her eyes to; that being a woman means she can’t win, no matter how hard she competes.

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