

The Uses of History in Contemporary Feminist Drama: A Response to Christiane Bimberg*

VERNA A. FOSTER

I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to Christiane Bimberg's interesting essay "Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* as Contributions to a Definition of Culture," which appeared in the same issue of *Connotations* as my own essay on *Our Country's Good*. My comments will focus particularly on Churchill's and Wertenbaker's uses of history in their respective plays.¹

Top Girls

In *Cloud 9* as well as *Top Girls* Caryl Churchill juxtaposes figures from the past with contemporary characters. The first act of *Cloud 9* takes place in Victorian colonial Africa and the second in London circa 1979, though the characters have aged only twenty-five years. The first scene of *Top Girls* (1982) presents a dinner party given by the contemporary character Marlene to celebrate her promotion to managing director of an employment agency; her guests are famous women from history, literature, and art: Isabella Bird, a nineteenth-century traveller; Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan and later Buddhist nun; Pope Joan, legendary medieval pope; Patient Griselda, a character in Chaucer; Dull Gret, the subject of a painting by Brueghel. The remaining scenes of *Top Girls* take place in contemporary England, in the employment agency and at the home of Marlene's sister, Joyce, and her daughter (actually Marlene's daughter), Angie. In both *Cloud*

*Reference: Christiane Bimberg, "Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* as Contributions to a Definition of Culture," *Connotations* 7.3 (1997/98): 399-416.

9 and *Top Girls* Churchill demonstrates the historical persistence of the problems faced by women, in their status and relations with men in the earlier play and in balancing career (however defined) and personal and family responsibilities in the later one. One of the most crucial critical questions raised by *Cloud 9* and *Top Girls* is how an audience's reading of the scenes or characters from the past inflects their interpretation of scenes or characters in the present. Are women better off today than in the past, happier, more fulfilled? Do they face the same or different kinds of problems than their historical sisters? Has anything been lost? And, in any case, which women are we talking about?

Christiane Bimberg argues convincingly and importantly that in *Top Girls* Churchill uses the experiences of the historical women to offer a critical evaluation of what Marlene and the other "top girls" at the agency have accomplished. The professional accomplishments ("Well it's not Pope but it is managing director" [13]) and even some of the problems of Marlene and her co-workers (Nell's and Win's difficulties in finding suitable men, for example) seem trivial in comparison with those of the women of the past, who had to struggle against much more adverse conditions of patriarchal oppression, which, Professor Bimberg points out, actually provided them with an impetus for their own achievements (402).

Another important distinction, too easily overlooked, that Bimberg makes between the women of the past and contemporary women is that they define themselves differently according to the different geographical, cultural, and temporal spaces they inhabit (403). Thus, despite some common topics of conversation (lovers, babies, education, clothes), what is important for one woman is not necessarily important in the same way for another. Christiane Bimberg suggests, for example, that specifically *professional* self-definition is relatively new for women (404), though several of Marlene's guests have had careers of one kind or another: pope, courtesan, traveller. However, as Professor Bimberg points out, although Marlene has acquired a professional qualification that allows her to have a high-paying management job, she lacks the humanist education and literacy that characterize most of the other women (404). As Marlene comments, "They didn't have Latin at my school" (4). I would add that, perhaps as a corollary to her limited education, Marlene often seems to

have no real comprehension of what is important to the other women—and why—and manages by her comments to trivialize the issues that concerned them. For example, when the conversation turns to clothes, Lady Nijo describes her elaborate court costume, important to her as defining her status; Joan explains that she dressed as a boy so that she could study in the library; Isabella insists that she always dressed as a lady on her travels for the sake of her reputation; and all Marlene can say is “I don’t wear trousers in the office. / I could but I don’t” (8).

Marlene is totally selfish as well as trivial. She does not care about other women or even her own family. All of her gains are for herself. Professor Bimberg comments, “There is no trace left of the certainly doubtful, frequently enforced, but nonetheless valuable and necessary charity of the women from the past” (404). The historical women possess a little more generosity than Marlene, but I would emphasise also the ways in which they share in her selfishness. Griselda, as Bimberg notes, passively allows her husband to take away (and as far as she knows kill) her children while retaining her own status as his wife. But Nijo and Joan, too, who are presented as more admirable than Griselda, like Marlene, express relatively little regret for their lost babies. Nijo comments, “It was only a girl but I was sorry to lose it” (16); and Joan found it “easier to do nothing” (16) when, as pope, she became pregnant and seems a bit uncertain whether or not the baby died when she was stoned to death: “Oh yes, I think so, yes” (17). Isabella had no children, but she did, like Marlene again, have a sister on whose presence at home she selfishly depended in some sense for her own accomplishments: “How could I go on my travels without that sweet soul waiting at home for my letters?” (11). Marlene’s success, of course, depends on her stay-at-home sister’s caring for her daughter. The point that Churchill is making, I think, is that women have always had to pay a terrible price for their own success, not only through their own suffering and sacrifices (losing children and lovers and even life itself), but also in a degree of selfishness and dehumanization.

Of all the women in the play only Gret (and perhaps Joyce) is truly unselfish. Gret has become famous not for what she did for herself, but for bringing together other women to fight against the evil of war that has killed her children, taking the fight to the source of evil, even into hell.

Gret, however, is the least educated and the least articulate of the women at Marlene's dinner party, and, like Joyce, she has been limited (until her amazing deed) in her sphere of action to the domestic. Gret and Joyce are generous and nurturing and possess communal values. (Joyce is a socialist, unlike Marlene, who supports Margaret Thatcher.) But most women in Churchill's audience would not want to identify with Gret and Joyce because of the limitations of their education and their lack of opportunities for self-fulfillment outside the domestic sphere. Nor, however, is it possible to identify with Marlene, the central character, because of her conservative narrow-mindedness, her triviality, and her selfish disregard for her daughter.

As Professor Bimberg emphasises, Churchill dramatizes the extraordinary difficulty of balancing a professional life with motherhood; something is always wrong in one area or the other. In fact, only one woman is presented as having accomplished it all. This woman belongs to the generation that came after Marlene, and significantly she is only mentioned and does not actually appear in the play; she seems indeed to be the exception that proves the rule:

MARLENE. I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because she's an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money.

JOYCE. So what's that got to do with you at the age of seventeen? (80)

Both the rather fantastic image of breastfeeding in the board room and Joyce's question imply that the executive Marlene admires is scarcely a possible role model for the vast majority of women. Indeed, to suggest that the balance achieved by this superwoman is a real possibility places an intolerable burden on women, implying that if they do not succeed in both the professional and domestic sphere by their own unaided efforts, the fault is their own.² In adopting such a view ("Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" [86]), Marlene displays the same kind of blinkered vision that causes her to be intolerant of those who are "stupid or lazy or frightened" (like Angie, Joyce points out) and whom she will

not help to get a job (86). The “stupendous” (83) future triumphantly predicted by Marlene is indeed, in Angie’s cryptic last word in the play, “Frightening” (87), in part because Churchill shows her audience no satisfactory middle ground between women who denature and dehumanize themselves to succeed (Marlene, Nell, Win, most of Marlene’s historical guests) and women who are left behind (literally, like Angie and Joyce and Isabella Bird’s sister, Hennie).³

Christiane Bimberg accurately comments that at the end of *Top Girls* there is no clear answer to the dilemma of women who desire to balance professional and family lives. While the play questions patriarchy, it also criticizes women’s adoption of stereotypically male ways of getting ahead. Caryl Churchill has said that she “quite deliberately left a hole in the play, rather than giving people a model of what they could be like. I meant the thing that is absent to have a presence in the play.”⁴ Audience members are implicitly asked to fill in this “hole” for themselves. In this respect *Top Girls* resembles *The Good Person of Szechwan*, in which Brecht explicitly leaves the solution to Shen Te’s problem of how to be good in an unregenerate capitalist society up to the audience, who are asked to consider “What sort of measures [they] would recommend / To help good people to a happy end” (109).⁵ Only in *Top Girls* it seems that the solution to the problems delineated will have to be individual as well as communal since, as the play demonstrates, every woman’s situation is both similar to that of other women and unique.⁶

Our Country’s Good

Professor Bimberg sees Timberlake Wertenbaker, like Caryl Churchill, as writing “an unofficial, ‘female’ history as a personal and subjective form” (406) in *Our Country’s Good*, which dramatizes the events leading to the first performance of a play in Australia, George Farquhar’s comedy *The Recruiting Officer*, acted by convicts in Sydney Cove in 1789. Where my own essay, “Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good*,” focuses on the play’s metatheatricity and explores the complex, if somewhat ambiguous,

sociological and psychological effects on the convicts of their participation in the production of Farquhar's play, Prof. Bimberg offers what may be seen as a complementary discussion of the ambiguous relation of theatre to colonialism in producing redefinitions of identity.

Prof. Bimberg argues that the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* becomes a "test of colony and colonialism": "the play is a stage for the colony as the colony is a stage for colonialism in the world" (409). The results, she points out, are mixed. Colonialism brings disease and death to the native population. But the colony, as represented by the play, turns out to be a partial success for the colonizers (convicts and officers) in allowing them to develop new identities that cut across the "old social gender, moral, professional and ethnic identities" that they brought with them to Australia (412). I would agree with this view of the play, but I am not sure that what is true of the play is also true of the colony. In advocating the performance of Farquhar's play in the first place, certainly, Governor Phillip deliberately sets out to bridge the moral and cultural divide that typically separates convicts from the rest of society. And the convict actors Wisehammer and Dabby and the officer who directs the play, Ralph Clark, do question old categories of social class and gender: playing Captain Brazen in the play, Wisehammer asserts his equality with Ralph's Captain Plume, and Ralph takes Mary (Sylvia in the play) as his mistress when he realizes that she can behave like a lady; Dabby similarly questions the assignment of gender roles when she says she wants to play Kite, the recruiting officer.

I would argue, however, that although the convicts and Ralph are psychologically transformed for the better by their participation in the play, there is no indication that there will be any lasting change in social relations between convicts and officers, as Prof. Bimberg seems to suggest when she says that "the social differences between the officers and the convicts are getting blurred" (415). The majority of the officers, in varying degrees friendly or hostile to the play from the start, do not appear to undergo any change. The convict Duckling has been thrown out of Harry Brewer's tent, in which she is allowed no rights once her protector has died. Mary, both as a woman and as a convict, is still inferior to Ralph. And Wisehammer is not allowed to read his adaptation of the prologue

to *The Recruiting Officer* because it will offend officers, like Ross, who are hostile both to the play and to the convicts.

My most serious disagreement with Christiane Bimberg's argument concerns her evaluation of Wisehammer's rewritten prologue. Bimberg argues that the prologue shows that Wisehammer "can generously claim an identification with British colonialism (the imperialism of the future) because he has made the experience that the old identification categories (geography, history, culture, language, gender etc.) do not work any more" (414). In fact, Wisehammer's prologue, written for the convict audience because Wisehammer believes it will be more meaningful to them than the classical allusions of the original, satirizes the transportation of convicts:

We left our country for our country's good;
 No private views disgraced our generous zeal,
 What urg'd our travels was our country's weal,
 And none will doubt but that our emigration
 Has prov'd most useful to the British nation. (38)

The tone of this new prologue is bitterly ironic. Wisehammer has already discussed the different meanings that "country" has for the rich and powerful and the poor and oppressed (17).⁷ "No private views" emphasises that the convicts did not come to Australia of their own choice. And the word *emigration* (not *immigration*) underscores the convicts' pain in being forced to leave their homeland rather than any sense of hope that they might have in coming to the new land. Wisehammer's prologue about leaving "our country for our country's good" (from which Wertebaker's play takes its title), then, satirically asserts that the "emigration" of the convicts "prov'd most useful," not to the convicts themselves, but to "the British nation," that is, to those in authority and in socially superior positions who remained behind in the mother country and who were now relieved of the burden of some of the troublesome poor.⁸ Ralph Clark, while praising Wisehammer's literary talent, recognizes the explosive nature of the new prologue and does not allow it to be spoken at the performance: "it's too-too political. And it will be considered provocative" (38). Only after the convicts have been released from the penal colony and

start their own community in Australia can the prologue be spoken at the theatre that Sideway plans to establish.

Clearly the play, *The Recruiting Officer*, creates a community out of those who participate in its production. And this community, as Bimberg argues, cuts across various social, gender, and ethnic divisions among the participants. But the community created by the play extends only minimally to the colony because, as Dabby says, "the play's only for one night" (36). Dabby, an enthusiastic if at times contrary participant in the production of the play, identifies so little with the colony that she intends to escape so that she may "grow old in Devon" (36). In fact, as Professor Bimberg implies at the end of her essay, sadly, what seems most likely to create a community out of both officers and convicts, by stressing their similarities to one another, is the presence of an "Other," the native Australian population, represented in Wertebaker's play by a lone Aborigine.

Interestingly, several of the most important women dramatists writing in England in the last twenty or thirty years (Pam Gems, Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertebaker) have turned to history and rewritten historical events and characters from a feminist perspective in order to explore contemporary issues. Christiane Bimberg has usefully brought together two of the most exciting and pertinent of their plays in showing how *Top Girls* and *Our Country's Good*, though dramaturgically quite different, use history to examine and critique the ways in which identity, especially gender and class identity, is created in contemporary society.

Loyola University
Chicago

NOTES

¹References are to Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1990), and Timberlake Wertebaker, *Our Country's Good* (London: Methuen, 1989).

²Though not referring to Churchill's unseen character, Lizbeth Goodman points out that by the 1990s the myth that this superwoman has arrived is both implied in the term "post-feminist" and has percolated down into the popular consciousness

through advertisements that feature “images of successful ‘new women’ in functional new families” (“Representing Gender / Representing Self: A Reflection on Role Playing in Performance Theory and Practice,” *Drama on Drama*, ed. Nicole Boireau [London: Macmillan, 1997] 205).

³The clients of the employment agency also fall into these two broad categories. Louise has succeeded to a limited extent at work by behaving like a man; Shona fantasizes about an aggressively male career. Jeanine, by contrast, cannot commit to a career because she wants to get married. Mrs. Kidd, the wife of an employee, has no job outside the home and is emotionally abused by her husband.

⁴Quoted in Laurie Stone, “Making Room at the Top,” *The Village Voice* 28.9 (1 March 1983): 81; extracted in *File on Churchill*, compiled by Linda Fitzsimmons (London: Methuen, 1989) 61.

⁵Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, trans. John Willett (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994).

⁶Janet Brown argues that *Top Girls* demonstrates “the futility of individual solutions” (“Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* Catches the Next Wave,” in *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, ed. Phyllis R. Randall [New York: Garland, 1988] 117). Certainly, some attempt to find a communal solution is desirable. But it seems to me that Christiane Bimberg’s position that “every woman will have consciously to negotiate the terms of her life and struggle for an individually satisfying balance between profession and family” (405) is truer to the diversity presented in the play.

⁷See my essay “Convicts, Characters, and Conventions of Acting in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good*,” *Connotations* 7 (1997/98): 428.

⁸Christine Dymkowski, similarly to Bimberg, suggests that Wisenhammer’s prologue offers an “indirect celebration of the convicts’ new Australian identity” (“‘The Play’s the Thing’: The Metatheatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker,” *Drama on Drama*, ed. Nicole Boireau, 128). But I cannot see how the prologue’s satiric attack on the transportation of convicts for the benefit of the “British Nation,” that is, the mother country, leaves any room for celebrating, even implicitly, the nascent Australian identity of the convicts.