

Declaration of Authorship

I, April De Angelis, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: April De Angelis

Date: 20. 9.13

ABSTRACT

My stated aim of this thesis *Interrogating a New Feminist Dramaturgy* was to use the French psychoanalytic post-structuralists, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva to think through the possibilities of a practice of feminist dramaturgy. Cixous' conceit of an *écriture féminine* was a provocation to examine all three theorists in relation to the possibilities of a radical re-writing of the feminine on stage.

I begin by outlining the three theorists. Chapter one is an analysis of *The Positive Hour*, a play I had written in 1997, in relation to French psychoanalytic post-structuralists with particular reference also to Susan Faludi's text *Backlash* in order to ascertain the nature of my representations of gender on stage.

Chapter two examines Caryl Churchill's play *A Number* (2002) in relation to Irigaray's dethroning of specularity and the patriarchal cogito.

Chapter three considers the work of Sarah Kane, in particular *4.48 Psychosis* (1999) and interrogates its representations of gender with reference to the work of Kristeva, particularly *Soleil Noir*.

Chapter four specifically analyses *Heart's Desire* (1997) by Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), *Cleansed* (1998) and *Crave* (1998) in relation to primarily Cixous' notion of alterity and interrogates the possibilities inherent in these works for deconstructing phallogocentric binaries.

As part of considering the possibilities of a feminist dramaturgical practice I wrote a play entitled *After Electra* which is submitted as part of the PHD. This is accompanied by a piece of analytical writing to assess the strategies I have employed as a writer. A shorter piece *Actress in Search of a Character* is also accompanied by an analysis.

Overall the thesis argues that theatrical form is implicated in patriarchal structures of subject formation and it explores the possibilities of reimagining gender relations through a renegotiation of theatrical form.

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INTRODUCTION

INTERROGATING A NEW FEMINIST DRAMATURY

My project is to use the writings of the French psychoanalytic, post-structural feminists to interrogate a new feminist dramaturgy which in turn shall be applied to my practise. Along with the theoretical chapters of my PHD I shall also be submitting two plays, one full length and one monologue. The aim of my research has been to discover the possibilities of applying my findings to the practice of playwriting in order to be able to see how the French feminists might liberate a new theatre particularly in terms of the representation of gender on stage. Their insistence that the female body must not be written out of the symbolic, but must be acknowledged as a radical force for encountering the other as well as recognised through the semiotic as a constant potentially radical force to challenge the symbolic, is that to which I shall give dramaturgical consideration. The correlating banishment of the Semiotic to the realms of the uncanny is arguably challenged by writers such as Churchill and Kane and also forms part of my argument. The French Feminists, I shall argue, provide theoretical possibilities for creating a theatre which radically challenges the presentation of gender on stage.

For Freud sexed identity was a 'fragile achievement' constructed through the Oedipal moment and not a biologically essential fact, one which implicated the unconscious in the construction of gender. Lacan took Freud's pronouncements further in proposing the unconscious was structured like a language. For Lacan, the ego, initially created in the realm of the imaginary through the mirror stage, provides the ego with an illusory wholeness, this misrecognition masking the fragmentary state of infantile being. Thus the ego is a rigid structure that is nonetheless always riven by desire, the state of lack, always also divided by language, the symbolic,

which splits the ego between the speaking 'I' and the 'I' that is spoken of, castrating the speaker, making them not whole. Lacan's insights, like Freud's point to the precariousness of identity; 'sexuality and subjectivity are not natural adaptations but deviations, detours, breaks from nature that undermine identity and divide and limit any unity of self or community'. This willingness to grapple with the limits of self-mastery, the cogito, is why Lacan has been taken as innovative and amenable by the French Feminist Theorists. Broadly, it is unnaturalness of 'woman' as outlined by Freud and Lacan that they find useful for their theories; they interrogate the space carved out by psychoanalysis in its attempts to register the precarious nature of the unconscious forces that structure gendered identity. Thus they concede the limits for socio-cultural explanations for woman's lack of standing in the social contract. This touches upon the point of my research; to investigate the limits of drama which makes use of naturalistic, or realistic theatrical representations, and their concomitant 'socio-cultural explanations' to explain the woman's condition; or to represent radical formulations of 'woman' on stage.

Before outlining each of the three theorists I have focussed on I want to place myself as a writer for theatre historically. I began my life as a playwright in 1986 while the Thatcher free-market revolution was breaking up the post war economic and social consensus. It was also a time where the left in Britain was fiercely debating the place of othered identities which the traditional left had perhaps considered irrelevant to issues of socialism and was now being called on to address in terms of issues of race, sexuality, gender. I self-identified as a feminist. My first job as an actress was with a theatre company called Resisters, this collective of black and white women had as its stated purpose the placing of women centre-stage in order to relate and examine in a political context the hidden experiences of women such as domestic violence. These plays, which we wrote and devised together, were a mixture of agit-prop and cabaret, they were performed in fringe theatre venues

and community centres and while they were radical in achieving their aim of putting women performers at the centre of the stage narrative and eschewing traditional three act structures, they were content to oppose patriarchy and capitalism without ever asking the more probing question 'what is a woman'? For us woman was the victim of patriarchy and capitalism and when these structures were vanquished she' would be liberated. I would like to include an example of these plays here but they were ephemeral, never published.

Then came the exit of Margaret Thatcher, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of ideological partisanship which 'freed young imaginations. Youth could be critical of capitalism without writing state-of -the -nation plays; it could be sceptical of male power without being dogmatically feminist; it could express outrage without being politically correct.'¹ To generalise, in the light of this movement, it became apparent that audiences and practitioners alike had moved on from theatre as a tool for socialism and revolutionary social reform, to one in which 'encouraged by post-modernism's notion that 'anything goes', theatre shook off the style police and began to explore a new found freedom.'² The question here is, in terms of feminism, did the baby exit with the bathwater? As I mention in my chapter on *The Positive Hour*, theatre culture in the 1990's seemed all to ready to return to a culture of laddish-ness. Was this new found 'freedom' somehow enmeshed unconsciously in free market economics and its lack of a moral community?

It was also clear to me, that having cut my teeth as a playwright pre-1989, or on the cusp of this change, I was not a member of this new wave. At the same time there was to be no returning to the old ideology. Despite what Sierz names 'feminist dogmatism'³, which in our culture almost amounts to a tautology, I still felt there were

¹ Aleks Sierz *In Yer Face Theatre* p. 36.

² *Ibid* p. 36.

pressing feminist concerns to be addressed in the world and in the theatre. It was to this end that I began my research. The question I began with was where Resisters had refused to go. By putting 'woman' on stage in a naturalistic context was I somehow reinforcing the subjection of the very identity I wished to promote? I shall now outline the work of the three theorists I used in my research. All are psychoanalytic, post-structuralists and would argue that sexual difference is 'integral to all cultural practices and all forms of knowledge production'.⁴ They would also broadly argue that as Cixous contends these differences cannot be determined on the basis of socially determined 'sexes' nor should they rely on notions of 'natural' anatomical determination of sexual difference-opposition. These 'differences' are used to reinforce and justify patriarchal systems of power and control.⁵

HELENE CIXOUS

Central to Cixous' writing is the concept of *écriture féminine*. Though growing up in war time Algiers, French and Jewish, thus doubly an outsider in terms of Algerian, Arab nationality and European anti-Semitism, Cixous maintains that the 'unacceptable truth in this world was my being a woman'.⁶ How to counter this 'othering' is at the heart of *écriture féminine* which desires to create 'a non-acquisitional space – a space where the self can explore and experience the non-self (the other)...that avoids the ('masculine') impulse to appropriate or annihilate the other's difference'.⁷ The urgency of such a practice can be summed up by Cixous' tenet 'if you don't write, someone else will 'write you'.⁸ Cixous elaborates that defining a feminine practice of writing is a continuing impossibility because it is not available to theorizing⁹, it is literally experimental and

³ Ibid p. 36.

⁴ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 4.

⁵ Helene Cixous *Newly born woman* p. 81.

⁶ Helene Cixous *Coming to Writing* p. 38.

⁷ Ibid p. 39.

⁸ Kelly Ives *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva* p. 40.

against closure. With such a caveat I will attempt a précis.

Cixous takes issue with Freud's structuring of the gendered self through the Oedipal configuration. It is Lacan's rereading of the Freudian paradigm through the agency of language that has been re-appropriated by Cixous and the other French Feminists for their subversive purposes of rewriting 'woman'. For Lacan the law of the father which the child must embrace through fear of castration due to illicit desire for the mother is seen as the realm of the symbolic, of language. This castration severs the child from the realm of the Imaginary, which can be thought of as a 'preverbal state of existence'. Language represents what is lacking; the imaginary, blissful state of union with the mother. Thus, one of the things the child lacks in the symbolic realm is the mother¹⁰. The Real, for Lacan, is the space where we lack nothing, where we return to the longed for imaginary. The Real, the space where there is no lack, will always be unobtainable. The symbolic is privileged. Cixous raises the question in *Sorties* as to whether 'a different system of relationship might be employed ... a system closer to the Imaginary and the Real'¹¹. This would engender a different relationship between the self and the other and thus for Cixous entail a revolution in sexual difference, allowing woman to be newly born.

Cixous takes further issue with the idea that female sexuality must be reconciled with the theory of castration.¹² She argues that Freud uses the metaphor of the 'dark continent'¹³ to obscure female sexuality and blind woman to her own body and pleasure; *jouissance*. She rejects Freud's 'fantasized relation to anatomy'¹⁴ which suffers from specularity and centres on the penis; 'phallogentrism'.¹⁵ For Cixous 'woman's' sexuality is

⁹ Helene Cixous *Sorties* p. 92.

¹⁰ Susan Sellers *Live theory* p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid* p. 21.

¹² *Ibid* p. 25.

¹³ Helene Cixous *Newly born woman* p. 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 82.

plural and ‘endless...without principle parts’.¹⁶ Though it should be stressed that the Freudian notion of male sexuality entails the loss of a ‘feminine’ or dispersed enjoyment of their *jouissance* too. For Cixous anatomical difference must be open-ended and not define sexuality.

Cixous looks to the experience of motherhood to rewrite the relationship with the other. It defies the patriarchal mode of exchange, ‘the self-perpetuating, circular economy of the masculine’¹⁷, and is the gift which one gives to the other with no thought of return. This newly born economy is one which must inform *écriture féminine* as women write their bodies, as the writing lets ‘strangeness’¹⁸ come through the flesh, drawing close to and tapping into pre verbal spaces of the unconscious, paying attention to the sensations of their bodies, accenting ‘language with the patterns, reverberations and echoes’¹⁹ of the lost imaginary and never restricting the possibility of ‘waste’, ‘superabundance’ and ‘uselessness’²⁰ in the service of oratory, closure, violence to the other. The unconscious will provide the radical instability as ‘ Now, I-woman am going to blow up the law...in language’.²¹ For Cixous it is the ‘unheard songs’²² of the woman’s body which must be written, because through writing the unconscious is accessed, and each unconscious, like each woman’s body, is unique, leading to an inexhaustible imaginary realm which will, like the woman’s body with its ‘thousand and one thresholds of ardor’²³ will smash through the ‘partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes’²⁴ and in writing the body, re-discovering the written out woman’s desire, will re- invent the world, smash patriarchy. Cixous has applied

¹⁵ Ibid p. 83.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 87.

¹⁷ Ibid p. 87.

¹⁸ Ibid p. 39.

¹⁹ Ibid p. 95.

²⁰ Ibid p. 93.

²¹ Ibid p. 95.

²² Helene Cixous *Laugh of the Medusa* p. 881.

²³ Ibid p. 882.

²⁴ Helene Cixous *Newly born Woman* p. 94.

her theory to theatrical practice most noticeably in her play *Portrait of Dora*(1975). While acknowledging Cixous' play I wish to focus on more contemporary work which is perhaps less consciously directed to Freudian re-imaginings.

LUCE IRIGARAY

The use of the metaphor of the speculum, the medical curved mirror for inspecting the vagina, introduces circularity, open-endedness and ambiguity into masculine, phallic discourse.²⁵ Irigaray condemns the specular logic by which the female is seen as lack because she lacks what is like a man.²⁶ She states that 'a normal female is configured as 'a man minus the possibility of representing herself as a man'.²⁷ Thus in Freudian discourse it is envy that takes residence in the lacking female. Irigaray counters this by asserting another economy, a circular one focussing on the female body in which she asserts that a woman's sex is 'two lips which embrace continually',²⁸ thus pleasuring themselves continually. To reinstate the economy of female sexuality, written out of history, is to subvert the patriarchal imperative and the penis as transcendental signifier and restore a female corporeality and a 'female' metaphysics.

Irigaray's theory of sexual difference suggests that women can never be understood on the model of a subject.²⁹ This is because within Western representational systems woman is constructed through the binary male/female as the imaginary other to the ascendant male element of the dyad. But as Irigaray points out the

²⁵ Kelly Ives p. 96.

²⁶ Elin Diamond x.

²⁷ Ibid x.

²⁸ Kelly Ives p. 96.

²⁹ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* p. 18.

woman is radically absent in this binary, she is not even represented by the 'other' because this is a complimentary construct of the binary which actually excludes 'woman' altogether. Woman, is absent, missing, just a grammatical invention. Irigaray characterizes her project as taking three stages; 'deconstructing the masculine subject, figuring the possibility of a feminine subject and construing a subjectivity that respects sexual difference.'³⁰ Her writing mirrors the text she is reading, transfiguring and intensifying its crises and putting its parapraxes on display, putting pressure on the masculine Symbolic by masquerading as an obedient daughter. Irigaray wants to dismantle the old dream of symmetry between the sexes which is really the reflecting back of the masculine 'self- same'³¹ which only constructs woman as a grammatical gesture and proposes instead genuine sexual difference, non- hierarchical, with a genealogy for woman that is engendered by the mother/daughter dyad. For Kristeva this is a fantasy that would bring the subject to psychosis. Irigaray takes the differing morphologies of the female and figures this as a possibility of non- hierarchical sexual difference. The labia, for example, become lips which break through the patriarchal rules of exchange 'their touching allows movement from inside to outside, from outside to in, with no fastening nor opening mouth to stop the exchange'.³² Here Irigaray comes close to exemplifying Cixous' *écriture féminine*.

JULIA KRISTEVA

Kristeva's theoretical writings are informed by her practice as a psychoanalyst. She is thus cognisant of the forces impinging on subjectivity and of the fragility of subjectivity. While she espouses the revolutionary potential of poetic language in submitting sexual difference to subversion she is careful not to take the loss of meaning too far.³³ It is perhaps in this gesture that she can be most obviously distinguished from Irigaray and

³⁰ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 76.

³¹ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 32.

³² Kelly Ives *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva* p. 98.

Cixous. For Kristeva meaning is not just made denotatively³⁴, but through the semiotic, that is the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy infects language working against the logical, syntactical symbolic. In this way subjectivity is both made and unmade through language.³⁵The Kristevan term *Chora* is originally the site provided by the mother's body as a containment for all the rhythms and intonations of the infant who does not yet know how to use language to refer to objects.³⁶This is also reminiscent of the psychotic who cannot use language in a meaningful way. While psychosis is of course an undesirable state of affairs, without the semiotic *chora* expressed through poetic language the symbolic would become stultifying and deadly. The *chora* refreshes language and the individual. Kristeva is most careful to repudiate what she might term the essentialising traits of feminism ; 'does not the struggle against the 'phallic sign'....sink into an essentialist cult of Woman, into a hysterical obsession with the neutralizing cave, a fantasy arising precisely as a negative imprint of the maternal phallus?'.³⁷While seeking a strategy out of the impasse of woman defined as lack within Freudian discourse, Kristeva is careful to seek a balance between the 'healthy' redefinition or refreshing of a female sexuality and the dead end of a rejection of the symbolic and the concomitant psychosis. Unlike Irigaray, who wants to retrieve the pre-Oedipal period in order to reclaim feminine genealogies, Kristeva only wants to re-describe it in order to assess its import for individuation and creative self-transformation. She takes infantile matricide as a necessary pre-condition for subjectivity. In her essay on 'Women's Time' Kristeva makes her position on feminism clear, she classifies the women's movement into three distinct times; the first generation which argues for women's equality within the social contract or a place in 'linear time',³⁸ the second emphasising women as distinct category, recognising women's specificity and stressing difference, including

³³ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 3.

³⁴ *Ibid* p. 13.

³⁵ *Ibid* p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid* p. 19.

³⁷ Toril Moi *The Kristeva Reader* p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid* p. 193.

theorists such as Irigaray, who ‘seek to give language to [...]corporeal experiences left mute by the past’³⁹ and the third time or generation which neither neutralises difference nor fixes identity but embraces non-identity and ambiguity while recognising that we enter historical time as embodied beings. Kristeva looks to ‘aesthetic practices’⁴⁰ to demystify the Symbolic bond in order to emphasise the singularity of each person; practices which surely must include theatre.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

CHAPTER ONE.

NEGATIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN THE POSITIVE HOUR

I begin with an analysis of *The Positive Hour* (1996) which is examined in relation to a series of texts which address issues of feminism and gender. The chapter discusses the liberal feminism of Faludi who characterises the backlash as a reactionary attempt to stymie the advances of feminism as opposed to insights provided by the French feminists who propose that the very category of ‘woman’ is predicated on a binary that constructs woman as lack and to pursue this term uncritically is to fall into the trap of entrenching this lack further. This entrenchment has resonances with the fundamentally realist form of the play which perhaps reinforces the place of woman in the male/female binary rather than disrupting it.

CHAPTER TWO

SPECULAR INSURRECTION AND FORBIDDEN GAMES IN CARYL CHURCHILL’S *A NUMBER*.

This chapter asks how the act of replication in *A Number* renders the world of the play female in the sense that it

³⁹ Ibid p. 194.

⁴⁰ Ibid p. 210.

subversively challenges the logic of the patriarchal Symbolic and through such destabilisations allows a space for a feminine subjectivity to be considered as it simultaneously foregrounds the exclusion of feminine subjectivity. By using the work of Irigaray which challenges the Freudian forgetting of feminine desire in *Speculum of the Other Woman* the chapter mines Irigaray's work to elucidate a practice that moves beyond naturalism/realism. Irigaray formulates the idea that Freud marked woman as lacking the organ of privilege and is thus unable to represent their desires but reflects back the masculine self- same, providing mastery for the masculine and the 'originating' phallus. It's the womanish duplication which displaces the original that makes Churchill's clones 'womanish'. This in turn contaminates the patriarchal syntax and deconstructs the uncanny. Structured into the look is castration of woman which thus creates the potency of the male Symbolic. As Irigaray notes nothing to be seen is equivalent of having no being, no truth. In the 'ocular funny house' of Churchill's play, this mastery of the look is challenged whilst simultaneously the binary self/other is broken down in a gesture which Cixous would have named *écriture féminine*. Churchill's deliberate 'forgeries' in *A Number* transcend the 'real/copy' binary, and wield an anti-essentialist power. This dream like play suits the desire to figure a feminine desire only found in dreams.

CHAPTER THREE

KRISTEVA'S *SOLEIL NOIR* AND KANE'S 'BLACKER THAN DESIRE': AN INTERROGATION OF THE BOUNDARIES OF THE GENDERED SUBJECT IN *4.48 PSYCHOSIS*.

A pairing of Kane and Kristeva in order to use Kristevan ideas of the Semiotic chora in relation to Kane's use of language in *4.48 Psychosis*. Also Kristeva's ideas of the flouting of the boundaries of the self, leading to psychosis and the loss of the maternal in the Semiotic chora leading to a mourning for the maternal which

cannot find a replacement in the object because the loss occurs at a moment before subjectivity has conceived of the object/subject binary; a loss suffered before other can be distinguished from self. Analysing the play in relation to Kristeva's ideas illuminates the thesis that while risk inherent in text is desirable it is necessary to find a path between the Symbolic and Semiotic, as either extreme is death. The conclusion; the great revolution of Kane's play is that the object of desire is obscured; a hollowing out of desire and the concomitant radical suggestion of the near impossibility of a female protagonist which resonates strongly with Kristeva's conception of the impossibility of annihilating the patriarchal Symbolic whilst at the same time strongly recommending the necessity for it to be profoundly challenged.

CHAPTER FOUR

STRATEGIES FOR A FEMINIST DRAMATURGY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SYMBOLIC BINARIES IN THE WORK OF CARYL CHURCHILL AND SARAH KANE.

Application of Cixous' key concepts to the work of Kane and Churchill. Cixous demands that writing come from a space of female desire that has no link with the logic that places desire on the side of possession, domination, phallogocentric appropriation. Feminine writing or *écriture féminine* should be an attempt to demonstrate a loving fidelity, an openness to the other without overcoming the other, a repudiation of the hierarchical dualisms of the phallogocentric binary. It seeks a new relation between subject and object. Cixous' repudiation of binaries provides a challenge for a feminist dramaturgy with its threat to the idea of mastery of the other and dramatic closure. Comparing Kristeva to Cixous is to note the difference concerning the binary which Kristeva sees as unbreakable but Cixous wishes to see tested to such extremes as might threaten disintegration, as with her concept of alterity; the existence of the other without threat. Laughter of the Medusa; a terrified mechanism against the spectre of phallic loss, she mocks the notion that women are castrated and this

threatens patriarchal Symbolic. Cixous' fears that the old categories of revolution only lead to violence because the old binaries re-assert themselves. The question raised by Kristeva is what happens to Oedipal structure of desire when mastery of the other is problematized by the refusal of old binaries and in Cixous' terms the old deathly structure falls away? Analysis of Churchill's *Heart's Desire* and its mimicking of the classic dictates of dramatic conflict, its tactic of using Cixous' laughing Medusa in her mocking of traditional realist structures, for example the resetting/the factory/theatre/ Illusion of control. The real machine in the play the ludic overturning of structural expectations. In this way Churchill's dramaturgy suggests the urgings of Cixous' theory while repetition hints at nature of performance not reality. Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, *Crave*; In the former – her inversion of the offstage/onstage binary that deconstructs the uncanny, unknown. Her protagonist's refusal to resist the other leads to moments of liberation from which Cixous binary 'dismantling' can be inferred. *Cleansed* continues the themes of fragmentation of the body and liberation of new identities. Lost plenitude of semiotic sought by Grace in her desire to become Graham. For Kane we are at such an extreme pass that psychosis is the cure. *Crave* and resonances with Kristeva's maternal *chora* and the revolution in poetic language. Overturning of classic conflict model as the voices come close to each other in a fluidity that perhaps demonstrates Cixous' formula of coming up close to the other without over-coming the other. Love in the Symbolic means war in Kane's world. Both Churchill and Kane illuminate possibilities for a feminist dramaturgy inherent in the writings of Kristeva and Cixous.

SELECTION OF CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES OF THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON STAGE

The impetus for using psychoanalytic, post-structuralist feminist theory to explore possibilities of a new feminist dramaturgy rose in part as a frustration with naturalistic representations of women on stage. A brief overview and some examples will illustrate the point I am making. Classic realism, with which the conventions of naturalism accord, 'supports the dominant ideology by constructing the reader as a subject within that ideology'⁴¹. Classic realism is characterised by illusionism, narrative closure, a hierarchy of discourses and the establishment of the 'truth' of the story⁴², all which pivot upon the creation of a 'real' or naturalistic subject which they both construct and are constructed by in turn. As such classic realism is always a 're-inscription of the dominant order'⁴³ which is patriarchy. Patriarchy predicates woman as the lacking other in the male/ female binary.

Realism was the 'ostensible beginning of modern drama'⁴⁴ coming to prominence in the final quarter of the nineteenth century and was characterized by putting onstage only what could be verified by observing ordinary life.⁴⁵ Naturalism, an offshoot of Realism 'tried to show that powerful forces governed human life, forces of which we might not be fully aware[...]forces of heredity and environment.'⁴⁶ However, for the French feminists the subject inherent to naturalism/realism is the 'I' or cogito, the self-authoring, masculine subject which depends for its construction upon the erased female other. To unpick naturalism/realism is thus to deconstruct

⁴¹ Jeanie Forte *Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright in Feminist Theatre and Theory* ed Helene Keyssar p. 20.

⁴² Catherine Belsey *Critical Practice* p. 70.

⁴³ Jeanie Forte *Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright in Feminist Theatre and Theory* ed Helene Keyssar p. 20.

⁴⁴ J L Styan *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* 1 p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* p. 6.

patriarchy. To refuse to question the constructions of naturalism/realism is to perhaps unknowingly enforce patriarchal configurations. Similarly Brechtian Drama, whilst seeking to defamiliarize⁴⁷ received reality as ideology still proposes a real predicated on the male cogito and so would be subject to the same critique. The French feminists wish to dig below the level of the real, the symbolic order, to expose an unseen, phallogocentric order.

In Marsha Norman's *Night Mother* (1983) thirty seven year old Jessie informs her mother Thelma that she will kill herself that evening, after having organised the details of her mother's life and her own death. After much argument and attempts by Thelma to change Jessie's mind, the suicide takes place. The narrative is built upon 'enigmas' and mysteries which are gradually revealed until the final scene of (dis)closure'.⁴⁸ This is the archetypal structure of narrative realism with its 'sadistic demands for a story, making something happen, forcing a change in another with the ensuing battle of wills and strength all occurring in real time with a beginning and an end'.⁴⁹ As such the spectator is kept comfortably in a position of (masculine) mastery and so sutured into the dominant, patriarchal discourse with its reassurances of coherence, closure and an illusory pleasure in catharsis which in Brechtian terms changes nothing fundamental.⁵⁰ Here, although the play was acclaimed by critics as a feminist investigation of the degradation of women's lives in patriarchal society, it 'ultimately reinscribes the dominant ideology in its realist form'.⁵¹ Jessie and her mother are 'fully known' as characters and the suicide provides a 'tragic closure' which indeed closes off possibilities for reading Jessie's suicide not as a scripted ideological act but as an 'individual' failure.

⁴⁷ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p. 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* p22

⁵¹ *Ibid* p22

Lucy Prebble's *The Effect* (2012) written a generation after *Night Mother* takes more formal risks and exhibits a more fragmented form; the stage being asked to occupy two contrasting worlds, that of the scientists and that of their human guinea pigs. Subversively, the juxtaposing of the two worlds encourages a viewing that does not privilege the scientists above those on the drugs trial. This deconstruction is an interesting variation on the naturalism of '*Night Mother*' where we are not invited to view so doubly. *The Effect* concerns Connie and Tristan who are involved in a trial for new anti-depressant drug which raises dopamine levels and mimics the effect of falling in love. They fall in love but it is unclear whether this is for real or an effect of the drug. The play thus proposes an obstacle in the form of this uncertainty to the male/female binary as it is made intelligible by the heterosexual matrix. What then is natural? If the heterosexual matrix is shaken then the construction of gender too looks uncertain. It transpires that one of the pair are being prescribed a 'placebo'. Connie believes it's her and so begins to question her feelings for Tristan, but then discovers that he is on the placebo, so she gives him a dosage of her drug which doubles his prescription and leads him to have a seizure and lose his memory, they play ends with her caring for him in a loving way, they exit as a couple.

While in the early stages the play seems to problematize for the audience the question of what is real and performed and thus trouble the mastery of their spectatorship, the play abandons this potentially radical position and unfolds along the lines of the enigma which is slowly revealed, placing the audience again in a position of mastery. Connie is once again both the obstacle and the object of Tristan's desire, with the Oedipal promise of mastery it brings and while Connie's desire is allowed a space on the stage it is firmly heterosexual. While she is cheated of her lover through his loss of memory the play configures her as a maternal loving figure and

embraces them as a couple at the end, allowing them to leave the stage and offering a putative closure to the audience. This play initially flirts with the idea of the constructed nature of desire through technology and thus intimates the arbitrary construction of gender through heterosexuality and the symbolic order but ultimately sexual difference is firmly re-inscribed as the natural order and the play refuses a critique of gender based on 'signification and discursive effects'.⁵² The illusion the play plays with it finally destroys with a 'truth' of gender, heterosexuality and narrative closure. We hope that Tristan gets better, we are made to forget the bigger question of a challenge/improvement in the representation of gender, female desire and 'woman'.

Reading Polly Stenham's *That Face* (2007) with close attention to gender raises some troubling questions. The central figure of Martha, the chronic alcoholic mother of two teenagers who are abandoned by their father was played by Lyndsey Duncan at the Royal Court. Out of control, dressed seductively in a silk shift, she is the archetypal castrating mother who destroys her son's clothes, symbolic of his identity, his maleness, forcing him into her nightdress, leaving him urinating like a child on her bed. His 'punishment' for not desiring a replacement for the mother in the Oedipal contract, leaves him helpless, unmanned. Fears of the powerful mother are projected onto the character of Martha, who is nonetheless still rendered powerless by the narrative drive as her madness and alcoholism means she leaves the stage defeated to be taken by doctors to an institution. She leaves with 'twisted dignity'⁵³ as if the play itself recognises somewhere a protagonist longing for freedom but only able to express her desires through the old Oedipal tale of longing for the male principle in her son, in Freudian conceit her baby or phallic substitute. 'I was so happy when I was pregnant with you. It was the happiest time of my life. I felt clear'.⁵⁴ This play, that received accolades from (male) critics for its 'emotional

⁵² Teresa de Laurentis *Technologies of Gender* p. 1.

⁵³ Polly Stenham *That Face* p. 97.

intelligence'⁵⁵, inclines one to ask whether such displays of female disintegration somehow empower critics to give their greatest accolades because such representations of woman engender a sense of male mastery in the male critic?

Jez Butterworth's hit play *Jerusalem* (2009) acclaimed as "one of the greatest plays of modern times"⁵⁶, illustrates a further trope concerning the representation of women in contemporary drama. Johnny Byron, the protagonist, is something of a latter day hero, a tainted saviour of local youth providing them with an alternative place to hang out, one not sanctioned by the politically correct brigade of castrating women: the female council worker who gives Byron his eviction order, or the local publican's wife who will not give her spouse any slack from his fiscal accounts which have forced him to partake of Byron's services as a drug dealer. The figure of a disappeared school girl, Pandora, hovers over this world. Byron, it transpires, has been hiding her from her violent father, who beats Byron, a prelude to Byron's eviction where he incants the giants of the past to come to his aid, providing us with a putative vision of a lost England. Pandora, largely silent and dressed as literally as an angel, functions as the exchange mechanism between the two patriarchs in the play, an ancient formulation and the basis for patriarchy 'where the woman's role constitutes the fulfilment of the narrative promise(made in the Freudian model, to the little boy) the reward at the end of the Oedipal journey; a representation which supports the male status of the mythical, culturally constructed subject'.⁵⁷

While Johnny Byron does not ultimately win the girl, it's a tragedy after all, he does possess her in a scene

⁵⁴ Ibid p. 96.

⁵⁵ Charles Spenser "One of the Most Thrilling Debuts for Decades," *Telegraph*, 26 April 2007

⁵⁶ "Review Round Up: Rooster Rylance Struts Again," *Watsonstage.com*, 11 February 2010

⁵⁷ Jeanie Forte *Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright in Feminist Theatre and Theory* ed Helene Keyssar p. 21.

where he slow dances with this child/angel, who is temporarily in his keep. In this play she becomes what is at stake or rather ownership of her becomes what is at stake. What this play demonstrates unconsciously in her appearance as an angel is the proximity of contemporary representations of woman to those of the Victorian angel in the house. Unless the representation of woman is radically questioned the old paradigms hauntingly reassert themselves, and seem to echo the Freudian constructions embedded in our culture. The women in this play are positioned as 'object/objective/obstacle by the Oedipal desire governing the narrative'.⁵⁸ They are either the castrating obstacles to Byron's territorial rights or the exchange mechanism between two rival patriarchs. The play is a lament for lost male power, and the trick is it is not really lost, as the huge amount of stage time taken by Byron demonstrates, as he struts his masculine prowess, is empowered by his control of Pandora, the lost girl, who is, from a feminist perspective well and truly erased. To use the feminist poststructuralist, psychoanalytic feminists to begin the radical unpicking of these constructions and to search their theory for hints as to possible paths out seems apposite in the light of such a contemporary condition. Bringing Pandora back as a central character within a realist paradigm is not going to work either for she would only reinstate the mastery of the audience who hold her in their gaze. She would still also be constructed under the sign 'woman', still condemned to be the female 'other' in the hierarchical binary male/female. What strategies might Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray hold for a new feminist dramaturgy?

⁵⁸ Ibid p. 21.

CHAPTER ONE

NEGATIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN *THE POSITIVE HOUR*

The Positive Hour is a play I wrote in 1996/7 which was produced by Out of Joint Theatre Company in 1997. I intend to interrogate this play in terms of its representations of gender, with specific reference to the French Feminists who offer a potent challenge to the realist paradigm and, due to their instance on the unconscious and the structuration of gender via entry into the symbolic, to the liberal/material feminism of both the play and texts such as Susan Faludi's *Backlash* which rely on a cultural/social model to decipher gender. In the 1998 edition of *Plays One* I wrote in the introduction concerning *The Positive Hour* 'Its starting point was my desire to look back and think, well, after twenty-five years of the women's movement, what?...suddenly ground that had seemed well established in terms of feminism appeared to be being eroded; women were 'babes' again. But it was also true that there was a puritanical edge to some aspects of the feminism I had embraced in the early eighties...I wanted to look back more coolly. (Growing up? Growing conservative?) I hoped the tension between these ambivalences would resonate for an audience.'⁵⁹

Susan Faludi's *Backlash* was published five years before *The Positive Hour*. It attempts to register the condition of feminism in the contemporary moment. What Faludi documents is the concerted effort of diverse interest groups to dismantle and reverse the advances of feminism for Western women in the late twentieth century. The mantra of the backlash, as Faludi perceives it, says to women 'You may be free and equal... but you have never been more miserable'.⁶⁰ Faludi takes the cultural temperature and pins down its reactionary

⁵⁹ April De Angelis *Plays One* Intro xi

⁶⁰ Susan Faludi *Backlash* p. 1.

ethos, ‘Women are unhappy precisely because they are free.’⁶¹ From popular psychology manuals, to Hollywood movies, media sound bites, academic revisionism and political pronouncements the word from the backlash was that ‘women’s distress was an unfortunate consequence of feminism...it created a myth among women that the apex of self-realisation could be achieved only through autonomy, independence and career.’⁶² But this ‘equality trap’⁶³ left them childless, man-less, ailing, unhappy and confused. To précis, Faludi questions this equality, noting that women were more likely to be poor in retirement, earn lower wages than men, are the majority of part time workers, complete the majority of household tasks (what has changed is that men think they do more in the home) and take a significantly reduced proportion of the top jobs in politics, industry and the law. Conversely, a 1991 poll in the *Guardian* found that women said ‘they need equal pay and equal job opportunities...the right to abortion without government interference...guaranteed maternity leave...decent childcare services. They have none of these. So how exactly how have we “won” the war for women’s rights?’⁶⁴ ‘The “man shortage” and the “infertility epidemic”...are chimeras, are chisels of a society wide backlash. They are part of a relentless whittling down process – much of it amounting to outright propaganda – that has served to stir women’s private anxieties and break their political wills...recruiting women to attack their own cause.’⁶⁵ This Backlash, Faludi argues, has historic precedents, such flare ups ‘have been triggered by the perception...that women are making great strides’⁶⁶. This is not just a resurgence of underlying misogyny but due to the perceived danger posed to men grappling with threats to their economic and social being, although Faludi does qualify this assertion by pointing to other entrenched interests which have investments in Backlash ideology, it suits the billion dollar beauty industry to keep women insecure, for

⁶¹ Ibid p. 2.

⁶² Ibid p. 4.

⁶³ Ibid p. 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid p. 8.

⁶⁵ Ibid p. 13.

⁶⁶ Ibid p. 13.

example. Other beneficiaries are TV evangelists who risked losing their predominantly female (paying) audience and corporations who sold products targeted at women homemakers. The most recent backlash as she sees it surfaced in the late 1970's among the evangelical Right, whose fundamentalist ideology became mainstream in government and by the mid-eighties passed into popular culture. These fears, Faludi argues, are mobilised not because of the so called pernicious effects of women achieving equality but 'by the increased possibility that they might win it'.⁶⁷

The Backlash, is not, Faludi points out, an organised movement and its 'lack of orchestration makes it harder to see...more effective.'⁶⁸Faludi compares the Backlash discourse of cultural products such as the film *Bridget Jones*, the eponymous heroine; single, unhappy, and in desperate quest for a man, with the reality of women's live where 'a Cosmopolitan survey of 106,000 women found that not only so do single women make more money than their married counterparts, they have better health and are more likely to have regular sex.'⁶⁹ Often women pedalling Backlash ideology were those who had no intention of fulfilling traditional female roles themselves because it would, at their own admission, be too depressing. But perhaps, Faludi ventures, they were allowed to be mouthpieces in conservative organisations precisely because they were apologists for reactionary visions of women in society. Their successes allowed at the price of denying power to other women. In summation, Faludi notes that the attack upon feminist ideas, the sustained discrediting of the movement, left women isolated and more likely to seek the answers for their discontents in their own beings as opposed to societies inequalities.

⁶⁷ Ibid p. 14.

⁶⁸ Ibid p. 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid p. 57.

Faludi draws from two strands of feminist thought, defined by Gayle Austin as liberal and materialist feminism.⁷⁰ Liberal in the sense that she had a reform agenda: adjust society, laws and practices to be fairer to individual women and materialist in the sense that she sees a structural underpinning to women's inequalities which according to Sue Ellen Case identify 'women as a class...women as a kind of surplus labour force necessary for the enforcement of lower wages and extending analysis into the domestic sphere where women work as free labour in the household.'⁷¹ Central to Faludi's text is the idea that there is a place of equality to be reached. It is due to the 'Backlash' that as women approach this utopia, time and again they are prevented from reaching it. Here the outer limits of Faludi's framing of the argument are reached and she is not prepared to go further. To suggest that, in Kristeva's formulation, there is no 'utopia' to be attained, that while woman is constructed via entry into the symbolic as the lacking 'other', to dismantle the symbolic means to enter psychosis, or that essentialist notions of 'woman' are perhaps productive of inequality is something that Faludi as a liberal/materialist feminist may consider a-productive. To place these caveats aside, or perhaps to think them through in relation to *The Positive Hour* what might be usefully brought to bear on the play which is consciously concerned with the nature of the Backlash, from a consideration of Faludi's text? I will be using a notion of theatrical realism which 'naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world,[...] operates in concert with ideology [...]depends on, insists on a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces[...]the arrangements of that world.'⁷²

ANALYSIS OF *THE POSITIVE HOUR*.

Returning to work after time off for an unspecified sickness, Miranda, a social worker and one time feminist

⁷⁰ Gayle Austin *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* p. 8.

⁷¹ Sue Ellen Case *Feminism and Theatre*. P. 73.

⁷² Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 5-6.

activist, meets Paula, a single mum in a violent relationship, whose child has been placed under temporary care order with another family. Miranda decides to take Paula on and redeem her, primarily through attendance at a support group aimed at increasing women's self-esteem and providing them with the confidence to take positive action in their lives. As the play progresses the forces ranged against Miranda; her friend Emma's failure as an artist, despite Miranda's promises, means she consequently takes revenge on Miranda by having a sado-masochistic affair with Miranda's husband, who, to add insult to injury, joins a men's group; Paula's inability to get her life back on track, due to her struggles with a low paid job, intransigent employer, childcare problems and return to her violent boyfriend which make getting custody of her child unlikely, finally lead Miranda, betrayed, appalled and having no fight left in her, to quit, despite the fact that the remaining and faithful group member still needs her help. The vacuum left by Miranda's exit prompts Nicola, a student, to worry about what the world without the values Miranda stood for would be like, she says 'I didn't just want a job....I wanted to feel something. That I was doing something important. Special.'⁷³The pronouncements from Paula that Nicola has a brilliant future ahead of her, underline the uncertainty.

Set in the backlash milieu, symbolised by Miranda's sickness, Miranda finds herself without the movement she once thrived upon and which she characterises in a utopian epiphany 'There were a group of us squatting a building we wanted for a women's refuge...this feeling shot through me...it was joy. Just joy...I am where I want to be. I am doing totally what I want to do and I believe I should be doing and it is completely liberating.'⁷⁴ But *The Positive Hour*, as claimed in the Faber introduction, is not a simple lament for a lost moment but also wants to interrogate the 'puritanical' elements of the woman's movement. Ranged against Miranda's world view

⁷³ April De Angelis *The Positive Hour* p. 86.

⁷⁴ *Ibid* p. 48.

is her best friend, the newly divorced Emma, who seems to mouth some of the concerns articulated by Faludi as backlash staples. Emma is ‘trawling’⁷⁵, ‘picking over the scrawny left behind’s for life’s partner...who’ll go on holiday with me...do you ever wish you’d had children?’⁷⁶ Emma resented having to throw away her mascara as an act of liberation and hiding the fact that she minded. Emma resents Miranda’s ambition for her to be an artist – why won’t Miranda let her limit her horizons without a guilt trip and allow her to go into the occasion card business? Miranda’s utopian aspirations ‘people have a great deal more in them than they realise’⁷⁷ are ironically overturned by events such as Emma’s liaison with the hooded man, Paula’s masochistic relationship with her lover and ultimately the reaction that Miranda has on discovering the mutilated baby which triggered her breakdown. Here the play seems to be hinting at the failure of feminism to fully account for irrational forces in its world view; pleasure in S and M sex, the insistent maternal instinct, the desire to hurt. But as Miranda retorts to Emma after she has expressed her neediness and despair at being alone ‘you can face these things and be a human being, You’ve got us. We’ll support you.’⁷⁸

It is Miranda who loses everything in *The Positive Hour*, ‘burnt out’ in backlash terminology – but is it through her own ‘unrealistic’ ambition or due to a world which no longer supports her political aspirations? Emma seems to have adapted more successfully, drawing S and M portraits for a living, but this can hardly be a utopian outcome. Paula’s failure to make something of her life in Miranda’s terms, it could be argued, is due to Miranda’s lack of consideration for the options open to working-class women in the market place. The cashier job that Paula has makes it hard to see her daughter and is not investable in, in career terms. Miranda’s utopian

⁷⁵ Ibid p. 26.

⁷⁶ Ibid p. 26.

⁷⁷ Ibid p. 6.

⁷⁸ Ibid p. 27.

idea of independence does not take into account the tedious, unrewarded nature of such work. Paula's allegiance to Miranda breaks down. This perhaps hints at the underlying instability of the term 'woman', are the differences greater than the similarities between women? The blanket term 'woman' suggests an essential shared nature between all those designated female. But perhaps other structural determinants such as class, race or geopolitical considerations are just as defining as gender and serve to destabilise the assumed commonalities marshalled under the signifier 'woman'. When Paula comments 'I don't talk to my sister, she's a cow'⁷⁹, the play is seeking to underline this instability and in so doing attacks one of the sacred cows of second wave feminism, the notion of sisterhood. Faludi's book, which needs to make a case for the backlash against women, may also elide the major differences that can be said to exist between different groups of women in order to promulgate the generality of its thesis.

The question remains whether *The Positive Hour* dramatizes the backlash or is infected by its tendency to 'stir women's private anxieties and break their political wills...recruiting women to attack their own cause.'⁸⁰The darker forces the play invokes which it refuses logical articulation, figured primarily in the mutilated baby are perhaps, arguably symbolic fears of women being 'led astray' by a feminism conceived as harmful to women and their natural role as promulgated by the backlash. As it is, Miranda, an older, political, opinionated, professional woman with a history of struggle, leaves the stage somehow subsumed in these fears, or tired of combatting them. The final question of the play is a stage direction, 'There is a bright flash of light, noise. Whether it is frightening as in a thunderstorm or hopeful as in a bright future is ambiguous'.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid p. 45.

⁸⁰ Susan Faludi *Backlash* p. 13.

⁸¹ April De Angelis *The Positive Hour* p. 86.

SCHOOL OF FRENCH FEMINISM AND *THE POSITIVE HOUR*.

What might the school of French feminisms bring to an analysis of *The Positive Hour*? Cixous labels the first section of *The Newly Born Woman* 'The Guilty One' in which she designates the sorceress as the historical precursor of the hysteric, or the reminiscences the hysteric suffers from being those of the sorceress. These roles, (hysteric, sorceress) are conservative, Cixous opines, because the sorceress ends up 'being destroyed and nothing is left of her but mythical traces. Even the hysteric ends up inuring others to her symptoms, and the family finally closes round her again, whether she is curable or incurable.'⁸² For Cixous, both the sorceress and the hysteric mark the end of a type, of how far a spit can go, that is the division from the phallogocentric Symbolic order. Miranda suffers from reminiscences; the mutilated child, the utopian past which makes the present moment in some sense unliveable for her. She is also perhaps, a shade of the sorceress, the healing woman, her unorthodoxy placing her on the margins. But as Cixous notes, both end up being destroyed which resonates with Miranda's disappearance at the end of the play. Is this because Miranda, as a representation similarly marks 'the end of a type, of how far a split can go?'⁸³

Miranda though is not a reactionary figure. She has instituted a consciousness raising group whose major tenet is female independence from men. Here she could be said to chime with Cixous' analysis that within patriarchy 'women must be circulated not circulate but the hysteric and the sorceress both violate exogamous exchange and transgress kinship'.⁸⁴ Miranda's gathering of women in order for them to become empowered in terms of self-definition is an implicit recognition that women must be active agents and not pawns in a patriarchal signifying system. However, like the challenge that the hysteric and the sorceress pose to patriarchy which is doomed to

⁸² Helene Cixous *The Newly Born Woman* p. 5.

⁸³ Ibid p .5.

⁸⁴ Ibid p. 56.

failure and re-containment, Miranda's enterprise also bites the dust. While, as Emma notes of earlier times, that Miranda and her husband 'stayed up for nights discussing whether his penis was an instrument of patriarchy'⁸⁵, Miranda at no point questions the structure of the binary man/woman, or the phallic signifier which constructs woman as lack. While it can be said she mounts a challenge, she does not deconstruct. As such she is as Cixous contends always working with the same metaphor of activity/passivity.⁸⁶ Miranda, and the play, are stuck much as Faludi is, with a notion of woman dependant on the opposition 'man'.

The first half of the play, however, concludes with the Miranda offering an image to the group by way of empowerment 'There's a story that the earth gave birth to the sea. That the earth was the most powerful goddess and the sea came from her belly.'⁸⁷ Is this a challenge to the logocentric universe structured along the hierarchical binary? Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray see radical potential in the relationship between the mother's body and the child, in terms of the maternal Semiotic as elucidated in the Kristevan *Chora*, for Cixous in the rethinking of the other that the maternal body prompts and for Irigaray in a reconfiguring of the lost, obscured relation between the mother and daughter, which opens out the possibility of a new relation of woman to her own body/desire. There is inherent in the pregnant female body, in that it challenges a self/other dichotomy, a dissipation of the self/other binary that underwrites logocentrism. A radical moving close to the other that for Cixous breaks down the deathly contract of the hierarchical binary, the master/slave dialectic⁸⁸. Is Miranda hinting here at a writing through the body, an *écriture féminine* that will rewrite the self/other contract and allow, in Cixous' terms liberation? But this 'opening' comes before the second half of the play and so is in some

⁸⁵ April De Angelis *The Positive Hour* p. 24.

⁸⁶ Helene Cixous *The Newly Born Woman* p. 63.

⁸⁷ April De Angelis *The Positive Hour* p. 51.

⁸⁸ Helene Cixous *The Newly Born Woman* p. 70.

senses left as a question mark for the audience. This *écriture féminine*, if that's what it is, is not engaged with again so explicitly in the play. Here too, the play does not manage to find its way out of a type, that is naturalism. The *Jouissance* which this utterance hints at and which Cixous suggests if liberated, written, would 'tell all the histories all the stories differently, the future would be incalculable, the historic forces would and will change hands and body....transform the functioning of all society'⁸⁹ is closed down. Instead the play commits what Cixous or Irigaray might term the dramatization of the self –same, refusing to allow *Jouissance* into the writing and instead producing what Cixous laments of her own history of reading a procession of 'mistreated, deceived, devastated, rejected, patient women'⁹⁰; women who are still slaves to the logocentric binary.

KRISTEVA AND THE SYMBOLIC.

Kristeva, however, diverges from Cixous. For Kristeva there is no escape from the Symbolic. Any belief in such a possibility is seen by Kristeva as a utopian fantasy and a dangerous one at that, 'a sort of laicized transcendence'.⁹¹ Kristeva designates this 'counter society' a paranoid type mechanism which she allies to terrorism. She further sees the archetype of belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, full, total, englobing mother with no frustration, no separation, with no break producing symbolism (no castration in other words) as explaining the 'paranoia' of the women's movement, and an invitation to violence. Miranda could be read as the 'englobing' mother, and Emma and Paula who do not fit neatly into her utopia as resistant to her tyranny. The dominatrix/dominated role play that Emma initiates with Roger, Miranda's husband, could be both an articulation of this resistance to Miranda's totalising world view or perhaps even a hint at an abandonment of the

⁸⁹ Ibid p. 65.

⁹⁰ Ibid p. 75.

⁹¹ Julia Kristeva *Women's Time in French Feminist Thought* p. 202.

roles assigned to men and women by gender. The swap takes place, not a re-imagining, but rather a radical confusion, perhaps it is that that disturbs Miranda? As a form of drag, as Judith Butler might have it, this role play which mimics the attributes of femininity and masculinity respectively, nods towards the performative nature of gender. Perhaps Emma is taking Cixous' type as far as it can go and not liberating herself and it is this limitation that Miranda cannot accept. A Kristevan reading might be more positive, a challenge to the binary for her surely holds more potential than a phantasmagoria of 'overthrowing'.

For Kristeva to be locked into a fantastic battle with the symbolic, to attack it from an imaginary 'outside' is only to reinforce its binary principle. Perhaps Miranda's ultimate demise is due to her transgression into the role of the englobing mother at the end of the first half of the play. This straying from reality, rather than being a moment of liberation made possible through *écriture féminine*, is rather a psychotic straying into the territory of the pre-oedipal, englobing mother who threatens to dismantle the symbolic and lead her followers precisely nowhere, or rather into the territory of psychosis. What does Kristeva offer by way of a political solution? She notes that in contemporary attitudes she sees 'a retreat from sexism...the multiplicity of every person's identifications...this fluidity will be put into play against the threats of death which are unavoidable when...a self and an/other...are constituted.'⁹² A consideration of this unsubstantiated position when set against the 'backlash' evidence which sees rather an incitement to reinforce traditional gender roles might suggest an equally utopian wish fulfilment. The final scene of *The Positive Hour* suggests not a hopeful future but an unknown one, suffering the loss of the political force of the women's movement. Kristeva might see this as the sane dethroning of a paranoid, englobing mother, Cixous might give the reading of a type not gone far enough to break the binary and liberate the as yet unborn 'newly born woman'. Miranda is seemingly caught between the

⁹² Ibid p.210

two possibilities; deadlocked, she is ushered off stage.

If there is to be no present utopia, either through a rewriting of history via *Jouissance*, or an establishment of a new ethical fluidity, then what might have allowed Miranda a different exit? The concept of a traditional exit line ushers in Elin Diamond's analysis of theatre which 'exists in a perpetual dialectic of the visible/invisible, of appearance and disappearance...representation has been called phallic because it relieves at the unconscious level, castration anxiety. Thus the scopical regime of the classic realist text reproduces this phallicism.'⁹³ In Psychoanalytic theory what is seen is never neutral 'scopical desire is directed towards substitute objects...that compensate for...loss'.⁹⁴ That is what is kept off stage is analogous to the suppressed female sexuality constructed as lack in order to allow the phallus to assume a plenitude in representation. What must be disappeared and kept off stage underpins what is allowed to be seen, and although the imaginary off-stage world can have a reality for the audience what takes precedence is what is made visible, which in the logic of the scopical regime is 'real'.

PERMISSIBLE VISIBILITY.

Cixous remarked that the question is asked of woman 'what does she want' precisely because there is so little room for her desire in society. This question conceals the most immediate and urgent question 'How do I pleasure?' What is feminine *jouissance*, where does it happen, how does it inscribe itself- on the level of the body or of her unconscious? And then how does it write itself?'⁹⁵ Cixous imagines that a liberation of sexuality and the concomitant transformation of each one's relation to their body will lead to radical political

⁹³ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 85.

⁹⁴ *Ibid* p. 85.

⁹⁵ Helene Cixous *The Newly Born Woman* p. 83.

transformations. Diamond suggests that although Churchill is a writer who cannot be accused as Cixous has been of keeping offstage the 'political and material differences within and between the genders'⁹⁶ and would find Cixous' disregard for historical materialism 'repugnant'⁹⁷, Diamond nonetheless finds in Churchill's work a 'certain obsession with the limits of the signifying body'⁹⁸ which she feels resonates with Cixous' desire to come to new revolutionary possibilities through writing the body. As if present limitations with theatrical representations of the body, for example 'the actor's body is a site of experience that cannot have experience'⁹⁹ which is commensurate with the body of say, the hysteric, who can only make a bid for freely experienced *Jouissance* through a kind of agonised mimicry.

Diamond notes that in Caryl Churchill's *Fen* the boundaries of what is representable are extended allowing a space for female desire to appear. When Churchill opens up the 'regime of permissible visibility', she is perhaps illuminating Cixous' exhortation to allow a new space for female desire. While *The Positive Hour* 'shifts the frame'¹⁰⁰ as it writes of women's lives rather than allowing representations of marginalised women figures to be figures pleasuring the male gaze, the play still operates in what may be termed a phallogomorphic regime of exits and entrances. The characters exit from the stage; they have, in a realistic framing of the play nowhere else to go. The regime of desire in which they operate is never challenged and when Miranda leaves the stage exhausted, she has in a sense failed in her operations as an impresario to orchestrate 'a newly born woman'. She leaves, accepting her castration, with no new 'joy'¹⁰¹ or accessed *Jouissance* to write a new world.

⁹⁶ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 83.

⁹⁷ *Ibid* p. 83.

⁹⁸ *Ibid* p. 84.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*. p. 86

¹⁰⁰ Gayle Austin *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* p. 8.

¹⁰¹ April De Angelis *The Positive Hour* p. 48.

Diamond suggests that a feminist mimesis would use a version of the Brechtian ‘A’ effect to expose the strictures of gender. If feminism is concerned with the ‘multiple and complex signs of a woman’s life; her desires, politics, class, ethnicity, race...her historicity’¹⁰² then Brechtian theory, which chooses to foreground the constructed nature of the historical conditions which keep her from choosing and changing, will put that historicity into view. Miranda’s role play sessions with her group, which allows them to step outside of themselves and see how they may be constrained to make choices, could be seen as a Brechtian technique, also drawing attention to the theatrical nature of performance and comically reminding us that we are watching actors act somebody acting. This gesture, however, is contained within a realistic framework that returns actors to their parts, ‘laminating body to character’.¹⁰³ This returns the female performer to her function as fetish.

There is a case to argue that the overtly political, feminist subject matter of *The Positive Hour* serves to trouble the easy viewing of these women characters as fetish. This seems characteristic of a play, which, like its central character, is aware of the need for change but can only find the means to partially effect it. Like Miranda who is feeling sick and exhausted by her largely futile efforts and retires defeated by the impasse of the present state of affairs, the play fails similarly as it has not found a way to break into new forms of representation.

THE HYSTERIC’S ENIGMA.

Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis* discusses Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* as a representative nineteenth century classic text in relation to the hysteric’s enigma which she deciphers as providing the theatre of the time with one of its ‘most satisfying, validating plots.’¹⁰⁴ Truth is finally revealed, the hysteric understood and the ‘interplay of truth and sex’ is finally fixed. Diamond sees this as a conspiracy which positions the spectator to recognise and verify

¹⁰² Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 46.

¹⁰³ *Ibid* p. 51.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid* p. 24.

its monolithic truths. The woman at the centre is the problem, cure her, cure society, re-establish the logocentric, phallogocentric order she troubles. At the end of *The Positive Hour* Miranda reveals her secret and by so doing, becomes decipherable. She incarnates the spectre of the dead baby at the heart of the play, and puts it down to a kind of barbarism which she fears is the product of an un-enlightened world, but also of an unaccountable side of human nature which can no longer be adequately framed by Miranda's brand of feminism, or is it in the backlash era that such horrors await us? Does this baby resonate on some level as the return of the repressed? Or in Kristevan terms, do the cuts that colonise the baby's body represent the polymorphous body of the infant riven by the drives and rhythms of the *chora*? The body which has not yet had its desire disciplined by the Symbolic? Does this image of the abused baby serve as a warning that psychosis, if the abuse is read as a psychotic act, is the price of a retreat from the patriarchal Symbolic into the world of the engulfing, paranoid mother? This reading would resonate with Miranda's retreat from a world which appears too hostile to her, the action of an individual suffering from a paranoid delusion? As Kristeva would point out this is not a satisfactory strategy.

Kristeva critiques the women's movement for rejecting motherhood and characterises the refusal of the paternal function by lesbians and single mothers as the most violent forms of the rejection of the Symbolic.¹⁰⁵ It is Kristeva's belief that to oppose the binary is to be locked into it all the more securely. The nightmarish image of the abused child is resonant both of a concoction of the backlash psyche, frightening women about the choices they have freely made not to be mothers and a Kristevan recognition that refusal of the patriarchal Symbolic ultimately only re-enforces it. It could be said that Miranda caught between the imperatives of both these forces is silent on the subject and ushered off stage.

¹⁰⁵ Julia Kristeva *Woman's Time* in *French Feminist Thought* Ed Moi. p. 200.

Teresa de Laurentis rewrites the Oedipal structuring of the subject, reconfiguring the loss of attachment to the mother as the girl's castration. Diamond figures the work of performance artist Peggy Shaw who ventriloquises her mother reminding us that the mother's desire is always spectral, always returning to trouble the present as a strategy for feminist mimesis. If the mother could look back it would dispel the woman as fetish in phallic representation.¹⁰⁶ The relationship between Miranda and Nicola could be seen as bearing traces of this forbidden desire. Nicola's new sense of herself, her new subjectivity is being modelled by Miranda, a mother figure, in place of Nicola's absent mother. As Nicola says 'I want to do what Miranda does'¹⁰⁷. Miranda's exit finishes this story prematurely. Is this because the backlash ideology makes Miranda's brand of feminism so hard to implement or is it because the Kristeva's regressive, englobing mother who banishes the paternal function is a faulty model which in leaving Miranda concedes? This is the dilemma writ large; to submit to the phallogocentric symbolic and submit to lack or to challenge it and embrace potential psychosis? It's no wonder Miranda beats a retreat under such a choice; is the image of the destroyed child the result of the psychotic work of such a mother or a gruesome amplification of the castrated, lacking girl child? The play leaves this question open.

Classical mimesis produces the order of aesthetic time where 'what is purged is time- the menace of successiveness, of all life falling haphazardly through time into accident and repetition.'¹⁰⁸, with its comforting historical narrative to limit meaning and its concomitant position of mastery for the spectator. If *The Positive Hour* in some senses mourns and challenges the idea of progress; the trajectory of Miranda's journey, the

¹⁰⁶ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 160.

¹⁰⁷ April De Angelis *The Positive Hour* p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 165.

economic, political and ‘instinctual’ forces that topple Miranda’s attempt to reinstate a utopian practice, Roger’s inability to complete his work on Hegel (symbol of historical progression), the play also employs a linear, causal narrative structure which seems to uphold the very ethic it seeks to question, that is progress. For Faludi the idea that progress is purely an ideological construction would be an anathema. As a reformist, who sees the struggle for women’s rights being eroded the argument that progress is a fiction is a pointless one. Without history women would be stuck in the eternal same of patriarchy. But the point is that history is the history of the patriarchal binary in which women are stuck in the eternal same. For the French feminists unless the binary is challenged the self-same is precisely what women are condemned to enact. They agree on the fact that it must be challenged but not as to how far it can be challenged. Miranda seems to be a creation oscillating between the reformist Faludi, Kristeva’s englobing mother and Cixous’ sorceress. Collapsing under the weight of these demands she exits the stage exhausted, perhaps opaque and incomprehensible. However, if a reading of the play is possible which foregrounds these questions, it may be possible to argue that the play has this very point to make.

BUTLER AND THE QUESTION OF PRIMARY IDENTITY.

For Judith Butler gender is ‘an insistent impersonation that passes as the real’.¹⁰⁹ She states that the ‘political task is not to refuse representational politics –as if we could’.¹¹⁰ But rather a genealogical critique must be mobilised to ‘investigate the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin’.¹¹¹ She suggests that ‘Feminist theory ought not to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics – instead we ought to ask - what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical

¹⁰⁹ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* p.6

¹¹⁰ *Ibid* p.11

¹¹¹ *Ibid* p.5

critique of the categories of identity? What new shape of politics emerges when identity as a common ground no longer constrains the discourse on feminist politics? And to what extent does the effort to locate a common identity as the foundation of feminist politics preclude a radical enquiry into the political construction and regulation of identity itself?¹¹² Butler notes that the feminist subject is discursively produced by the very system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation. Perhaps this is a further reason that Miranda, cornered, leaves the stage. Butler resonates here with the French feminists theory as to the binary system of the symbolic which produces 'woman' as lack in relation to 'man' as endowed, potent, active. How can this subject 'woman' enact her own liberation from a construction that will always return her to the self-same. While Butler is an 'anti-essentialist' and the French Feminists have been dismissed as essentialists, a closer reading of them proves them to be not dismissed so easily. Cixous does not see *écriture féminine* as only the province of women for example, neither is the Kristevan *Chora* is not unavailable to male poets. Kristeva might read in Butler a utopian wish to conceive of the gendered body a purely a gesture of representation which circumvents the unconscious and certain embodied experiences of 'woman' such as maternity. It is not that the Kristeva denies that gender is structured through the symbolic moment for example but that the attempt to undo such structuration leads to the impasse of psychosis, the ultimate denial of agency.

For Faludi, the interventions on behalf of woman, which she never troubles as a category and would seek to maintain as an identity to be mobilised politically, are of tremendous importance in this time of backlash. She would agree with Miranda that the 'utopian' time of the 70's and 80's radically improved the lives of Western women. Like Miranda she does not try to dismantle the category of women. But as Miranda tries to shore up this category the deeper the hole she digs; woman is lack in the patriarchal symbolic. Perhaps Miranda is

¹¹² Ibid p.6

implicated as she seeks power from the 'fictive universality' in which liberal feminism constructs patriarchy to shore up its own claims and to produce women's common subjugated experience'?¹¹³ Defeated by say, Paula's class challenging her hegemonic view of the world, she leaves the stage.

A reading of *The Positive Hour* thus produces many possible directions for a future feminist dramaturgy. As Elin Diamond points to in *Unmaking Mimesis* there are perhaps multiple strategies for unseating woman as fetish for the male gaze, but as close reading of *The Positive Hour* shows any easy victory is a utopian pipe dream. If liberal, material feminism is a close ally of stage realism what possibilities will closer examination of the French feminists release in readings of the plays of Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane which move beyond the simplistic designation of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva as essentialists.

CHAPTER TWO

SPECULAR INSURRECTION AND FORBIDDEN GAMES IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S *A NUMBER*.

Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (2002) with its act of doubling and redoubling, maybe be usefully analysed in relation to the project of applying the theories of the French feminists to her works in order to delineate strategies in which a new dramaturgy may be employed to provoke gender trouble. How might the act of replication, testified to in *A Number* render the world of the play 'feminine' or enact a refusal at least to reflect back the masculine 'self- same'?¹¹⁴ In investigating the dramatic and performance strategies Churchill employs, by applying the work of Luce Irigaray, I hope to gain insights into the means by which her teasing of the notion of mimesis might lend dramatic strategies to the project of troubling representations of gender on stage and thus discover a practice that moves beyond the classic realist paradigm.

Salter, is the patriarch of *A Number*, he has three sons, the second two, Bernard 2 and Michael Black are clones of the first, Bernard 1. The play is structured around the conflict spread over a series of visits by the sons to their father. Initially none of the sons knew of the existence of each other. The inciting incident of the play which occurs before the play starts is the accidental meeting of two of the brothers. At first it might

¹¹⁴ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* vi.

appear that in banishing the bodies of women from the stage, Churchill is obeying the Aristotelian dictate

that denies that woman can exemplify tragic virtues to the same degree as a male protagonist because women

suffer ‘an erosion of character due to the strain of misfortune’¹¹⁵ because she is an ‘inferior being’¹¹⁶ and so

cannot by definition be as truly noble as their male counterparts and therefore will produce an inferior brand

of tragedy? Is *A Number* taking this injunction to heart? Further, in her creation of Salter, the patriarchal

exemplar of *A Number*, has Churchill not reproduced, embodied the ‘epistemological, morphological, universal

standard for determining the true...the masculine, a metaphoric stand-in for God the Father.’?¹¹⁷ Salter it seems

is the centre of this world, holds all the truths and never leaves the stage, he has committed the greatest

transgression in allowing the cloning of his sons, he had held quite literally the power of life and death over

them. These qualities add up to leading man material and indeed (sir) Michael Gambon took the role in the

premier production at the Royal Court Theatre in 2002. How can Churchill be said to be instituting gender

trouble?

Bernard (B2) has sprung himself upon Salter much as he is sprung upon us, the audience, plunging us in

¹¹⁵ Angela Curran ‘Feminism and the Narrative Structures of the *Poetics*’. *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*. Ed. Cynthia A Freeland. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, p. 295.

¹¹⁶ Aristotle *Classical Literary Criticism* p. 51.

¹¹⁷ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 31.

media res, to an unusual family drama; as Bernard 2 suggests 'a twin would be a surprise but a number', Salter rejoins 'a number any number is a shock'.¹¹⁸ The word 'number' replicating uneasily in this exchange,¹¹⁹ Bernard is alarmed that the indefinite pronoun 'a' produces 'worries about authenticity in a world of reproductions. This anxiety derives from an essentialising mind-set, which Churchill aligns with a patrilineal logic'.¹²⁰ The family produces the 'I' that anchors the subject either by the 'linguistic opposition to 'you' or against the mother whose unlikeness the child recognises as a necessary precondition for language'.¹²¹ Language is already troubled in the first Salter/Bernard2 encounter as B2 struggles to position himself in this new logic 'what if someone else is the one, the first one, the real one and I'm'¹²² even here the one proliferates against its nature. Lacan's theory of the subject's entry into language when he describes the 'unlikeness' of the mother which the child must recognise in order to enter the Symbolic. But it is precisely this formulation of subjectivity that Irigaray takes issue with in the *Speculum of the Other Woman* in which she vigorously contests the Freudian forgetting of female desire.

¹¹⁸ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p .4.

¹¹⁹ R. Darren Gobert 'On Performance and Selfhood in Caryl Churchill. *The Cambridge Guide to Caryl Churchill*. Ed Elaine Aston, Elin Diamond. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 119.

¹²⁰ R. Darren Gobert *Ibid* p. 119.

¹²¹ R. Darren Gobert *Ibid* p. 106.

¹²² Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 4.

IRIGARAY'S SELF-SAME AS APPLIED TO A NUMBER

In the first section *The Blind Spot of an Old Dream Of Symmetry* Irigaray anatomises Freud's formulations of the Oedipus Complex which she summarises as marking woman as lacking the organ of privilege, and thus unable to represent their desires in the male symbolic, women are positioned as the mirrors to reflect back the masculine 'self-same'. It is this 'self- same' that Churchill could be said to parody in *A Number*, as Salter's ambitions for his lineage have lead him to clone his own son innumerable times in this world which eradicates female desire and leads to the reproduction of the male Symbolic where 'the subject plays at multiplying himself.he is the father, mother and child(ren). And the relationship between them. He is masculine and feminine and the relationship between them. What mockery of generation, parody of copulation and genealogy, drawing its strength from the same model, from the model of the same'¹²³, *A Number* can be read as subversively making this word flesh.

Salter tries to stem Bernard 2's tide of anxiety by assuring him that Salter is his father, and that the others are copies, because to be a copy, and not an original, is as we have seen, to become embroiled in the politics of mimesis, which has historically caused anxiety in the phallogocentric universe. Mimesis is 'impossibly double,

¹²³ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 136.

simultaneously the stake and the shifting sands, order and potential disorder, reason and madness...in

imitating...the model, the mimos becomes an other, is being an other, thus a shape-shifting Proteus, a panderer

of reflections, a destroyer of forms.¹²⁴ It is what 'Plato most dreaded, impersonation'.¹²⁵ Bernard 2 would love

the others to be 'things'¹²⁶ Salter's words which Bernard 2 at first takes exception too, but then retracts his

disagreement 'of course I want them to be things, I do think they're things, I don't think they're, of course I do

think they're them just as much as I'm me but I. I don't know what I think, I feel terrible.'¹²⁷The terrible

anxiety around the letter 'I' finally stops Bernard in his discursive tracks at the penultimate full stop. The

patriarchal 'I', the subject's prize for entry into the symbolic is finding its brand becoming contaminated by

impersonation. Syntax itself begins to fragment, the goal of the sentence, like the goal of the individual, or

indeed the dramatic character in Aristotelian drama becomes opaque. The transparency of language is at stake,

and although Bernard recuperates, his subsequent 'I's' are troubled, an insistent repetition that resonates with

the enforced full stop of that rogue 'I', reminding us all of the flagrant instability of this pronoun, both ours and

everyone's. A hint that the patriarchal symbolic is a construct with an instability at its core, in that it aims to

universalise, naturalise its own construction while being dependant on the othering of woman to provide, in

¹²⁴ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* intro v.

¹²⁵ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* intro v.

¹²⁶ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 5.

¹²⁷ Caryl Churchill *Ibid* p. 5.

Irigaray's terms, its inherently deceptive self-same. A point Churchill makes with dramatic aplomb.

Churchill satirises 'the law of the father' with Salter's initial blindness to the implications for the patriarchal Symbolic and with his the register of response to Bernard 2's potentially castrating discovery of his non-uniqueness; Salter calls on the old gods 'we can sue'¹²⁸ 'Sue, who?' retorts Bernard 2, a nod to the mystery of origins the play is deconstructing. In designating the other Bernards as 'things' but realising that he may himself be one of these 'things', Bernard 2 is discovering himself as other, a displacement which threatens to overturn the primacy of the male symbolic and create gender trouble. Isn't that what Irigaray has analysed as the role of the woman in the patriarchal symbolic, to provide mastery, being, for the 'original' and originating phallus? Isn't Bernard 2 in some way an honorary woman; a thing unable to claim authenticity and so mastery? But how does this womanish Bernard 2 rebound on the authenticity of Salter, for god the father can surely only produce originals? Irigaray's reconfiguration of Plato's cave analogy where the cave equipped with the chained men looking 'in phallic straight lines'¹²⁹ all one way at projections on the cave wall in front of them redefines the cave a 'womb/theatre'¹³⁰. What Irigaray gives is 'a mimetic system' that completely belies the concept of

¹²⁸ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 5.

¹²⁹ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 245.

¹³⁰ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* xi.

origin or model, for to the prisoners what they experience as origin is already mimicry, a representation of a repetition. Hence mimesis without a true referent; mimesis without truth'¹³¹

With this reconfigured womb/theatre, Irigaray wittily retrieves and confirms Plato's worst fears about theatre, female duplicity and, by implication, maternity. Platonic philosophy wants to place man's origins, not in the dark uncertain cave, but in his recognition of the (Father's) light'. The philosopher wants to forget – wants to prove illusory – his female origins.'¹³² But in this theatre/womb which ironically disturbs the self-same,¹³³ Irigaray warns that we will (playfully) lose our bearings as soon as we set foot in the Cave for it will 'turn your head, set you walking on your hands'.¹³⁴ Once unchained from the patriarchal lineage, as the Bernards ironically find themselves after Salter's literal enactment of the patriarchal Symbolic imperative, banishment of the female, which tests its Mastery, this womb/theatre of Churchill, a theatre of female duplicity, an 'ocular funnyhouse'¹³⁵ of mimicry unleashed does ultimately assault Salter's control.

Bernard 2's fear at the shock he might experience if he unexpectedly could 'suddenly see myself coming round the corner'¹³⁶, is akin to Freud's notion of the uncanny, an instance where something can be familiar,

¹³¹ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* xi.

¹³² Elin Diamond *Ibid* xi.

¹³³ Elin Diamond *Ibid* xi.

¹³⁴ Elin Diamond *Ibid* xi.

¹³⁵ Elin Diamond *Ibid* xi.

yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange.¹³⁷ This equivocal sensation is resonant of the breakdown of binary categories; self/other, male /female, real/copy upon which the patriarchal Symbolic is predicated and which in *A Number* is being put under such representational Pressure .In fact, the whole of *A Number* can be read under the sign of unheimlich; of that which ought to remain secret and hidden coming to life.¹³⁸ Further, an investigation of the hidden meanings behind the seemingly austere title *A Number* also include a short musical entertainment, the colloquial meaning ‘to do a number on someone’ meaning to play a trick or in relation to that to ‘get someone’s number’; to rumble them. Churchill is doing a lot of rumbling in this play, not just of her character Salter by the three clones but of the patriarchal symbolic and its dependency upon the othering of the feminine

A Number is divided into five sections, in the first of which we learn of the dread idea that this unique individual we see before us is one of a number. This accords with the idea that the scope of the uncanny includes an ‘uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton’¹³⁹ this doubt is dispelled by the conceit that this Bernard is ‘real’ and the others as Salter tells him are created from some ‘some scrapings of your skin’¹⁴⁰ recalling Kristeva’s abject, ‘where one reacts adversely to that which

¹³⁶ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 8.

¹³⁷ Sigmund Freud *The Uncanny* p. 3.

¹³⁸ Sigmund Freud *Ibid* p. 4.

¹³⁹ Sigmund Freud *Ibid* p. 5.

has been forcefully cast out of the symbolic order'.¹⁴¹ Salter's weak riposte in keeping something outside, outside, does not work, for Bernard 2 has learned he is part of a 'batch'¹⁴² and that as he states 'none of us are original'.¹⁴³ Salter tries to reassure Bernard 2 'You're the only one', that is, that matters, that Salter wanted. But this resolution is unstable; 'did you give me the same name as him?' asks Bernard 2, 'Does it make it worse' replies Salter? Surely he knows it does, for it is in the nature of the uncanny, the return of what should be hidden that any 'doubling or interchanging of the self...the repetition of the same features...or even the same names'¹⁴⁴ causes anxiety, here read as ontological, phallogocentric anxiety.

Irigaray conceives of the construction of woman in the male symbolic as 'A man minus the possibility of re-presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman. In this proliferating desire of the same, death will be the only representative of an outside, of a heterogeneity, of an other: woman will assume the function of representing death (of sex/organ), castration, and man will be sure as far as possible of achieving mastery, subjugation. By triumphing over the anguish (of death) through intercourse, by sustaining sexual pleasure despite or thanks to, the horror of closeness to that absence of sex/penis, that mortification of sex that is

¹⁴⁰ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Sigmund Freud *The Uncanny* p. 3.

¹⁴² Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 10.

¹⁴³ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud *The Uncanny* p. 9.

evoked by woman; the trial of intercourse will have, moreover, as teleological parameter the challenge of an indefinite procreation of the son, this same procreating father.¹⁴⁵ It is notable that the horror of closeness to the repressed idea of an absent penis aligns the woman with the uncanny, and the triumph over the uncanny is the production of a son. 'The unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former (heim) home of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time'.¹⁴⁶ The familiar, that is repressed, the womb, calls to mind of course, Irigaray's uterine challenge to Plato's Cave, the repressed 'feminine earth'¹⁴⁷, the repression of which provides the patriarchal Symbolic with its mastery. It is the genius of Churchill's play that Salter's pursuit of the ultimate logic of the patriarchal Symbolic, the banishment of woman should, in the form of the repetitious return of the repressed reveal to him the three clones who ultimately between them unravel and dismantle the patriarchal imperative. Only Bernard 1 comes legitimately from the womb but it is precisely this circumvention of the womb and concomitantly, the phallus, in the process of reproduction, that unmans Salter, or is possibly the making of Bernard 3 and hints at a new order.

Bernard 2 and Michael, created through technological intervention have much in common with Donna Haraway's cyborg which is 'a creature in a post gender world, it has no truck with bi sexuality, pre Oedipal

¹⁴⁵ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 29.

¹⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud *The Uncanny* p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 247.

symbiosis, unalienated labour or other seductions to organic wholeness'¹⁴⁸. Cyborgs skip the Oedipus complex

and as such may come to challenge the patriarchal Symbolic. As Haraway adds 'The main trouble with

cyborgs of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism[...]but

illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their fathers.'¹⁴⁹ *A Number* demonstrates this

unfaithfulness via the interrogation of Salter by his son's and the ultimate insurrection of Michael Black who

rather than be locked into the father's narrative as are the two Bernards circumvents it altogether.

'So they stole – don't look at me – they stole your genetic material and' says Salter at the top of scene two

as we witness for the first time the incarnation of the troubled Bernard I. Does Salter avoid his son's look

because it's threatening or because the whole question of seeing is now being put under a peculiar pressure? Is

the repressed of this sentence that it is Salter who really does not want to look, reminding us as audience that our

seeing is also being questioned, troubled? What exactly are we seeing? The same actor playing a different being

who was identical to the last but is, in 'character' somewhat different. It is not by looking that we will know this

individual as different but by something else. The displacement of such specular power has deep resonance. 'In

Aristotelian dramatic theory, theatrical identification serves precisely to consolidate the subject position of the

¹⁴⁸ Donna Haraway *The Haraway Reader* p. 10.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid* p. 10.

spectator. Acknowledging his similarity with the hero the spectator fears, recognizing his difference he concomitantly pities. Since we learn as we look in Aristotle's immortal formulation, presumably the theatre going impulse inheres partly in the desire for a refined self- knowledge, gained in contemplation of the theatrical other.¹⁵⁰ But the challenge to our look, our spectatorship, our brand of knowing, is put on mimetic trial in the ocular funny-house of *'A Number'*.

Irigaray writes of Women's castration as being defined as 'her having nothing you can see, as her having nothing. That is to say no sex/organ that can be seen in a form capable of founding its reality, reproducing its truth. *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being, no truth.*'¹⁵¹ However, Irigaray continues 'The girl comes out of castration complex feminised by a decision which she is duty bound to ratify; there cannot be a nothing to be seen. A something not subject to the rule of visibility or of specularization, might yet have some reality, might be intolerable to a man. It would serve to threaten the theory and practice of the representation.'¹⁵² It is precisely this 'nothing to be seen' in terms of the specular difference between the three Clones, because they are all played by the same actor, which hints at the fact that difference cannot be seen, or that the primacy of the look, the gaze, is dethroned allowing for the reality of a truth that is unseen, to be

¹⁵⁰ R. Darren Gobert 'On Performance and Selfhood in Caryl Churchill. *The Cambridge Guide to Caryl Churchill*. Ed Elaine Aston, Elin Diamond. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p 111.

¹⁵¹ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 48.

¹⁵² Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 48.

entertained, resonant of the hidden, discredited female genitals which are in Irigaray's words 'A nothing threatening the process of production, reproduction and mastery and profitability, of meaning, dominated by the phallus – that master signifier whose law of functioning erases, rejects, denies the surging up...of a heterogeneity capable of reworking the principle in its authority.'¹⁵³

IRIGARAY AND THE STRANGENESS OF THE NON-IDENTICAL

Irigaray pursues her questioning 'Why does having nothing that can be seen threaten his (the boy child's) libidinal economy? ...In boys the castration complex arises after they have learnt (from the sight of the female genitals) that the organ they value so highly need not necessarily accompany the body...here again the little girl will have to act like the little boy, feel the same urge to see, look in the same way, and her resentment at not having a penis must follow and corroborate the horrified astonishment the little boy feels when faced with the strangeness of the non-identical, the non-identifiable.'¹⁵⁴ Thus, the little girl is supposed to have cloned her feelings from that of the boy child which disallows a separate response from the girl child. But in the ocular funny-house of *A Number* we witness the uncanny horror of the replication of the identical (as opposed to the non-identical) and at the same time have a growing awareness that the very binary identical/different is

¹⁵³ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 50.

¹⁵⁴ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 50.

beginning to break down under our scrutiny for it is apparent that what we understand from a process which exceeds specularly that teaches us that this binary is in fact inadequate to explain the three sons who are simultaneously identical and non-identical. The act of performance provides us with the three individuated beings who nonetheless are the same person. Churchill may be travesty-ing castration fears when Bernard 1 accuses Salter 'you sent me away and had this other one made from some bit of my body...what bit...not a limb'¹⁵⁵. 'A speck' Salter reassures him, but this of course is alternative castration through the back door. Bernard 1 has a hysterical reaction and begins talking of a heightened, unhinged version of masculinity 'you go into a pub someone throws his beer into your face you're supposed to say sorry, he only had three stitches'¹⁵⁶. The stitches of the cicatrix are reminiscent of a castration wound, the hidden behind this scenario. And in the disfigurement of a face an echo of the wish that Bernard 1 wants his face to be his own and to destroy any copies.

HYSTERIA: A PRIVILEGED DRAMATISATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

If Hysteria in women is that which cannot be legitimately reproduced because it is othered, this 'reproduction' of violence by Bernard 1 is the 'legitimate' repetition of a behaviour that will assert a psychotic

¹⁵⁵ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 16.

¹⁵⁶ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 21.

individuality/masculinity that will destroy all in that impedes it as it obeys the dictates of the patriarchal

Symbolic, to have mastery. Bernard 1 is trapped, as Haraway writes, in 'The plot of original unity out of which

difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature.'¹⁵⁷ Unlike the

cyborg which 'skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the western sense, this is its

illegitimate promise that might lead to a subversion of the teleology of star wars.'¹⁵⁸ If the patriarchal Symbolic

and the psychotic drive to be unique at the cost of the feminine is not reconfigured, then perhaps Churchill is

suggesting war will be the outcome. Irigaray writes of hysteria that it is condemned because it occurs outside a

system of reproduction, that is, it is not reproducible within terms of the patriarchal Symbolic. 'The hysteria

phenomenon is that privileged dramatisation of female sexuality. Hysteria is stigmatised as a place where

fantasies, ghosts and shadows fester and must be unmasked, interpreted and brought back to the reality of a

repetition, a reproduction, A representation that is congruent to, consistent with the original'.¹⁵⁹ But here, the

faulty reproduction of the non-identical-identical clones flouts reproducibility and may account for some of the

hysterical reaction to being 'cloned' that is exhibited by Bernard 1 and to some extent by Bernard 2. Although

the discourse of Bernard 2 is already moving away from the idea that the Bernard's are 'things'¹⁶⁰ and is

¹⁵⁷ Donna Haraway *A Haraway Reader* p. 8.

¹⁵⁸ Donna Haraway *Ibid* p. 8.

¹⁵⁹ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 60.

¹⁶⁰ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 4.

gesturing towards a new politics of representation which is linked strongly in the play to a politics of performance. That the two Bernards and Michael are all played by the same actor and so exceed the ability of the gaze to control that is, choose between them, resonant of Irigaray's description of Oedipus who 'will end up losing sight of it altogether, by being unable to distinguish wife from mother, mother from wife. *Because it has neither "truth" nor "copies", nothing of its "own", this (so called) female sexuality, this woman's sex/organ will blind anyone taken up in its question*'.¹⁶¹ But perhaps, as Churchill is suggesting through the politics of performance, it is a new seeing we need.

Irigaray reinforces the link between the gaze and patriarchy 'the specular organisation leaves... both the female sexual function and the female maternal function in an amorphous suspension of their instinctual economy and/or shapes them in ways quite heteronomous to that economy. Their "economy" will be governed by demands of drives particularly sadistic or scotophilic ones – that only men can actually practice, governed above all by the need to maintain the primacy of the phallus'.¹⁶² Churchill's strategy of not allowing a woman's actual body onto the stage removes a source of 'Scotophilic' pleasure from the male gaze, and in troubling the uniqueness of the male protagonist, undermines the mastery of the patriarchal gaze. Irigaray speculates that

¹⁶¹ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 80.

¹⁶² Luce Irigaray *Ibid* p. 102.

‘Women’s desire can find expression only in dreams. It can never under any circumstances, take on a conscious shape.’¹⁶³ Irigaray quotes Freud, “Women’s special form of neurosis would be to mimic a work of art. To be a bad copy of a work of art...a counterfeit or parody of an artistic process. A forgery because it is neither nature not an appropriate technique for re-producing nature”. Artifice, lie, deception, snare.’¹⁶⁴ But Churchill in *A Number* is triumphant in her use of artifice, the crafty repetition of the three sons is a snare set for the patriarchal Symbolic ‘mimesis imposed becomes mimicry unleashed’.¹⁶⁵ And it is the ‘male eye/I’¹⁶⁶ that is deconstructed. As Elin Diamond writes in her consideration of Irigaray’s *Speculum Of the Other Woman* ‘Irigaray’s revisionary hystera-theatre has lain in the ‘womb’ of Western thought since Plato, generating promiscuous fake offspring’¹⁶⁷.

Is Irigaray suggesting an ‘alternative feminine Symbolic’? Is she guilty of essentialism? Is she replacing the mother for father? Elin Diamond stresses that ‘mimesis’ has no being unto itself. ‘A theatricalized hystera necessarily de-essentializes both female anatomy and maternal experience, for if the maternal womb is a theatre, then ideas of essence, truth, origin are continually displaced onto questions of material

¹⁶³ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 125.

¹⁶⁴ Luce Irigaray *Ibid* p. 125.

¹⁶⁵ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* intro xi.

¹⁶⁶ Elin Diamond *Ibid* intro xi.

¹⁶⁷ Elin Diamond *Ibid* intro xi.

relations and operations'.¹⁶⁸ Churchill takes her up on that – avoiding Eden – with her cyborgs that skip the myth of origin. 'Theatre stresses coming into being - it wields an anti –essentialist power.'¹⁶⁹ Or as Judith Butler would have it 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.'¹⁷⁰ However, Irigaray, unlike Butler has been lead to considerations of rethinking the patriarchal symbolic, not through abandoning notions of the female body but through rethinking the nature of the construction of 'woman' through a rewriting of the female body, a possible '*écriture feminine*', which dismantles the patriarchal Symbolic, the patriarchal 'I'. This does not reduce the body to a series of intelligible gestures as Butler would have it, but takes account of it even as it cannot be accounted for in the patriarchal Symbolic because it 'is the subject that is not one'¹⁷¹. There is a sly echo of this 'enforced' one-ness in *A Number*, as Bernard 1 and 2 rail against their corraling into the singular, while Michael, the third son, refutes in his individuality the fact that not being seen to be different does not preclude the existence of difference.

THE ABSENT MOTHER: IRIGARAY REWORKS FREUD'S MELANCHOLIA

¹⁶⁸ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* xii.

¹⁶⁹ R. Darren Gobert 'On Performance and Selfhood in Caryl Churchill. *The Cambridge Guide to Caryl Churchill*. Ed Elaine Aston, Elin Diamond. Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 121.

¹⁷⁰ Judith Butler *Gender trouble* p. 25.

¹⁷¹ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* p. 11.

Embedded in the text of *A Number* are various references to the mother of Bernard 1. He remembers that

while he would be shouting for the inebriated Salter who wouldn't come 'she'd be there but she wouldn't

help stop anything'¹⁷². In scene three, Salter informs Bernard 2 that his 'mother' killed herself under a tube

train, as Salter puts it 'Your mother, the thing a thing about your mother was that she wasn't very happy'¹⁷³.

Allowing for the fact that this is Salter's depleted account of the mother, this image does resonate with

Irigaray's observation on re-reading Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* that 'the libidinal economy of the

little girl, after she finds out that both she and her mother are castrated, crosschecks with the symptoms of

melancholia.....profoundly painful dejection – absence of any libidinal activity ...abrogation of interest in the

outside world.¹⁷⁴ All that is left to the girl is to 'turn away from her mother- and indeed from all women, herself

included. Her desire for her father would in no way imply love – the wish with which the girl turns to her

father is no doubt originally the wish for the penis which her mother has refused her and which she now expects

from her father[...]so now there is nothing but envy, jealousy, greed'.¹⁷⁵ This state of affairs, the jealousy, the

dejection is similar to that experienced by Bernard 1 and the result of his jealousy, the feeling that he has had

something stolen from him, leads him to murder Bernard 2. Salter's questioning, his trying to get to the facts,

¹⁷² Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 23.

¹⁷³ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 30.

¹⁷⁴ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 66.

¹⁷⁵ Luce Irigaray *Ibid* p. 66.

leads to a few clichéd facts about a crime scene that do not release the desired knowledge that Salter requests and seems to need. The reasons for murder don't seem to stack up very logically and indeed Bernard 1 does not seem restored to primacy, because as Salter remarks 'you're not going to be a serial, wipe them all out'¹⁷⁶. What does get revealed, unexpectedly, is a kind of confession from Salter as to his brand of parenting 'I'd put you in the cupboard do you remember...I'd find you under the bed...I'd put your dinner under for you'¹⁷⁷. Women maybe excluded from signifying their own economy and from phallic power which as Freud states leads women to 'weaker social interests [...]few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilisation'.¹⁷⁸ Yet surely this parody of parenting described by Salter is a cheeky reminder by Churchill that 'women's work' though dismissed and discredited requires deep emotional commitment over many years and the hard, repetitive labour of rearing a child.

We see in this scene that there is a kind of shared murderous melancholy, which Bernard 1 has 'inherited' from Salter as the latter pleads 'I could have killed you and had another son...I didn't, I spared you though you were this disgusting thing'¹⁷⁹. Could this be referencing not the melancholy of the girl child excluded from the

¹⁷⁶ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 39.

¹⁷⁷ Caryl Churchill *Ibid* p. 39.

¹⁷⁸ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 66.

¹⁷⁹ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 40.

patriarchal symbolic and her own desire but the antagonism between father and son that occurs in the Oedipal triangle? The threat of replacement/castration which lingers over that dynamic just as its miasma infects siblings, as the rivalry between B1 and B2 testifies. Irigaray references Freud 'A new second, and third etc birth would completely disrupt the child's comprehension of where it stands in relation to its own birth and conception. The child's desire for a relation to an origin, one origin, would thereby be seriously thwarted...Every time an exclusive, unitary relation to the origin or the fantasy of a primeval simplicity has to be enumerated, castration is involved.'¹⁸⁰ It is the removal of the threat of castration because the birth of the clones sidesteps the phallus, that may have potentially freed Michael from the terrible dynamic. The final sighting we have before we learn of his suicide, of Bernard1 is his explanation to Salter of his pursuit of Bernard 2. He gets on the same train as the unlucky Bernard 2 as part of his plan to kill him, as he does so Bernard 2 'looked round, I thought he was looking right at me but he didn't see me'¹⁸¹.As the last note in the final exchange of the penultimate scene, the emphasis falls on the fact of not being seen, is this because Bernard 1 has now the power of the sadistic patriarchal gaze and Bernard 2, the victim, is now helpless before the mastery of Bernard 1, or is there another meaning hiding behind the fact of the gaze, the sadness of loss of commonality which must be cast out in the power games of the patriarchal Symbolic which always has the trauma of

¹⁸⁰ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 45.

¹⁸¹ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 41.

castration hanging over it?

DETHRONING SPECULARITY AND SUBVERTING TRAGEDY: A STRATEGY FOR A FEMINIST
DRAMATURGY

Realism relies on a system of mastery for the spectator; what can be seen can be known. In unmasking the illusory claims of realism Churchill's *A Number* ushers in possibilities for a form which foregrounds the illusory and theatrical in a radical gesture which lends potential for a new feminist dramaturgy. In the final scene the same actor returns to play not Bernard 1 or 2 as both are now dead, but Michael, one of the numberless clones. Salter tries to recruit Michael into his world and to create Michael a replacement son. But this third son breaks the symmetry of B1/ B2 in more than just numerical terms. In fact as Salter tells Michael 'You don't look at me in the same way'¹⁸² This alerts us to the theme of specularity and its primacy in the patriarchal Symbolic. If Michael is looking differently then maybe something has shifted? Perhaps too it has shifted for us, the audience, who have become more skilled in deciphering the ocular funny-house of this play. After the dying fall of the last scene we are gladdened, amazed to find ourselves on new territory, to find a possibility of renewal with this new clone who doesn't seem at all upset to be one of a number; 'Are you going meet us all?'¹⁸³ he inquires breezily, with a new commonality so tragically missed in the previous scene. This play is moving

¹⁸² Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 43.

¹⁸³ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 42.

beyond tragedy to some new generic definition. Tragedy relies upon, in Cixous' terms a deathly overcoming of the other. If the play had stopped after Bernard 1's murder of Bernard 2 perhaps it might have resonated tragically, but it doesn't it continues, there are a number of Clones after all which mitigates against tragic waste. Michael perhaps transmutes this play into comedy and it not afraid to lean close into the other as *écriture féminine* exhorts. If, as Plato surmised, women are not fit to represent tragedy, perhaps tragedy is not worth their bother. This overturning of tragedy might lend them more opportunities. The attitude of Michael may be likened to an intense moment of Brechtian *gestus*, as Diamond writes 'the moment in performance when a play's implied social attitudes become visible to the spectator...to 'ruin' and 'destroy' conventional mimetic practice...overhauling the apparatus of production and reception'.¹⁸⁴ Michael, a maths teacher, presumably at home with numbers, admits his 'job gets me down sometimes. The world's a mess of course. But you can't help, a sunny morning, leaves turning, off to the park with the baby, you can't help feeling wonderful can you?'¹⁸⁵ Salter's dark reply 'can't you'¹⁸⁶ is a wonderfully bathetic rejoinder which reminds the audience of the difference between man and clone.

Michael, in his reiterated connection to his children seems to have maternal qualities which hint at exciting

¹⁸⁴ Elin Diamond *Understanding Mimesis* iv.

¹⁸⁵ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 44.

¹⁸⁶ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 44.

possibilities of gender reconfigurations once phallic reproduction has been circumvented. Salter, wants to get to the truth of Michael all he gets offered is another imaginative suggestion of a new order, redolent with imagery from Irigaray's reconfigured womb/cave in this, Churchill's womb/theatre; 'these people used to live in holes in the ground with... underground chambers... you had to... wriggle on your stomach and you'd get through to this chamber deep deep down..this room...this cave'¹⁸⁷. Salter's cold reply 'I don't think this is what I'm looking for'¹⁸⁸ restates the primacy of specularity inherent in the patriarchal Symbolic. Michael goes on to prove Haraway's contention that the cyborg may indeed not prove the faithful son to the father as he tells Salter 'I dislike war, I'm not at all happy when people say we're doing a lot of good with our bombing'¹⁸⁹ As Haraway states 'From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a star war apocalypse waged in the name of defence, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identity and contradictory standpoints.'¹⁹⁰ As Michael shares with Salter 'We've got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as another person. We've got ninety percent the same as a

¹⁸⁷ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 44/45.

¹⁸⁸ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 45.

¹⁸⁹ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 45.

¹⁹⁰ Donna Haraway *The Haraway Reader* p. 13.

Chimpanzee. We've got thirty percent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love that about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong.¹⁹¹ Salter complains 'I miss him so much. I miss them both'.¹⁹² Already the one doubles uneasily, but Michael tops him with the extravagantly generous 'There's nineteen more of us'.¹⁹³

BANISHING THE UNCANNY, RECLAIMING JOUISSANCE; FURTHER STRATEGIES FOR A FEMINIST DRAMATURGY.

What Churchill achieves with this last scene of her play is a reconfiguring of the necessary ingredients which produce an unheimlich sensation in order to banish the uncanny. Here in this new order, the boundary between Human and thing can be crossed without fear (sharing genes with a lettuce, a chimp) and the uncanny doubling becomes the glorious excess of a frank nineteen. The world where the mother's body is not banished and unheimlich is a world where the threat of castration is vanished where the woman's body does not have to be perceived in terms of lack and where a female desire may be allowed which dismantles the patriarchal Symbolic. Freud talks about such a destruction of the impression of the uncanny in describing a farce where 'the fleeing man, convinced he is a murderer, lifts up one trap-door after another and each time sees what he takes to be the ghost of his victim rising up out of it. He calls out in despair "But I've only killed one man. Why this

¹⁹¹ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 50.

¹⁹² Caryl Churchill *Ibid* p. 50.

¹⁹³ Caryl Churchill *Ibid* p. 50.

ghastly multiplication?" We know what went before this scene and do not share his error'.¹⁹⁴ Churchill has

deconstructed the uncanny repetition in her play before our eyes, because we know what went before the scene

is transformed, this final Frankenstein's monster is a married mathematician with kids who likes a walk in the

park, his wife's ears and is little concerned to be 'unique'. By such a stroke Salter is transformed from a 'dark,

dark power'¹⁹⁵ his horror, when seen from such a viewpoint is precisely 'an error'.

In *A Number*, her surreal, dream like play Churchill fulfils Freud's edict elucidated by Irigaray that

'women's desire can find expression only in dreams. It can never under any circumstances, take on a conscious

shape'¹⁹⁶ in an unexpected way. Irigaray goes on to remark on Freud's discussion of women and self-

representation 'playing with dolls will be either helpful or harmful to becoming a woman according to

what it acts out (Freud) ...the girl child has no right to play in any manner whatever with any representation

of her beginning, no specific mimicry of origin is available to her; she must inscribe herself in the masculine,

phallic way of relating to origin, that involves repetition, representation, reproduction, And this is meant to be

the most powerful feminine wish'.¹⁹⁷ But it is this wish that Churchill parodies in creating the character of Salter

¹⁹⁴ Sigmund Freud *The Uncanny* p. 17.

¹⁹⁵ Caryl Churchill *A Number* p. 15.

¹⁹⁶ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 78.

¹⁹⁷ Luce Irigaray *Ibid* p. 78.

who has unexpectedly trespassed in his desire to be the sole parent in charge of cloning his sons. Unbeknownst to him, Salter has turfed himself out of his own Eden, in creating clones that know no origin via the Oedipus complex and so he has unwittingly created many new radical possibilities in circumventing the patriarchal symbolic. The categories have gone awry. As Judith Butler asks 'To what extent does the category of woman achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?'¹⁹⁸ A stability Salter has unintentionally disabled. The banished woman however has the last laugh in this tragedy transmuted into comedy in the last of its five sections. The writer, Churchill, is a woman and we are cognisant of this fact. She is orchestrating the male bodies we see on the stage; they enact her text.. The bodies of the actor who performs the three clones signals the differences between each to the audience through the body through tone, movement and gesture, which resonates which the French feminists insistence on the Semiotic. A challenge is mounted to the patriarchal Symbolic and a version of *écriture féminine* created which must lend opportunities for delineating a new feminist dramaturgy.

In *A Number* we see the flouting of the unique dramatic character with its intact interiority, as performance reproduces for us the same but different and asks us to dismantle that very binary created in the forge of the

¹⁹⁸ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* p. 5.

Patriarchal symbolic. Likewise, punctuation and syntax begin to break down and be reconfigured. The first attempts at punctuation were attempted in the first printings of the Bible, in order to facilitate spreading the word of god and it is precisely the word of god these cyber clones, who skip Eden, challenge, allowing as they do for shades of the Kristevan *Chora* and possibilities for *écriture féminine*.

Churchill makes us question what is 'both genealogical and specular'¹⁹⁹ in the patriarchal Symbolic and creates radical dramaturgical possibilities as she questions our assumptions of spectatorship, dismantles the idea of unique, Aristotelian characters and allows us to glimpse a hidden world of sameness behind the tyranny of difference. In *A Number* we see in one sense five identical two handed scenes; the actor playing Salter, plus the actor playing Bernard/1/2/Michael, in conversation. This both questions the 'control' that Salter imagines he has, and is after all in a repetition, but the difference in outcome in the final scene that masquerades as the same, leads us to understand that our fetish with difference/individuality is a kind of blindness, and in a world where the Oedipal principle is so challenged the whole binary of same/different may be exploded and lend us a new order of contemplation. In *The Blind spot of an Old Dream Of Symmetry* Irigaray writes that for symmetry must read the creation of one out of two, that is desire configured as male and the female obscured to create the

¹⁹⁹ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 76.

patriarchal Symbolic, Churchill has made many from one, in a theatrical coup that reverses the patrilineal edict and perhaps ushers in Irigaray's imperatives of the female body and *écriture féminine*.

CHAPTER THREE

KRISTEVA'S *SOLEIL NOIR* AND KANE'S 'BLACKER THAN DESIRE'; AN INTERROGATION OF THE BOUNDARIES OF THE GENDERED SUBJECT IN *4.48 PSYCHOSIS*.

Kristeva is one of the triumvirate of French Feminists, along with Irigaray and Cixous, each who seek in different ways to rewrite the symbolic contract: the moment the subject enters language and embraces the paternal law, a pivotal moment of gain and loss in which sexuality and gender are concurrently established and subjectivity enabled. Each theorist in different ways interrogates Freudian/Lacanian discourse and seeks to reinsert or redefine the maternal contribution to this moment of the birth of the subject, thus questioning assumptions of the structure of subjectivity itself. Each theorist positions writing, both through their own writings, and also through positing as Cixous would have it *écriture féminine*, as key in the possibilities of re-writing, or reconfiguring the feminine in relation to the patriarchal Symbolic. Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), a play that deals with the extremes of a psychotic state of mind and as such dispenses with named characters, a secure sense of place and a linear sense of time might, in its refusal of the classic staples of drama be profitably explored alongside Kristeva's theories of the maternal *chora* for possible strategies for a feminist dramaturgy that moves representations of gender beyond the realist paradigm and so create new forms of theatre.

Kristeva's has described language as a discursive or signifying system in which the speaking subject

makes and unmakes himself; any theory of language is a theory of the subject. 'Thus Kristeva folds two giant subjects into one; language and subjectivity'.²⁰⁰ In so doing she keeps alive a tension between the formation of subjectivity and our use of language which is curiously dramaturgical; the subject is being created in front of us through the use of language; a particularly theatrical form of agency – at one and the same time liberating yet fragile. It seems pertinent for this among other reasons to pair Kristeva with the linguistically formulated subjectivities apparent in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. My particular concern will be to note the ways in which subjectivity may be put under pressure in Kane's representations and how the analytical insights offered by Kristeva as regards particularly the Kristevan Chora and its relation to subjectivity, which may illuminate strategies for a theatre practice which by questioning the boundaries of subjectivity in turn question the representations of gender and female agency on stage, perhaps offering an example of a radical *écriture féminine*.

KRISTEVA'S CHORA AND THE CHALLENGE TO THE LACANIAN SYMBOLIC.

Kristeva takes the Lacanian model of the psyche and reconfigures it. Lacan's reworking of the Freudian paradigm instituted language as the primary acquisition of the symbolic and designated language as the structure

²⁰⁰ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 13.

of the unconscious. Of the three overlapping stages in his theory of child development the Imaginary can be thought of as the pre-verbal existence of the child before the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the Symbolic is the state of language brought about by the intervention of the father to disrupt the mother/child dyad, and the Real, which can never be directly experienced, is the fantasised space where no lack exists.²⁰¹ For all the French feminist the absolute and permanent exile from the mother is at issue. Kristeva's work presupposes that of Lacan's as far as the triangular structure of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary is concerned.²⁰² But Kristeva goes further than Lacan since 'Lacan's subject tends to be the already posited linguistic subject'²⁰³ for Kristeva this ignores a stage in the development of subjectivity that precedes the mirror stage and entry into the paternal symbolic order, she terms this pre-Oedipal holding place the *chora* which denotes 'an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases...the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm) precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality...all discourse moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it.'²⁰⁴ The *Chora* is 'analogous to vocal or kinetic rhythm.'²⁰⁵ This is not to say that the *Chora* lacks all regulation, it is subject to a regulating process but this is different from that of Symbolic law, it nevertheless 'effectuates

²⁰¹ Helene Cixous *Live Theory* p .20.

²⁰² John Fletcher *Abjection, Melancholia and Love* p. 26.

²⁰³ *Ibid* p. 26.

²⁰⁴ Julia Kristeva *Revolution in Poetic Language* p. 94.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid* p. 94.

discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again'.²⁰⁶

For Kristeva the *chora* brings the maternal into a new significance in relation to subjectivity and this is its radical potential for *écriture féminine* and the potential of its refiguring the symbolic contract. The significance of the *chora* as the recipient of drives, drives involving 'pre-oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother'.²⁰⁷ These drives are both assimilating and destructive, a kind of double helix which makes the semiotized body a place of permanent unease. The mother's body must become the organising principle for these conflicting drives. The semiotic *chora* is 'the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him'.²⁰⁸ It is interesting to note that this 'holding place', the *chora*, which is beholden to the maternal body, is not romanticised by Kristeva as a lost Eden, or an arena of unquestioned plenitude. It is here that it is possible to read a divergence from the *écriture féminine* posited by Cixous, who sees only liberation in the re-embracing of the woman's (maternal, naturally) body. For Kristeva the schisms and their potential threat to subjectivity allow no such unproblematic liberties because it cannot be an answer for subjectivity to reject the Symbolic, for that way she suggests, psychosis lies.

²⁰⁶ Ibid p. 94.

²⁰⁷ Ibid p. 95.

²⁰⁸ Ibid p. 95

Kristeva offers a developmental account of the child; first it is embraced by the *chora* where ‘the unarticulated sounds a baby makes have significance even if they have no symbolic meaning’²⁰⁹; energy is discharged and separation from its surroundings are tested. Significantly ‘in Kristeva’s view when the child takes up the Symbolic position it does not leave the Semiotic behind. The Semiotic will remain a constant companion to the Symbolic in all its communications.’²¹⁰ It is this capacity for the Semiotic to be in constant negotiation with the symbolic that marks Kristeva’s difference from Freud and Lacan and which reinserts the revolutionary maternal aspect into language. But again it should be noted that Kristeva refuses to romanticise the Semiotic and seek the overthrow of paternal law, for total abandonment of the symbolic leads nowhere but to psychosis and the death drive. ‘Instead of holding on to the dualistic thinking of the West, Kristeva is showing how the poles of these dichotomies intertwine’²¹¹ in refusing to separate the Semiotic and the Symbolic she is reconfiguring the relationship between Nature/culture, body/mind, disallowing their absolute separation.

KANE’S 4.48 PSYCHOSIS AND THE MATERNAL CHORA

If we are to make our first foray into *4.48 Psychosis* it would be to note that the body/mind distinction is

²⁰⁹ John Fletcher *Abjection, Melancholia and Love* p. 27

²¹⁰ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 24.

²¹¹ *Ibid* p. 24.

blurred. Kane's play has no stage directions or indications of a location. Where are these utterances taking place? In the mind of the sufferer? Is this a memory? The dialogue is unassigned. There are no sign posts to set us at ease or defined characters to separate us easily from what takes place on the stage. All that exist are the words spoken by the actors and this is rarely dialogue, mostly poetic address, but to whom, the audience, the other actors, the self-reflexive discursions of the mind displayed? Boundaries blur. Kane is quoted as saying: 'I'm writing a play called *4.48 Psychosis*...It's about a psychotic breakdown and what happens in a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life...where you stop and the world starts.'²¹² In *4.48 Psychosis* while the usual boundaries that define the theatrical event; scene changes, entrances and exits, character names are absent, the play itself is organised on a principle of levels of abstraction, they are not boundaries in the traditional sense but they exist separately from each other, defined by genre, rhythm, mood. While *4.48 Psychosis* borrows qualities from Kristeva's *chora* it is not a psychotic outpouring. The Semiotic exists at the level of genotext where the author organises or manifests semiotic drives and energy, while at the symbolic or phenotext level the work it is a structured and map-able piece of communication.²¹³

²¹² Graham Saunders *Love Me or Kill Me* p. 111/2.

KANE'S REVOLUTION IN LANGUAGE

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva outlines her theory that poetic language calls up an aspect of the signifying process that destabilises the symbolic's logical, orderly aspects and manifestations, showing how dynamic subjectivity really is. 'The works of literary avant-garde writers produce a 'revolution in poetic language' that is they 'shatter' the way we think texts are meaningful.'²¹⁴ Meaning is not just made denotatively it is made by poetic and affective aspects of text as well. 'All our attempts to use language neatly, clearly, and in an orderly way are handmaidens of our attempts to be neat, clearly demarcated subjects. But such attempts are disrupted by certain elements of our signifying practice.'²¹⁵ What are we to make of the unassigned utterance in Kane's play?:

'a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting
hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten
thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all
thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent
as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no-one ever utters'²¹⁶

²¹³ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 13.

²¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 13.

²¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 13.

This nightmare image seems to be conveyed to us as much through the use of alliteration ‘consolidated consciousness’ which soothes us momentarily before rocking us through the enjambment banqueting/hall in preparation for the abject entrance of the ‘cockroaches’ where the repetition of the soft ‘c’ sound mocks our initial comfort in ‘consciousness’ and as the poem rushes us on without the safety of punctuation to ‘a body no longer expellent’ to the truth which is never uttered. We are shifting like the cockroaches in a ‘darkened hall’ where the boundaries of the self- same to be in jeopardy as the human/insect binary is blurred. Here also the Semiotic mounts a challenge to the Symbolic, asking us to respond affectively, removing our landmark punctuations and refusing to designate this reality dream or real but a frightening fusion of both. It is impossible to encounter this writing and not in some terrifying/liberating sense be revolutionised.

Noelle McAfee applies Kristeva’s Semiotic/sSymbolic in a discussion of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from Joyce’s *Ulysses* noting the ‘breathless, punctuation-less flow of words more emotive than logical’²¹⁷ in which we get a keen sense of Molly’s *jouissance* (erotic and psychic pleasure) where time shifts do not allow reality to displace pleasure and where ‘Molly Bloom’s prose comes forth almost unbidden from a wellspring of internal desires and drives’²¹⁸. However it is pertinent to note that while Joyce’s (named) heroine has a memory to call

²¹⁶ Sarah Kane 4.48 *Psychosis* p. 205.

²¹⁷ *Ibid* p. 16.

her own and her musings are all erotically directed, Kane's unnamed voice/s have a much darker, bleaker trajectory. If there are two dominant drives eros and thanatos one would be tempted to ascribe Kane the latter, although perhaps the two in true Kristevian logic are intertwined.

Kristeva elaborates that where there is such a disruptive genotext the reader is put at risk of losing his or her bounds. It is possible to read *4.48 Psychosis* as just such a text? The question for this discussion is are the boundaries of gender dissolved? And is this desirable as a theatrical strategy? Kristeva exhorts us to find a path between the two poles of language; to be beholden only to the Symbolic we would be devoid of affect, dead, while to be overly reliant on the semiotic and expression alone would overwhelm order and lead to psychosis. Ideally Kristeva wants the reader to see 'how much risk there is in a text, how much non-identity, non-authenticity, impossibility and corrosiveness for those who choose to see themselves within it'.²¹⁹

THE CHARGE OF THE SEMIOTIC IN *BLASTED*

Traditionally women are condemned more for flouting boundaries. This surely is the foundation of the traditional 'double standard' of sexual behaviour; a man is sewing his wild oats, a woman is a slut etc. We might go back to the Platonic fear of the double-ness of women, already once removed from the 'ideal' they are

²¹⁸ Ibid p. 16.

²¹⁹ Ibid p. 41.

a copy, and as such subversively positioned – which is why any attempt at mimesis – women actors for example – are a copy of a copy and doubly threatening.²²⁰ Perhaps this partially accounts for the hysterical reaction to Kane's *Blasted* where boundaries are again famously blurred 'the wall between 'peace time civilisation' and the 'chaotic violence' of war was 'paper-thin''²²¹ and where this transgression lead to press headlines such as 'This Disgusting Feast of Filth'²²². Perhaps the word 'feast' betrays an unconscious delight on the part of Jack Tinker? That alliteration a slyly unconscious wink of approval at the Semiotic charge in Kane's work.

Blasted (1995) begins in a naturalistic fashion that is later, quite literally exploded. Ian, a middle aged journalist has taken Cate, a vulnerable young girl subject to epilepsy, to an expensive hotel room in Leeds where he rapes her. At the point of an explosion of a mortar bomb the play changes radically into 'an absurdist space in which the unthinkable crimes of war unfold. We seem to enter a Beckettian domain that rejects naturalistic conventions of geographical space and chronological time'.²²³ This new domain, in its troubling of the symbolic markers time and space, may also be read as a version of the Kristevan *Chora*, riven as it is by literally unspeakable drives, thanatos contending with eros. The regression is hinted at in the first line of the play

²²⁰ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* v.

²²¹ Helen Iball *Sarah Kane's Blast* p. 2.

²²² *Ibid* p. 1.

²²³ Karoline Gritzner *Modern Subjectivity and the New Expressionism* p. 335.

Ian I've shat in better places than this.²²⁴

There is a suppressed infantile delight in Ian's exclamation as he enters the bedroom, a place of birth, sex and death, as, in an act of carnivalesque²²⁵ disparaging, he verbally indulges in the polymorphous body, unrestricted yet by the taming phallogocentric symbolic which will order the body along the lines of shame, inner/outer, polluted/clean, genital/anal. It is an act of hubris which will rebound on Ian, for he is to discover that patriarchal mastery is not available in the world of the maternal semiotic. Kane, however is not nostalgic for the maternal *chora*, her brand of *écriture féminine* is one which revels in the sheer brutality of the place, which will castrate

Ian (he has his eyes torn out), breaks down the binary between life and death:

He dies with relief.

It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.

Eventually.

Ian Shit.²²⁶

as 'knowledge' is proved largely redundant, and will place subjectivity under the most extreme and painful pressure, perhaps pushed to the very limits of its possibility.

²²⁴ Sarah Kane *Blasted* p3

²²⁵ Peter Stallybrass, Allon White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* p8

²²⁶ *Ibid* p60

The Kristevan semiotic is unleashed in other ways; in Cate's broken language

Cate I t-t-t-t-t-t-t-told you. I really like you but I c-c-c-c- can't do this²²⁷

which prefigures the later breakdown in 'civilisation' when the soldier bursts into the room, anally rapes Ian and

sucks out his eyes and when later Ian digs up and devours the dead baby. This broken language is set against the

deathly rhetoric of Ian's newspaper report which with its sensationalistic account of the murder of teenager

Samantha Scrace, which can be read as a mocking account of the representation of woman in the patriarchal

Symbolic. As Irigaray points out, woman does not exist, she is a grammatical construction, an invented other for

the male phallogocentric 'I'. Indeed the name 'Samantha Scrace' has a deliberately fictional ring to it, the

'Scrace' resonant with 'disgrace', fitting for the 'disgraced' sex, lacking the Freudian phallus and forever

condemned to envy, lack. It is precisely this deathly rhetoric, deathly assumption of the other with its accent

always on 'victory'²²⁸ which will be exploded through Ian's suffering as the rhetoric is shown to be inadequate

to the point of ludicrousness to convey the human horror of torture the stage can convey to us via the human

body. Here the most powerful signifier is the human body, not the official language of the symbolic, and here in

²²⁷ Ibid p. 14.

²²⁸ Helene Cixous *The Newly Born Woman* p. 64.

privileging the body Kane gives us her version of an *écriture féminine*.

Cate's epileptic fits, one of which occurs as a result of her rape with a gun by Ian, and her resultant hysterical laughter²²⁹ can be read as the body an insistence on speaking its truth which is not allowed a place in the symbolic discourse, much like the Freudian hysteric. Cate's body, like that of her hysterical precursors, could be seen to be indulging in a form of mimesis that exceeded the individual body. Her distress might also be speaking the wider form of as yet unspoken convulsions the world outside the hotel room is going through. In a revolutionary manner Kane allows Cate's hysteria to literally infect the outside world, in fact the whole of the theatre space, as the mortar bomb explodes and what is kept unspoken and outside floods the stage. From this moment Cate's fits stop. Her reality is apparent on stage, she has no need to express the unspeakable through her body, the male bodies on stage will do that for her. Kane has with her *écriture féminine*, taken Cixous hysteric beyond the confines of her type, letting the world be mad and not her. The convulsions of this world have been hinted at in the Semiotic pulses of Cate's fits and in Ian's dying body, which prefigures the dethroning of the cogito by the Kristevan *Chora*. The hysteric's secret which was the favourite staple of nineteenth century realism²³⁰ in operated the formula 'discover her secret and cure the world' is here inverted. When Cate's 'secret'

²²⁹ Sarah Kane *Blasted* p. 27.

²³⁰ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 25.

is out, the world is a nightmare and a closure or 'cure' is unimaginable, even death cannot seem to end this play with the concomitant salve of tragedy. It exceeds tragedy, which like realism depends on the closure that is achieved in the mastery of overcoming the other which concomitantly provides the illusion of knowledge. This play doesn't end. Ian thinks he has died but wakes up again. This confounding of the life/death binary also breaks down the comic/tragic dichotomy. The pulse of the play continues, like the Kristevan *chora* which will not be untwined from the Symbolic but refreshes it, like Kane's rain which wakes Ian, and without which he and the Symbolic order would be dead/deathly.

BLASTED AND THE BANISHMENT OF THE UNCANNY

The uncanny is also blasted within *Blasted*. The uncanny figures as the sense of otherness experienced when the familiar becomes strange. It has been named a phallogocentric because 'The psychic economy of sight[...] is a phallic economy based upon the disavowal of a feared absence.'²³¹ What is kept off stage is symbolic of the fantasised horror of female genitalia, or rather castration. This is demystified in *Blasted*. The eerie knocking

Ian *thinks*.

Then he knocks three times.

Silence

²³¹ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 89.

*Three knocks from outside.*²³²

is revealed to be the Soldier who symbolically castrates Ian, removing the fantasized ‘horror’ and replacing it with a rendition of the workings of the violence of the patriarchal symbolic and its endemic damage to the ‘other’; ‘young girl I fucked hand up inside her trying to claw my liquid out’²³³ says the Soldier, his syntax decaying under the pressure of the Semoitic world of *Blasted*. The forensic portrayal of violence does us the service of demystifying the offstage horror. It is shown to us, it leaves us, witnesses, with a responsibility to the other not a sensationalised, unlocated frisson of repressed knowledge in place of an actual response to the other. Here the uncanny is exposed by onstage violence and in the ultimate incarnation of the blinded or ‘castrated’ Ian’s continuance and continuing dialogue with Cate. The myth of the despised female other is exploded as Cate ‘feeds Ian with the remaining food’²³⁴, in a quotidian, maternal gesture that fills the space of the absent uncanny. Likewise Cate’s laughter at the sight of Ian’s genitals, as Ian strips off in Scene One²³⁵, is perhaps reminiscent of Cixous’ laugh of the Medusa, wouldn’t it be funny if women weren’t castrated after all?²³⁶

²³² Sarah Kane *Blasted* p. 36.

²³³ *Ibid* p. 50.

²³⁴ *ibid* p. 61.

²³⁵ *ibid* p. 8.

²³⁶ Helen Cixous ‘The Laugh of The Medusa.’ *Signs Vol.4 Summer 1976*, p. 875.

The Kristevan abject also pulverises and beseeches the subject in *Blasted* as in, for example, the visceral moment when the Soldier ‘puts his mouth over one of Ian’s eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye.’²³⁷ The abject exists for Kristeva as a function of the *Chora* that allows for the earliest form of subjectivity to evolve, and is thus a maternal creation and precedes the patriarchal Symbolic. *Blasted* partakes of the abject to destabilise the symbolic and pulverise Ian further. The loss of his eyes is also a symbolic dethroning of the centrality of specularity, one of the building blocks of the mastery of the phallogocentric cogito. Likewise Cate’s attempt to savagely bite off Ian’s penis is a further nod to the *Chora*, the place before the patriarchal symbolic takes precedence. However, while Kate causes Ian considerable discomfort and temporarily robs him of the power of the symbolic

Ian lies in pain, unable to speak²³⁸

it is not an absolute dethroning. *Blasted* is, as might be expected an explosive crisis for the patriarchal Symbolic but it does not admit to its utter negation, that would lead in Kristevan terms to the realm of psychosis, non-meaning, and while Kane is putting subjectivity under extreme pressure, she is not obliterating it. Threads of narrative remain, the inside and outside just barely hold, though rain comes in and the back wall is reduced to

²³⁷ *ibid* p. 50.

²³⁸ *ibid* p. 31.

rubble. Ian is still alive at the end of the play, can still utter the final words

Ian Thank you.²³⁹

If Kane's plays are about 'the difficulty of responding to immeasurable experiences, like love, violence and suffering; and the challenge of making a claim about one's needs that does not do violence to others'²⁴⁰ then the French psychoanalytic post-structuralists resonate with her project through their insistence on reclaiming the lost maternal Semiotic experience which both evades the limitations of the patriarchal Symbolic as well as having been excluded. Perhaps as Cixous notes 'one can only begin to advance along the path of discovery...from the point of mourning'²⁴¹, that is mourning the mastery of the Symbolic.

FLOUTING BOUNDARIES IN PSYCHOSIS: A DRAMATIC STRATEGY FOR DISRUPTING GENDER.

How does gender figure in *4.48 Psychosis*? The first reference to gender is the 'broken hermaphrodite'²⁴² a being that displays both male and female sexual organs. Originating from the Greek, a compound of 'Aphrodite', the goddess of love and Hermes, the messenger god of poets and boundaries. This might beg the

²³⁹ *ibid* p. 61.

²⁴⁰ Ehren Fordyce 'The Voice of Kane' *Sarah Kane in Context*. Ed. Graham Saunders. Manchester University press, 2010, p. 103.

²⁴¹ Susan Sellers *Live Theory* p. 37.

²⁴² Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 205.

question what boundary of love has Kane's hermaphrodite crossed (as well as in essence being a boundary flouter) and why is 'hermself'²⁴³ broken by this experience? I shall return to this point. It is clear however from this point on that the sexuality of the voice/protagonist is not constrained by the heterosexual matrix, this is broken indeed by the references in the play to both male and female lovers and certainly in the initial Royal Court production, by the use of male and female actors to embody the language. 'I am jealous of my sleeping lover and covet his induced unconsciousness'²⁴⁴ and later 'I kiss a woman across the years that say we shall never meet'²⁴⁵. If the 'I' is promiscuous in *4.48 Psychosis*, in that it circulates between three actors, the audience understand the scissions to be within the mind/body of the tormented sufferer, s/he is all these positions, it is an excessive subjectivity that as Kristeva exhorts should 'shake us'. But beyond these admissions of sexual desire and the mournful *jouissance* exhibited by the text are there other clues that tend to position the 'consolidated consciousness' of the play as female?

'I am fat'²⁴⁶ is the eternal lament of modern woman, bullied as she is by spectacles of young, mimetically prepubescent models; 'My hips are too big'²⁴⁷ hips bearing a metonymic relationship to the female; the list as an

²⁴³ Ibid p. 205.

²⁴⁴ Ibid p. 208.

²⁴⁵ Ibid p. 218.

²⁴⁶ Ibid p. 207.

²⁴⁷ Ibid p. 207.

organising textual principle, so reminiscent of self-help books and the anguished organising of experience, with over tones of self-hatred, for which women are major consumers. In a piece with so few sign posts we reach for the author and autobiography. Yet the circulatory 'I' and the unassigned utterances still leave us guessing, and when finally Kane has the power to nail the gender of the 'protagonist', she leaves us hanging; 'I dislike my genitals'²⁴⁸. Is this refusal to name Penis or Vagina a refusal to ascribe gender or is it a reference to 'hermself' who has both? Or is it the text's nod to the Semiotic, where in a pre-oedipal world gender is not yet ascribed and so subjectivity unanchored, unintelligible?

The 'I' is pinned down in *4.48 Psychosis* not via the character but via the discourse being used. The lists, for example, pinion the 'I' in the position of subjection to an ideology, perhaps that of (psycho?) therapy or as I have suggested self-help manuals and yet as confining as they seem they anchor the spectator in the certainty of the Symbolic, they are surely less disorienting than the passages located midway in the play which appear to be a series of movement directions 'flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash'²⁴⁹ imitative of the drives that twitch through the *chora* both generating and negating the subject. There is still a discernible poetry in the insistent rhythm reminiscent of a typing exercise, a Beckettian horror of consciousness that cannot cease, the

²⁴⁸ Ibid p. 207.

²⁴⁹ Ibid p. 231.

life force that pulses through us and involuntarily propels us on. This categorising of movement hints at symbolic ordering of the semiotic which attempts to order the body's movement. This semiotic/symbolic boundary seems to touch a wound for Kane and creates a scission in the spectator; the pleasure of repetition, rhythm and the horror of meaninglessness which 'casts' the 'subject' as a recipient of involuntary drives.

Graham Saunders sums up *4.48 Psychosis* giving it a putative closure 'It is the last line of the play – 'It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind' (245) that sets up the implication of not only all the voices belonging to one person, but that the 'awful physical aching fucking longing' (241), in fact constitutes the search for self-hood.²⁵⁰ David Greig ties (her) it up with a neat bow 'Kane mapped the darkest and most unforgiving internal landscapes; landscapes of violation...loneliness...power...mental collapse...and most consistently the language of love'²⁵¹. Putting her (male) interpreters aside the question arises – to what extent in a post-Freudian world do we allow the stated intention of the author, in Kane's own analysis she states: 'I just met someone who has taken God knows how many overdoses and has attempted suicide in almost every imaginable way...but she's actually more connected with herself than most people I know...when she takes an overdose suddenly she's connected and then she wants to live.'²⁵² Kane rationalises

²⁵⁰ Ibid p. 113.

²⁵¹ Ibid p. 118.

²⁵² Graham Saunders *Love Me Or Kill Me* p. 114.

this as a desire to heal the mind/body scission, to dominate our reading of a text? And what might it be about the territory of this revolutionary text (in Kristevan terms) that defies the capacity to 'heal' the mind/ body split or question the possibilities of non-pathological self-hood for those of the female gender? What is the meaning in the Kanian context of the word 'love'? Perhaps the insistence of the text in refusing a discrete, singular voice expressed in a realistic character means that love, here expressed as self-love, which so often effects closure in a text, is not available to the protagonist who is grieving for a pre-symbolic, maternal loss. Love, and its opposite, death, are not available to effect closure in the world a Kane's plays. Or rather they co-exist in a confounding of the binary; in *Blasted*, Ian is awoken from death to receive Kate's loving gesture, somehow at the fleeting point of this complete abnegation of the self, love is allowed.

KANE AND ABJECTION

For Kristeva we do not emerge from the womb as discrete subjects. Our first experience is of plenitude, a lack of borders, being at one with our environment and embraced by the Semiotic *chora*.²⁵³ How these borders are developed, how the 'I' forms is one of the central concerns of psychoanalytic theory. Kristeva agrees that the mirror stage may bring about a sense of unity. But she thinks that even before this stage the infant

²⁵³ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 46.

begins to separate and develop borders via a process called abjection- jettisoning what seems to be a part of oneself. 'The object is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself; sour milk, excrement, a mother's engulfing embrace. What is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's tenuous borders of selfhood.'²⁵⁴The object is what does not respect boundaries. 'It beseeches and pulverizes the subject.'²⁵⁵ A corpse is object, neither alive nor dead. Kane reminds us continually of the properties of the object in *4.48 Psychosis*; 'a blanket of roaches'²⁵⁶, 'Patient woke in a pool of vomit'²⁵⁷, 'a crippling failure oozing from my skin'²⁵⁸, 'interned in an alien carcass'²⁵⁹. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* takes the reader back to the brink of how subjectivity is constituted in the first place.²⁶⁰ That is how a person comes to see themselves as having a border between self and others. Kristeva believes that the infant begins to separate before the Lacanian mirror stage via the process of abjection. 'The object does not represent something as a symbol might; it is a direct "infection" of my own living: it is death infecting life'.²⁶¹ Like a corpse it is sickening yet irresistible. 'Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons us and ends up engulfing us'.²⁶² Doesn't this in some way describe the affect of *4.48 Psychosis*; its

²⁵⁴ Ibid p. 46.

²⁵⁵ Ibid p. 46.

²⁵⁶ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 227.

²⁵⁷ Ibid p. 225.

²⁵⁸ Ibid p. 209.

²⁵⁹ Ibid p. 214.

²⁶⁰ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 45.

²⁶¹ Ibid p. 45.

imagery appeals to us on a visceral level, seducing us like the abject, clawing away at the boundaries of our subjectivity, making us aware of the fragility of our subject hood, and our capture by the process of abjection?

In some sense pulverising us too?

The first thing to be abjected is the mother's body. 'The child is in a double bind; a longing for narcissistic union with its first love and a need to renounce this union in order to become a subject.'²⁶³ While Freud addresses the possibility of the return of the repressed, so long as it doesn't return it is hidden, the abject is qualitatively different remaining on the periphery of consciousness, a looming presence like filth or death. And death certainly looms in Kane's play; 'I write for the dead'²⁶⁴, 'I have resigned myself to death this year'²⁶⁵.

There is abject fear too in falling back into the mother's body.²⁶⁶ Freud's uncanny is a re-meeting of something old-established in the mind; the mother's womb/genitals. Kristeva names this maternal abjection which she sees as 'a constant companion of consciousness, a longing to fall back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity'.²⁶⁷ Does this describe the pleasure/pain of watching

4.48 *Psychosis*? The balancing of dissolution with form? It is of interest to note that Kane's 'protagonist' seems

²⁶² Ibid p. 45.

²⁶³ Ibid p. 48.

²⁶⁴ Sarah Kane 4.48 *Psychosis* p. 213.

²⁶⁵ Ibid p. 208.

²⁶⁶ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 48.

²⁶⁷ Ibid p. 49.

to initiate the uncanny in reverse. If it is something that pursues her the s/he pursues it in return. ‘Sometimes I

turn around and catch the smell of you and I cannot go on....and I go out at six in the morning and start my

search for you. If I’ve dreamt a message of a street or a pub or a station I go there. And I wait for you.’²⁶⁸

What ghost is she pursuing? The next utterance is one of anger ‘You know I really feel like I’m being

manipulated’.²⁶⁹ But as Kristeva would have it, while the abject will always haunt the subject, the subject finds

the abject both repellent and seductive ‘and thus his or her borders are continuously threatened and

maintained...threatened because the abject is alluring enough to crumble the borders of self...maintained

because the fear of collapse keeps the subject vigilant’.²⁷⁰ Perhaps it is this boundary that Kane is drawn towards

as a writer, and which threatens psychosis/loss of meaning if she crosses it, indeed the passages of pure numbers

come close to the loss, what are we to make of them? Or how do we make meaning from them? Is it this

boundary of love which the hermaphrodite has attempted to cross? That which in mythic terms allows the self

to be everything, lack nothing, be both male and female? This return to the *chora* will pulverise or break the

subject but which like the abject is seductive it is the non-place Kane knows that is ‘blacker than desire’²⁷¹ and

where the death drive resides and would explain perhaps the inverse journey of the uncanny which she pursues.

²⁶⁸ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 214.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid* p. 215.

²⁷⁰ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 50.

²⁷¹ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 226.

MELANCHOLIC LOSS IN THE MATERNAL CHORA.

In classic psychoanalysis depression is mourning for a lost internal object but this not adequate for Kristeva. The classical story accounts for depression that results from a loss suffered after one has made thethetic break into the symbolic, after one begins to differentiate subject from object. It does not account for those who have lost their primary love while still in the *chora*. In such an individual 'sadness would point to a primitive self - wounded, incomplete, empty. Persons thus affected do not consider themselves wronged but afflicted with a fundamental flaw, a congenital deficiency.'²⁷² Does this account for the lament of Kane's 'protagonist', 'Do you think it's possible for a person to be born in the wrong body?'²⁷³

This is a loss, according to Kristeva, that is suffered before she can distinguish mother from self. 'The depressed narcissist has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something un-representable,'²⁷⁴. 4.48 *Psychosis* is haunted by a sense of loss which is nonetheless curiously non-specific; 'I've never in my life had a problem giving another person what they want. But no one's ever been able to do that for me. No one touches me, no one gets near me'.²⁷⁵ This loss, if one is to use Kristeva's account, arises from an awareness of the loss of an aspect of the maternal body before the acquisition of

²⁷² Ibid p. 215.

²⁷³ Ibid p. 215.

²⁷⁴ Ibid p. 51.

²⁷⁵ Sarah Kane 4.48 *Psychosis* p. 215.

language and the Symbolic. ‘Whereas all people must eventually lose their mothers- we are all weaned after all – most of us will compensate for this lost object of desire by using language, words to chase what has been lost’²⁷⁶. For the narcissistic depressed person (narcissistic because their love is not cathected to an object) they substitute sadness as the unifying principle of their persona. As Kane’s protagonist describes it ‘‘beautiful pain/that says I exist’²⁷⁷. As Kristeva elaborates ‘In such a case suicide is not a disguised act of war but a merging with sadness and beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as promises of nothingness, of death.’²⁷⁸

For Kane’s ‘protagonist’ love must constitutionally be always out of reach;

‘I dread the loss of her I’ve never touched

Love keeps me a slave in a cage of tears

I gnaw my tongue with which to her I can never speak

I miss a woman who was never born

I kiss a woman across the years that say we shall never meet’²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p.51.

²⁷⁷ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 232.

²⁷⁸ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 60.

²⁷⁹ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 218.

This passage demonstrates a curious contradiction in Kane's writing – she demonstrates Kristeva's melancholic's lack of desire to speak (because for Lacan speech is always filling the gap or lack between the subject and the object of desire but for the Kristevan Narcissistic melancholic the object has not yet been, nor ever will be established) 'I gnaw my tongue', yet simultaneously this is conveyed to us in poetry, redolent with the Kristevan semiotic; the melancholic assonant half rhyme slave/cage, the teasing 't's in touch, tears, tongue.

Perhaps rather than a contradiction for Kane it is one for Kristeva; how can her melancholic speak? Kristeva explains this by elucidating the phenomena of the creative melancholic who takes part in 'the adventure of the body, signs ... novelists, poets, artists'.²⁸⁰ Here it is possible to read Kane as a writer of an *écriture féminine*, echoing a pre-symbolic loss in the maternal Semiotic.

Kristeva uses the poet Nerval's 'dazzling metaphor'²⁸¹ of the Black sun to describe the phenomenon that 'suggests an insistence without presence, a light without representation: the Thing is an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time'²⁸². Kristeva goes on to speculate of the melancholic creative that while seeking to give form in the realm of the symbolic to what they mourn 'What they truly memorialize, beyond paternal weakness, is nostalgic dedication to the lost mother'.²⁸³ Kristeva describes Nerval's attempts to master his

²⁸⁰ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 61.

²⁸¹ Julia Kristeva *Black Sun* p. 187.

²⁸² *Ibid* p. 187.

sadness by reaching the realm of signs. But his form will defy convention. His sonnets defy coherent interpretation even as they exercise rhythmically hypnotic power on the reader and ‘Narrative continuity, which beyond the certainty of syntax, builds space and time and reveals the mastery of existential judgement over hazards and conflicts is far from being Nerval’s favourite realm. Any narrative already assumes that there is an identity stabilised by a completed Oedipus and that, having accepted the loss of the thing it can concatenate its adventures through failures and conquests of the ‘objects’ of desire. This kind of storytelling seems too secondary, schematic and superficial to capture Nerval’s black sun.²⁸⁴ Likewise, if we evaluate *4.48 Psychosis* through a similar lens it is possible to discern a similar repudiation of narrative mastery, linear time and coherent space. We are moved through a series of internal reflections, possible encounters with doctors, mocking asides ‘ Kane parodies the medical language used by reporting a suicide attempt ...100 aspirin and one bottle of Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon, 1986. Patient woke in a pool of vomit and said “sleep with the dog and rise with the fleas”. Severe stomach pain. No other reaction’.²⁸⁵ The great revolution of her play is that the object of desire is obscured. She points to the fact, that for those of the female gender, the loss of the maternal body points both on a psychic and a cultural level to a huge hollowing out of desire and the near impossibility of

²⁸³ Ibid p. 194.

²⁸⁴ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 71.

²⁸⁵ Graham Saunders *Love Me Or Kill Me* p. 113.

creating a female protagonist. Female desire is so lost that it cannot even be articulated in the symbolic. The 'huge fucking aching longing'²⁸⁶ that Graham Saunders has designated self-hood is in fact something that is unattainable in a more profound way. The narcissistic melancholic's archaic loss as exhibited in *4.48 Psychosis* symbolises the impossibility of representing female desire/agency on a stage and proposes that it can only be made apparent via its absence, like the black sun that makes it shine even harder. If we can nominate *4.48 psychosis* as an example of *écriture féminine* it would seem to tell us that the binary object/subject must be troubled to such an extent that the 'black sun' it creates sucks in everything to its vortex; assigned dialogue, traditional character, linear time, concrete setting, the mastery of the spectator, all must fall before the demands of her dramaturgy which as her play states in curiously old fashioned theatrical pun we must 'open the curtains'²⁸⁷ to embrace.

In *Black Sun* Kristeva writes that matricide is our vital necessity.²⁸⁸ But it has to take place under optimal circumstances. She describes that for women this is a difficult process since 'how can She be that bloodthirsty fury, since I am She? Consequently, the hatred I bear her is not oriented toward the outside but is locked up

²⁸⁶ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 245.

²⁸⁷ Ibid p. 245.

²⁸⁸ Julia Kristeva *Black Sun* p. 197.

within myself.²⁸⁹The ‘putting to death of the self is what follows instead of matricide’.²⁹⁰ Is this what Kane’s protagonist is articulating at 4.48, where for a moment in the play we are anchored in time, and she states ‘I know no sin’ because death is about to purge her of it? ‘Look after your mum now/look after your mum’²⁹¹ has a sinister overtone. Death of the protagonist renders matricide impossible. But the play does indeed allow us to do as the protagonist beseeches; ‘Validate me/Witness me/See me/Love me’.²⁹² For while the ‘narcissistic structure seems to share features of the death drive, both leading to a kind of disintegration and threaten of the loss of subjectivity’²⁹³ at the same time this new fragmented subjectivity shakes us, to use Kristeva’s word, and just as the use of the Semiotic’s power can refresh the potentially stultifying Symbolic, the new forms of fragmented subjectivity can allow us to see anew, create new configurations, be liberated by uncertainty into the possibilities of a new feminist dramatic practice.

If Like Kristeva’s Nerval, Kane’s writing kept her alive, until her ‘subintentional death’²⁹⁴(Nerval hanged himself too), we must salute her work for its capacity to illuminate the boundaries of subjectivity. Kane’s protagonist in *4.48 Psychosis* claimed ‘I sing without hope on the boundary’²⁹⁵this can be interpreted as

²⁸⁹ Ibid p. 198.

²⁹⁰ Ibid p. 197.

²⁹¹ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 243.

²⁹² Ibid. p. 243.

²⁹³ Noelle McAfee *Julia Kristeva* p. 72.

²⁹⁴ Sarah Kane *4.48 Psychosis* p. 226.

²⁹⁵ Ibid p. 214.

exceeding a singular interpretation it surely includes the boundaries of life/death, Semiotic/Symbolic,

psychotic/neurotic, *chora*/individuation and male/female and yet blurs/defies them all.

CHAPTER FOUR

STRATEGIES FOR A FEMINIST DRAMATURGY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SYMBOLIC BINARIES IN THE WORK OF CARYL CHURCHILL AND SARAH KANE.

Post-structural, psycho-analytic feminism has taken issue with the Symbolic's binary structure, recognising this gender binary as seminal and indicating that once it is shaken the whole of the patriarchal symbolic is thrown into productive crisis. Joan Riviere famously defined femininity as masquerade underscoring that womanliness was a conscious strategy applied by women to appease powerful men.²⁹⁶ Riviere's reflections can be read as partial precursors to Cixous' concept of morphology, the body created via discourse as opposed to biology. I wish to firstly outline Cixous' fundamental concepts, accenting the difference from Kristeva's formulations on key points, before applying both theorists to the work of Churchill and Kane in an attempt to advance questions about a feminist dramaturgy.

'What I ask of writing', states Cixous, 'is what I ask of desire; that it should have no link with that logic which places desire on the side of possession, of acquisition, or even of that of consumption/consummation which strikes up a (imaginary) relationship with death. A writing which is vitalized by feminine libidinal economy will liberate desire from being colonised by death, negativity, castration, the economy of phallogocentric appropriation.'²⁹⁷ Cixous incites us to rethink the Cartesian body/mind split²⁹⁸. Her

²⁹⁶ Joan Riviere 'Womanliness as Masquerade'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 10, 1929, p. 303-313.

écriture féminine is precisely ‘a path towards thought through the body’²⁹⁹ but this is not about putting the female body back into discourse – because to quote Judith Butler ‘there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of the body’³⁰⁰ - it is rather ‘a continual calling into question of the foundations of thinking’³⁰¹ through a rethinking of symbolic binaries via the lost maternal and a reclamation of the excluded feminine made redundant and configured as lacking via the oedipal moment and formation of the masculine subject as it enters the language and the symbolic. ‘Cixous’ writing is an attempt to comprehend the materiality of the world without imposing...the death bound, colonizing language of phallogocentrism.’³⁰²

Feminine Writing she exhorts should be ‘an attempt to demonstrate a loving fidelity to the other...thought has always worked through opposition and this structure of opposition or hierarchical dualisms is phallogocentric. Within phallogocentric thought woman is positioned as passive, ‘Either woman is passive or she does not exist.’³⁰³ For Cixous, phallogocentrism is predicated upon the exclusion of female desire – as Irigaray would have it women reflect back the masculine self –same. For Cixous and indeed all the post-structural, psychoanalytic feminists ‘women are projected as the source of threatening castration and lack by the phobic masculine subject’³⁰⁴, Cixous counters this by talking of an economy, not of exchange, where the gift does not expect a return but is ‘an openness to the other which is not a veiled demand for the other to provide something which the subject can appropriate’.³⁰⁵

²⁹⁷ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 90.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid* p.90.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid* p. 71.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid* p. 71.

³⁰¹ *Ibid* p. 71.

³⁰² *Ibid* p. 60.

³⁰³ *Ibid* p. 52.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid* p. 51.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid* p. 53.

ECRITURE FEMININE AND ITS CHALLENGE TO TRAGEDY.

What would it mean for a play to reconfigure this deathly economy of giving becoming losing? Where loss and expense are stuck in the commercial deal that always turns the gift into a gift that takes? In jettisoning this practice would we be in danger of losing sight of the dramatic altogether? Perhaps it is useful to distinguish here between the exchange which tragedy dictates, that is the deathly overcoming of the other, which requires an exchange that obliterates one party at the expense of the protagonist's life, as opposed to a gift which as Mauss articulates, is part of a system which bestows a social obligation onto the giver and receiver of the gift and in which the gift must always carry a trace of the giver.³⁰⁶ This is not the exchange of tragedy. If deconstruction of the phallogentric binary means the creation of other ways of being where 'writing becomes a type of rapture, an ecstasy in which the subject stands outside herself and becomes aware that she is other'³⁰⁷ what becomes of the self/other dichotomy that has underpinned the Western dramatic canon since the Greeks and, for example, Sophocles' Oedipus? How far this can be pushed is a question for a feminist dramaturgy? Kane's work it could be argued as already moved towards forms which refuses tragedy and blurs the comic/tragic boundary, the tragic prerogative of a deathly overcoming of the other and the concomitant spectatorial mastery and transcendence of the cogito; In *Blasted* we see just Ian's head poking from the earth as he is gifted bread by Cate.³⁰⁸ This moment both mocks our wish to see and therefore know all, as well as make us see a form of exchange that continues in some sense after the play has finished in tragic terms with Ian's death, but on his awakening it is as if we are also awoken to new possibilities and admitted to a new regime of visibility, implicating us both in a new form and a new way of looking. Cixous' incitements are a challenge to the 'phallogentric Oedipal economy',³⁰⁹ and its

³⁰⁶ Marcel Mauss *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*.

³⁰⁷ Helene Cixous *Coming to writing* p. 63.

³⁰⁸ Sarah Kane *Blasted* p. 60.

³⁰⁹ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 65.

narratives of loss and castration, its unequal casting of the gender binary male/female and its concurrent binary of potency/lack; *écriture féminine* is a willingness to 'defy the masculine and seek new relations between subject and other through writing'.³¹⁰

Like Kristeva, Cixous sees the space which precedes the creation of the Symbolic binary A(self)/not-A(other) as maternal. Any dismantling of the binary will lead to the creation of maternal space and potentially a receptacle for female desire (jouissance) that has been excluded by the phallic binary i/not I where the female has been constructed as other/lacking in this deathly masculine contract. Cixous explores Clarice Lispector's text *The Passion According to GH* where the protagonist, in an attempt to embrace the otherness of the other eats a Cockroach and vomits, thus destroying the other in the process of attempting to know it. As Cixous notes 'The other must remain absolutely strange within the greatest possible proximity'³¹¹ because it is not possible to know the other by incorporation. Thus she avoids Kristeva's accusations that absorption of the abject is psychotic, but yet the pushing so close to the other allows for alterity – the allowance of the existence of the other without threat. But threat and suspense are further staples of classic 'mimetic' dramaturgy – or rather they are elements which reproduce the patriarchal binary self/other without deconstructing it. Surely 'threat' must always have psychic echoes of castration fear in it? For Cixous the cockroach eating episode 'teaches us that the most difficult thing to do is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification' – this also has implications for a dramaturgy – how to be close to the other without identifying? Conversely, what happens to Brechtian distance? Or Aristotelian catharsis which conversely relies upon the assumption/identification with the onstage Self? If for Cixous the intensity of desire becomes 'a

³¹⁰ Helene Cixous *The Newly Born Woman* p. 83.

³¹¹ Susan Sellers *Helene Cixous* p. 74.

desire to know the other to inhabit the other'³¹² which is 'acutely impossible'³¹³ then we must account love as the 'recognition of the incalculable other'. This in turn has implications for the mastery of knowledge which is implied by the classic realist drama. As Elin Diamond describes in *Unmaking Mimesis* the crisis of society finds closure in the discovery of the flaw/secret hidden from and within the character of the female protagonist; when that is revealed, society is healed. This hysterical formulation too would be impossible as would the Aristotelian forward movement of narrative based on the recognition and reversal, the certain revelation of knowledge that leads the protagonist and audience to a masterful 'truth'. In Cixous accounting the other is incalculable. At a stroke, the uncanny is also dismantled for that is the unknown that comes to light, the female genitalia, the repressed and feared 'other' which must be exorcised – but this terror is what we must bring close in Cixous' alterity.

The laugh of Cixous' Medusa is a repudiation of female lack in which phallogentric power is revealed as a 'terrified defence mechanism against the spectre of phallic loss'³¹⁴ this laughter marks the crossing of a boundary between the improper and the proper; 'the medusa's laughter is rebellious for she[...]mocks the fragility of patriarchal myths about the mother's lack[...]wouldn't the worst be[...]that women aren't castrated?'³¹⁵ The logic of the medusa would then lead to a deconstruction of the male/female binary which would render the mimetic representation of gender on stage as 'laughable'. But how to put such figures on stage? Would they be in Judith Butler's terms intelligible? Similarly the pushing close to the other, which as Irigaray would agree, defies masculine specularity, upon which the castration scenario depends, undermines

³¹² Ibid p76

³¹³ Ibid p76

³¹⁴ Ibid p66

³¹⁵ Helene Cixous *The Laugh of the Medusa* p 877

masculinity's mastery, also in its overturning of the binary self/other, male/female, disallows the 'limited image of feminine identity as pure opposition'.³¹⁶

CIXOUS' RENEGOTIATION OF SELF AND OTHER: THE CHALLENGES THE FRENCH FEMINISTS
POSE FOR A NEW FEMINIST DRAMATURGY.

Cixous' *écriture féminine* seeks a new relation between subject and other through writing³¹⁷ exceeding binary oppositions and ultimately, in a utopian gesture, transforming our social and political systems. Like Kristeva, Cixous sees the articulations and rhythms of the mother's body as important in preventing the patriarchal Symbolic becoming too rigid. This link with the pre-symbolic represents a link and thus a way through separation and loss³¹⁸. For Lacan 'feminine jouissance is supplementary, it is the residue, the remainder, that which is left over from the phallic dialectic woman is subjected to.'³¹⁹ That of woman's desire that is left out of the symbolic contract, that is the maternal Semiotic and as Irigaray would have it, the structuring of woman to reflect back the masculine self-same, comprises the libidinal force of 'jouissance', which may challenge the Symbolic binary and bring about though writing, revolution. This is where Kristeva and Cixous part company; for Kristeva the symbolic may be refreshed by the semiotic but to overthrow it leads nowhere but to psychosis; while Cixous does not seek the overthrow of the Symbolic she gets too close for comfort for Kristeva, pushing up so close to the other as to render the binary self/ other almost redundant which in Kristevan terms threatens psychosis. As Bray puts it 'How does one create pragmatic ethics and politics if one is continually attempting an opening to and a receptivity to the other when the other is violent? At what point should we distinguish between the Other as an ontological category and the other as an empirical subject in the world 'putting a flower in the

³¹⁶ Susan Sellers *Helene Cixous* p. 33.

³¹⁷ *ibid* p. 5.

³¹⁸ *ibid* p. 8.

³¹⁹ *ibid* p. 27.

end of a rifle is all very well until a bullet comes shooting out'³²⁰ As for drama – is a pushing so close to the other a possibility without losing dramatic definition without losing conflict? Or does it allow us to push beyond a traditional concept of conflict and reconfigure a dramaturgy as Cixous exhorts *écriture féminine* to reconfigure the symbolic binary and re-invent politics, the self, to make sure as she says ' that the holocaust can never again happen' .³²¹ To create an economy of thinking that is not determined upon 'the sacrifice of the other'³²² .

Cixous names the rational, political subject as masculine, repressing the 'unconscious, the body, sexuality, creativity and the feminine' .³²³ Thinking dramatically, plays employing such a subject in an attempt to say, revolutionise the state, unconsciously mimic the repressive fictions of masculinity and only recreate the oppressive structures it would wish to overthrow. For Cixous, like Kristeva, it is important to put the accent on the poetic – for that is precisely what rationality attempts to limit and contain through reason.³²⁴ Cixous fears that old categories of revolution lead to violence and repression because old binaries reassert. What strategy for the 'political' writer must there be in the absence of the old 'state of the nation' structures of socialist realism? Cixous would have us break the strangle hold of the Symbolic, push at the binaries, to come so close to the other not to overwhelm, or master, but to allow alterity, the coexistence with the other which questions the whole self/other binary.

There is one final provocation to make concerning the post-structural, psycho-analytic feminists

³²⁰ *ibid* p. 55.

³²¹ *ibid* p. 55.

³²² *ibid* p. 45.

³²³ *ibid* p. 15.

³²⁴ *ibid* p. 15.

challenge to our traditional understandings of the classic dramatic lexicon, which is a point made in my previous chapter but pertinently re iterated here in relation to the structure of narrative. As Kristeva discusses it in relation to Nerval's poetry: 'Any narrative already assumes that there is an identity stabilised by a completed Oedipus and that, having accepted the loss of the thing it can concatenate its adventures through failures and conquests of the 'objects' of desire. This kind of storytelling seems too secondary, schematic and superficial to capture Nerval's black sun.'³²⁵ This hints at a further destabilisation of dramatic structure – when the problem of desire is foregrounded – and the Oedipal structure shaken, what is desire to mean in this potential new formation – the 'I want' based on a lack that in feminist psycho-analytic formulations becomes outmoded – if desire is about separation from the other, pursuit, then mastery of the other (or failure to master in the way one expected – with the gift of knowledge of the other, a mastery of kind) then what becomes of this structure when desire is not figured around lack but around moving closer to the other without loss and a willing embrace of the 'incalculable' nature of the other? Where the 'slow stillness of an open contemplation of the other'³²⁶ replaces the pacy consumption/identification with the other, their obliteration? When this 'deathly' structure falls away what is left?

Having sketched out some dramaturgical challenges proffered by post-structural, psycho-analytic feminism, I shall now look at some examples of plays which through their dramaturgy may be read as attempts to answer the questions set by the theorists I have discussed above.

³²⁵ Noelle McAfee *Julia kristeva* p. 71.

³²⁶ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 62.

CARYL CHURCHILL'S HEART'S DESIRE

In the introduction to her *Plays 4*, Churchill succinctly describes her intention for the two interlinked plays *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle* to be 'their destruction'³²⁷. Both plays are linked in subject matter by being described as 'a family waiting for their daughter and a son looking for his mother'³²⁸. In *Heart's Desire* we watch a family await the return of their daughter from a trip to Australia, only the play is continually 'Reset to top'³²⁹ which means their daughter never satisfactorily arrives. In *Blue Kettle* the destruction of the play takes place in the language itself, where the viral word 'kettle' and 'blue' randomly replaces other words until words themselves finally break down into inarticulate, stuttering single letters. The question here is how to read this destruction in the light of post-structural, psychoanalytic feminist theory?

At the very top of *Heart's Desire*, Maisie ruminates upon her sister's adventures in Australia and the possibility of seeing a platypus 'imagine this furry creature with its ducky face, it makes you think what else could have existed, tigers with trunks'³³⁰, here Churchill subliminally provokes us to imagine what does not exist, posing a question about the limitations placed on our heart's desires, and suggesting that rather than reality being fixed, there is a random serendipity about the structures that surround us and structure us. What else could exist? The elephant's trunk, with its phallic resonance is surreally detachable, and calls to mind Cixous 'rethinking through the body', imagining the possibility of a new way of thinking which displaces our present phallogocentric structures. The fact that Maisie is entranced by the idea of 'tigers with trunks' instead of appalled (abjected) by the promiscuous, arbitrary nature of these new, miscegenetic imaginings, is also resonant of

³²⁷ Caryl Churchill *Intro Plays 4* p. viii.

³²⁸ *Ibid* p. viii.

³²⁹ Caryl Churchill *Heart's Desire* p. 66.

³³⁰ *ibid* p. 65.

Cixous' incitement to push close to the other, not being afraid to question the category which keeps elephant/tiger separate and 'pure', the suggestion is to rethink our bodies and desires. For Churchill it is possible to infer that the tiger with a trunk is not the Kristevan creature of a nightmare psychosis but closer to the utopian vision of Cixous' *écriture féminine*.

Maisie's reflections are cut short by the first example of the play's resetting. Is this an indication of the threatening nature of the female imaginary being cut short by a curtailing structure or the unsettling reminder that whatever our 'heart's desire' we are not individuals who can surmount or become separate from the structures we are interpolated by? The dialogue which continues between parents Alice and Brian is comically repetitive and combative.

BRIAN We should have met the plane.

ALICE We should not.³³¹

It mimics the classic dictates of dramatic conflict; two individual wills in conflict; thesis, antithesis reach toward a new synthesis, which in turn reformulates a new thesis/antithesis. This is what Cixous might term the deathly logic of the phallogocentric binary predicated upon the obliteration of the feared other. Churchill mocks the structure through the meaningless squabbles of her characters, locked into a contest which they can't justify but are nonetheless in thrall to its logic, its petty rhythms, in the absence of an imagined alternative. Is it with relief that we embrace the resets or are they a further sinister insistence on structures that we embrace which are laws which keep us from our heart's desires? Is Alice following her heart's desire as she walks out on Brian or is this merely another trope from a soapy fiction that carves a path for our imagination to tread? Is it pertinent that the reset occurs at another moment of feminine rebellion? But where can such a rebellion lead? Like Nora, in *A*

³³¹ Ibid p. 66.

Doll's House, Alice may slam the door but doesn't she walk out into a world where the gender binary still configures her as other, lacking? This is an illusion of an exit. No wonder the play is reset. There is something mournful about the repetition, a replaying but with no real regenerative exit or perhaps it is a play that will not accept the old conventions of escape/closure?

The play is in fact, 'reset' twenty-five times, each time fatally dismantling the narrative trajectory normally associated with dramatic realism and the forward movement of progressive, linear time. The narrative is set back to an earlier point and seems to be repeating itself for a few exchanges before careening off into unfamiliar territory with unexpected outcomes. This has an uncanny resonance, the familiar made strange, as we see what we have known replayed before us without the safety of a known outcome. However we see the mechanism of this affect and in this sense Churchill is deconstructing the uncanny; the usual 'threat' or 'suspense' created by the hidden knowledge generated by realism/naturalism which must be purged in order for the social to be healed/made known/mastered. Thus, the uncanny as the incipient emergence of the repressed knowledge of the mother's 'castration', is shown to be precisely an artificial structure. There is laughter beneath this manipulated surprise, a comedy akin to Cixous laughter of the Medusa; wouldn't the biggest joke be if the mother wasn't castrated after all?

The tired tropes of drama are given a heightened awareness in this comedy that keeps us guessing as to what is coming next; it's the drunken son Lewis, bitterly reviling his treatment by his family, hinting at abuse between father and daughter³³², the body in the garden the family have buried and fear will be discovered³³³, a

³³² *ibid* p. 71.

³³³ *ibid* p. 73.

horde of children,³³⁴ and rising to a mock dramatic ‘climax’

‘Two GUNMEN burst in and kill them all and leave’.³³⁵ However nothing will stop the production of this factory/theatre and the characters are resurrected to continue their subjection to the structure that controls them. This is underscored in the sections of the play where the dialogue exchanges are stripped down to mere fragments but the characters continue as if full sentences were being spoken. This strips bare the illusion that characters are in control of speech and by extension their world. Churchill here reverses the ‘fictional I’³³⁶ of the Symbolic which creates the fiction that the cogito creates the world, and shows us a world where structures, like the Symbolic, control the ‘individual’. As such the classic protagonist is ‘castrated’. Male and female alike in this performance are not the generators of action but cyphers in the theatre machine in which they find themselves. The mechanical repetition of the occasional epiphany only underlines this point. What is worked towards as a moment of heightened meaning and intense revelation in classically structured drama is here foregrounded as a performed moment vulnerable to repetition (deathly) such as Maisie’s ‘I do think waiting is one of the hardest things’³³⁷ repeated four times as if to underline the point! The question here is what is to be discovered in this drama – not the interior life of the character – or the character in conflict with society – all givens in realistic drama, but rather it is the nature of the structure itself that Churchill is revealing while simultaneously destroying our expectations of what a play is supposed to be.

In *Heart’s Desire* there is no new world to discover in the classic sense, no exegesis that leads to renewal, for this structure, as in Irigaray’s formulation can only reproduce the self- same. Whether ‘*A ten foot tall bird*

³³⁴ *ibid* p. 74.

³³⁵ *Ibid* p. 77.

³³⁶ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 83.

³³⁷ Caryl Churchill *Heart’s Desire* p. 82.

*enters*³³⁸ or a man in uniform, is in some senses immaterial, the underlying structure remains the same and this is why for Churchill the classic, realist play can only reproduce the violence of binary structures no matter how it consciously strives to do the opposite. We can hear Churchillian laughter beneath Lewis' pronouncement ' It's time we had it out. It's time we spoke the truth'³³⁹ which reminds us we have heard this echoed in a thousand dramas down the epochs, a deathly repetition since the symbolic binaries including male/female still hold sway and the truth of their constructed nature is never outed. However, the ten foot bird is also, joyfully, a creature of the imagination, resonating back to the 'ducky' face of the platypus a nod to the possibility of yet unknown relationships to the other. It also, in its encapsulation of a poetic truth, hints at semiotic joys of the pre symbolic and for Cixous a way back to the lost maternal, for Kristeva a welcome refreshing of the deadly nature of the Symbolic. The repetition inherent in the play's structure also being a quality Freud identified in the death drive resonating with Cixous claims of the deathly nature of the phallogentric law.

What are we to make of the title *Heart's Desire* in a play which continually frustrates the desire of the protagonists and where the world of the play can never be quite known - who or what will enter next ? Thus, there is no possibility of mastering knowledge of the world for characters or audience and no satisfactory closure. The final beats of the play see the daughter, Susy, entering

BRIAN Here you are.

ALICE Yes here she is.

SUSY Hello aunty.

BRIAN You are my heart's-

³³⁸ Caryl Churchill *Heart's Desire* p. 91.

³³⁹ *Ibid* p. 83.

*Reset to top.*³⁴⁰

Even at this moment of potential closure, the unexpected appellation 'aunty' disturbs and derails our sense of knowing this scenario, even as we may be alert for the resetting, we are thrown off course by Alice's newly ascribed identity. The factory play will continue to produce endless (cheesy) scenarios which nonetheless also create disturbingly fluid identities. Brian's chance to have the final word of the play and thus fix his desire is also brutally, and comically truncated as desire goes missing at the final moment. This reminds us that the Oedipal structure of desire always keeps the illusion of the possibility of having desire fulfilled and in overturning the possibility of fulfilment, Churchill is also troubling the Oedipal structure or in Cixous' terms showing it to be laughable. This overturning is also hinted at in the aunty/mother confusion. In true oedipal style this would surely have been uncle/father? But perhaps in a nod to Irigaray's theatrical womb/cave, the world here is comically upside down. Oedipus is the moment of the creation of binaries. Until this moment the child is both male and female, in deconstructing oedipal desire she is surely deconstructing the identity of self/other, male/ female. She mocks the deathly desire to overcome, consume the other in the scenario where Brian insists that he wants to eat himself. 'MAISIE Is this something you've always wanted to do or-?'³⁴¹ An echo here of the final missing word, the Medusa's mockery of the fear of the Other's lack where a desire predicated on mastery of the other leads ultimately to a grisly consumption that leaves the body comically re-altered; 'my whole body's in my mouth now so there's just my legs sticking out'³⁴² says Brian. The whole, tragic body is here replaced by the carnivalesque body, reminiscent of the possibilities of another pre-symbolic body. The real 'machine' in Churchill's play intends this kind of transformation, from tragic seriousness to a playful mischievousness where desire is closer to *jouissance* and deliberately sets out to frustrate an identity stabilised

³⁴⁰ Ibid p. 95.

³⁴¹ Ibid p. 81.

³⁴² Ibid p. 82.

by a completed Oedipus which having accepted the loss of the thing it can concatenate its adventures through failures and conquests of the 'objects' of desire. Like the mechanical moments of rewind in *Heart's Desire*, the play takes us back to the moment of Oedipal desire's conception and asks is it really our heart's desire?

'My memories are definitely what I am' says Mrs Vane. But yet her memory is fragile 'Blue, I've forgotten blue than I ever blue.'³⁴³ As Derek remarks of memory 'If you didn't have any you wouldn't know who you were would you?'³⁴⁴ She is also being manipulated by Derek into thinking he is her son long ago put up for adoption. As another of his putative mothers Mrs Oliver comments on the subject of imagining the existence of her son 'There was a time I knew every minute. But you know how sharp things get worn down.'³⁴⁵ Derek's 'real' mother is in a nursing home suffering from Alzheimers, where we see a mind fragmented by a physical disease. If even emotion can be blunted, and one can forget everything one ever knew, the question for *Blue Kettle* is what is it that defines our identity? The women in the play are, with the exception of Enid, his girlfriend, all known by their relation to another; Mrs Vane, Mrs Oliver, Mrs Plant and Miss Clarence are all known by their relation to patriarchal forms of power, named by husbands or fathers respectively. Mother is known as simply that and similarly all the women that are interpolated by Derek as mother seem unable or unwilling to reject the role. All the women have secret histories, which they face pragmatically and honestly. These are histories, that but for Derek, would never see the light of day. 'Critics have connected the faltering language of *Blue Kettle* to the disintegration of identity as Derek's ploy gradually fails. But this misreading projects the audience's own disconnection from the stage back onto the characters...Mrs Plant and Mrs Oliver in fact know exactly what she and her scene partner have to say'.³⁴⁶

³⁴³ Caryl Churchill *Blue Kettle* p. 115.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid* p. 115.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid* p. 112.

In disrupting language, the play points, as the structure of resetting does in *Heart's Desire*, to the hidden system, language, which directs us. The disruption of speech, is a disrobing of the 'fictional I' – the illusion that the cogito is in control and directing the world. Despite taking language away the mechanism of the play continues, the performance as 'mother' continues. Enid's question to Derek 'Is it a conrick or is it a hangup'³⁴⁷ comes close to a lay dissection of the paternal law, which could be fruitfully described as both. As in *Heart's Desire*, there is *jouissance* in Churchill's joyful disruption of language until it breaks down finally into single phonemes in semiotic abundance. The Brechtian distance created by the disparity between what we are seeing/hearing as an audience and the spell in which the characters are gripped as the play's machine seems to be winding down:

MRS PLANT T b k k k k l?

DEREK B. K.³⁴⁸

underlines the point, we must continue, we must speak but what exactly are we playing at?

SARAH KANE'S PHAEDRA'S LOVE, CLEANSED, CRAVE.

In the light of Churchill's rewriting of tragedy how does Sarah Kane approach the genre in her rewriting of the Phaedra myth? Should we describe the world of *Cleansed* as a tragic world? In the introduction to her *Complete Plays*, David Greig writes 'Kane believed passionately that if it was possible to imagine something, it was possible to represent it'.³⁴⁹ This overturning of the hierarchy of the binary real/imagined, where mimesis is a true reflection of the real, embraces the urgings of the post structural, psycho-analytic feminists to worry the

³⁴⁶ Elaine Aston, Elin Diamond *Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* p.117.

³⁴⁷ Caryl Churchill *Blue Kettle* p. 120.

³⁴⁸ Caryl Churchill *Ibid* p. 128.

³⁴⁹ Sarah Kane *Complete Plays* p. xiii.

Symbolic with Semiotic revolutionary impulses, allowing the feminine imaginary residing in the Semiotic to test the Symbolic to its limits, and as Cixous would have it, push so close to the other as to rewrite the world. From the point of view of exploring the plays of Kane and Churchill it is possible to argue that in eschewing the genre of tragedy these writers create new forms and possibilities and therefore new directions for a feminist dramaturgy. Kane's plays, while exhibiting many of the tragic tropes; violence, a melancholy atmosphere, dark desires and a gruesome destruction of the body; repeatedly however, bring in a dark humour to her landscapes; Cate biting Ian's penis as a risposte to her rape.³⁵⁰ Kane's endings too, it can be argued, defy the tragic/comic definitions with their slight but tender exchanges in landscapes of apocalyptic loss. *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* complete with actions that take place in a dramatic world that seems to have lasted past what should have in traditional terms constituted an ending and so defy tragic closure. Likewise Churchill's *A Number* continues, after the deaths of Bernard 1 and 2, with the entrance of a third death-defying clone, Michael, played by the same actor, whose very body provides a resistance to tragic closure. Similarly the clone's strange brand of technological reincarnation hints at possibilities beyond the deathly closure of tragedy, its inherent mastery of the other and a concomitant dethroning of patriarchy.

PHAEDRA'S LOVE

Kane described *Phaedra's Love* as 'my comedy'³⁵¹. Hippolytus cuts through the defences and pretensions of the other characters, Kane replaced the puritanism of the original with the pursuit of 'honesty, both physically and morally –even when that means he has to destroy himself and everyone else'³⁵². She describes her Hippolytus as 'a complete shit, but he's also very funny, and for me that is redeeming'.³⁵³ A further significant

³⁵⁰ Sarah Kane *Blasted* p.

³⁵¹ Graham Saunders *Love Me or Kill Me* p. 78.

³⁵² *Ibid* p. 76.

alteration she made to the original was to subvert the onstage/offstage binary; 'you can subvert the convention of everything happening onstage and have it onstage and see how that works'.³⁵⁴ Thus we see Hippolytus' genitals cut off, his bowels eviscerated and both tossed onto the barbecue of the on looking crowd. The honesty that Kane promulgates for Hippolytus, extends to her dramaturgy, you really see what you're getting, it's not the hidden, uncanny threat of castration that lurks offstage, or resides in the distorted representation of women characters, despised because they have castration fears projected upon them, everything is revealed in a bacchanalian horror, which is also paradoxically a release from the psychic tension of the self/other binary in which fear accumulates, as the dying Hippolytus says as a last and, what can only be, funny line, or perhaps suggestive of an emotion both funny and sad, transcending the comedy/tragedy binary 'If there could have been more moments like this'.³⁵⁵ Graham Saunders warns that the bloody climax 'is a potentially dangerous venture to put before a modern audience...possibly risking its sense of ridicule'³⁵⁶in that it is seen as an excessive gesture and not mimetically 'true'. But Kane's intention is not to 'reproduce reality', her brand of honesty is to show the theatrical reality that is kept off stage which does not bear a direct mimetic relationship to the 'real', but is part of an imaginary construct which supported the onstage 'reality'. That is what is exposed to us and exposure is what Kane is interested in. By bringing the offstage onstage she has disrupted the 'regime of permissible visibility'³⁵⁷ and in so doing transgresses paternal law. The ridicule Saunders warns against may be the attempt to re-instate the paternal law, scorn being a reaction to attempt to eradicate the threat Kane's play poses. Kane's onstage excessive violence may be, indeed, a mockery of the threat of castration that is more usually so coyly hidden offstage, show it and perhaps the laughter is the laughter of the medusa? Is this fake blood and guts what

³⁵³ Ibid p. 78.

³⁵⁴ Ibid p. 80.

³⁵⁵ Sarah Kane *Phaedre's Love* p. 103.

³⁵⁶ Graham Saunders *Love Me or Kill Me* p. 80.

³⁵⁷ Elin diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 94.

you are scared of? It's not real. What exactly is so frightening about the absence of a penis? Perhaps absence isn't absence after all. What is so radical about Kane's onstage violence here is that her protagonist submits to it willingly, which castrates the aggressor because it then cannot be simplistically about the will of the antagonist. It is a further binary that Kane is confusing; the master/slave or victim/perpetrator which classic drama likes to keep discrete.

Kane deconstructs the 'tragic' passion that Phaedra has evinced for Hippolytus. After she has performed oral sex on him while the stage directions tells us he childlike, '*eats his sweets*' he comments bathetically 'There, mystery over.'³⁵⁸ He demystifies Phaedra's obsessive protestations of love; his childishness, refusal to take 'adult' responsibility, a nod to the Semiotic which resists Symbolic structuring and the construction of love/ownership. He remarks 'Wouldn't be about me. Never was.'³⁵⁹, highlighting that a system is at work that has less to do with the individual than the romantic version of love would suggest. Roland Barthes writes 'In Plato's Phaedrus...the lover is intolerable (by his heaviness) to the beloved...he acts as an intolerable detective and constantly subjects the lover to malicious spying'³⁶⁰. This tyranny or, in lover's discourse 'conquest' of the other is precisely what Kane and her protagonist object to. It is not a moving close to the other in slow contemplation as Cixous would have it, but a desire to know, to consume, to destroy. It is driven by the concealed fear of lack and a desire for mastery spawned by the oedipal contract and it is Hippolytus' insistence on the truth of love that destroys him. Instead of accepting/rejecting the other, he pushes close but refuses to be overcome, he submits physically, sexually to the other because to refuse is to be locked into a distorted relationship of love/ownership. Just like the abject '*Inch of pleurococcus*'³⁶¹ that co-habits on his tongue he

³⁵⁸ Ibid p. 81.

³⁵⁹ Ibid p. 84.

³⁶⁰ Roland Barthes *Lover's Discourse* p. 165.

prefers to be got up close to but not to invest in the discourse of love because he desecrates the patriarchal structures invested in it; 'Fuck God. Fuck the monarchy'.³⁶²

Hippolytus' decision to turn himself in after Phaedra's accusation of rape and her suicide comes close to demonstrating some kind of dramatic strategy in answer to Bray's earlier question 'How does one create pragmatic ethics and politics if one is continually attempting an opening to and a receptivity to the other when the other is violent?'³⁶³ Hippolytus' gruesome dismemberment looks close to sacrifice except we are on a stage not in the 'real' world. In Kane's imagination, the dismantling of his body is also figured as release from the 'boring'³⁶⁴ nature of his role as prince and putative lover. The conception of the whole body formed through a misreading of the entry into the Symbolic, a body founded on fear of lack (male) and ascribed lack (female) is torn apart and with its fragmentation the possibility of pushing our imaginations to new limits, new configurations.

CLEANSED

Cleansed, written subsequently to *Phaedra's Love* can be read as a continuation of the themes of fragmentation of the body and the liberation of new identities. The play is set in a former university that is concurrently a prison/hospital. Its main protagonist, Grace, 'pursues an obsessive and incestuous love for her dead brother, Graham'³⁶⁵. From the start the Symbolic order is threatened with transgressive desire, incest being a prohibition of the Symbolic, Oedipal law. Graham is dead, but Grace wants to go beyond the traditional

³⁶¹ Sarah Kane *Phaedra's Love* p. 85.

³⁶² *Ibid* p. 95.

³⁶³ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 53.

³⁶⁴ Sarah Kane *Phaedra's Love* p. 83.

³⁶⁵ Graham Saunders *About Kane* p. 28.

mourning process, which according to Freud which allows for a space in which the mourner refuses to let go of the lost object which for a time is understandable since ‘people never willingly abandon a libidinal position’³⁶⁶. For Grace, however, the opposition is so intense that she turns away from reality and clings to the object (Graham) ‘through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis’.³⁶⁷ This is unusual, because as Freud explains ‘normally reality gains the day’³⁶⁸, here though, Grace is refusing to accept the binary self/other and wishes, rather like Lispector’s cockroach consuming GH, to change her body ‘So it looked like it feels. Graham outside like Graham outside’.³⁶⁹ But it is not Grace that enacts this becoming, rather it is the sadistic Tinker who makes Grace’s word flesh. What is Grace in mourning for? Her twin brother is after all as close to her as possible without being her. Perhaps he represents the lost plenitude of the semiotic, where, the psycho-analytic feminists under discussion here all agree, sexual difference was not yet imposed on the polymorphous body. It is Tinker’s mocking parody of Grace’s desire to regain the lack instituted by the Oedipal contract, that has him give Grace a ‘double mastectomy and phalloplasty’³⁷⁰. This is the exposed fascist meaning of *Cleansed* which seeks to punish and ‘purify’ desire which is seen as transgressive through a devastating practice of pain and humiliation. However, as with *Phaedra’s Love*, the dismantling of the body has a curiously liberating effect. Grace becomes Grace/Graham, freed from the gender binary and in a final moment of bleak tenderness, beyond words and their Symbolic sway, the stage direction instructs ‘CARL *reaches out his arm./GRACE/GRAHAM holds his stump*’³⁷¹ and in that transcendent moment of maternal embrace the protagonists are cleansed of the difference phallogocentrism has imposed upon them. The torture inflicted upon them by Tinker, their inability to oppose his violence meant in effect a refusal to ‘other’ him, to respond in return with equal violence, none of

³⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud *Mourning and Melancholia* p. 253.

³⁶⁷ Ibid p. 253.

³⁶⁸ Ibid p. 253.

³⁶⁹ Sarah Kane *Cleansed* p. 126.

³⁷⁰ Graham Saunders *About Kane* p. 30.

³⁷¹ Sarah Kane *Cleansed* p. 150.

the characters defend themselves but submit to him, Grace even willingly puts herself into his hands. To allow the violation is the dramatic strategy employed by Kane and as one critic wrote ‘As with a nightmare, you cannot shut it out because nightmares are experienced with your whole body’.³⁷² The effect on the audience could be a terrorised sensation that heals the mind/body split and challenges the symbolic separation of the two. Kane pushes so close to the borders of the other that her characters become the other, in Kristevan terms this is psychosis, and perhaps it is taking Cixous further than she intended, but the fact that so much of Kane’s play exists in the stage directions and therefore in embodied physicality means that *écriture féminine* as applied to the stage means precisely that, the semiotic made flesh through the body of the actor. The fluidity of identity as in the Grace/Graham incarnation also resonates with *écriture féminine*. Kane likened the torture of Carl having a pole inserted through his anus until it comes out of his shoulder to ‘a form of crucifixion which Serbian soldiers used against Muslims in Bosnia’.³⁷³ In a world where this type of ‘ethnic cleansing’ is an atrocious example of the self/other binary imposed by the Symbolic order, refreshing the Symbolic in Kristevan terms is not enough for Kane. The type of nightmare shock she delivers us pushes us not up close to the other as Cixous would have it but awakens us by watching the boundaries of self/other disintegrate. For Kane we are at such an extreme pass that psychosis is the cure.

CRAVE

CRAVE was Kane’s penultimate play. In it she left behind some of the dramatic strategies she had so far employed saying ‘As soon as you’ve written and used a theatrical form, it becomes redundant’.³⁷⁴ She may have left strategies behind but her concerns, as one might expect, stayed with her. *Crave* can be described as

³⁷² Graham Saunders *Love Me or Kill Me* p. 90.

³⁷³ *Ibid* p. 90.

³⁷⁴ *ibid* p. 99.

‘involving rhythmic language, and absence of formal characterisation’³⁷⁵ and having a ‘poetic structure, based exclusively around pace and rhythm, resists rational analysis’³⁷⁶ of which both descriptions could be said to represent features of Kristeva’s semiotic *chora*, the pre-symbolic holding place of the child, responsive to the rhythms and pre-linguistic utterances of the maternal body. The four voices in *Crave*³⁷⁷ are indicated by the letters A, B, C and M which indicate a concern not with the outward social organisation of existence but the interior world in which all the characters have been ‘damaged by their relationships’.³⁷⁸ However the lyrical nature of the play means that the audience while seeing four actors on stage also experiences ‘one voice’, as separate utterances tantalisingly bleed into one meaning although we understand this is not the thesis/antithesis brand of conflict/dialogue;

M I keep telling people I’m pregnant. They say How did you do it, what are you taking? I say I drank
a bottle of port, smoked some fags and fucked a stranger.

B All lies.

The speaking voices are separate, yet not directly in conflict in the sense that the self/other binary would usually operate, but the voices, in Cixous’ terms, coming up so close to each other, begin to question the boundaries between selves. Kane’s more fluid identities are pushing the boundaries of classic representation. Here the initial lack of discrete, named characters mean that the merging and mutilation of bodies as seen in *Cleansed*, are indeed in Kane’s own terms ‘redundant’.

The wonderful, mournful rhythms of

³⁷⁵ Graham Saunders *About Kane* p. 32.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid* p. 32.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid* p. 32.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid* p. 33.

M The heat is going out of me.

C The heart is going out of me

B I feel nothing, nothing.

I feel nothing.³⁷⁹

replicate the beats of a faltering heart. Perhaps this is reminiscent of the heart beat heard by the foetus in the womb, the soundtrack to the semiotic? It is the metaphorical removal of the child from the maternal body via paternal law that leaves it cold, un-embraced, and separate from the maternal, Semiotic chora where the beat of the mother's heart would have formed the backdrop to a world of the undivided self, unmarked by phallogocentric lack? Is this what is craved in *Crave*? A time before the self/other binary made love cruel and in Kanian terms a war-zone? 'Love me or kill me'³⁸⁰ says Grace in *Cleansed* but for Kane's voices in *Crave* does it mean the same thing? Phyllis Nagy commented on Kane that her work seemed to say that for 'any two people who form a relationship some kind of colonisation is bound to take place – someone will be abused, power structures will come into play'.³⁸¹ But where the self/other binary exists unchallenged then colonisation of the other is part of what Cixous would arraign as the deathly contract of phallogocentrism, where the other must be overcome and not come up close to so as to institute alterity, not otherness.

Crave uses dramatic strategies to overcome othering. David Greig comments on A's long love speech achieved without punctuation, therefore a transgression of paternal ordering, an outpouring which Kristeva would recognise as refreshing, he comments that 'the audience are prevented from seeing the speech as something autobiographical, concerning the character A or the dramatist'³⁸²; instead 'because of its very

³⁷⁹ Sarah Kane *Crave* p. 156.

³⁸⁰ Sarah Kane *Cleansed* p. 120.

³⁸¹ Graham Saunders *Love Me or Kill Me* p. 107.

precision it opens itself up to you, me or anybody who has felt desire or felt those similar words. You don't have to know the name of the coffee shop[...] (it) allows you to bring your own detail to it'.³⁸³ This brings us up close to the other. Similarly, the original director of *Crave*, Vicky Featherstone, commented on another of its qualities, the speed and emotional impact of the play actively refuses the audience any speculative response³⁸⁴, forcing the audience to 'experience the play moment by moment through the senses'³⁸⁵, a strategy which disallows the spectator to separate from the performer but pushes us up close to them. The play also reinforces this by using a confessional not confrontational discourse which also frustrates the tenets of traditional dramaturgy in its self/other formulations.

Crave seems to suggest that, for the voices, death is the way out of 'love is the law, love under will'³⁸⁶ but their 'Free-falling' into the light, in the final poetic patterning of the play is the linguistic equivalent of the liberating loss of self, defined by the self/other binary that we see in *Cleansed*. The last word of the play is 'free'.³⁸⁷

Both Churchill and Kane through their respective dramaturgies challenge the paternal symbolic binaries and in so doing offer not only distinctive, original plays which joyfully/painfully transgress the classic structures of mimetically 'real' drama but also invite us to contemplate a new alterity. Both dramatists can be read fruitfully through the lens of the French psychoanalytic post-structuralists, whose concept of *écriture féminine* insists on a re-configuration of the patriarchal symbolic through a recognition of the role of the maternal body in subject

³⁸² Graham Ibid p. 107.

³⁸³ Ibid p. 107.

³⁸⁴ Graham Saunders *About Kane* p. 34.

³⁸⁵ Ibid p. 34.

³⁸⁶ Sarah Kane *Crave* p. 199.

³⁸⁷ Ibid p. 199.

formation. While theorist Judith Butler may dismiss such a gesture as a colonisation of difference, that is the differences between women in order to create the political entity 'woman', the alternative is to dismiss the body to just allow for the sign woman in the order of discourse, surely banishing the unruly maternal/female body from somatic consideration. French feminist discourse in relation to writing for the theatre, an embodied form, is productive both as an analytic tool for examining the strategies of the writers under consideration, for example Churchill who is highly attuned to the history of the female body in representation and has sought repeatedly to bring a consideration of the reality of the female body to bear even in such plays as *A Number* where the absence of the maternal is brought to the fore precisely through its absence.

The fact that as Irigaray states 'woman can never be[...] they are neither subject nor other but an exclusion from the binary opposition itself a ruse for a monologic elaboration of the masculine'³⁸⁸ is recognised by these dramatists not as a position of weakness, but as one of potency which they use respectively to unmask the illusions of phallogocentrism to trouble the patriarchal symbolic with strategies of the imagination, and the subverting of the genre of tragedy which pushes the forms they write in to embrace new possibilities of a feminist dramaturgy.

³⁸⁸ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* p 18

AFTER ELECTRA

A play.

PART ONE

HAYDN: You have to imagine a house on an estuary. When the tide goes out the water disappears – all that's left are miles upon miles of ridged sand with just the faintest suggestion of water, flashes of light, tiny mirrors reflecting the sun. It's possible to get lost out there, to forget which way is back, to be seduced by the stillness, but when the tide comes in it comes back faster than a man can run. You drown because you were lulled into a false sense of peace and you stood there too long, dreaming.

TWO WOMEN, VIRGIE (80 YRS OLD) AND HER DAUGHTER, HAYDN (58 YRS) STAND IN THE ROOM, HAYDN IS SMOKING.

VIRGIE Would you like the photos?

HAYDN Not particularly.

VIRGIE I'll burn them.

HAYDN That's a bit extreme

VIRGIE: There's nothing sadder than seeing old photos in second hand shops, gone irreversibly astray. I'm not subjecting Aunt Hilda and Uncle Bill to that. Having them smiling out at nothing.

HAYDN So you're going to immolate them?

VIRGIE Better than having them sniffed at by strangers. Picked up and thrown down carelessly.

Hilda was always so particular about what she wore.

HAYDN You might feel differently in a few months, want their company.

VIRGIE There's something spiritual in consigning them to the flames.

I saved everything; my feminist post card collection; it begins when you sink in his arms it ends with your arms in his sink. Interested?

HAYDN Naturally. I really do have room in my life for all sorts of pointless junk.

VIRGIE I'll burn that too then.

This is turning out to be marvelously straight forward. What did I think I was saving all this stuff for? Dragging it round for years and years.

How about a dining room table and four chairs?

HAYDN Stop engaging in termination behavior. It's tasteless.

VIRGIE Do you want the car?

HAYDN For god's sake you're not dying are you?

VIRGIE No

HAYDN Good. Can we get things on a more normal footing. You talk about things that don't interest me and I pretend to listen.

Then I can pop back onto the M25 feeling I've done my duty.

VIRGIE Visiting me must have been dreadful

HAYDN Not really, I fantasize about the nice glass of cold chardonnay waiting for me at home.

The bottle chilling in the fridge; gorgeous icy bloom on the green glass.

VIRGIE What's that a breast substitute?

HAYDN Well I do qualify. By the way - happy birthday.

VIRGIE Thank you.

HAYDN HANDS HER A PARCEL. VIRGIE DOESN'T OPEN IT

Look, I don't think there's an easy way to tell you this so I'll just give it to you on the chin.

I'm going to kill myself.

PAUSE

HAYDN Well., that really takes the fucking biscuit.

VIRGIE Yes, sorry.

HAYDN What's brought this on?

VIRGIE Nothing. I've enjoyed my life. I've had a good innings. I've done everything I wanted to and I'd like to go now before things get any worse. I wasn't looking forward to the decrepit bit. My eyes aren't getting any better. I can't walk further than the garden. A protest at Pig Bay last week, 'our land not the militaries', couldn't make it. My hands - can't hold a brush. I don't want to go ga-ga. It's my decision. It's perfectly rational. I know it's your job to suspect everybody's motives. But what I suggest is you accept it and we can get on with having our final day together. The weather's fabulous. Couldn't ask for better in September

HAYDN For god's sake mother.

VIRGIE I want you to stay for the evening. Should be able to let you go by midnight.

The traffic will be better then, - I've invited a few close friends those I've got left, and I'd like you to help me out –

I need to prepare a lot of salads -

HAYDN Will you listen to yourself.

VIRGIE HOLDS UP HER HAND

VIRGIE I actually managed to cut myself the other day, a knife slipped - 'my thumb instead of an onion!' What a coincidence...so that's slowed me down considerably -

HAYDN If you're asking me to preside over some ghoulish scene of self- murder you are absolutely mistaken, I won't do it.

VIRGIE I'm asking you as a last request and if you say no, Haydn, I'll never speak to you again till the day I die. It may be a short silence but it will be profound, I guarantee.

HAYDN If I stay I shall be doing everything in my power to prevent you.

VIRGIE I didn't expect killing myself would be so demanding.

HAYDN You've only just scratched the surface.

VIRGIE I'm not doing this thoughtlessly. I googled it. 'The intentional, sudden and violent nature of the loved one's death often makes those left behind feel abandoned, helpless and rejected'. That's what I'm trying to avoid.

HAYDN How are you going to do it? Dying's messy. Pills get puked up

Jump in front of a train you traumatize the driver.

Guns - do you really want other people wiping up your brains?

Knives hurt.

VIRGIE I thought about that. Look.

THEY LOOK. THE SEA STRETCHES BEFORE THEM

I suddenly realized it was out there all the time.

HAYDN LOOKS AT HER MOTHER LOOKING AT THE SEA.

You won't need to bury me. I'm going to be eaten by fish.

I've eaten a lot of fish in my life time. I'd like to return the favour.

HAYDN That's preposterous.

VIRGIE I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm just letting you know.

Perhaps you'd like to walk out there with me. Leave me, don't look back.

It only takes a minute to drown. And living here I've often wondered, you know, what it would be like.

HAYDN you're depressed. Have you seen doctor Roberts?

VIRGIE He's got cancer.

HAYDN They'll have a locum. You need help.

VIRGIE I got old, Haydn. Get over it.

HAYDN STARTS TO BREATHE SHALLOWLY. SHE IS HAVING A PANIC ATTACK

Have you swallowed a cigarette butt?

HAYDN'S FINDS IT HARD TO BREATHE SHE BEGINS TO STUMBLE ABOUT

VIRGIE You're not dying are you? Trust you to steal my fire.

HAYDN MANAGES TO FIND A PAPER BAG AND BEGINS BREATHING INTO IT SHE MANAGES TO CALM DOWN

I've managed to live through a whole 84 years without seeing a panic attack and now on my last day ever! Well I wouldn't have missed it. Most people would have cried. But you have an attack. What's that called?

HAYDN Conversion Hysteria.

HAYDN SLOWLY GETS TO GRIPS WITH HER BREATHING. VIRGIE WATCHES HER BUT DOES NOT HELP.

VIRGIE I didn't open my present!

How exciting

SHE OPENS IT. A BOOK

That's lovely. Tai chi for beginners

I don't think I'll be able to get through it by the morning. I intend to be intensively socializing. Perhaps you could take it back with you?

PAUSE

Whatever

I'm going to use the last of the lettuce from the garden. It's sublime.

Isn't nature wonderful? It's such a pity we're destroying it. How do you account for it? People are stupid cunts?

Shall we start the salads?

HAYDN MAKES NO MOVE TO HELP

Is John's coming down?

HAYDN No

VIRGIE How are you getting on these days?

HAYDN We're splitting up

VIRGIE Oh dear. what a shame.

There's no chance of you patching things up?

HAYDN No.

VIRGIE That surprises me. You were always so traditional.

HAYDN I made a good stab at it. More than you did. You haven't got a leg to stand on.

Your marriage was shit

VIRGIE That's because your father was a wanker. All men were in 1960. It's not his fault. Men had too much power. I was inquiring because - I've only got your best interests at heart

HAYDN You're perversely threatening suicide in my presence i don't think that qualifies for adequate loving care

VIRGIE You're 58 how long was it supposed to go on - this mother thing? Surely there comes a time when my life is my own to dispose of how I please?

HAYDN Why couldn't you have just got it over quietly then instead of indulging in this display of theatrics?

VIRGIE well I prefer you being angry with me too all that Victorian panting into a bag

HAYDN I haven't had an attack like that for years

VIRGIE I suppose it's all my fault

HAYDN Frankly yes

VIRGIE If you feel so badly about it perhaps you better go.

HAYDN I can't go mother because I'll feel guilty for the rest of my life – what would have happened if I'd stayed – I could have prevented you etc etc. I'm trapped unless I can think of a way out. Ooh maybe I'll kill myself. Except I'm not a coward.

VIRGIE I'm not a coward, Haydn. I'm quite scared of water.

PAUSE

HAYDN I know what this is about. You're frightened of getting sick and being on your own. I would have

visited.

VIRGIE You know nothing.

HAYDN You've got everything to live for

VIRGIE What have I got to live for you don't like me, never have really you've tolerated me and I've loved you of course because being a mother is like being a madwoman, you're visited by a kind of insane, boundless love for your children that has no known precedent you must have that with Candida.

HAYDN Is that why you left me with Bill and Hilda?

VIRGIE Summer in the countryside – wonderful.

HAYDN You abandoned me there.

VIRGIE I visited -

HAYDN For two years.

VIRGIE Was it as long as that? Farm house Christmases, lovely.

HAYDN I cried myself to sleep.

VIRGIE I expressed my love in trying to change the world, painting that was my way, that was for you

HAYDN Thank you very much I was a child I didn't appreciate it.

VIRGIE It seemed selfish to you but I was surviving, spiritually. I used to meet a lot of dead women at the

shops.

HAYDN How did that happen?

VIRGIE Housewives. They only appeared living if you weren't looking closely. I was an artist. I noticed. This is a trip down memory lane .

HAYDN I'm not blaming you, you did the best you were capable of but kids need mindless secure routine

VIRGIE Do they? It's what Candida's had.

HAYDN An eating disorder has a completely different aetiology.

VIRGIE Oh look here are the first guests.

This is what the Romans did - have a feast and fall on their swords. It's civilized.

HAYDN I'm just warning you I will be doing all in my power to disrupt.

VIRGIE You think you mind now Hadyn, but I assure you, really you'll be pleased. You've never liked me and you can inherit the cottage. And there are a few paintings. You'll have to forgive me and help out. It'll be cathartic.

ENTER A COUPLE, TOM, 69, STILL HANDSOME AND SONIA

TOM Virgie!

THEY EMBRACE

SONIA Virgie, love.

VIRGIE Hello Tom, hello Sonia.

TOM Happy birthday to you but it is impossible birthdays are wasted you are immortal, ageless -

VIRGIE You're flattering me. You remember Haydn - my daughter

TOM My god.

SONIA My god.

TOM Little Haydn. This is good isn't it? Wonderful. The light. For your painting.

SONIA Yes it's very pretty.

VIRGIE Delightful, isn't it?

TOM You haven't changed, Virgie.

SONIA Tom's declaiming. He's been at the RSC.

VIRGIE Good for Tom.

HADYN Virgie's got a surprise.

TOM God I hate surprises.

HAYDN You've come to the right place then.

SONIA Look at us - we've got your presents in the car a crate of champagne.

You're not 84 every day.

VIRGIE I shan't be drinking.

TOM I've heard that before.

VIRGIE I don't want to die drunk.

SONIA We're not suggesting you drink the whole crate alone and at once.

TOM Although it would be a laugh - we could help. Virgie's always been very good value with a few
beers down her.

VIRGIE Yes, but I want to be stone cold sober when I commit suicide. I don't want anything going
wrong. I don't want to wake up alive and have to face everybody, I don't want to be doing it all over
again on Monday morning.

PAUSE

TOM I suggest we crack a bottle open now

SONIA Tom - don't you think we should react to what Virgie just said.

TOM I didn't understand of word of what she just said it didn't make sense.

SONIA How do you survive as a bloody actor? Too busy thinking about what you're going to say
next, never listening. Well she said - perhaps you could help me out here Haydn she said - is
that what she said?

TOM We just want to clarify what you meant Virgie when you said....what you said...

HAYDN My mother is going into the sea and she's not coming back.

TOM Are you swimming to France?

SONIA She's 84.

HAYDN She's not planning to get that far.

TOM You mean you are....swimming....and swimming and not returning -

VIRGIE Yes. I don't think swimming is the right word. I'll be sitting at the confluence of tides. I just want to say goodbye properly. You mustn't think of death in a grim way it's just a change from one form of existence to another.

TOM From warm, passionate sensate life.

SONIA Surely you're not describing yourself.

TOM To a lump of dead meat.

SONIA That's more like it.

TOM Christ, Sonia is it going to be like this we've only just arrived.

SONIA Virgie could you confirm that you are going to.

VIRGIE Yes.

SONIA Oh God.

TOM What nonsense.

A PAUSE

What a bloody awful thing to do.

HAYDN Yes.

VIRGIE I want today to be a celebration.

TOM Oh my god my god my god my god my god.

VIRGIE With the people that mean something to me.

Would you like a drink? A gin and tonic, some wine

TOM My god.

VIRGIE Or a soft drink or a cup of tea you have been travelling.

TOM It's not possible i can't believe it this is terrible news I'm coming with you.

VIRGIE No no no.

TOM Yes.

VIRGIE Don't be silly this is my exit.

SONIA Yes, don't be a cunt, Tom.

TOM A light will go out

VIRGIE I know what I'm doing.

TOM What about Haydn?

VIRGIE What about her?

TOM You're her mother

VIRGIE I am also a person in my own right.

Well, now we've got that out of the way perhaps we can start.

SHIRLEY ENTERS

SHIRLEY Hello, hello everyone, It's me! I come to shower you with gifts.

SHE KISSES EVERYONE

When does the fun start?

VIRGIE Shirley is my little sister.

SHIRLEY Not so little.

VIRGIE Tom and Sonia are old friends. Tom lived with me years back.

SHIRLEY Lovely to meet you.

TOM We're all feeling a little put out Shirley because Virgie's decided she's going to kill her self.

SHIRLEY I don't think so.

VIRGIE Yes, I've got the order of events.

TOM That's a bit morbid.

VIRGIE Death is morbid. Tom?

TOM TAKES IT

TOM We have free time till drinks before dinner. There are a range of available snacks including a vegan alternative. An optional stroll on the beach. Dinner at 7.30. Followed by an address by each one of us to Virgie or if we prefer an entertainment of some sort Virgie addresses us.

Then we have the lighting of the bonfire.

Then we go home and Virgie tops herself. She's underlined it look. She's gone mad.

SONIA Do you really think we're going to sit by and let you do it Virgie?

VIRGIE You're my oldest friends I expect you to respect my wishes

SHIRLEY Someone get me a sherry for Christ's sake.

VIRGIE Dry or medium?

SHIRLEY I don't fucking care at this jointure. Who can tell the difference after two glasses?

VIRGIE You're not supposed to have more than two glasses it's an aperitif

SHIRLEY Are these people living in the real world? Now i want you to stop all this nonsense and let everyone breathe a sigh of relief and then we can all have a jolly time.
I must say everyone's looking shit.

VIRGIE We're old.

SHIRLEY 60 is the new 30.

VIRGIE How exhausting. Go away Tom and Sonia, go for a walk while I do the family thing.

SONIA Talk some sense into her.

TOM You should have told us what you were up to Virgie, we're not wearing the right clothes, this light jacket.

SONIA He doesn't feel dressed for the part.

SHIRLEY Leave it to me.

TOM AND SONIA EXIT

SHIRLEY They're hard work. Well, I came. Husband said to me these things have to be done these big occasions have to be marked.

VIRGIE How is James?

SHIRLEY Excellent. Retirement bores the arse off him.

VIRGIE And how's life as a lord?

SHIRLY Well, it's what I was born for but I don't think we should get on to that side of things do you?

VIRGIE I'm not afraid.

SHIRLEY Of the hurly-burley, no neither am I. I'd rather talk about something completely different like plants. James has taken to gardening in a tremendous way.

He says there's nothing like digging about in the earth feeling the air swirling about your nostrils and no body speaking- do you think he means me- just the breeze and the twittering of birds – I heard one that sounded like a mini pile driver the other day I said to James boy that must be heavy on the beak - he said yes that's a car alarm. What am I wittering on about you've unsettled me, Virgie and I've been looking forward to today –to be embraced in the bosom of my family and its banal everyday life and you have to go and pull a stunt like this. Cancel it will you.

VIRIGE Not everything happens at your convenience.

SHIRLEY Does usually; the perk of being an honourable.

VIRGIE Well you're not one now you're my sister.

SHIRLEY Yes, happy birthday.

SHE HANDS HER AN ENVELOPE

VIRGIE What is it?

SHIRLEY It's a holiday in Venice.

VIRGIE I won't be going.

SHIRLEY Don't be silly it's a renaissance jewel - you want to see it before it goes underwater.

VIRGIE That thought would lessen the enjoyment for me. I don't want to see
anything beautiful if there's a niggling feeling it might soon be thoughtlessly destroyed.

SHIRLEY I can assure you drainage experts are working very hard to ensure that probably never
occurs.

VIRGIE You don't know the first thing about drainage.

SHIRLEY I know, I always manage to pull something out of the hat –

VIRGIE Well, it's very kind but i won't be in a fit state to travel.

SHIRLEY Oh come on stop it it's me Shirley - stop posturing. I love you Virgie and we're sisters.

VIRGIE I'm a big enough person to be happy that you want to carry on for whatever reason - but I don't.

SHE HANDS HER A SHERRY

SHIRLEY Don't think I can't see what you're doing you've always been nasty and spiteful and now
you're belittling my life in this revolting way.

VIRGIE Sorry.

SHIRLY You're not a bit sorry - you've got the upper hand for once and you're reveling in it - well what

a pathetic way to achieve power over another individual.

VIRGIE And you'd know nothing about that of course.

SHIRLEY Is this some kind of political protest - because if it is I'm not listening?

VIRGIE My god why is everything about you?

SHIRLEY No one says politics is a clean game - but that's the price of power - mostly it's a choice between two types of bad.

VIRGIE Don't ask me to absolve you, Shirley.

SHIRLEY I'm just explaining a few things that you've obviously passed you by.

I wouldn't like you to go to the grave ignorant of realpolitik

VIRGIE I thought you didn't want an argument?

SHIRLEY You threw down the gauntlet. Taunting me with your death.

VIRGIE More sherry?

SHIRLEY I know we haven't seen eye to eye over the years.

VIRGIE I don't want to look back over the past it's dreary.

SHIRLEY That's all you've got now

VIRGIE I've got today that's all anybody's got.

SHIRLEY It's civilized to leave politics outside the bedroom door - not to let it get in the way of people.

VIRGIE Then why do you keep bringing it up?

SHIRLEY I don't know yes I do because you keep bringing it up.

I want you word that you'll drop this.

VIRGIE No.

SHIRLY Or we'll have to have you sectioned, (TO HAYDN) won't we?

VIRGIE Is that a threat ?

SHIRLEY Of course. It's always something with you Virgie. Do you remember, Haydn the naked protest?

HAYDN Yes.

SHIRLEY When they spelled the word *peace* on Foulness. Virgie was the exclamation mark.

That was bloody embarrassing. I was the member for Enfield and my 75 year old sister was flashing her bush for demilitarization.

HAYDN That's her right, after all.

SHIRLEY But it's all part of the same thing. A deliberate attempt to unsettle. Like this – now.

VIRGIE Not only do we have to suffer the mess politicians create but we're imprisoned when we try to leave it

SHIRLEY Don't blame the state of the world on politicians - we're the last people that can be held

responsible - we don't have the power to change anything really.

VIRGIE One wonders why you bother getting up in the morning.

SHIRLEY We can't be held responsible for human nature or the post democratic forces of global capital.

VIRGIE I don't want to argue with you Shirley life's too short especially mine.

SHIRLEY I refuse to let you passively aggressively blame me in some way.

VIRGIE You're just going to have to accept that you're just not important enough to take the blame for this. Sorry you're insignificant.

SHIRLEY Promise. I'm totally insignificant.

VIRGIE Absolutely.

SHIRLEY Thank you.

PAUSE

James and I have been very happy

VIRGIE Good for you.

SHIRLY I'm sorry you never had that.

VIRGIE I've had plenty of lovers, quite a few of them knew what they were doing and if they didn't I showed them the ropes. So don't be sorry on my account.

SHIRLEY No need to boast. I'm sure that wasn't easy on the Haydn. Or Orin.

James and I often talk about what happened. It was a tragedy.

HAYDN It was a long time ago and I've had a lot of therapy.

SHIRLEY That's not cheap. Please tell me this is some ridiculous joke, Virgie.

VIRGIE No, cheers though. Raise a glass to me.

SHIRLEY No.

VIRGIE The surprising thing is I thought seeing you all might make me change my mind, but it's the opposite.

I'm actually looking forward to going.

SHE EXITS

TOM AND SONIA RE ENTER

TOM It's really happening then?

SHIRLEY Apparently.

SONIA We can't let it happen.

SHIRLEY Of course not. we might be implicated.

TOM I can't go to prison at my age. I'll never make it. One awkward encounter in a shower I'd be dead meat.

SONIA No one's going to bother to bugger you Tom, you're 68.

TOM God getting old's depressing

SHIRLEY I assumed you were straight.

SONIA Primarily he's a narcissist.

TOM Yes, what am I doing moralizing to Virgie, I'm an ethical foetus.

SHIRLEY There are values, Tom without which civilization would collapse. I won't list them now.

Maybe after a few drinks.

TOM I look forward to that. Where is she?

HAYDN In the garden picking the salad

SHIRLEY What's brought it on?

SONIA We saw her last month - she seemed perfectly fine.

TOM Although it was in a theatre bar - whose going to say anything meaningful in the interval of

Shrek? It's mostly jostling for over- priced shiraz.

SONIA People do say interesting things - I often eavesdrop - rather than stand there in silence with

You.

TOM There's usually a general sense of relief to have got half way without wanting to slit your throat –

sorry Haydn -

SONIA Well, what do you expect - theatre is culinary. It's lost its ability to be critical or subversive –

subversion's just another brand.

TOM Theatre hasn't been political since the late 70's - when we ran our theatre collective it's ambition was to overthrow the state.

SONIA Then the state stopped funding you.

TOM Growing old is growing disillusioned. Do you think that's why Virgie?

And to think I was actually looking forward to today. Virgie makes such a delicious quiche. Few glasses of bubbles. Now we've got Hedda bloody Gabler. What do you do Haydn?

HAYDN I'm a psychoanalyst.

SONIA You knew that Tom.

TOM A lot of my friends see analysts

SONIA That won't surprise her.

TOM This must be a kind of busman's holiday for you, Haydn?

SONIA Sorry Haydn this is all very tasteless. Stop being a prick, Tom.

TOM Has there been some particular trigger - is that the word?

SONIA I expect it's got a lot to do with being a woman

Women go mad - look at Jenny.

TOM Jenny's not a good example.

SONIA Why?

TOM She is mad. trying to pretend she's forty-five, twenty-five even, it's scary. Somebody should have told

Jenny that an Alice band is not fooling anyone. She's a crone.

SONIA There's a special brand of contempt reserved for women who get old.

TOM Burning at the stake?

SONIA Oh fuck off Tom.

SHIRLEY Let's try to put our differences aside for Haydn's sake - for Virgie's sake – let's try and sort
this out

TOM Yes. If she sees us arguing she'll only be confirmed in her desire to kill herself – I know how she
feels - let's encourage her through our practice to re-embrace life.

SHIRLEY That's a good idea.

SONIA How are we going to do that?

TOM Fuck knows but we'll have to try and imagine what it would be like to be enamored of life again
It's like a sort of theatre game when you remember when you were happiest. We can try that for an
evening and if it doesn't work phone the police.

SHIRLEY Fantastic idea.

TOM We need to do something - to tempt her with - just to get her over this hiccup.

SONIA Death can't be described as a hiccup - it's like one final god almighty belch that brings up
your liver, heart and lungs.

SHIRLEY Maybe someone should phone Orin.

SONIA Do they speak?

SHIRLEY No one's got his number?

HAYDN I've got his number.

SHIRLEY Of course you're his sister.

SONIA I thought you didn't get on.

TOM What's this suicide thing all about Haydn - from a professional point of view?

HAYDN Anger towards others turned in on the self.

SHIRLEY I'll never understand that. I'd always prefer to take everything out on my husband,

HAYDN In Virgie's case it could be revenge

SHIRLEY Revenge? For what?

TOM Living in Essex can't be a barrel of laughs. I'd top myself.

SONIA She lost a child, that's hard.

TOM Sonia's done counseling.

SONIA Only up to intermediate.

HAYDN Life hasn't turned out the way she wanted it. She's taking back control.

SHIRLEY We can't let her do that.

HAYDN It's a way of punishing me. Suicide always kills two people.

SONIA Why would she want to do that?

VIRGIE RE ENTERS

VIRGIE Is everyone having as much fun as possible under the circumstances?

I've been for a walk along the beach, lovely, such soft blues, sublime in the garden, edges of
the leaves all hazy in the sun.

TOM Oh God Virgie.

VIRGIE You worry too much, Tom, it's all going to be fine. Trust me. Why are we also hung up about death?

Look, you all flinched when I said that. Death. Death.

Come out and see how beautiful the sunset is here. Then we can eat.

SHE EXITS, THEY FOLLOW.

SCENE TWO, AFTER DINNER

MUSIC

SHIRLEY God. I've been drinking.

TOM Time seems to be drifting along and we're not stopping it. But then what's new?

SHIRLEY She's always been headstrong. Once she made me eat snow. I didn't want to but she made me. I was seven.

TOM We should've phoned the police. I don't like to though on her birthday.

SHIRLEY It's messy. We should try NHS direct I think as our first port of call. it may not come to that. If we can – sort this out ourselves.

TOM It's pagan, in a way. A ritual?

SONIA You're not in King Lear now, Tom. This is Essex.

TOM That could have been Essex. Bloody novelists don't know a thing about the theatre snobs– and then they think I'll take a break from proper writing and knock out the odd play – and it's really

SONIA Stop going on

TOM Really really really shit because

SONIA Sorry Shirley

TOM Novels are easy compared to plays. Like taking a crap as opposed to building a matchstick Taj Mahal

SONIA I'm a novelist, well, I had one published once. I've done a lot of jobs.

TOM Our whole society is drowning in mediocre literature that's why we're intellectual pygmies 'The Lemon Drizzle Cake Club' That's supposed to be a title – I'd rather have my eyes torn out and stuffed up my

SONIA I'll do that for you if you like

SHIRLEY Your plan Tom, of us all being happy is definitely the right way to go.

VIRGIE ENTERS WITH HAYDN. THEY CARRY PRESENTS.

VIRGIE Farewell gifts.

SHIRLEY LAUGHS

VIRGIE What are you laughing for Shirley?

SHIRLEY I'm just happy.

SHIRLEY LAUGHS AGAIN

SHIRLEY I'm just thinking how nice it is to be together after that lovely meal you made us Virgie.

VIRGIE Haydn gave me a hand. Haydn's been following me around like a lost chick. That's for you.

GIVES SHIRLEY A GIFT.

SHIRLEY Oh what have I got? Oh fabulous. What is it? (BINOCULARS) Am I doing it right?

Everything looks smaller. I like smaller world! No it's the other way. These are fantastic.

What are they actually for?

VIRGIE Bird watching.

SHIRLEY Don't get a lot of birds in Westminster.

SONIA Pigeons.

TOM No one wants to see a pigeon close up, a lot of them have foot rot. I want to vomit when I see a pigeon.

Nature mostly gets it right – but not with pigeons. If you went into Trafalgar Square with those you'd probably be arrested for being weird.

VIRGIE For when you retire. You can take up bird-watching as a hobby.

SHIRLEY I won't be retiring for a very, very, long time.

VIRGIE You're seventy-four.

SHIRLEY LAUGHS

I mean how much longer do you plan to go on

SHIRLEY I'm a lord. Well, I've not given enough time to birds. So thank you. Birds, here I come. Eventually.

VIRGIE Going around in chauffeured cars, metal bubbles, you lose the ability to imagine nature.

SHIRLEY Don't get on your high horse just because you're killing yourself.

SHE LAUGHS

VIRGIE Laughing doesn't suit you.

SHIRLEY STOPS LAUGHING

TOM When I see a particularly tatty looking pigeon, gnarled feet, gummy beak, I think, Christ, that'll be me in a few years.

SONIA They have beady eyes like you.

VIRGIE Sonia.

SONIA I hope this isn't ridiculously generous?

VIRGIE Really it isn't.

SHIRLEY Mine wasn't. (PAUSE) It was thoughtful.

VIRGIE We've moved on from birds, Shirley, get over it.

Why don't you open yours at the same time Tom, then we can speed things up a bit.

TOM I don't want to 'Speed things up' – not if it means

VIRGIE Tom.

TOM Won't it be stealing Sonia's fire?

SONIA You don't usually mind.

VIRGIE Tom!

THEY OPEN SIMULTANEOUSLY

SONIA O, Virgie, it's beautiful.

SONIA HAS A PAINTING

SHIRLEY What is it?

SONIA It's here I think, the sea.

SHIRLEY Every time you look at that you can remember today. Not Virgie killing herself.

SHE LAUGHS

SONIA Isn't that sublime, Tom love.

TOM Yes, dearest.

SONIA Thank you I'll treasure it.

TOM This is too

HE HOLDS A BOOK

Generous

VIRGIE I won't be doing a lot of reading where I'm going.

SHIRLEY A book

TOM Plays

SONIA Oh. Lovely.

TOM First edition, Orestia,

SHIRLEY That must be bloody ancient.

TOM 1936, Macneice. Translation.

SHIRLEY Yes, of course. Losing my

TOM No one has ever given me anything quite so wonderful.

SONIA We've only been married 30 years.

PAUSE

Are you going to say anything else Tom

VIRGIE He's absorbing his gift.

SHIRLEY Your turn, Haydn.

VIRGIE Haydn hasn't got one.

HAYDN It's all right.

VIRGIE She's going to get everything she doesn't need a present.

HAYDN Don't make a fuss – anyone

VIRGIE There's that bead dress I showed you.

SHIRLEY A bead dress – how smashing – what's a bead dress.

SONIA Covered in beads sewn together.

SHIRLEY Why don't you have that? That sounds super.

HAYDN Bit like wearing an abacus.

TOM I still can't speak

SONIA That won't last.

TOM I always wanted to play Clytemnestra.

SONIA Another colour to add to my husband's palate; cross dresser.

TOM Best part in it.

SHIRLEY Wasn't she a whore?

TOM Murdered by her kids. The Greeks weren't frightened to give the family a bad name. Thank you Virgie.

VIRGIE Finished? Now, I'm offering you the chance to say anything that's been eating at you, there's no point waking up tomorrow morning and thinking, I wish I'd said this or that. I'd always meant to mention to Virgie... Now is your chance. I'll be dead tomorrow.

PAUSE

No? Let's move swiftly onto the entertainments.

SHIRLEY What entertainments?

TOM Traditional birthday ritual customized for suicide party

SONIA I was going to – read this for your 84th- but here goes

READS

WARNING

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat

SHE PAUSES

SHIRLEY You can do it

TOM Come on old girl, the last fence.

SONIA And eat three pounds of sausages at a go

Or only bread and pickle for a week

And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry

And pay our rent and not swear in the street

And set a good example for the children.

We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?

So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised

When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

VIRGIE Thank you.

TOM Well done, love.

SONIA Change your mind, Virgie.

VIRGIE It's a nice poem but a sentimental middleclass fiction. Eccentric older women do not get rewarded
they get pilloried.

SONIA Ah

SHIRLEY I haven't fucking clue what to do. If I'm honest.

SONIA Join in Tom's song.

TOM I'm not sure it's suitable in the circumstances.

VIRGIE just do it. We don't want to sit here being gloomy.

TOM Virgie's a hard woman to turn down.

SONIA (TO SHIRLY) Just hum along.

THEY SING 'AINT GOT NO LIFE'

I ain't got no home, ain't got no shoes

Ain't got no money, ain't got no clothes

Aint got no perfume, ain't got no skirts

Ain't got no sweaters, ain't got no smokes

Ain't got no god

Ain't got no father, ain't got no mother

Ain't got no sisters, I got one brother

Ain't got no land, ain't got no country

Ain't got no freedom, ain't got no god

Ain't got no mind

But there is something I got

There is something I got

There is something I got

Nobody can take away

I got

My hair on my head

Got my brains got my ears

Got my eyes, got my nose

Got my mouth, I got my smile

I got my tongue, got my chin

Got my neck, got my boobies

Got my heart got my soul

Got my sex

I got my arms, my hands, my fingers,

My legs, my feet, my toes

My liver, got my blood,

VIRGIE JOINS THE LAST REFRAIN

I got life, and I'm going to keep it

As long as I want it, I got life

VIRGIE Perfect. Wonderful. I shall hum that as I die.

TOM Tricky when you're taking on water.

SHIRLEY Absolutely fantastic. Well done everybody.

Now stop this bloody nonsense, Virginia or we'll have you sectioned.

VIRGIE It's my body.

Have you got anything to say, Haydn?

HAYDN You'd like us to stop you, there's a frightened part inside you hoping you won't let the more despairing, depressed part of you drive you to do what you don't really want to.

VIRGIE But apart from all that is there anything *you'd* like to say to me?

Because I realise you're going to look back on today and wish it had gone a hundred other ways

HAYDN Maybe that's what you're wishing now.

VIRGIE No.

HAYDN You're making a mistake – Suicide - It's impossible to do it in a rational frame of mind – and if you're not rational then you're sick, depressed and you need help.

VIRGIE What's rational about people? Three quarters of the planet believe in a supernatural being who is watching over them and is responsible in some way for all this? Don't think I'm unhappy. I'm not. I just want out. I've lived a long time and I just - want – out –

And I'm doing it in a lovely, celebratory way. Like being at my own funeral. I've been actually looking forward to hearing what people had to say about me. I haven't been looking forward to anything so much for ages. Since I've decided to exit in this way I've been really enjoying myself.

The mornings are so beautiful. Each new day is so fresh and I hadn't felt that – since I was a child- or painting - I like that feeling of now. It's just greed that makes us want more and more. We're all a bit greedy and spoilt in these rich countries. . Well that's what I've been having these last months and really, Haydn, I can't go back to what it as before – and i won't. which is why – yes, why I'm going to do it.

HAYDN You asked me here so I would stop you.

VIRGIE Poor Haydn. Do you want a cuddle?

HAYDN Between us we can make sure you're safe and won't do anything.

VIRGIE I refuse to be drugged up to the eyeballs and locked up with men who think they're Jesus

SHIRLEY The thing is Virgie I've got one tit.

VIRGIE Your point is?

SHIRLEY If I can go around with one tit you can put up with feeling a bit old.

VIRGIE I don't really see that.

SHIRLEY I don't want you to do this, Virgie because it's like you're saying to us life's not worth it. Our lives aren't.

VIRGIE That's your business. You've all got to learn to let people go, to stop being childish, if I'd have imagined this level of immaturity I would never have invited you in the first place. I'd have had a gin and tonic and set off. You can't imagine a worse death, a worse life? Don't you know what goes on in the world? And you can be upset about this? This is a world where children go to bed hungry. Get upset about that if you want to be upset. Don't be such emotional philistines. Grow up.

TOM Yes but we like you such a lot

SONIA I always imagine I can come here to you, Virgie, and be happy, if things get so bad with Tom.

VIRGIE They are bloody awful with Tom, Sonia.

SONIA They got worse when we slept with you.

SHIRLEY Oh that's put me off my crème de menthe.

VIRGIE Not at the same time.

HAYDN Virgie's always had lovers.

VIRGIE An accusation?

HAYDN A fact.

VIRGIE Be happy for me. I've been 'in the present', carefree, since I made my decision.

TOM We aren't so carefree, as it happens, Virgie, we're shitting ourselves.

VIRGIE Let's just be together, now. Who knows the world might end in five minutes.

TOM It won't though will it that would have been too much of a coincidence.

HAYDN I know what this is about, Virgie. It's about me.

VIRGIE Really I thought it was about me. My life. My body

HADYN Getting to me. So I die too.

VIRGIE Freud. What a hoot. You're not eight anymore, darling you're fifty-eight.

A VOICE ECHOES THROUGH THE HOUSE

MAN'S VOICE Hello

SHIRLEY Are we expecting any more guests?

A MAN ENTERS, THIS IS VIRGIE'S 52 YEAR OLD SON, ORIN. VIRGIE IS NOT EXPECTING HIM

ORIN Hello mum.

SCENE FOUR

VIRGIE, ORIN, HAYDN

VIRGIE I expect you're wondering why I didn't invite you?

ORIN To your own funeral? Just a bit.

VIRGIE I've written you a letter. It's somewhere - I would have asked you but I only have six chairs.

ORIN I'm your son.

VIRGIE Yes. I love you but it's not been the easiest relationship in the world. I'm sure that's my fault.

ORIN Yes, it is.

VIRGIE I knew you'd kick up a fuss if you were here.

ORIN You guessed right.

VIRGIE Did Haydn ring you?

ORIN Can't I visit my own ma? I need to fill you in. Apparently I haven't got much time.

VIRGIE Let's do it then. How are the girls?

ORIN Jennifer's doing her exams.

VIRGIE Yes she was worrying about her choices did she go for art or music?

ORIN Dawn's doing a lot of swimming

VIRGIE Where does she get that from? I sink like a stone. And how's Berenice?

ORIN Pretty fucked off with my drinking and recidivist level of unemployment. The trouble with being a free-lance illustrator – more free than illustrator.

VIRGIE She's had you back before.

ORIN I wish I shared your buoyancy about the future.

VIRGIE There's the children

ORIN Not your strongest suite. No guarantee for marital longevity.

VIRGIE I am ashamed of some of the things I did. I'm sorry. But that was then and this is now.

ORIN Berenice kicked me out. I've been sleeping – in stations.

VIRGIE Yes, you smell - you could do with a bath

ORIN I've come home

VIRGIE It's not a good time.

ORIN I've come home.

PAUSE

I can't...anymore....something in me....is broken

VIRGIE Not a physical thing?

ORIN I've come home, mum.

VIRGIE Right. Goodness. I just have to compute that one. It's Berenice that keeps in touch - we've spoken on the phone- I didn't get a sense of...you seemed – all right.

ORIN No.no. Things haven't been right for a long time.

VIRGIE Since before Christmas?

ORIN I don't know the exact –longer –building up – a kind of – everything in me pushing me to –

VIRGIE This Sounds like a big conversation- I don't mean to be – there are people here- and I've got a schedule

ORIN I had to come home, like a thing crying out in me, home, I think that's here

VIRGIE So, you came for a visit?

ORIN Like a lost child in a fairy tale wandering the woods looking for something familiar – an old stone they'd cast away - breadcrumbs - a lighted window.

VIRGIE I might have liked a visit months ago, but now the time for all that is over. Perhaps you could talk to Haydn about it she's a therapist.

ORIN Of all the relationships in the world- mother and child- should be the one you can count on – template for all the others - if that one doesn't work – well, the rest are pretty fucked.

VIRGIE Fathers get off lightly in your world don't they?

ORIN The thing is mum, you can't do this to us.

VIRGIE I can't talk now, I'm busy. Tell, him Haydn, I've got other things on my mind.

HAYDN Dying is a kind of accounting for – it's inevitable.

VIRGIE When I met your father I thought I liked him but I made a mistake. So I left. Then I began to discover something about myself. my paintings started to get very big I was quite frightened of them at first, colour too, as if I'd been starved of life, lots of reds and one I don't know a name for like blood that's dried – you know how it stiffens the material its caked on – peculiar, I I didn't want to live the kind of lives most people did. They bored me. sorry about that. If I'd been stupider I would have made a better mother.

ORIN You took us away from him but you didn't really want us. farmed us out any chance you got.

VIRGIE You were always so fond of your father –

ORIN I have to pinch myself sometimes, we got taken away

VIRGIE Life did get a bit chaotic

ORIN That actually happened to me.

VIRGIE You usually give me a ring. You don't usually visit. How are the girls?

ORIN We've done this

VIRGIE Jennifer was worrying Dawn's swimming...what do Berenice and the girls? Then - my paintings started...

ORIN No more outrages

HADYN It's good to see you Stand up to her.

ORIN You're not deserting us again.

VIRGIE What are you going to do? Keep me prisoner?

ORIN If I have to. I can't let you do this to yourself.

VIRGIE I want to go now, I'm ready.

ORIN You're staying here with us.

VIRGIE SITS DOWN SUDDENLY

HAYDN I don't think she knows what she's doing.

VIRGIE Let me go

HAYDN You stay here, watch her. I'll send the others home.

EXITS

ORIN You don't know what it is to be a mother. Do you?

VIRGIE GIVES A CRY

SCENE FIVE

SMALL HOURS OF THE NIGHT

HAYDN COMES IN SHIVERING, SHE HAS A MAC, WET HAIR.

TOM No-where?

HAYDN No-where, no-where

TOM So sorry.

HAYDN Not your fault, no-one's fault. Except Virgie's. I can feel her hand in it, can you? Look at us running
around – as if she's stage managed us. It's dawning on me it's sicker than I thought.

TOM Don't say anything you'll regret later love. You've had a shock. Mustn't speak ill of the dead.

HAYDN Why not, if it makes us feel better?

TOM Well, that's what I'm saying – later it might not. And perhaps after all she's not –

HAYDN Dead. She better be. I can't believe she did that.

TOM I expect she had her reasons.

HAYDN . They won't have been good ones. We had hardly any notice.

TOM I don't think that would have helped things. Do you? Made us feel more bloody useless because we had
more time in which not to stop her – she was being kind really. He was watching her

HAYDN He fell asleep. His medication.

TOM Ah yes. Well, that's very common.

HAYDN How am I going to explain it to my daughter? Granny had a party then topped herself.

TOM When you're in the middle of things it's very hard to change them. You always look back and imagine it's
easy but really you're a tram stuck on its rails and there's this momentum rushing you forwards and you
only have time to stop yourself derailing re- routing's impossible. That's life

SONIA Has entered

SONIA I've had that speech. It's a character he once played in *Street Car*. The first time you're bowled over,
the second you get that deja-vous feeling – third you realise you married a plagiarising tosser.

TOM Is that the way to talk after someone has died?

SONIA there isn't a body. For all we know she could be upstairs. Trapped in a wardrobe

TOM This isn't fucking Narnia. Virgie has drowned herself. Like she said she would. She's a woman of her
word

SONIA She wouldn't do that without speaking to me first.

TOM Well, hey ho. She has.

SONIA The sea's bloody freezing his time of year there's no way she was going in.

TOM She went in. She's incredibly brave. I'd do it if I had half her guts.

SONIA God you do talk rubbish.

TOM Anyone would think you thought I talked rubbish.

SONIA I don't know why anyone ever bothers to listen to actors? Like they know anything? They haven't

actually lived their lives, they've lived other peoples. They don't have experiences like us they have a

CV of parts played. Time spent saying words written for them by people who are cleverer than them and

have a conscience -

TOM Why don't you have another drink Sonia you're not quite marmalised. I prefer it when you're insensible.

SONIA A conscience, a morality, a sense of the world cohering into an idea more expansive than their own

stomach face and cock.

TOM There's a dead woman out there – no one wants to talk about my cock

SONIA Sure about that Tom? You are in the room.

SHE THINKS THIS IS FUNNY

SONIA I love being old you get to be rude and no-one tells you to fuck off.

TOM If we could get a word in edgewise I'm sure we would– novelists on the other hand

SONIA Old record...

TOM Well, I say writers – that usually presumes one has to have written something quite good.

SONIA I've taught creative writing for 40 years.

TOM Writing the same novel in endless variation, with decreasing returns.

SONIA I have an award, Haydn. That's how I met your mother – she came to my book signing.

TOM By accident, she thought it was Safeways.

SONIA You don't hurt me Tom because I don't value your opinion.

TOM The same wounded females teetering between despair and empowerment, but they find self- fulfilment in
map–restoration.

SONIA Tom plays a variety of beards now. Old blokes in beards parts - you never bother to remember the
names; Cuntsman, the Duke of Cardiff , short and tufty beard, Arsewipe the Earl of Puff, long flowing
beard dipped in wee

TOM Some people do remember the names Sonia. Those people are clever and take care.

SONIA When Virgie walks back in here I will be laughing.

PAUSE

I will.

This is how we keep alive, Haydn. Hating each other

TOM Poor Sonia.

SONIA Don't patronise me you bastard

PAUSE

God what an awful night. Being happy was such a strain.

TOM We obviously weren't made for it were we? My face is aching from smiling.

SONIA It's going to be a relief to miserable after this.

TOM I'm sure we'll manage.

SHIRLY ENTERS

SHIRLY I've alerted everybody. Everybody who ought to know, knows. The police, the coastguard, the local
publican. Everything possible is being done, no stone is left unturned. It's a tragedy. It's an
unforeseeable – well maybe not that – it is tragic but no-one's to blame – she wasn't in her – some

mood had seized her – and before we could –it was over so – give me a fucking drink. Thank you .

She always was an absolute catastrophe. This is off the record.

Before I get too upset –before all this gets set in stone- before the official version is written by us all of good Virgie. I just want to point out that she was one of life’s bloody minded.

When I was a kid she made me eat snow. I said, Virgie, I don’t want to eat it– they eat it in Canada with syrup she said – so I ate it and puked up but by then she had moved on to the next thing – she always had to be ahead. It’s very selfish, self-centred. That’s Virgie. She killed herself because she was feeling left out and she wanted to be the centre of attention. Absolutely bloody pointless. They don’t eat snow in bloody Canada Virgie- why would they? They’re the sixth richest nation on earth. They eat snow in your imagination. Just like in your imagination we’re all having champagne now and enjoying the crack. No, we’re sad and angry and bloody heart broken. So fuck you.

Now who wants a lift to London?

HAYDN There’s a bonfire of stuff- that has to be burnt. Let’s burn it.

SHIRLEY Yes, the witch is dead.

VIRGIE COMES BACK IN WITH ORIN LEADING HER.

ORIN Found her. She hadn’t got far. Collapsed at the side of the road. It’s so dark here, isn’t it? Heard moaning.

But she’s alive. Aren’t you?

VIRGIE TRIES TO SPEAK, CAN’T. IT IS OBVIOUS SHE HAS HAD SOME KIND OF STROKE.

SCENE 6

VIRGIE SITS IN CHAIR, IMMOBILISED. A FOLD UP WHEELCHAIR AND A STICK ARE APPARENT.

TOM SITS READING TO VIRGIE

TOM READS ALL THE PARTS

TOM: (CLYTEMESTRA) Help! Death is upon us! Is there no-one to help?

(ELECTRA) There it is. Do you hear, do you hear?

(CHORUS) O What terrible cries!

(CLYTEMNESTRA) Have mercy, my son, have mercy on your mother!

(ELECTRA, SHOUTING THROUGH CLOSED DOORS) You had none for him, nor his father before
him.

(CHORUS) Now may the house and kingdom cry

This is the end, the end of days of affliction

TOM AS HIMSELF; I love the bloody chorus. You've got to give it to them.

(CLYTEMNESTRA) Ah!

(ELECTRA) Strike her again, strike!

TOM AS HIMSELF She's a baggage, that Electra

(CLYTEMNESTRA) Ah!

HE MAKES THIS LAST CRY FAIRLY GRUESOME.

SONIA ENTERS.

SONIA Do you think you should be reading her that?

TOM She can't get enough of it

SONIA Couldn't you find something more cheerful?

TOM More cheerful than tragedy? I don't think so. Gets the pulse racing

SONIA She doesn't need to get her pulse racing, she's had a stroke.

TOM You love it, don't you, Virgie? Yes, she does, she loves it. All the horror. Cleansing. Life affirming.

SONIA I wish Haydn was here.

TOM She's having a well- deserved break.

SONIA Shopping? What if something happened, what would we do?

TOM Nothing's going to happen, is it Virgie? No, see, she's promised me.

SONIA We're useless in adult situations. You haven't used a wardrobe in years. You just throw things on the floor like a toddler. I haven't been able to walk in a straight line in our bedroom for years.

I have to take a running leap onto bed. It's so un-Ikea.

TOM Such an effort putting clothes on hangers and then taking them off again. Life's too short. Virgie understands.

SONIA We've been existing. What have we done? Eaten, cried, tried to avoid unnecessary suffering.

TOM We are *married*.

SONIA She puts everything into perspective.

TOM Virgie. That's an achievement.

SONIA I think we have to go home today.

TOM Why?

SONIA We can't just live here. We have commitments. I have to write a novel. What are we doing?

TOM This is a good experience for me. In case I ever do a Holby.

SONIA You'll only get on as a corpse.

TOM Sensitive, isn't she Virgie?

SONIA Sensitivity is overrated.

SHE EXITS

TOM READS ON The curse has it way

The dead speak from the earth

The tide is turned and the blood

Is sucked from the slayer

By the slain of long ago

Here they come. Their hands are red

With the blood of sacrifice. And who condemns?

Not I.

HAYDN ENTERS WITH SHOPPING BAGS, FLINGS THEM DOWN.

HAYDN LIGHTS UP

HADYN You'll stay another night? I bought some mince.

TOM Mince.

HAYDN I should have bought steaks. No one says no to steaks .I ought to stop this. Apparently it's a nipple

Substitute.

INDICATES CIGARETTE

TOM Can I have one?

HAYDN A summer's day today but it's autumn. Everything's out of synch. (INDICATES VIRGIE) Thank god

she's out of that hospital. Nightmare, driving in each day, the traffic grinding into my brain.

I have no routine. I'm outside my normal existence, like a baby suspended on its chord, Peaceful,

VIRGIE SILENT

How weird that we start off like that. So dependent. Powerless. And that's how we end up.

The bit in between is – this.

TOM I think we'll probably be heading back.

HAYDN The haul I did at Sainsbury's. She won't be eating it.

TOM Sonia's pretty set on heading back.

HAYDN Yes, but when have you ever listened to Sonia. If I get you both pissed you won't be going anywhere.

TOM It's eleven am. We'll have sobered up by midnight.

Don't your family need you?

HAYDN Candida's at Uni. My marriage is over. I'm on leave from work. This has to be sorted first.

TOM Right.

HAYDN Then she can go to a – a home. Don't leave me alone with her. You're the nearest thing I've got to a

dad.

TOM I'm old, don't rub it in.

HAYDN I was thirteen.

TOM Thirteen.

HAYDN Forty-five years ago.

TOM Preposterous. Time is.

HAYDN When you moved in.

TOM The republic of South Camden. Tenant's rights. I was just setting out.

HAYDN You did jazz dance.

TOM Did I/ Oh yes.

HAYDN Kept up with your classes. I was impressed. You had your eyes set on some point in the future. You
had two girlfriends

TOM I'm warming to this topic.

HAYDN I had that patch over one eye.

TOM Oh yes.

HAYDN It was a corrective thing. You called me the pirate.

TOM Sorry.

HAYDN I didn't mind.

TOM What a lout. The pirate. Ouch.

HAYDN Hideous. I was.

TOM No, no.

HAYDN Virgie painted a flower on my patch.

TOM Yes, a rose!

HAYDN So I'm just saying I appreciated it. What you did.

PAUSE

Flirting with me. Because there was no-one else. To give me a sense that I was – female.

TOM Well, good, good. Was I flirting? I mean was I good at it.

SONIA CALLS(AM I DOING THIS RIGHT?)

HAYDN Coming

EXITS

TOM (TO VIRGIE) I can't read any more. I feel too sad. This is like talking to myself. It's quite nice. You just
say whatever comes into your head. Michael Gove is a cunt.

SHIRLEY ENTERS

SHIRLEY I'm not sure you're an appropriate adult.

TOM Possibly not.

SHIRLEY I can't believe I'm here. I never do twice in a year. My PA got a call telling me it was urgent.

HAYDN, SONIA ENTERS. SONIA HAS A PLATE OF MASHED UP BANANA

HADYN Thank you for coming.

SHIRLEY What for?

HADYN It's good for her to have people here.

SHIRLEY But not me darling, ordinary people.

HAYDN You're her sister.

SHIRLEY Isn't there a television? An agency?

HAYDN She has to get a bit better. You might help.

SHIRLEY Let me have a look at her.

SHE GOES TO VIRGIE

It's me, Shirley. How are you?

A PAUSE

Well, she doesn't seem very good.

I'm taking an executive decision. This can't carry on.

SONIA I think Haydn is anxious to see Virgie on her feet more before she puts her in a home.

SHIRLEY On her feet more? She's a vegetable. Sorry Virgie, but you can't understand.

HAYDN She understands everything.

SONIA I'm sure she does

HAYDN She spoke to me this morning.

SHIRLEY Really? her eyes follow you about the room. Was it all down the left side? Don't feel guilty Haydn
because you persecuted her. She deserved it.

HAYDN Thank you.

TOM You speak as to some thoughtless woman; you are wrong, my pulse beats firm.

SONIA Piss off Tom. he's quoting

TOM Neither of us are here, Virgie.

SONIA Because we had some terrible experiences with Tom's mother

TOM Poor old mum

SONIA She wasn't a fool. She was an administrator for the NHS. I found her sitting after her bath naked, wet,
shivering in a chair, no one had dried her. It was like she'd ended her life in a camp.

TOM That's a bit

SONIA No. What are we doing? Don't we even think for a moment that's going to be us?

THEY ALL LOOK AT HER

SHIRLEY My driver's picking me up at 3. If anyone wants a lift?

SONIA Here's her banana

HAYDN You give it to her, Sonia. It'll make a change.

HAYDN PICKS UP SHOPPING BAGS, EXITS.

SHIRLEY I will say this for Virgie, she made a wonderful garden. I'll go and walk in it.

SHIRLEY EXITS.

SONIA BEGINS TO FEED VIRGIE

TOM READS

VIRGIE REFUSES TO EAT

SONIA She's not hungry.

SHIRLEY RE ENTERS

SHIRLEY Bugger the garden, I was passing the fridge. There's some champagne. Left over from...

TOM Ah lovely.

SHIRLEY Yes, don't let me get too pissed though

SONIA Do you think we ought to drink it? It feels sacrilegious.

SHIRLEY Got to drink it now.

SONIA It's so lovely to be together again – like this.

TOM What good times,

SONIA Yes all right I was just trying to make the best of - We can sit here in silence if we like

TOM I'd love to sit in silence. I'm finding this all a bit of a strain

SHIRLEY I don't like silence.

SONIA Think of a topic, Tom

TOM What am I? A conversational machine?

PAUSE

The ice is melting. Can't you do something about that?

SHIRLEY What do you suggest? Set myself alight in the member's tea room?

Industrial processes feed us like babies sucking on giant teat. Who said that/Maybe it was me

do you think I'm an alcoholic, Sonia?

SONIA Look, I don't like to – well what do you think?

SHIRLEY I like a drink.

SONIA Yes. Tom and I like a drink together. I'm not sure what else we'd do – you know, if we weren't

drinking. I've started Zumba

SHIRLEY What?

SONIA Cuban, aerobic hybrid exercise.

SHIRLEY Fuck off. I can't even reach the top shelf at the supermarket, when I wake up in the morning I'm so

stiff. What is that? Like life leaks out of you at night.

SONIA Zumba. Something you could do IF YOU STOPPED DRINKING

SHIRLEY Piss off I like drinking. What else is there to do on interminable train journeys up and down the

country?

SONIA I've been volunteering –I teach drumming to the unemployed – it's great fun.

SHIRLEY That must cheer them up

SONIA It's a skill

SHIRLEY Must be a lot of call for that in the job market, drumming.

SONIA It's more about confidence. A lot of people are under-confident. It's a terrible thing to see – when you

look at someone and they really are sweet but they just don't have enough confidence and it means

they're at the mercy.

SHIRLEY At the mercy/

SONIA Of anyone really, of anything, any forces – because they just can't speak up for themselves

They just can't believe in themselves enough to –

SHIRLEY And drumming helps does it?

SONIA Well, I know this seems strange

SHIRLEY This is the best laugh I've had in ages

SONIA But it does seem to make people happy –happier and more – well, you achieve something – a rhythm

and doing it all together – that really is something – the sound – it's an insistent – beat - because people

get thrown away – they let themselves get thrown away but then the forces against them can be – huge

SHIRLEY Well you got that out finally.

SONIA There was one woman and she'd had one of those lives – everything wrong – childhood in care, meets

a violent man – always smoking, worrying – her kids - comes to the class because a friend takes her

and first of all won't touch a drum –looks at me like I've come from Kensington - and I don't push her

but I know that by the end if she hasn't had a go she won't be coming back and in the tea break I lie, I

tell her that unless I get ten participants who bang a drum- I don't fulfil my quota and that's it- no more

class –and she looked at me and said – bullshit. But she did stay. And at the end she said. I enjoyed

that.

SHIRLEY What patronising shit. How is that going to help her – really help her? It makes you feel better.

Doesn't change her life. Middle class guilt assuaged.

SONIA I hate the middle classes

TOM I hate to be the one to tell you this, Sonia, but you are middle class

SONIA I wasn't born – into- hear them at the theatre I want to throw up. That awful collective yay a-ing –the

braying sound of self- centred, collective preening. Aren't we beautiful, aren't we clever, our kids go

to public school. Like to send them all to the gulags

TOM Then where'd be all us actors– no one to listen to us – the sounds furling out of the exits and into the

immensity of the universe, pointless smoke

SONIA Working class people go to the theatre

TOM Sonia lives in a parallel universe

SONIA Stop putting me down

TOM Sonia does drumming with the working class

SONIA There's an anthropology graduate.

TOM How lovely

SONIA Tom says anything – there's nothing behind his words – he's a carapace of platitudes

TOM No I actually mean that, sincerely. How lovely for them – to be with you – and a few drums

SHIRLEY Oh god, get a room

SONIA We don't have sex anymore

TOM Did you say that out loud?

SONIA Shirley doesn't either. She told us last time.

SHIRLEY Sex was tricky for me since I got one breast.

SONIA Why have you got one breast

SHIRLEY Because the other one - when I had cancer.

TOM Bloody hell Sonia. Look, I'm sure the other breast is splendid,

SHIRLEY It's ok. I haven't really thought about it.

TOM It wouldn't put me off. I've got athlete's foot.

SONIA That's not bloody comparable.

TOM A bald patch, flaky nails and man boobs. I'm hardly a great catch myself

SONIA And you're married to me. Not that that's ever stopped you before.

SHIRLEY I don't want to have sex with you, Tom, I've got a career.

TOM No, no, no, of course not, you must think it's awfully big headed of me. You haven't been a saint, Sonia.

SHIRLEY That was then, this is now. After what happened to Virgie I started to feel bloody randy. Since then

James and I have been at it like wasp wings.

SONIA Since Tom had his affair

TOM It gets very boring in Stratford. There's only one pub. The dirty Duck's practically a knocking shop for
theatricals.

SONIA That's his excuse for shagging Caesar's wife.

TOM A two year stint. Those Roman women knew how to dress.

SONIA THROWS HER DRINK IN TOM'S FACE

SONIA I don't know why we don't all do it.

SHIRLEY What?

SONIA Kill ourselves like Virgie tried to.

SHIRLEY Think of all the drinks we'd never have.

SONIA Aren't we just clinging on to our bit of unhappiness, forced to get up and go through it all – day after

day – what is it were living for

TOM How you can ask that,

SONIA Why not ask?

SHIRLEY Listen, keep up the drumming.

I blame Virgie for this, she's forced us to become introspective.

SONIA I blame her a bit for me and Tom. She slept with him and then I slept with her to even things up.

Who wants to end up like that.

INDICATES VIRGIE

TOM That's nasty.

HAYDN ENTERS

SONIA I can't stay here another minute, I'm sorry. I'm incubating the story arc for a bestseller.

SHE EXITS

HAYDN I've been selfish. Thank you for coming. What was I thinking forcing mince on you .Like that was

any incentive.

TOM We'll come back.

HAYDN I'm fine from here on in, alone.

SHIRLEY I'll give my driver a call.

SHE EXITS.

HAYDN BEGINS TO FEED VIRGIE.

VIRGIE SPITS OUT THE FOOD THAT HAYDN IS FEEDING HER.

HAYDN WIPES VIRGIE'S FACE IN THE FOOD AS PUNISHMENT. AN AGGRESSIVE ACT.

SHE GOES AND GETS A CLOTH, WIPES IT CLEAN.

SHIRLEY SEES HER

SCENE SEVEN

HAYDN SEARCHES AND FINDS HER CIGARETTES

VIRGIE Gladys

HAYDN Gladys used to smoke, yes.

VIRGIE Wilson's

HAYDN Let you practice on their Piano

VIRGIE (SINGS) And was Jerusalem builded here

Gladys

HAYDN Smoked. Yes we know that.

VIRGIE Didn't like. Cleaning.

HAYDN Didn't like you playing while she had to clean. Yes, I've heard this. Envy. Straightforward stuff.

VIRGIE Watch me

Watch you? No time – got clean the lav

HAYDN STUBBS OUT HER FAG

Work?

HAYDN I'm looking after you.

VIRGIE Divorce

HAYDN We've agreed we can see other people

VIRGIE Found someone?

HAYDN What here?

VIRGIE No one wants

HAYDN Let's put some music on

PUTS ON MUSIC

How about we try to get you on your feet

VIRGIE Mummy?

Mummy?

Headache.

HAYDN You were giving her a headache.

VIRGIE School? See.

BIG PAUSE

What I painted.

Hay-dn.

SHE STARTS TO CRY

HAYDN What? I know you had a shit mother. Join the club.

Why did you have us.

VIRGIE People had children.

HAYDN Didn't know if I loved or hated you.

ORIN ENTERS THE ROOM.

ORIN It's a bit of a mess.

HAYDN She needs a lot of looking after. Can I get you something - a drink?

ORIN what a thing - that happened

HAYDN Yes.

ORIN They rang me - the others – they were worried

HAYDN They needn't have/ worried

ORIN /that you weren't coping

HAYDN I am.

ORIN My wife, she took me back

HADYN Good for you.

ORIN A trial. Have to be sober. Felt sorry for me. Or the kids. I'm ashamed of what we did. I dream about it.

HAYDN We tried to stop her. Of course We did.

ORIN Mum.

PAUSE

God, she doesn't know me.

HAYDN Listen. She does. Part of this is pretending.

ORIN She didn't want us to/ stop her

HAYDN /What she was doing- it was – how could we have/ let her

ORIN/ – maybe she had the right

HAYDN To involve us –/ in that –

ORIN She didn't involve me

HAYDN You're her son – you were involved

ORIN I didn't fall asleep.

HAYDN No?

ORIN she took me by the arms. She looked me in the face.

HAYDN What did she say?

ORIN She – nothing. I couldn't say anything. She stroked the side of my face and I felt tears

I felt like a child, when I was a child.

She always told me I was beautiful. When I was a kid.

HAYDN Did she?

ORIN When I got into her bed in the mornings. The sun fell on the Indian bedspread which was red and turned

the walls pink. This glow was everywhere. I was like a prince in a fairy tale. I didn't like school. She'd
let me stay

HAYDN She should have encouraged you to go.

ORIN (HE QUOTE HER) School stamps the spirit out of you

HAYDN I had to go.

ORIN And whatever happened to me in the day. If I got pushed over at playtime I waited for her in the school
playground to take me home. Seeing her face I felt everything bad fall away.

HAYDN You went to find her – after you let her go –

ORIN Because you told me to –

But she's come back like this -

She saw me coming and she ran, fell.

HAYDN We did the right thing. I'll keep saying it.

ORIN But now I'm here. I'll look after her.

HAYDN I don't think it's right for us to do that

ORIN After what we did.

HAYDN There's a place ' Lark House'.

ORIN This is her home. We do this to her and then we shove her in some

HAYDN Lark house

ORIN Dustbin for the old

HAYDN It has a Jacuzzi. I'd love a Jacuzzi

ORIN That sounds weird – old people in a Jacuzzi –

HAYDN. We can't be expected to – live here.

ORIN It's all right. We'll be all right.

VIRGIE You hurt me

PAUSE

ORIN Did she say?

HAYDN She's confused.

ORIN We did. Hurt her. I did this to her.

HAYDN You're just starting to get your life back together.

ORIN I'll stay. I won't send her somewhere.

HAYDN You're not capable

ORIN Thank you

HAYDN I'm being practical.

ORIN Don't tell me what the right thing is.

HAYDN You're not the kind that copes. That's not your fault. Look, the way she treated you. Kept you too close. Then when it suited her – let you down. Just look at her.

PAUSE

Day after day in the end your hands itch. We're too angry.

ORIN You wouldn't.

HAYDN I can't trust myself – can you?

ORIN I would never. I can prove -

HAYDN But you might drink. Alone here? Don't like what she makes you feel? Reach for the bottle – next
thing

VIRGIE Orin.

PAUSE

HAYDN I'm right, aren't I? It's hard to be honest. I'm trying to be honest.

ORIN Virgie, you can't stay here on your own, you're too old, frail, love. Courage! the gods ordain.

HAYDN Lark house, then.

ORIN I'm here now. I'm here to take you away. I'm no good.

VIRGIE WITH ONE MIGHTY EFFORT TRIES TO HIT OUT AT HER CHILDREN, FAILS.

HAYDN It's Lark House I worry about.

SECOND HALF

SCENE EIGHT

HAYDN AND ROY. VIRGIE'S HOME. 7 MONTHS LATER.

ROY Your mother is she?

HAYDN What?

ROY Unusual?

HAYDN She feels like she's been exiled.

ROY The language. For a lady her age. I've never been called a rancid toad.

HAYDN This is her first visit home.

ROY Usually it's me taking you

HAYDN Can you wait?

ROY Wait?

HAYDN Hang around. I'm not sure she's going to last the lunch.

ROY I've got a pick up at 1.15. Ipswich to Maningtree. One of my regulars.

HAYDN Thirty quid

ROY I'll call the base.

HAYDN Thank you. What's your name, I forgot?

ROY Roy

HAYDEN Roy. From the Latin root Rex, for king.

ROY I drive a Vauxhall Cortina.

HAYDN You'll be beneficial too - a neutral presence

ROY I thought you just wanted a mini cab?

HAYDN I want you to drive her back at a moment's notice. I'm not sure how she's going to react. She's in the garden. I'm grateful to you for helping me out. Last year – she tried to drown herself.

ROY That's heavy

HAYDN I can't call on my ex. I've always found Norwich Cars extremely reliable.

ROY So your mother...

HAYDN We always called her Virgie, she didn't want to be known as 'mother'. She was resistant to the role.

What I'm really afraid of Roy is that I'm so angry I'll kill her myself.

ROY It's all right. I won't let you do that

I had planned a quiet afternoon. I was the one – we had that glass of wine once- after you'd visited

HAYDN Did we? I thought it was you

SONIA ENTERS

SONIA I'll lay the table.

SHE STOPS, SEES ROY

HAYDN I've asked Roy to hang on. In case of an emergency exit.

SONIA Could be any one of us fleeing, Roy.

VIRGIE ENTERS. SHE JUST ABOUT MANAGES WITH A STICK. IT IS HARD GOING. SHE IS
PYSICALLY FRAIL BUT HER MIND IS SHARP.

VIRIGE Breadsticks?

SONIA I didn't know breadsticks were on the menu.

VIRGIE They're supposed to *be there* on the table.

SONIA I don't like them because there not what they say they are they're more like a biscuit.

VIRGIE Well, I'm disappointed. Soak up the alcohol. We'll be pissed as mattresses before we get to the grub.

HAYDN How did you sleep?

VIRGIE I don't sleep anymore. Sleep's a thing of the past. Something I long for, something that's not coming back. You don't know what I'd do for a good night's kip. How did you sleep?

HAYDN Fine

VIRGIE Well, good for you. Is it too early for a drink?

SONIA 11.55...

VIRGIE Mines a rum and coke.

SONIA Haven't done the ice yet.

HAYDN Welcome home, Virgie.

SHE SPOTS ROY

VIRGIE Who are you? Do I know you?

ROY I'm just – your daughter called me

VIRGIE But who are you?

ROY My name's Roy. I drive a taxi.

VIRGIE Is my daughter fucking you?

ROY We just met. Well, we met before but Haydn doesn't remember.

VIRGIE I repeat the question

HAYDN No mother. We are not having sexual relations.

VIRGIE I should have known you wouldn't have the style. Still, it is my first visit home - why would you bring a stranger to such an intimate occasion. I don't think it's a preposterous suggestion, do you Sonia?

HAYDN I asked Roy to stay. You might suddenly want to go

VIRGIE I wanted to go for good Roy only my children wouldn't let me

HAYDN Of course not

VIRGIE It's only what you'd like to do to me but you can't accept it. That's why you stopped me.

HAYDN Well, you've tried your best to drive me to it.

ROY Anyway it's been nice meeting you all. I hope you have a good day and nothing untoward occurs

HAYDN You'd agreed to stay!

ROY I don't think this lady likes me.

VIRGIE. Oh come on Roy, you might as well stay now you're here - have a drink. I insist. Open some
Champagne, Sonia. It'll be good stuff, Roy, they're assuaging their guilt.

ROY, I'm driving.

VIRGIE For Christ's sake. Fucking have some. Live taste enjoy. You're dead an eternity. Take it from me- I'm
very attuned to it because I'm a suicidal octogenarian.

ROY Just the one

VIRGIE Fabulous.

HAYDN He's staying because of me.

VIRGIE Everything's about you.

HAYDN He's being compassionate. He sees I'm in difficulty and he wants to help me. Thank you Roy I
acknowledge your gesture.

VIRGIE He couldn't wait to get out of the front door two minutes ago. It was only because I offered him
vintage Champagne that he changed his mind.

HAYDN Don't twist the truth.

VIRGIE Well then Roy. You could clear this up for us once and for all. And right in the nick of time. You can
offer what the Greeks called Nous. An objective healing truth to lay all the old ghosts.

ALL LOOK AT ROY

ROY Well, it's a bit of both, really. If I'm honest.

VIRGIE Oh but darling Roy, you're not honest. Very few of us ever are. And we get into the habit of lying most of all to ourselves and then we're lost. Yes, lost. And there I gave you a chance and you stalled at the fence. Never mind. You're in company.

SONIA How is life in the - in your new accommodation.

VIRGIE Like being dead without the alleviating condition of insensibility.

Be you in a few years.

SONIA Quite a few

VIRGIE Goes fast though. The more behind you the more it speeds up, rushing you to obscurity and incontinence pads.

SONIA Live in the present. That's what I say.

VIRGIE I've shrunk an inch since Friday. My hearing aid makes weird noises. Am I underwater? We're being inebriated by constant television. Martin Clunes visits the lemurs of Madagascar.

TOM ENTERS WITH DRINKS

SONIA Oh Tom, thank god.

TOM Hello, Virgie, how wonderful,

VIRGIE What?

TOM To see you looking so...yourself

VIRGIE Don't patronise me Tom, I'm not a moron. I just look like a moron because my neck is bad.

TOM You've never lost your sense of humour, Virgie. That's wonderful too.

VIRGIE What's wrong with him? Is it senility?

SONIA Then you could join Virgie at Lark House, Tom. The home's lovely. They have vegetarian options.

VIRGIE Also known as the Omelette.

SHIRLEY ENTERS FROM GARDEN

SHIRLEY Spectacular; the colours, those lovely little blue flowers. Who wouldn't want to live forever?

VIRGIE Me but you bastards fucked it up.

SHIRLEY Happy homecoming for the day darling

VIRGIE Piss off Shirley

SHIRLEY SPOTS ROY

SHIRLEY So who's this

VIRGIE Haydn's bit of squeeze.

SHIRLEY (TO ROY) I'm the aunt. How have you ended up in this madhouse?

ROY I don't know. All families are mad aren't they?

VIRGIE Oh Roy, you almost verged on the interesting.

SHIRLEY So is this your new man?

HAYDN You're getting the wrong end of the stick

SONIA He drives a cab

SHIRLEY That's how they met? Oh that's darling.

TOM Is anyone else finding this excruciating?

SONIA He picks her up from the station when she got the train down.

VIRGIE She obsessed about getting the train

SHIRLEY Of course and why not, with lovely Roy waiting in his warm cab

VIRGIE You're making it sound like porn, Shirley

SHIRLEY Really? That good

HAYDN I'm sorry about this Roy. It's a collective fantasy.

ROY It's quite nice.

VIRGIE Roy, have you ever been to Venice?

ROY No.

VIRGIE Well everyone should go once in their lives. I want to give Roy my holiday in Venice. It was my birthday present last year.

ROY I don't feel I can

VIRGIE Don't be such a self-sacrificing wimp.

SHIRLEY Don't be offended Roy. She's only doing it to annoy me. It was my present.

VIRGIE Thank you for imputing base motives to me, Shirley. It would just may me very happy to think of Roy on the Ponte Dei Sospiri. Or seeing a Tintoretto at the Scuolo Grande de San Rocc; The Crucifixion. Tintoretto has Christ in really rather tremendous physical shape. Muscular pulsing arms and he's not afraid to suffer, Roy, because to be afraid to suffer is to be afraid to live. He is driving his tragedy forward to its inevitable end.

HADYN Don't patronize Roy, he's capable of arranging a city break.

ROY I picked a bloke up from Braintree once thought he was Jesus. He wasn't.

VIRGIE These things Roy, these sights, are spiritually enriching. Shirley doesn't understand these things because she doesn't have an artist's soul. She has the soul of a bureaucrat. She's in the House of Lords

SHIRLEY Not that again

VIRGIE Now Roy. Say you're going to go on this wonderful trip to Venice.

ROY No, Virgie

HAYDN Thank you Roy

VIRGIE Piss off then.

SONIA Well- oh dear – come on, let's have our booze in the garden, why not? Toast the spring Maybe some fresh air Virgie will cheer you up?

VIRGIE Cheer me up? I'm suicidal. I can't bear pusillanimous platitudes. That's you all over Sonia.

SONIA Lovely. Lovely. here we go.

THEY EXIT

HAYDN LEFT WITH ROY

HAYDN It's an experiment. To see if it would work. Me moving down to live with her. I don't know if I can do it.

ROY it's a big ask

HAYDN I know how it looks, to a stranger. As if I should.

ROY Not a total stranger.

PAUSE

I've had you in the cab. Once you were upset and that was when we had that drink when I dropped you off.

Nice wine; merlot.

HAYDN Right

ROY Second bottle was a sauvignon.

HAYDN *Second* bottle?

ROY You've forgotten

HAYDN The details.

ROY It's existence.

HAYDN No, I knew I remembered your face

ROY Flattery. Just before Christmas it was.

HAYDN That was bad. My decree Nisi had come. I'd put Virgie in a home she hated it. When I went to visit

she spat at me.

ROY Then we hit the Limoncello. I had to get a cab home. I was the laughing stock of the office.

HAYDN Do you remember what we talked about?

ROY Most.

HADYN Was it was profound? O god.

ROY Not in a bad way. You told me things.

HAYDN Picking over the bones of my marriage, my neglected childhood.

PAUSE

Were we intimate?

ROY What? Well –

HAYDN Because I apologise for all three.

ROY Don't apologise

HAYDN I don't think there couldn't be anything sustained between us

ROY Oh yes. Yes. Yes. I knew that.

HAYDN I was just re iterating it for the sake of clarity.

ROY It was a nice evening. Is it because of my job?

HAYDN No. Well, perhaps. Yes.

ROY I'm just glad it's not because I've got a small knob.

HAYDN What else did I say?

ROY You know we'd been drinking

HAYDN Tell me.

ROY You said something about that night, the one you thought she drowned but she came back. I don't think I -

HADYN What did I say?

ROY Really you wished she – she had died. By the third bottle that is what we all want isn't it? Someone dead

or alive? Or sex.

HAYDN Anything else? Apart from matricide?

ROY Don't beat yourself up

HAYDN I'm not. I'm interested. I've got guts when I'm pissed.

ROY You said, you know, what you have to do, what you have to do is vanquish the living.

HAYDN Thank you. I need to see to lunch.

SHE EXITS. ROY WAITS.

SCENE NINE

LUNCH.

SHIRLEY Do you live round here, Roy?

ROY I'm a local. Retired.

VIRGIE Shirley's in politics. Unfortunately she hasn't. Anymore wars on the horizon?

SHIRLEY I'm loving the veg. Are you Roy?

VIRGIE I think they should send old people to war - Citizens of the third age. We'd jump at it; free travel to

exotic places; no heating bills; we could while away the time between target practice playing bridge;

stepping on a Land mine, quicker than cancer. No one would really mind. 80 years. Shot by

insurgents in Kabul while winching her mate's wheelchair out of quicksand. Save's the NHS loads; the

answer to austerity. No wasted life. No Bereft mothers weeping at Royal Wootton, our Ma's are long

dead. No wobbly kiddie writing saying Daddy we miss you – our kids have grown up and hate our guts.

It's a solution.

TOM Dad's army. Quite funny

SONIA People couldn't bear to look at pensioners all shot up

VIRGIE They smell of wee, they're as deaf as posts and they're so fucking horribly jolly. They know no-one's going put up with them unless they're humiliatingly upbeat. Christ. I'd actually enjoy shooting them.

SONIA This is a bit dark.

VIRGIE Yes. Anyway – where do I sign?

SONIA I don't think you should attack Shirley she's had cancer.

SHIRLEY Yes and it's fucking come back. Oh well, what's the use of one tit. Might as well chop that one off as well.

SONIA Green beans, Roy?

ROY No, thank you

SHIRLEY Be a bloody irony if Virgie outlives me.

VIRGIE You should have thought of that before you press ganged me into existence. Is your mother coming Roy?

ROY No.

VIRGIE Dead is she?

ROY Yes

VIRGIE Lucky cow. No point in asking her then.

TOM No. Bit tasteless.

SONIA I'm so sorry to hear-Shirley

SHIRLEY I don't want to talk about it

VIRIGIE So Roy what's your position on euthanasia?

SONIA Top up, Roy

ROY I'm fine. Thank you

SHIRLEY We don't know anything about Roy yet

TOM What would we talk about if Roy wasn't here?

VIRGIE You'd have to talk to me. Acknowledge my wretched existence. I'm like Banquo at the Banquet.

Embarrassing. I hate embarrassed people. Too shamed to live.

TOM 'Which of you have done this? Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake thy gory locks at me'.

HAYDN Tom's an actor

TOM Gloucester- I had this moment the other night on stage listening to the others – and then no-one was

speaking, silence fell and I thought some bugger's forgotten their lines silly bugger and then I realised it

was me and I could see Kent looking at me thinking any moment now the lines will pop out of his mouth

and the whole machine will trundle on – but he could have waited an eternity because my head was empty

as a bubble

SHIRLEY What happened?

TOM I said something. Not something Shakespeare had written mind you. Something about a herring.

SHIRLEY Bravo – that sounds Shakespearean

VIRGIE Shirley's got nothing against speaking nonsense. She's a politician.

SONIA That's getting older Tom. Soon all the Viagra in the world won't give you an erection. Then what will

you do?

TOM I'll write memoirs. Get lost in that

HAYDN Why do you always want to be lost Tom?

TOM What happens after your found? That's the bit that scares me.

VIRGIE I wanted to be permanently lost and they wouldn't let me.

SONIA Well, let's toast Virgie. Let's hope Virgie that you get to come home. You and Haydn here together
could be very – what's the word I'm looking for Tom

TOM I've no idea.

SONIA Well, everyone knows what I mean.

TOM The novelist strikes back.

SONIA Very, very satisfactory.

VIRGIE I don't want to come back.

SHIRLEY Yes you do. Haydn is turning her life inside out to do you this favour.

VIRGIE I don't trust her

SHIRLEY Don't be ridiculous.

HAYDN We've talked about this, you wanted to come home.

VIRGIE So you can shove food in my face.

SHIRLEY I'm sure she had good reason.

VIRGIE What do you know you're a war criminal

SONIA Are you married Roy?

TOM How could he be if he's seeing Haydn?

ROY I'm not seeing her

SHIRLEY Bread, Roy?

HAYDN I'm sorry about this

VIRGIE He could be a bigamist

TOM Does he look like a bigamist?

HAYDN He's not a bigamist.

VIRGIE He wouldn't get away with it if they looked like one

TOM Look, he isn't

SONIA Tom's defending you because he's a serial adulterer. Not that you are. We both slept with Virgie

VIRGIE Not simultaneously

HAYDN Poor Roy, he's getting a baptism of fire

ROY I'm okay.

SHIRLEY What's your family like Roy?

ROY I've got an uncle who plays the ukulele.

TOM Not really up there with the house of Atreus.

ORIN ENTERS

GENERAL EXCLAMATION

ORIN Sorry, sorry.

SONIA Make a place for Orin.

ORIN Hello mother.

VIRGIE Why do you want to get involved with this family Roy? Has anybody told him? I have time to think

while I'm rotting in my present institution. Why don't my children love me?

HAYDN Mum. She's impossible.

VIRGIE I blame the books they learnt to read with. Daddy at the office. Mummy looking out of the window

while she's washing up. I should have burnt them. I was an artist I wanted to paint what I saw out of the window. Kirche, kinder, kitche- that was what Adolf Hitler had in mind for women and that's who my children sided with

HAYDN We did not side with Adolf Hitler

SHIRLEY They weren't even born

VIRGIE I can see them though – awful pale plaits and smug uniforms. In order to paint you have to live and to live to be frank with you Roy you have to fuck –

SHIRLEY More showing off

SONIA It's honest

TOM Good story

VIRGIE I worked and I fucked and just once I went AWOL .Supper at Emmaus. Anyone know it? Caravaggio.

I was gripped by an overwhelming desire to see it. Christ at in inn. The inn-keepers wife is a late addition. The ear of the disciple is badly drawn but the overall effect is masterful, the lighting; emphasising presence more than the drama. It's a hard world for a woman who really wants to live most of them end up neurotic like Sonia, or power crazed like Shirley or repressed and vengeful like my daughter.

TOM Don't paint her in a good light just for Roy's sake

ORIN Oh god do we have to hear this story. Its chewing up my balls.

VIRGIE Women keep up a good pretence of being alive because the alternative is revolt and that gets punished as you can see. Hadyn's never forgiven me for her father. Orin follows her lead. She's hunched over

that like a squirrel over the last nut in the universe. He'd come in front of my paintings, couldn't see them, stood in front of them face clouded over because they scared him and he used to say to me – what are the kids having for tea and I'd say – you sort it out – I'm working – and he'd say that's your department – my department? – and I said to him you're killing me that's what you're trying to do – kill me – I left him. Who wouldn't, who wanted to live.

HAYDN The thing is Virgie, we didn't want to leave him, he didn't want to leave and

VIRGIE Yes well that's history and if you want to be weighed down by history go ahead

HAYDN Really after that he was a very sad man, lost without his kids and you

VIRGIE He wasn't that sad he went to Australia and married an art collector who specialised in dots

SHIRLEY Dot's was it?

SONIA Shall we toast?

TOM God yes. Sitting here without alcohol. Are we mad?

THEY GET DRINK

Here's to Virgie. And to Roy.

ORIN Who the hell is he?

VIRGIE He drives a mini cab. He's shagging Haydn.

ROY Hello.

HAYDN No, He's not.

ORIN Do you have a good relationship with your mother Roy?

ROY Not really, I never met her.

ORIN That's an option

TOM Virgie, it's great to see you back in the bosom of your friends and family. May you long remain.

VIRGIE They blame me. They sent me to prison.

SONIA Lark House isn't a prison, Virgie. It's got a jacuzzi.

VIRGIE Someone drowned it.

ORIN There's an idea.

SONIA Orin.

VIRGIE BEGINS TO TAKE OFF HER CLOTHES

SONIA What are you doing Virgie?

VIRGIE I'm not ashamed

SHIRLEY O god she's taking her clothes off.

VIRGIE Cowards. None of you have lived! Why doesn't everyone let me be?

SHIRLEY No one wants to see your bush, Virgie.

TOM We really don't.

SHIRLEY Would you like to see the garden Roy?

VIRGIE Yes, go bury yourself in it

SONIA He should drive you back, Virgie. If being here is upsetting ?

TOM That's understandable, it was your home.

VIRGIE This is a protest. I don't want to go back there. Living death.

SONIA It's not that bad, Roy, they have Whist evenings. They play classical music. Brahms.

VIRGIE Oh piss on Brahms.

HAYDN Stop making an exhibition of yourself. Behave and we can see about you coming home.

VIRGIE Under your rules. No thank you.

HAYDN Well, I tried.

SHIRLEY You did.

HAYDN I really have tried.

VIRGIE You've always been a self- satisfied prig. Took after your father.

HAYDN Stop taking off your clothes. Stop that and you can stay.

VIRGIE I don't want to stay. I wanted to die.

HAYDN What Virgie didn't mention Roy was that when she left us alone to have her artistic epiphany we were
kids, I was eight, Orin was six and Helen was three.

VIRGIE That old chestnut.

HAYDN She was three and when a neighbour came to see why she could hear crying and she found us we were
all taken away. We all were and Virgie got us back, Orin and Me. But not Helen. So these things have to
be weighed up.

VIRGIE You've locked me up. You're killing me.

HAYDN And all through our childhood there was this little ghost .Of our sister who we never saw again. She
was sweet with brown eyes and she liked the colour red. And I know big secrets aren't fashionable but
this is real life and people do have secrets which are bitter and destroy. And Virgie might like to play
the artist in big gestures, with bold strokes, but underneath it's a crime that we have to live with and
so does she

SONIA Put your blouse back on.

SHIRLEY Yes, we don't usually talk about that Roy.

VIRGIE Blame me. Don't blame your father for having a small soul in the first place.

HAYDN I do blame you. You were unnatural.

VIRGIE Yes. I was. Good for me. Fuck nature.

ROY Is it now? Should I take her back now?

HAYDN Yes, take her back now.

SHE GOES TO EXITS, AT THE DOOR SHE SEEMS TO SLUMP AGAINST THE DOOR.

SCENE TEN

TEN DAYS LATER.

MIRANDA, 30 , STANDS IN THE ROOM LATE AFTERNOON

MIRANDA Am I the last?

TOM The last?

MIRANDA Well, not family.

I don't want to miss my train

TOM We're driving back, you could come with us

MIRANDA Really?

TOM No problem

MIRANDA wonderful. I'm sorry I'm quite vocal. When I cry

TOM Yes. That's a good thing

MIRANDA I've always been a very loud crier. It was noted in my family. I'm not very good at holding back

TOM Ah

MIRANDA I'm impulsive as well. I came here on impulse but I adored Virgie and I had to come

TOM I think you cried louder than anyone.

MIRANDA And I never bring tissues. So thank you for

TOM Please. I was overflowing.

MIRANDA I still feel really sad.

TOM That might be all the Cava.

MIRANDA Hug me

THEY HUG

HE DOES. SONIA WALKS IN. SHE SEES THIS AND WALKS OUT

TOM That was my wife

MIRANDA She seems nice.

TOM So Virgie taught you, you were saying

MIRANDA when I was a student, yes.

HAYDN ENTERS

TOM Haydn, did you meet

MIRANDA Miranda

TOM Earlier

HAYDN No

MIRANDA I was the loud sobbing

HAYDN Yes, you were.

TOM Never out of place at a funeral. Virgie taught her

HAYDN To cry?

MIRANDA At the royal college of art. I was a great admirer of your mother's work

HAYDN Why?

MIRANDA ?

PAUSE

It must have been isolating for her living down here.

HAYDN She liked it

MIRANDA She couldn't afford London that's why she moved she told me. Even though her work sold it wasn't

enough, you know.

HAYDN She always got by

MIRANDA I've got one of her paintings. Glad Ocean. I look at it every day and it makes me happy

TOM Well, what an affirmation.

MIRANDA She made it by throwing paint at the canvas. Then she rolled in it.

HAYDN Yes, that sounds like her.

MIRANDA She allowed herself to be influenced by the American abstract expressionists in the 50's whose

energy she adapted to an open and joyous lyricism. She was a superlative colourist.

HAYDN Are you planning on staying the night? Because if you want to catch the last train.

MIRANDA No. Tom is driving me home

HAYDN I'm not sure Sonia is going to agree to that

TOM Really. Shit.

HAYDN She's already broken three glasses. She's supposed to be washing up.

TOM It's all a misunderstanding

SONIA ENTERS

SONIA I've cut my hand. That's your fault.

TOM For fuck's sake Sonia, how did you do that?

SONIA I was washing up. I hate death. My mother used to say you'll be so tired when your old you won't mind
dying. That was a lie

TOM She had to say something.

SONIA Don't think I haven't got your number

MIRANDA What?

SONIA I have a slut radar

TOM Sonia

MIRANDA I wouldn't sleep with you husband he's too old.

TOM See Sonia. I'm decrepit.

MIRANDA Do I still get a lift?

TOM You'll get a lift. Miranda was taught by Virgie.

SONIA O how wonderful.

MIRANDA I used to go for coffee with her. I loved that. Felt like being singled out. But we both had the thing
of coping with depression

HAYDN Virgie was never depressed

MIRANDA We both started hatha yoga, that helped. she told me it wasn't easy being a female artist in the 50's

– or an abstractionist – the two together - men made their names and she always snuck in on the
side-lines – I think she came down here in a kind of defeat

TOM She exhibited at the biennale

HAYDN She won prizes, second prize at the John Moore's exhibition

TOM She had a one woman show in New York

MIRANDA She never got what she deserved.

HAYDN You've made a particular study of my mother

MIRANDA She was always growing, her work was, once she had an architect lover, from him she learnt the
formal value of geometric shapes

TOM While having a shag. Marvellous economy

MIRANDA Her paintings had controlled shapes brushed in against a ferment of organic forms.

HAYDN I'd really like it if you left now I've had a tiring day I buried my mother

MIRANDA Can I take something. just something small. I'll miss her

HAYDN No.

SHIRLEY ENTERS

SHIRLEY I was just thinking we ought to have a memorial to Virgie

SONIA A bench – some people have a bench

MIRANDA Her work is her memorial. You should think about a retrospective..

ORIN ENTERS WITH SHIRLEY

ORIN Did I miss it

HAYDN Yes

ORIN My own mother's funeral

SHIRLEY Yes.

ORIN Christ.

TOM Least it wasn't yours .Unforgiveable to be late for that.

SHIRLEY She'd understand.

ORIN Sat Nav – fucking useless- too upset to follow it. Did the kids get here?

SONIA They've gone back on the train.

ORIN Their mother

SONIA Her too

ORIN Well that's – just –not going to impress them. We're on another ' break'.

TOM Lovely girls.

SONIA Spare us. This is Miranda. A student of Virgie's.

MIRANDA Would you like a drink?

ORIN I would but I'm an alcoholic.

SONIA We're thinking of a bench for Virgie.

SHIRLEY God spare me from a fucking bench. I don't want an endless series of arses parked on my bit of
eternity.

SONIA You aren't going anywhere yet.

SHIRLEY Not if I can help it.

ORIN Have I met you before?

MIRANDA Are you a waiter?

ORIN No.

MIRANDA Then we haven't.

ORIN You could be –

HAYDN Who?

ORIN No-one. Helen. Like Helen.

MIRANDA Helen?

HAYDN She's too young for Helen

HAYDN She'd be 51

ORIN And dead of course

MIRANDA I'm definitely not her.

ORIN Well, we say dead. Not really dead. Just lost to us. So metaphorically dead.

MIRANDA I'm 28. And I should be going.

ORIN We all got put into care but she was three so she never came back

MIRANDA Poor Virgie

ORIN It was her fault

MIRANDA She told me all about it. She was punished. Taking her child. For that.

TOM How will you get to the station?

MIRANDA I'll trust to the universe

ORIN Don't go.

SONIA Give her a lift, Tom. Or she won't make it

SHIRLEY I loved your speech Tom

TOM Thank you

SHIRLEY It must be handy knowing all that Shakespeare, one of the perks helps you put up with all the
‘resting’.

TOM Nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon

SONIA He did his *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Northgate. In his 50’s

TOM Perfect age. I’d do it better now. I think that about everything.

SHIRLEY I’m going to hate resting..

TOM The point is doing things in the moment - the art of life – but there’s no rehearsal. That’s what’s good
about acting.

SONIA Except it’s not real

MIRANDA Can I take something? Small. A memento?

HAYDN No. It’ll muck up the invoice.

ORIN An ashtray?

TOM EXITS WITH MIRANDA

ORIN That was a bit

HAYDN We don’t know who she is really.

ORIN PICKS UP SOMETHING AND RUNS OUT AFTER HER

SONIA Well, Tom can shag her now.

SHIRLEY I don’t think he’ll shag her. He’ll be driving like a cartoon or she’ll miss the 6.03.

SONIA What do you think Haydn in your professional opinion?

HAYDN Driving, I imagine.

SONIA I fancy a bit of drumming.

SHIRLEY Have you got a drum

SONIA It travels with me

SONIA GETS IT

You try that- I'll use the table. You start off with a simple 3/2 rhythm

DEMONSTRATES

SHIRLEY Not at my age. I like my drums at a distance with lots of other instruments mixed in.

SONIA Once you try it you really get into it.

SHIRLEY It not some female empowerment nonsense is it? That stuff churns my guts.

SONIA There is a joy of drumming with other women

SHIRLEY God spare me. SHE TRIES Actually its quite good fun.

THEY BEAT OUT A RYTHMN

SHIRLEY Have a go, Haydn. Just imagine you're hitting someone you don't like.

THIS BUILDS UP

SHIRLEY I'm actually feeling it in my fanny

SONIA That's not unusual

SHIRLEY I'm really good at this.

SONIA Shout things if you like. It's therapeutic. We are women

SHIRLEY I'm not saying that nonsense. It smacks of essentialism

SONIA Something else then

SHIRLEY Give me back my tit. Oh this is fun.

SHIRLEY STARTS TO CRY

Now what's happening.

SONIA It's perfectly normal. keep up the drumming

SHIRLEY IS CRYING AND DRUMMING

SHIRLEY This is mega.

HAYDN JOINS IN. THEY DANCE ROUND THE ROOM

HAYDN Virgie, I miss you, you murderer.

ORIN ENTERS

SHIRLEY Well, today's done. We can draw a line under everything. Shall we sit out for a bit?

ORIN Saw them off. Don't you always think is this Helen or is that?

HAYDN She's probably a married mother of three living in Hull.

ORIN Sounds good.

HAYDN If she wanted to get in touch she would have.

ORIN She was three. She won't remember us. She'll be angry. Things would have been all right. If Virgie had
got back. We'd have been waiting. If we hadn't been found. Taken away.

HAYDN Well, we were.

SONIA She got you back -

TOM RE ENTERS

SONIA Did you see her off

TOM Yes

SONIA What happened?

TOM You know me?

SONIA Did you kiss her?

TOM Yes. She's a good kisser. Nothing fucking happened. I don't think she was drunk enough. Just stop it

Sonia. Will you? I'm a fucking philanderer but I must be near the end of the road.

SONIA Come and wave us off..

TOM Good luck

SONIA We'll be in touch.

HAYDN Do you still want the sideboard?

SONIA Will it fit? It seems a bit

HAYDN Take it. The place is up for sale Monday.

SONIA Tom's back. Gives him gyp.

ORIN I'll give you a hand.

HAYDN Take the plates. I don't want them.

SHIRLEY TAKES THE PLATES

ORIN GRABS THE SMALL SIDEBOARD STAGGERS OUT.

SHIRLEY /ORIN EXIT

TOM Well, look good luck. So it's finished with you and that

HAYDN There was never anything with Roy.

TOM Bit dull. Bit young for you. Not like me.

HAYDN Well, you're married to Sonia. Everyone's got someone. Except me.

TOM I've got Sonia. It's not all roses.

HAYDN I was so jealous.

TOM Of Sonia.

HAYDN Of you and Virgie. She never hid anything.

TOM You were a kid

HAYDN I still had feelings.

TOM A very nice one, kid, you were. Sweet.

HAYDN But not pretty

TOM Thirteen.

SHE KISSES TOM

SONIA ENTERS

HAYDN Sorry, Sonia.

SONIA Nonsense, what for? I don't want to hear sorry. You're not the first. You've just buried your mother.

TOM Did they get the side board in?

SONIA They're tying it on with rope.

TOM That'll spill off on the motorway then. That's life.

SONIA Come and wave us off.

You'll be ok.

Shirley's staying the night.

TOM Good luck

THEY EXIT.

SHIRLEY COMES BACK IN

SHIRLEY Just now, Haydn, just now, in the garden, I very sharply missed Virgie. I got a sense of her I'd never had in life. As if I could see her. As if she'd become clearer somehow in my memory now she was dead. As if it's much clearer to see what it is you had when you know what you've lost. The dead are more vivid than the living. Unfair.

HAYDN Sometimes people do think they've seen the dead, until they can let go of the love object. Then they know they've done it right. Healthy mourning.

SHIRLEY Seems like a contradiction.

HAYDN You don't have to stay the night. Really. I'll go to bed early, see the estate agent first thing. Go back home.

SHIRLEY I'll go back with Orin. I know Virgie was a nightmare. Awful but she was also good fun. And I always wondered why she didn't tell you.

HAYDN Tell me?

SHIRLEY Because I always said to her – Haydn ought to know.

HAYDN What?

SHIRLEY That she knew it was you who made the call. When she in Milan, when she ran away. You were the one and she knew that but she always said you were too young to really know what you were doing. And that you'd blame yourself for Helen being lost.

HAYDN Right. Did you always know it was me?

SHIRLEY Virgie knew, I knew.

HAYDN It would have been better if you'd told me.

SHIRLEY It was all a long time ago. Listen. You were young. You know. We have to forgive ourselves these things.

THE HORN OF THE CAR BEEPS.

Wave them off

SHE EXITS

NOISE OF GOODBYES OUTSIDE.

HAYDN COMES BACK IN ALONE. SUDDENLY VIRGIE APPEARS

VIRGIE: Would you like the photos?

HAYDN : Not particularly.

VIRGIE: I'll burn them.

HAYDN That's a bit extreme

VIRGIE: There's nothing sadder than seeing old photos in second hand shops, gone irreversibly astray. I'm not subjecting Aunt Hilda and Uncle Bill to that. Having them smiling out at nothing.

HAYDN So you're going to immolate them

VIRGIE Better than having them sniffed at by strangers. Picked up and thrown down carelessly. Hilda was always so particular about what she wore.

HAYDN You might feel differently in a few months, want their company.

VIRGIE There's something spiritual in consigning them to the flames.

I saved everything; My feminist postcard collection. It begins when you sink in his arms it ends with your arms in his sink. Interested?

HAYDN Naturally. I really do have room in my life for all sorts of pointless junk.

VIRGIE I'll burn that too then.

This is turning out to be marvelously straight forward. What did I think I was saving all this stuff for? Dragging it round for years and years.

How about a dining room table and four chairs?

HAYDN stop engaging in termination behavior. It's tasteless.

VIRGIE Do you want the car?

HAYDN For god's sake you're not dying are you?

VIRGIE No

HAYDN Good. Can we get things on a more normal footing. You talk about things that don't interest me and I pretend to listen.

Then I can pop back onto the M 25 feeling like I've done my duty.

VIRGIE Visiting me must have been dreadful

HAYDN Not really, I fantasize about the nice glass of cold chardonnay waiting for me at home.

The bottle chilling in the fridge; gorgeous icy bloom on the green glass.

VIRGIE What's that a breast substitute?

HAYDN Well I do qualify. By the way - happy birthday.

VIRGIE Thank you.

HAYDN HANDS HER A PARCEL. VIRGIE DOESN'T OPEN IT

Look, I don't think there's an easy way to tell you this so I'll just give it to you on the chin.

I'm going to kill myself.

PAUSE

HAYDN What's brought this on?

VIRGIE Nothing. I've enjoyed my life. I've had a good innings. I've done everything I wanted to and I'd

like to go now before things get any worse. I wasn't looking forward to the decrepit bit. My eyes aren't getting any better. I can't walk further than the garden. A protest at Pig Bay last week, it's our land not the militaries, couldn't make it. My hands are - can't hold a brush. I don't want to go ga-ga. It's my decision. It's perfectly rational. Philosophical. I know it's your job to suspect everybody's motives. But what I suggest is you accept it and we can get on with having our final day together. The weather's fabulous. Couldn't ask for better in September

HAYDN All right. Yes. Yes.

END OF PLAY

AFTER ELECTRA: AN ANALYSIS

After Electra, the first draft of which was completed on June 15th 2012, was an attempt to marry the theory I had encountered during my research into representations of gender on stage using, primarily, the work of the psychoanalytic, post-structuralist theorists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, with my practice as a playwright. *After Electra*, whilst set in the present day, is a mother/ daughter play using loosely the Electra/Clytemnestra dynamic to explore the possibilities of re-imagining the mother in a representation, which while not denying the necessity of the symbolic order, attempts to push at its boundaries and as Cixous exhorts in her espousal of *écriture féminine* to come so close to the other as to question the binary self/other or in the case of *After Electra*, through an unravelling of expectations of the mother's role, to trouble the good mother/bad mother opposition and in so doing point to representations of woman on stage that in Judith Butler's terminology, make gender trouble.³⁸⁹

The choice to write a play which interfaced with the Electra myth was a deliberate one. Jill Scott argues that while Oedipus seems to be the 'everyman of human psychological development'³⁹⁰, staging the story of the son who usurps the father, the story of Electra poses a 'threat to the primacy of Freud's oedipal model as a central trope of the modernist literary imagination'.³⁹¹ To elaborate on this point, the question I posed for myself in writing the play was how might this 'narrative revolt against Oedipus'³⁹² allow for the exploration of

³⁸⁹ Judith Butler *Gender Trouble*

³⁹⁰ Jill Scott *Electra After Freud* p. 1.

³⁹¹ *Ibid* p. 2.

representations which might in turn generate a dramaturgy with possibilities that would challenge the realistic, mimetic portrayal of gender? An exploration of the Electra myth further attracted me because the project of challenging the Oedipus complex as the unquestioned founding myth of subjectivity also resonated since all three theorists, Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, had returned to the Freudian model of the founding moment of the subject in order to re-excavate it and insert a more active model of maternity in the formation of subjectivity and to trouble the exclusion of female desire from the Freudian model.

What is it in the story of Electra that challenges the social hierarchy of the sexes?³⁹³ While she appears as a character in the central play of Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy, in the eponymous dramas of Euripides and Sophocles, she plays an increasingly central role, in which role she oversteps the bounds of gender with her violent and manic behaviour.³⁹⁴ Euripides, in the later and most daring of the three Attic Dramas, creates her protagonist and has her claim to be the one who will plan her mother's death though it may be her brother who carries it out.³⁹⁵ Electra brutally lures Clytemnestra to her death with promise of a sacrifice for a new grandson, perhaps wearing a mask of normative femininity to reassure her mother. After her revenge is complete she suffers some guilt and shame but this is diffused through the closure of marriage with Pylades.³⁹⁶ In the Electra of Sophocles the successful murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra is portrayed as a cleansing of the social whole as the curse of the house of Atreus is lifted, and its temporary matriarchy reverts to a patriarchy, just as Electra is subsumed in marriage to a humble shepherd, no vestige of royal power being allowed to stay in her hands.

³⁹² Ibid p. 2.

³⁹³ Ibid p. 2.

³⁹⁴ Ibid p. 17.

³⁹⁵ Ibid p. 17.

³⁹⁶ Euripides *Electra* p. 32.

The character of Electra though stays to trouble us, demonstrating an ‘ambiguous liminality’³⁹⁷ both in her refusal, like Hamlet, to cast off her mourning and accept the new order and to mournfully repeat the performance of grief, feeding a vengeful obsession and in her refusal to be reduced to a single archetype as she plays ‘aggressor, victim, mourner, survivor’³⁹⁸ and at the apex of her behaviour inciting matricide. She is guilty of ‘inserting disorder, irrationality and even hysteria into the ordered world of tragedy’³⁹⁹ While the Greek Electra is finally allowed her matricide and re-embraced by patriarchy in all three tragedies, there is a possibility that if myth is read as a ‘perpetual textual deferral’⁴⁰⁰ never having a definite telling, the story is not over, but offers itself to rewritings and re-imaginings.

My question was whether it was possible to use the Electra myth to create a dramaturgy which challenged the Oedipal structure of self versus other in Aristotelian drama, the deathly principle⁴⁰¹ of the classic canon which does not allow the self to push close to the other in order to witness it but must overcome it, destroy it to be transcendent. Although as Electra states ‘Either my mother or I, one of us will die’⁴⁰², it is possible to read her story differently and to infer that her object of mourning, that is the father, has become confused ‘with the primary grief over the lost mother’.⁴⁰³ Perhaps it is a little grandiose to suggest that this is an everywoman story to oppose to the Oedipal everyman story, but it is tempting and is also one which resonates strongly with the writings of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous who all take to task ‘Freud’s discriminatory and ill-conceived theories

³⁹⁷ Jill Scott *Electra After Freud* p. 22.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid* p. 60.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid* p. 60.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid* p. 23.

⁴⁰¹ Abigail Bray *Helene Cixous* p. 60.

⁴⁰² Euripides *Electra*

⁴⁰³ Jill Scott *Electra After Freud* p. 148.

of female sexuality'⁴⁰⁴.

I would like to set out in brief the three theorists analysis of the nature of the creation of subjectivity in relation to the body of the mother. The classic Freudian model of subjectivity and sexuality inheres round the Oedipus complex where the male child must renounce desire for the body of the mother in exchange for the future promise of a replacement female body in the form of a culturally sanctioned adult heterosexual relationship, the threat that drives this transition is castration. The female child as Irigaray points out is, in Freud's formulation, a 'little man with a smaller penis, a disadvantaged little man'.⁴⁰⁵ As such 'the desire for the auto...the homo...the male, dominates the representational economy. "Sexual difference" is a derivation of the problematics of sameness'.⁴⁰⁶ Woman can only ever be not a man, associated with nature and unthinking matter as opposed to man's culture, excluded from an independent subjectivity. Sexual difference turns out to be an illusion, there is one sex, the male.

Irigaray questions the relation of the girl child to the mother. She points to the fact that Freud elaborated upon the relation the daughter has to the father remarking that it is built upon an earlier attachment, that is the mother.⁴⁰⁷ Although the daughter is in Freudian terms, supposed to hate the mother for her lack of ability to give the daughter a penis, and be in competition with the mother for the father's penis, Irigaray questions this logic; 'why must a girl's affection for her mother necessarily change into hatred if she is to turn towards her father?'⁴⁰⁸ In Freud's formulation 'with only one sex being desirable, it becomes a matter of demonstrating

⁴⁰⁴ Jill Scott *Electra After Freud* p. 3.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid* p. 26.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid* p. 26.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid* p. 34.

how the little girl comes to devalue her own sex by devaluing the mother's.⁴⁰⁹ Irigaray points to the fact that it is likely to be the mother that through her activities over the child's bodily hygiene inevitably 'stimulated...pleasurable sensations in her genitals'⁴¹⁰but this story is written out of history via the story of the girl child's seduction, in fantasy terms, by the father. Similarly erased is the girl child's desire to have a baby by the mother. This fantasy of the woman-daughter conceived between mother and daughter would indicate a want to 'represent themselves as women's bodies that are both desired and desiring – though not necessarily "phallic"'.⁴¹¹What is clear is that for Irigaray the erasing of the early bond between mother and daughter in psychoanalytic discourse is a preparation for the erasure of a subjectivity and sexuality for the adult woman independent from phallogocentric structuration.

For Kristeva the possibility of reclaiming the body of the mother is more circumscribed. The abject body of the mother must be excluded or abjected by the child in order for the process of individuation to occur. This precedes Oedipus and so here again we see the body of the mother as the first port of call in which the dynamic between self and other is activated. But the abject differs from Freud's uncanny which arises from the lost body of the mother, the *unheimlich*, being buried more securely in the unconscious. The abject does not belong to the unconscious but remains 'excluded in a strange fashion, not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be held'.⁴¹²The lost body of the mother haunts us, is at the edges of our sense of self hood, drawing us to 'the place where meaning collapses'⁴¹³, it 'beseeches, worries, fascinates desire'⁴¹⁴. The abject isn't totally other because it does not have

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid p. 40.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid p. 40.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid p. 39.

⁴¹¹ Ibid p. 36.

⁴¹² Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror* p. 7.

the solidity of an object, the only quality it shares with the object is 'that of being opposed to the 'I'.⁴¹⁵ It may be possible to discern a route to hint through the abject to a reconfiguration of the mother/daughter, self/other dichotomy. I will return to this point later.

Kristeva is wary of any attempt to deconstruct the symbolic which she sees as leading to psychosis, to the engulfing⁴¹⁶ body of the mother which must be 'healthily' abjected. But she rewrites the mother's body into a more active proposition concerning subjectivity through her concept of the *chora*. Describing the primary relationship between the neo natal infant and the mother Kristeva concludes 'In this early psychic space, the infant experiences a wealth of drives...that could be extremely disorienting and destructive were it not for the infant's relation with her mother's body'.⁴¹⁷ These 'Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such...in this way they...articulate what we call a *chora*: a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stasis in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated'.⁴¹⁸ Comprised of rhythms and inarticulate sounds, it is the *chora* that allows for poetic language, that 'destabilises the Symbolic logical orderly aspects of the signifying process'⁴¹⁹ that, refreshes the symbolic which can become deathly and rigid. This is the fruit of the body of the mother revivifying the paternal symbolic and not left behind and impotent in the classic Oedipal scenario. It is via the *chora*, courtesy of the maternal body, that revolutionary writers can shatter the way we think texts are meaningful.⁴²⁰

Cixous argues that women's sex specific experiences of pregnancy and childbirth offer a radically different

⁴¹³ Ibid p. 7.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid p. 1.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid p. 1.

⁴¹⁶ Noelle Mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 19.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid p. 19.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid p. 20.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid p. 23.

⁴²⁰ Ibid p. 20.

connection to the other.⁴²¹ It is through 'writing the body', the female body with its potential for a different order of self/other, that will explode the patriarchal Symbolic and open us to new possibilities. She also emphasises that although the binary system instituted by the Symbolic, which privileges male over female and mind over body, inheres, each act of thought and language must traverse the body as 'the whole of reality worked upon in my flesh, intercepted by my nerves, by my senses, by the labour of all my cells'⁴²². Finally, she stresses the role of the mother's body in feminine writing. She stresses that the non-repression and inclusion of the rhythms and articulations of the maternal body in writing presents a link with the 'pre-Symbolic relation between self and m/other and thus a way through the loss, separation and perpetual alienation of a masculine schema'.⁴²³

After Electra takes place over a period of a year and is set in the modest country home in Essex, proximate to an estuary, of a painter called Virgie who on her eightieth birthday calls her family and close friends together for a final farewell before she commits suicide by drowning. The protagonist of the play is her daughter Haydn, a 58 year old psychoanalyst who has always had a fraught relationship with her mother and blames her for her neglect and the loss of Haydn's father, whom Virgie abandoned in pursuit of life as an artist. Divided into four acts, the first details Virgie's unveiling of her plan and the unexpected return of her son, Orin, which precipitates her stroke. The second act concerns whether or not she should be cared for at home by her daughter or sent to a care home. The third act sees Virgie coming home for a trial which may see her return but which ends in Virgie's death. The fourth and final act shows the daughter Haydn coming to a sense of understanding her mother and a healing of old wounds culminating in Virgie's return in her daughter's imaginings. To what extent does this retelling of the Electra story address the possibilities that the theory I have encountered in my research

⁴²¹ Susan Sellers *Helene Cixous* p. 4.

⁴²² *Ibid* p. 7.

⁴²³ *Ibid* p. 7.

offer for challenging the representation of gender, specifically the representation of women on stage? How fruitful has the relationship between theory and practice been? This analysis acknowledges that *After Electra* is, as a yet unperformed play, still in that respect a work in progress and perhaps this exploration may serve as a dramaturgical exercise which may in turn benefit the play. This play may be re-written as a result of this analysis.

Virgie's declaration of suicide is like a declaration of war. It again sits uneasily on the binary of life/death. In Virgie's estimation it is a life enhancing decision, but is unintelligible to other characters in the play. Sonia's solution is threaten Virgie 'We'll have you sectioned'⁴²⁴. Another binary Virgie threatens to disrupt is sanity/madness. But her carnivalesque behaviour drives others to eccentricity;

TOM It's not possible i can't believe it this is terrible news I'm coming with you

VIRGIE No no no

TOM Yes.

VIRGIE Don't be silly this is my exit.

SONIA Yes, don't be a cunt, Tom.⁴²⁵

Kristeva describes the carnivalesque as discourse which 'breaks through the laws of language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest'.⁴²⁶ But the carnival cannot by

⁴²⁴ Ibid p.11.

⁴²⁵ After Electra p. 148.

definition be taken soberly. In carnival, quotidian social hierarchies, their solemnities, pieties and etiquettes are profaned, overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Opposites are mingled and in this frustration of clear binaries ideologies are banished.⁴²⁷ There is something of the carnival in Virgie's project, in coming to her own funeral, in celebrating her own coming death, the guests are thrown into an existential unease, should they be happy or sad? The binary disfigures. Virgie is a dark mistress of ceremonies leading them into queasy territory. The guests make a decision to humour Virgie:

'VIRGIE What are you laughing for, Shirley?

SHIRLEY I'm just happy.

SHIRLEY LAUGHS AGAIN⁴²⁸

Virgie has instituted a whole new order where the 'rules' of carnival deconstruct the notion of a rule.

'Normal' behaviour seems defunct and even a gift loses its power of exchange:

'TOM This is too

HE HOLDS A BOOK

Generous

VIRGIE I won't be doing a lot of reading where I'm going.⁴²⁹

It is a gift with no expectation of return, except perhaps the dark one of acquiescing to self-murder. Is there a resonance in the gift which has its prehistoric origins in the exchange of woman between two men, husband and father, the foundation of patriarchy⁴³⁰ and 'civilisation' which Freud alludes to in his formulation of the

⁴²⁶ Noelle mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 6.

⁴²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin *Rabelais and his world* p. 82.

⁴²⁸ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 16.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid* p. 17.

‘resolution’ of the Oedipus complex? Is this gift with no expectation of return, outside the economy of phallogocentric sexuality? Does it point to another economy which Virgie, the matriarch, has instituted? As Tom comments in response to Sonia who has been given a painting of the sea ‘Every time you look at that you can remember today. Not Virgie Killing herself.’⁴³¹The meaning of the word gift is uncertain. Like Derrida’s critique of Plato’s pharmakon, which is slippery and defies the binary poison/cure⁴³², pointing to a disruption of oppositions. Within this world of troubled binaries it is hard for the inhabitants to make clear moral choices, or to position themselves in regard to the ‘correct’ moral behaviour. The sign posts are missing, as prefigured by Haydn’s monologue at the top of the play concerning the topological territory when the tide recedes leaving ‘the faintest suggestion of water, flashes of light, tiny mirrors reflecting the sun, ‘It’s possible to get lost out there, to forget which way is back.’⁴³³Like the mime Glaucon’s mirror which ‘falsifies’ reality by its promiscuous reflecting on and ‘displacing the singularity of forms’.⁴³⁴And, one might add, the discretion of binaries.

The most historically troubled relationship in the play is that of Virgie and her daughter Haydn, as might be expected in a play called *After Electra*. Haydn has arrived on her mother’s eightieth birthday to be hit by the bombshell of her mother’s impending suicide. But is this a ‘true’ act? As Haydn comments couldn’t she have got it all over with quietly instead of ‘indulging in this display of theatrics’⁴³⁵. This does not follow the script of the traditional suicide with its secrecy and sadness. The desire to be ‘eaten by fish’⁴³⁶is a gruesome touch by Virgie but delivered in an insouciant manner, which unnerves and provides a comic bathos. It is also a nod to

⁴³⁰ Gayle Rubin *The traffic in Women* p. 770.

⁴³¹ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 17.

⁴³² Jaques Derrida *Dissemination* p. 36.

⁴³³ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 1.

⁴³⁴ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. ii.

⁴³⁵ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 4.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid* p. 3.

the abject and brings the corpse into close proximity. Is this spontaneous dialogue or has Virgie 'written' it beforehand? Haydn later accuses her of stage managing⁴³⁷. These meta-theatrical hints trouble the boundary between control/abandon and reality/fiction. They don't however assume the gravitas of a Brechtian gestus. The politics of this play seem to lie in the first of Elin Diamond's strategies concerning the unmaking of mimesis, 'mimesis as representation, with its many doublings and unravellings of model, subject, identity (Irigaray, Derrida)⁴³⁸. This depends on the truth of the model and its creative revisions as opposed to truths produced in Brechtian engaged interpretation.⁴³⁹

Perhaps the central question of the play coheres around the good mother/bad mother binary and is a potential deconstruction of the word 'mother'. For Irigaray this word implicates all women whether they are mothers or not.⁴⁴⁰ As Virgie asks Haydn 'You're fifty-eight, how long was it supposed to go on- this mother thing'?⁴⁴¹ And later when her guests implore her to think of Haydn because she is her mother, she replies that she is 'also a person in her own right'⁴⁴². But this is a struggle that Virgie has had her whole life, to what extent is she such an independent individual and what are the responsibilities of a being a mother? There is a suggestion that to be in complete control of one's subjectivity to the point of taking your own life is also a negation, a defeat. The question might be how does one escape the Symbolic and be completely self-defining? Or how can one be a woman without being a woman if being a woman means a submission to being the feminine other to a masculinist phallogocentrism? Is her suicide an admission of defeat? Or of the impossibility of an alternative? Or is it the just what Virgie says it is, self-defining act sans parallel, and a final act of gender trouble as she acts

⁴³⁷ Ibid p. 25.

⁴³⁸ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. ii.

⁴³⁹ Ibid p. ii.

⁴⁴⁰ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 35

⁴⁴¹ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 4.

⁴⁴² Ibid p. 8.

like the Romans who 'fall on their swords'⁴⁴³, reclaiming phallic power?

How 'alternative' has Virgie been? The book she gives to Tom, her ex-lover, is a translation of the *Oresteia*. Electra is angry with her mother for the revenge murder of her father and has sworn to murder her in turn. Clytemnestra driven by the bitterness over the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia, murders her husband and takes a replacement lover, Aegisthus. As the watchman notes at the beginning of the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is an uneasy gender hybrid 'in whose woman's heart/A man's will nurses hope'.⁴⁴⁴ Likewise, Virgie, leaves her husband in who refuses to nurture, not her daughter, but her other offspring, her art. Refusing to be stymied, she states 'I didn't want to live the kind of lives most people did. They bored me. Sorry about that. If I'd been stupider I would have made a better mother'.⁴⁴⁵ She also at her own admission did a lot of fucking, transgressive by virtue of being outside the socially sanctioned nuclear family. Although she didn't reject men and her role as 'female other' in the heterosexual matrix what does she offer Haydn as a role model that is a redefinition of the category 'woman'? Perhaps it is her failure to do so that leads to the hostility Haydn experiences. She abandons her children at her own admission to see a Caravaggio painting in Milan, but she is punished by having her children put into care. Her re-negotiation of her role has been partial and at the expense of her relationship with her children. She offers trouble to the liberal feminist paradigm of equality without reference to deconstructing the male/female binary, the male artist can live for art and let the women take care of the kids, the symmetry breaks down in regard to the female artist. The artist I partly based the character of Virgie on, Sandra Blow, was childless and expressed regret at not being able to make having children work with her all-consuming vocation.⁴⁴⁶ Is Virgie caught in an irresolvable paradox? To be an artist, at the centre of one's

⁴⁴³ Ibid p. 5.

⁴⁴⁴ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* p. 41.

⁴⁴⁵ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 23.

own life, and a mother, by definition on call to others, is an impossibility, and yet all women are defined by virtue of the mother, to be both is impossible and to be either one is to be lacking by virtue of not being the other?

Virgie's role needs to be taken account of in terms of the abject. She is constantly associated with it, from the insistence on her upcoming suicide which brings the possibility of the abject into the room, to the moment of her actual death which does bring the long threatened corpse into view⁴⁴⁷; 'The corpse, most sickening of wastes... it is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled'.⁴⁴⁸ In between Virgie has spat out masticated banana⁴⁴⁹, and presented her stroke affected body⁴⁵⁰ which she later attempts to strip naked.⁴⁵¹ reminding us of the unheimlich⁴⁵² nature of our beginnings. Kristeva, however, re-configures the unheimlich in her notion of the abject. The unheimlich is the return of the already repressed in the Freudian paradigm but the abject does not have the properties of the object, apart from being opposed to the 'I'. It comes from an earlier time, from the time the infant begins the process of disassociation from the maternal body before the symbolic moment of language. 'Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separate from another body in order to be'.⁴⁵³

The abject bears traces of the lost maternal connection before the insistence of the paternal signifier and the Symbolic. It thus circumvents the Oedipus complex. Although there is no return to the maternal body, 'from its

⁴⁴⁶ Michael McNay 'Obituary Sandra Blow' Guardian Newspaper, 23.8.2006.

⁴⁴⁷ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 54

⁴⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva *Powers of horror* p. 4.

⁴⁴⁹ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 39.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid p. 30.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid p. 11.

⁴⁵² Sigmund Freud *Mourning and Melancholia* p. 253.

⁴⁵³ Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror* p. 8.

place of banishment the abject does not cease challenging its master'.⁴⁵⁴ If the abject hovers at the edges of meaning and threatens to collapse it, as it 'beseches, worries and fascinates desire'⁴⁵⁵, it also has radical potential; 'There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language or desire is founded'.⁴⁵⁶ The suggestion is that the abject points to the ultimate fiction of all structures and must therefore beseech and worry the paternal Symbolic and the subjectivities predicated upon it; the male/female binary, male culture to female body, as there is no body that escapes the pulverising of subjectivity inherent in the abject. If the abject cannot stand alone as a 'solution', it is perhaps for Virgie, a possible source of resistance to the irresolvable paradox of artist/mother. The abject decays all meaning. Is this the key to her desire for suicide? 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'⁴⁵⁷ And as a planned crime Virgie's suicide accedes to the abject in a further way for 'Any crime because it draws attention to the fragility of the law is abject but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility'.⁴⁵⁸

If the structure of *After Electra* is fundamentally linear, apart from the final encounter (see below), and if the characters are mimetically real, with actor 'laminated to character'⁴⁵⁹, both which an audience might expect to encounter in a naturalistic or realistic representation of gender, I have so far suggested, to counter that, that it is possible to read the disruption of gender in the representation of 'woman' on stage through

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid p. 21.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid p. 17.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid p. 30.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid p. 5.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid p. 4.

⁴⁵⁹ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 46.

consideration of the blurring of binaries and the employment of the abject. I would now like to add to that argument a consideration of the Kristevan *chora*. For Kristeva language has two modes, orderly thinking and evocation of feeling/discharge of energy, that is the Symbolic and Semiotic. The Semiotic is the extra verbal way in which bodily energy and effects make their way in language. The sound image cannot be completely divested of its Semiotic motility. When the child takes up the Symbolic position it does not leave the semiotic behind. The Semiotic will remain a constant companion to the Symbolic in all its communications. Kristeva asks 'how much risk there is in a text, how much non-identity, non-authenticity, impossibility and corrosiveness for those who choose to see themselves within it... where there is such a disruptive genotext the reader is put at risk of losing his/her bounds' .⁴⁶⁰ The *chora* then manifests itself in the genotext with the poetic and affective aspects of language. In *After Electra* it may be said to manifest itself in the performances of the guests, the poem and song they perform for Virgie as her request on her 'last day', a sign perhaps of their regression and behold-ness to the maternal power of Virgie. It can be discerned in the fact that her paintings which are referred to in part four of the play are full of colour, a Semiotic gesture. It is apparent in the broken down language of Virgie's stroke, in part two. A refusal to co-operate with the symbolic which has rigidly defined her, first as a bad mother and now as sick and helpless. Virgie's responses are spat out.⁴⁶¹

How might mother and daughter separate without the crushing sense of betrayal and loss, as the mother, in such powerful discourses as psychoanalysis, is voided in homage to the father and the healthy recreation of a girl in the mother's image is stymied? The mother is lacking and so despised for not having the phallus and the father is the phantom the girl must seek all her life at the expense of a sense of her own desire, figured on her

⁴⁶⁰ Noelle Mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 25.

⁴⁶¹ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 30.

own body courtesy of the mother. For the girl child, as Irigaray discusses, is constructed as the little man without a penis⁴⁶², as lacking. Perhaps the resonances of the *chora* insist on a reminder of the lost body of the mother in a play which is structured in a realistic fashion. As Kristeva argues, differing from Lacan, who sees the imaginary body first created in misrecognition by the infant subsumed by the Symbolic, the imaginary is not a lost territory, it continues to be discernible in the Semiotic mode of signification.⁴⁶³ In *After Electra*, the Semiotic elements offer a hope that a space for female desire predicated upon the body of the mother, may be, like the abject, at the periphery of subjectivity.

After Electra seems, like its character Virgie, to be a little suspicious of political ideologies as the carnivalesque setting of the first scene signifies. The emphasis for Virgie is more on enjoying the sensuous aspects of this 'last' day which puts her in mind of being a child.⁴⁶⁴ She insists on the politics of the body, primarily in terms of her right to die as well as her right to live life sexually outside of a patriarchal marriage. The play is informed by this structurally as it is organised by definitions of the the state of Virgie's physical body; impending death/stroke victim/incarcerated-dead/absent. Her final appearance at the end of the play perhaps breaking down the binary absent/present. This may be akin to Cixous' exhortation for *écriture féminine* to be 'a path toward thought through the body'.⁴⁶⁵ It is Virgie's body that dictates the major shifts from act to act. The materiality of the female body is thus insisted on over that of an ideological debate which must, by definition, occur within the realm of the masculine symbolic and in Cixous' terms repeat mournfully the deathly imperative of self versus the other, where one discourse triumphs over another but is really an institution of just

⁴⁶² Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p.26.

⁴⁶³ Noelle Mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 33.

⁴⁶⁴ April De Angelis *After Electra* p.21.

⁴⁶⁵ Susan Sellers *Helene Cixous* p. 8.

another dominant, phallogocentric discourse, plus ca change? It is not the institution of a the new relation between self and other demanded by *écriture feminine*.

If the truth be known to ourselves, argues Kristeva, what we truly want is to be ‘the object of our mother’s unwavering love but if we had that we would never become civilised speaking beings. We learn language and its accompanying arts as a kind of compensation for what we must all lose; being embraced by our mother’s body’.

⁴⁶⁶ Towards the end of Part one, Orin returns. It seems from his disjointed speech and admissions of being broken that he has suffered through Virgie’s parenting, now exacerbated by the break-up of his marriage. His speech is permeated by the ‘archaic, unconsciously driven, ravenous’ ⁴⁶⁷ Semiotic, which displays and amplifies the subject’s lack of unity.⁴⁶⁸ If Virgie’s mothering has intensified ‘insulting gap’⁴⁶⁹ the child experiences between need and satisfaction which is an on-going state of desire for desires that can never be met, Orin is incensed and demands an almost psychotic return to the mother, to home, troubling in an adult male. Haydn’s response to her mother’s possible suicide has been to have a bout of ‘conversion hysteria’⁴⁷⁰. Both the speech of these adult children are troubled by attacks from the Semiotic. While they both wish to punish the mother, to ‘kill’ her by preventing her suicide, it is Orin who eventually regains his marriage, his wife/replacement mother and is restored to the Symbolic. He can be provided with a sustaining illusion of phallic plenitude while Haydn’s potential lovers, Tom and Roy, prove not to resolve her need to discover her own desire which since she does not have a replacement mother like Orin, leaves her more unresolved. If ‘the ultimate signifier is the phallus; it is the representation of what one really wants, what we are ultimately seeking and what we can never have’⁴⁷¹, it

⁴⁶⁶ Noelle Mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 37.

⁴⁶⁷ Noelle Mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 39.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid* p. 39.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid* p. 39.

⁴⁷⁰ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 3.

sees that men and women are placed differently in regard to the symbolic. Men gaining a plenitude from the illusion that women, defined as other, cannot attain via symbolic practises. As such the play maybe troubling this lack of resolution in the symbolic register with its employment of the abject and the Semiotic.

Before Virgie's sudden death she decides to have a naked protest. During Act One she has threatened them all with the abject nature of death by challenging them with her assertion "Look, you all flinched when I said that. Death. Death."⁴⁷² Now she will push this challenge as a revolt against her enforced life by removing her clothes. This scares them. Are they to get another glimpse of her pubic hair to remind them of the uncanny possibilities of their repressed origins? 'No-one wants to see your bush, Virgie'⁴⁷³, urges Shirley. Earlier in this act Virgie has aligned the construction of the ideal mother with the ideologies of the Nazi party; 'Kirche, Kinder, Kitche- that's what Adolf Hitler had in mind for women and that's who my children sided with'⁴⁷⁴. Perhaps she is touching on, in both gestures, the tendency for the containment of women's bodies as the repressed and feared 'other' by patriarchal ideologies and the Symbolic which feel the need to punish and control women as part of a deathly binary. This is the opposite of Cixous' formulation where the binary is broken down as one pushes close to the other and allows for alterity, the allowance of the existence of the other without threat.⁴⁷⁵

It is perhaps witnessing Tom's betrayal of Sonia as well as Haydn's recognition that Orin has a wife, that awakens Haydn to a position where she may be in a frame of mind to re-assess her mother. There is

⁴⁷¹ Noelle Mc Afee *Kristeva* p. 39.

⁴⁷² April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 15.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid* p. 54.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid* p. 52.

⁴⁷⁵ Susan Sellers *Helene Cixous* p. 11.

also the radical absence of Virgie which allows for an understanding of what her presence meant. It is at this point that Haydn re-encounters her mother as if in the first scene, as hallucination bursts Symbolicity⁴⁷⁶ The dialogue is, apart from the last line, a partial repeat of the first half of scene one. This could be read as a mournful repeat, a deathly repetition which allows for no re-imaginings for Haydn of her relationship between her and her mother, but the last two words, 'Yes, Yes'⁴⁷⁷ which suggest a change in the pattern and a possibility of new configurations.

There is also the possibility that what was formerly the uncanny nature of the female body, is now transformed into something other, a non-repressed co-existence with the other, Cixous' alterity, just as the binary presence/absence is blurring, along with alive/dead. What we are seeing, the impossible, is also a jab at the specular construction of the Oedipal Symbolic, which privileges sight over other senses, and as regards woman's sex implies what cannot be seen does not exist. 'Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being. No truth'.⁴⁷⁸ Further, it could be said to open up the 'regime of permissible visibility'⁴⁷⁹ to allow a space for women's desire, a feminine *jouissance*. Until this moment it may be said that the play operates in a 'phallogomorphic regime'⁴⁸⁰ where the stage exists in a perpetual dialectic of the visible/invisible which relieves at the unconscious level, castration anxiety. Now this is overturned and by association suggests a liberation for Haydn. The pleasure/pain boundary blurs as she 'sees' her mother, and it seems the alchemical changes also suggest a new relationship between mother/daughter, self/other. In this new time, which disrupts linearity, this Electra will acquiesce to killing her mother at her mother's bequest. It is a separation between mother and

⁴⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror* p. 46.

⁴⁷⁷ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 62.

⁴⁷⁸ Luce Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* p. 48.

⁴⁷⁹ Elin Diamond *Unmaking Mimesis* p. 83.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid* p. 83.

daughter that does not leave the daughter in a state of mourning at the loss of female desire. Female desire is recognised in the scene along with female agency. Where loss can be acknowledged as loss there is a possibility of redemption.

After Electra perhaps responds to the challenges posed by an exploration of French feminist theory in its representation of a female character that subverts the tragic genre. In welcoming death as a free choice Virgie subverts the tragic necessity of death and rewrites the contract negating its deathly overcoming of the other. Virgie, indeed, satirises such power structures in her response to her sister, a politician who has remarked on Virgie's suicide scheme:

SHIRLEY What a pathetic way to achieve power over another individual.

VIRGIE You'd know nothing about that of course.⁴⁸¹

If Virgie has resisted the patriarchal family structure, traditional notions of motherhood and pursued life as an artist, she is also finally overthrowing the sense of death as a tragic trope. She returns from death twice, first after her stroke in which Virgie's body becomes riven with the Semiotic; it's jerky movements, it's stuttering voice; secondly as she returns after death to continue her part in the play. This final action underscores the point that the theatre is an apt medium to encompass the challenges of the *écriture féminine*. The body of the actress returns to remind us of the instance of the Semiotic's challenge to text in gesture reminiscent of Kristeva's exhortation that the Symbolic be refreshed by the legacy of the mother's body, Cixous' desire that *écriture féminine* breaks the self/other binary and release new possibilities and as Irigaray would have it all predicated on a new writing of women's desire courtesy of the maternal body and the excluded passion of the mother/child dyad by the patriarchal Symbolic.

⁴⁸¹ April De Angelis *After Electra* p. 148.

ACTRESS IN SEARCH OF A CHARACTER

A I think she's kind, I think she's confused, I think she's 38, I think she has suffered, I think she had a rabbit, I think she doesn't mind the way she looks, she's used to it, what can she do - once- on holiday in Barcelona a

man asked her to dance with him on the beach it was a moment of sensuous possibility which turned sour when she discovered he'd stolen her passport but I don't think she's cynical, I think cynical people alarm her. I think she had a cynical mother, I think she has a tendency to over-eat, she'd rather have an ice cream than sex if it was a hot day, this isn't based on me but let's face it you know what you're getting with a chunky monkey

Q But what would she do in this situation?

A I haven't worked her out yet. She had a dog called Nobby

Q As well as the rabbit?

A The dog ate the rabbit

she is lower middle class

she shops in John Lewis she considers that a political act even the lingerie section

she thinks history is a catastrophe but she wouldn't have liked to live in any other age because they didn't have central heating but she doesn't like now either it's too scary, ecological disaster, liposuction, Michael Gove. A lot of the time she feels lost,

she likes potatoes, mashed fluffy roast chips where am I going with this

Q Do you think she might be in a restaurant making this decision, there is a lot of food, it keeps recurring?

A Is she too much like me?

she's on a diet. no, scrub that, she refuses to diet for ideological purposes. once women were policed for sex, now they are policed for food. she read political science at hull university where she met her partner, Harry

Q What does Harry do?

A He's a chef

Q We know she likes food

A She lucked out with Harry. He likes to cook for her

even though he cooks all day and all night long till 2 am in an organic restaurant in Shoreditch 'la lentil' cooking is his hobby he cooks for her all the time anytime he loves to. Who's gonna believe that shit?

Q No no I think I'm getting a picture of Harry

hold on to him. Is Harry hairy?

A he doesn't have a hair on his body

Q Really? That's unusual. For a chef. Was it a disappointment to her?

A She was not consciously disappointed

she's too self-abnegating to complain about the hair or his inept gropings

Q So you think you have a clear idea of her now?

A Once she did something she's ashamed of

Q That's interesting

A Yes but I don't know what it is. Wait - yes no yes she betrayed her principles she has a child named after a Shakespearean heroine who she sent to private school while professing left leaning principles

Q Well it's understandable

A And this child, this Volumnia, became obnoxious and expected her to do things for it

Q What

A Like cook for it at unreasonable hours and not just pre-packaged food

Q The child had learnt the value of fresh from Harry

A Yes that drove her mad

Q Good

A It drove her fucking bananas to hear Harry and Volumnia go on about the salutary effects of fresh she could vomit

Q Go on

A Volumnia gets everything while as a child she always longed for a pair of pink plastic dressing up shoes in the toyshop window they had frozen bubbles suspended in the heels and even though now she's grown up and doesn't need them or want them - she can't want anything so much ever again because somehow those shoes were magic, they exceeded in their tremendous fascination for her anything that could ever exist again. but you know she never got them. I mean they weren't real - they were held onto your foot by just a bit of elastic.

She spends time wondering why the things you wanted then that you never got are more real so much more desirable than things that you can have now -

she's frightened that everything will lose its glamour

Q This is good

A Everything will lose its shine and when she stops wanting things, like a shark suddenly thinking fuck this - - what is this life - it's just more fucking murky salt water - when you've torn the guts out of one bloody fish you've torn the guts out of one bloody fish

oh god is this getting a bit - where is this coming from?

Q I think we're almost there

A Because I'd prefer if it was written down for me - who I was- so that I could you know draw a line between me and this - monster - her - whoever the hell she thinks she is- who doesn't cook for her own child. Is she an alcoholic?

Q That might be good, more -

A What do people want?

Q The dirt, the detail - out there they've all done worse stuff than anything you can make up or they think they have. People are guilt magnets.

A She did something else

Q What?

A No no I'm not doing this anymore.

Q The worse the better - bad people make good art. look we almost got somewhere tremendous

A We did?

Q Yes yes we're almost there. What did she do?

A She stuffed a fish-finger down the back of her best-friend's radiator -

Q Is that all?

A You're not getting it. she knew that slowly over time the fish-finger would rot and the odour would fill the front room and never be located and would poison her friend's new life causing untold marital friction she was envious because her friend seemed to really have something that made her happy in a childlike way and boy did she go on about it, you know- Kath Kidson wall paper and tonally matching napkins, the ornamental garden feature; a faun that sprouted water from his penis and both horns. so she went to fetch a packet of Findus and when her friend was out of the room getting the photos of her vegan Barbados honeymoon she secreted it behind the radiator so later when she said to her friend – how's the new house - and she waited for the doubt and concern to creep into her friend's voice about the terrible fucking stink but her friend turned to her and said- it's marvellous - there was this smell but and i thought i wonder if it's the old fish-finger behind the radiator trick, and I looked and it was and she knew this was her moment to say it was me, to be known, to be brave and rise above her petty limitations as a human being instead she said well, people, you know, people.

Q That's sick.

A That's good?

Q That's a character.

A Thank god. So let's put this bitch on the stage

ACTRESS IN SEARCH OF A CHARACTER ANALYSIS

In this piece the Actress is put in a position of profound instability. Forced to discover a character for an unnamed, impending performance the boundaries between self and fiction are radically blurred. Further, the demarcation between performance and rehearsal are fluid too, as the Actress is performing for the first time for the director/questioner who can sit comfortably outside the performance and judge it, who urges her on to greater self-implicating creativity with platitudes. It is as if the narrative is pulled from the Actress as she in effect 'writes' her own performance/self. Authorship is normally constructed as a position of being in almost divine control. As Ibsen urged a writer must know their characters like God knows the world. But the world the Actress is bringing forward is uncannily unknown. It is unbearable to her to think where this material she is bodying forth is coming from. Worse it is coming from an unknown place inside her. The boundaries between true and false are also breaking down. What is really her story and what is a strange fiction which she must own against her will because she has created it, is blurring. In effect the boundary between 'truth' and 'fiction', 'biography' and guilty self-fashioning, is radically destabilised. 'Where is this going'? She asks. She could equally ask 'Where is this coming from?'. She is certainly experiencing the 'sickening torture'⁴⁸² a woman exposes herself to when giving a public speech.

Is she self-parodying? She seems too out of control to be doing so. It is a kind of miscopying of herself, as Cixous would describe it, the first stuttering attempts to write herself out of the patriarchal imperative. Cixous believes that all too often women have written themselves into patriarchy rather than out of it. Is the actress is experiencing the 'anxiety that comes from the sensation of losing control in *écriture féminine*'?⁴⁸³ This writing which purportedly 'exceeds boundaries and overflows in a way that is vertiginous and intoxicating'⁴⁸⁴ There is a

⁴⁸² Susan Sellers *Live Theory* p. 33.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid* p. 33.

sense that the Actress's false starts and retractions are underlined by an awareness that 'women do not have time nor leeway to let the feminine express itself to the full. Oratory is too certain; it makes no allowance for uneasiness and questioning. It restricts the possibility of waste, superabundance and uselessness'.⁴⁸⁵

Her creation touches on the lost realm of childhood as she wonders about her desire for the pink shoes.

Uninhibited *jouissance* seemed to be directed at such supremely useless and artificially feminine attire. Not politically correct but desired and unobtainable perhaps an article of footwear she might imagine her mother wearing, an attempt to re-engage with the lost imaginary? The instigation of such childlike wishes still able to exert a force on the personality of an adult is the inversion of a hierarchy which hints at the semiotic. Such desires are dangerous because they can de-throne an adult. They also suggest the 'artificial' nature of femininity. The endless repetitive task of 'being a woman' which lost to original desire is why she is afraid of life losing all its 'glamour'.

The broken and uncertain rhythms of the piece, the long burst of phrases not controlled by punctuation, the sudden stops and starts 'whose going to believe this shit', are also reminiscent of the Kristevan Semiotic. As the Actress is both drawn to the Dionysian unfolding of her crazy narrative but anxious that it will somehow overwhelm her. 'I'd rather this as written down for me like a proper script'.

In the end does the Actress discover that envy, as the old Freudian paradigm would contend, is what fills her interior as she describes her hostility to her friend's perfect life, the Kath Kidson table cloth and the fawn

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid p. 91.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid p. 36.

fountain sprouting water from its penis might suggest. Or is her anger more at the limiting of her desire/*jouissance* to such illusions? The penis bearing faun is a statue after all. And as the end of the Actress' monologue is also a beginning 'let's get this bitch on the stage' it may suggest that all is not closure here. Why is the Actress forced to create her character? What else is out there for her that disobeys the patriarchal configurations? And after all we are watching a female performer who has agreed to embody the Actress, thus slyly underlying all with a pleasurable *jouissance*.

Actress in Search of A Character parodies the certainties that are to be found in classic realist representation. There is no stable resolution which bodies forth a significant truth, there is no major objective action that takes place, the action is the foregrounding of the creation of the material itself, even the concept of the protagonist is challenged, because in this case who that is, is problematized as the truth of the Actresses life is problematized. What she wants is also obscure. The questioner who could be seen as the male analyst/director who is probing her for a truth is given a parody of self-discovery which destabilises the fiction of a brand of realism that searches for the 'hysterical' truth embodied in women which must have its exegesis for both the woman and society to be cured; the fish-finger hardly provides this cure or enlightenment. As such the piece avoids closure as it also avoids revelation of the hysterical secret.

The piece was written obeying Cixous' dictates that, as reflected in the act of the central character, the writing was allowed to be bodied forth. As the writer I allowed the writing to flow out of me, not inhibiting it by feeling it had to answer to an issue or commit to a form, or move to closure. It was written as free association and thus

was allowed to be 'trivial', inscribe childhood memories (the pink shoes). Further, I think the piece reflects as desire to be the other, as evinced her as competition with or envy towards her friend and her friend's happy marriage, which perhaps is a buried desire to merge with the other, or in Cixous' terms to come close to the other. On reflection it is perhaps the 'other' inside the Actress that she is being forced to encounter within herself and be appalled at, that the Actress is moving closer to, rather than projecting this unconscious material onto the exterior 'other', in the deathly contract of the patriarchal Symbolic.

CONCLUSION

In applying the theories of Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva to an exploration of the possibilities of new understandings in terms of a feminist dramaturgy it is possible to delineate a direction for a radical theatre practice which suggests a meaningful relationship between theatrical form and subject formation particularly in relation to gender. What is pertinent to foreground is the way in which the classic realist production of subjectivity while perhaps making claims for arguing or presenting progressive representations of woman may in fact through the use of traditional forms be inadvertently shoring up patriarchy or reproducing 'woman' as a lack. Conversely, plays such as Caryl Churchill's *A Number* may be said to be working in contradistinction to this. While seeming to reproduce gender norms by banishing representations of woman from the stage, a closer look at the form may reveal subversive pleasures in overturning, challenging and dismantling gender roles.

The three post-structuralist, psychoanalytic theorists under discussion here propose the deconstruction of the Freudian/Lacanian proposition 'woman'. Each offers a radical revaluing of the creation of subjectivity at the Oedipal moment and argue for a reinsertion of the maternal into the significance of subject formation, the moment when gender becomes intelligible. Kristeva primarily through theories of the *chora* and the abject,

Cixous via *jouissance* and the destabilising of the gender binary and Irigaray in an insistence on a remembering and reclaiming of the radical potential of obscured female desire and the different possibilities for subjectivity provided by the female anatomy. All three launch an assault on the primacy of a Symbolic order that excludes a possibility of woman represented as anything other than lacking, a foil to the phallogocentric 'I'. However, of the three, Kristeva is most wary of the potential for 'psychosis' in pushing too hard at a dismantling of the Symbolic order.

In analysing works of Churchill and Kane through the lens of the French feminists, it is possible to describe the way in which theatrical form might take precedence over content in the search for a radical feminist dramaturgy.

Both these writers are particularly concerned with the primacy of form and both can be read to offer incisive challenges to portrayals of feminine subjectivity. Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* can, for example, be profitably read alongside Kristeva's notion of the *chora*, where the breakdown of language allows for a semiotic charge to trouble and shake the symbolic register. Churchill's *A Number* read through Irigaray's formulation of the masculine self-same, reveals a mocking, mimesis gone awry through repetition, an assault on the patriarchal assertion of the Symbolic's deathly order which excludes female desire and refuses a representation of female

subjectivity except as lacking, or as Irigaray would have it, merely a grammatical gesture disguised as a subjectivity.

If these theorists can be profitably read to provide pathways into both the reading and writing of plays in terms of creating new feminist dramaturgies, is it possible to discern ways in which work written for the stage may in turn present challenges to the theory? Perhaps one of the key issues of contention may coalesce around the notion of agency. Classically agency is seen as integral to drama. Aristotle pins this down in his discussion of tragedy as an imitation of an action which is 'brought about by agents who necessarily display certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought, according to which we also define the nature of the actions'⁴⁸⁶. This agency is the key to action and to the profoundest changes in the play which in turn are the prerogative of the protagonist.

The classic cannon provided scant examples of the female protagonist which feminist playwrights since the onset of second wave feminism have sought to address in their work. Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982)⁴⁸⁷ could be said to both reinforce this position as well as to qualify it; she puts a woman protagonist centre stage

⁴⁸⁶ Aristotle Horace Longinus *Classical Literary Criticism* p39

but at the same time demands a recognition that the class interests of women divide them. *Jumpy* (2011)⁴⁸⁸

which features a central female protagonist and a pivotal mother/daughter resonated with a women's audience who wished to see representations of feminine subjectivity and life experiences reflected on stage albeit in a classic realist form which did not problematize a notion of subjectivity. In some senses agency is already problematized if it is in the hands of a female character which according to the strict patriarchal logic of the symbolic is an impossibility, for as the French feminists would insist feminine subjectivity is ruled by the notion of the lack including lack of agency. As Irigaray points out for the male Symbolic predicated on specularly what can't be seen can't be known. Putting a woman centre stage means to be seen in a most significant and challenging way.

Perhaps it is pertinent to invoke the resonances between tragedy and realism. As Cixous argues the binary between self and Other is structured by the symbolic as a structure of selfhood which always sets up the other to be an excluded, threatening presence which has to be overcome as the result of the deathly logic of the Symbolic. This is also the structure of tragedy which maybe said to be by definition about deathly overcoming, the overcoming of the other even at the price of the self, perhaps even the necessity of the death of the self as the

⁴⁸⁸ April De Angelis *Jumpy*

price of overcoming the other in the self. This deathly logic of the symbolic is that which the French feminists exhort us to challenge, to move so close to the other not as to overcome it but to recognise its difference without feeling our borders threatened, to allow desire (*jouissance*) to exist without the imperative to eliminate the other, perhaps to allow the other to exist in ourselves in a radical plurality. But perhaps mimetic realism can be prised apart from tragedy in some respects. It is interesting to note that *After Electra, Actress in Search of a Character* and indeed *Jumpy* are written as comedies.

Comedy, classically, employs strategies that disrupt the integrity of the body, that mock seriousness, deal in desire and traditionally end in sexual union, not division. In comedy is it useless to overcome the other, which in the figure of the lover, is often what must be joined with not destroyed. Death is banished from comedy and so is deathly overcoming. Laughter banishes seriousness and in the figure of the lord of misrule hierarchies are overturned. While closure often reasserts social order and transgressive women may be put in their place it is possible to discern strategies for a feminist dramaturgy in the opposition of comedy to tragedy. Cixous' Laugh of the Medusa⁴⁸⁹ maybe invoked here, perhaps women in this upside down world are *temporarily* not castrated after all? Comedy recognises structures in order to parody them. As Churchill's work demonstrates repeatedly in

⁴⁸⁹ Helene Cixous *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

its rejection of the tragic template and an insistent use of many comic tropes there is a power in laughter; its

reckless *joissance*; its dangerous Irigarayan mimicry; its repletion with the qualities of the Kristevan *chora*

(the chuckle, the hoot) ; its delight in invoking the abject; its very residence in the body (I shook with laughter);

its confounding of boundaries (I laughed till I cried; laughter infected the audience); it is, which surely the

French Feminists would accept, a mode which slyly eludes even their seriousness.

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