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## **"What a bloody family" : power, gender, and sexuality in contemporary British drama**

William C. Boles

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by William C. Boles entitled ""What a bloody family" : power, gender, and sexuality in contemporary British drama." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Stanton B. Garner Jr., Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Norman Sanders, B. J. Leggett, Judy Lee Olivia

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Major Professor

We have read this dissertation  
and recommend its acceptance:

Norman Sanders  
Norman Sanders

B. J. Leggett  
B. J. Leggett

Judy Lee Oliva  
Judy Lee Oliva

Accepted for the Council:

Cowminkel  
Associate Vice Chancellor and  
Dean of The Graduate School

**"WHAT A BLOODY FAMILY":  
POWER, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DRAMA**

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

William Clura Boles  
December 1995



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**DEDICATION**

For Leslie

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## ABSTRACT

Since the conclusion of World War II, the traditional Victorian idealization of the British family as an extended, heterosexual, patriarchal institution has been challenged through governmental policies, post-war economic affluence, and social changes. Through the plays of Harold Pinter, Peter Nichols, Caryl Churchill, Stephen Poliakoff and Sarah Daniels, among others, the contemporary British theatre has reflected these challenges to the image of the British family. Building upon socio-historical studies of the post-war British family as well as traditional dramatizations of the family (by playwrights such as Noel Coward), this dissertation discusses the changing presentation of the British family between 1956 and 1990.

Chapter One considers contemporary explorations of maternity. Plays such as Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey, Churchill's Owners and Top Girls, and Charlotte Keatley's My Mother Said I Never Should contest the patriarchal preconception that women are merely maternal figures by emphasizing the effect of economics on motherhood. While Delaney underscores the economic plight of a struggling, lower-class mother and her pregnant daughter, Churchill and Keatley address the growing

economic individuality of women and mothers in the work place. Incest, the classical taboo, forms the focus of Chapter Two. While Joe Orton's What the Butler Saw and David Storey's Mother's Day, both farces, create an inverted world in which incest is seen as a "normal" and even a restorative relationship within the family, Poliakoff's Hitting Town focuses on incest as a form of protest in an alienating urban landscape. In contrast, Daniels' Beside Herself politicizes the damaging long-term effects of incest in order to indict an unresponsive and uncaring patriarchy. Chapter Three discusses four adultery plays: Alan Ayckbourn's The Norman Conquests, Pinter's Betrayal, Nichols' Passion Play and Tom Stoppard's The Real Thing. Not only do these plays rejuvenate the tired adultery play genre, but they also address, the pain, agony and distress infidelity causes in marital relationships. Finally, Chapter Four examines a burgeoning collection of plays interested in alternative families: John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane and Churchill's Cloud Nine. Through the destabilization of the family as a traditional domestic unit, these plays explore alternative family configurations.

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## INTRODUCTION

"In the Bosom of the Family":

### The Contemporary British Family in Theatre and Society

RUTH. Don't you like your family?

TEDDY. Which family?

RUTH. Your family here.

TEDDY. Of course I like them. What are you talking about?

Pause.

RUTH. You don't like them as much as you thought you did?

TEDDY. Of course I do. Of course I . . . like them. I don't know what you're talking about.

--Harold Pinter, The Homecoming

The living room of Harold Pinter's The Homecoming (1965) is, as Charles Carpenter points out, the setting for one of the most bizarre scenes in all domestic drama (493). Sitting in the middle of the vast living room is Ruth, who is negotiating the financial criteria for moving in with (and possibly prostituting herself for) her husband's brothers, father, and uncle. Ruth's husband Teddy observes the transaction without comment. Once agreeable terms are reached between Ruth and Lenny, her brother-in-law, Teddy leaves his former homestead, while Ruth remains.

Thirty years after the initial premiere, the conclusion to The Homecoming--indeed, the entire play--still manages to alarm and unsettle our traditional

perceptions and assumptions about the composition of the family and the behavior of its members. Nowhere has this disruptive element become more apparent to me than in the classroom as students have expressed their uncomfortableness with Ruth's desertion of her family in America. Based on this reaction, I focussed a recent class discussion on this scene and asked: Why does Ruth leave her husband and children to stay in this misogynistic household? Their answer surprised me. The students argued that Ruth does not return to America with Teddy because *she never lived there in the first place*. In fact, she is not Teddy's husband nor is she the mother of his three children (the students also doubt they even exist). Instead, Teddy hired her, they contended, to come home with him so that he could "impress" his family. While this is an interesting interpretation, the student's denial of Ruth's and Teddy's marriage allows them to avoid precisely what Pinter wants his audience to confront: a mother's abandonment of her children; a wife's sexually-charged conversations, dances, and kisses with her husband's brothers; a husband's apparent lack of interest in his wife's and family's actions; and a wife's cool detachment in telling her husband good-bye: "Eddie. . . . Don't become a stranger" (80, ellipsis mine). In an interview with John Lahr, John Normington (Sam in the original Royal Shakespeare Company production) made clear Pinter's intention in terms of the

play's ending through the following anecdote, which occurred during the play's pre-London run in Brighton:

The audience heckled and booed. While we were saying lines they actually shouted: 'What nonsense! Oh, what rubbish!' They stormed out and there was no applause at all. Just an avalanche of boos. . . . Harold was delighted and I don't think he was pretending. Because it had precisely the effect on them that he wanted. Just absolutely hit them below the belt.  
(Casebook 147)

However, Pinter was concerned with not only the incongruity of his ending, but also the inherent contradictions of the family, in general. Elin Diamond's discussion of the play notes the intrinsic dualities of the general concept of the family, as it is "united, divided, creative, destructive, immortal and timebound" all at once (Pinter's 136). Pinter illustrates this same idea through his depiction of a "mother" and "father" who embody and connoting two contrary qualities at one time. In his characterization of Ruth and Jessie, both mothers to three boys, Pinter focuses on the two disparate images that society attributes to women: Madonna and whore. The two mothers are described this way by the male family members, especially Max, Jessie's husband, who upon seeing Ruth for the first time exclaims: "We've had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night" (41). Occasionally, both images are conjured in the same breath. In describing his wife to Ruth, Max extols her virtues: "Mind you, she taught those boys everything they know. She taught them all the

morality they know" (45-6). And yet, this seemingly ringing endorsement of Jessie turns shrill when we look at her boys. Lenny is a pimp, Joey a rapist. This same kind of contradiction is apparent in the depiction of Max, who cares for and threatens his sons at the same time. At one point Lenny comments on Max's ritual of tucking his sons into bed at night when they were children. His father responds: "I'll give you a proper tuck up one of these nights, son. You mark my word" (17). Max turns the word "tuck," which usually connotes affection, into not only a physical, but also a sexual threat.

Nowhere is this contradictory nature of the family more apparent than at the commencement of Act Two, when Max describes an evening spent with his family after successfully negotiating with an association of international butchers. After giving the boys a bath himself--"What fun we used to have in the bath, eh, boys?"--Max made Jessie place her feet up on a pouffe to rest. He recalls: "I remember the boys came down, in their pyjamas, all their hair shining, their faces pink, it was before they started shaving, and they knelt down at our feet, Jessie's and mine. I tell you, it was like Christmas" (46). Max describes a scene of ideal domesticity: mother, father, and children, gleamingly embodying a contented state of familial bliss. Max's portrait is replicated through the stage placement of his current family, which is

also gathered in the living room. The men smoke their cigars, while Ruth, at the center of their focus, assists Joey in passing around cups of coffee. The figures who were once children--"before they started to shave"--have now matured, and Jessie has been replaced by yet another mother of three boys.<sup>1</sup> Through Max's anecdote and the physical placement of the actors on stage, Pinter creates a traditional, comforting and reassuring portrait of a contented, well-fed, "clean" family. His adaption of the same scene to film in the early 1970s also stresses this idealization. In an article comparing the two versions of The Homecoming, Enoch Brater describes this scene's cinematic set-up: "A medium shot of Max and his sons simultaneously lighting up cigars after lunch with Uncle Sam is held and extended; the frame lingers in our memory, the texture of a vivid family portrait captured in still photography" ("Pinter's" 447).

John Russell Brown finds Pinter's attention to the scene's stage business significant precisely because the family's actions are so uncharacteristic of this household.

The silent business with cigars and coffee cups takes little time to read and to comprehend, but in action on the stage it is an elaborate and strange piece of business. Joey is not the most

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<sup>1</sup> This same image is later modified in the play's last scene. Ruth maintains her position in Jessie's chair, but now Joey's head lays in her lap, while Max crawls towards her uttering: "I'm not an old man. . . . Kiss me" (82, ellipsis mine). Lenny merely stands watching.

usual attendant, nor cigars their usual pleasure. Each of the six cups of coffee has to be poured and handed, and must therefore occupy an appreciable amount of time, during which no word is spoken. This fantastic dumbshow of polite acceptance is followed by Max's smile, who shortly before the end of Act One had greeted Ruth as an intruding whore. (111)

Brown reminds us that this scene of congeniality, decorum and politeness, dotted with compliments--

MAX: I've got the feeling you're a first-rate cook.

RUTH: I'm not bad.

MAX: No, I've got the feeling you're a number one cook. Am I right, Teddy?

TEDDY: Yes, she's a very good cook. (45)

--contrasts starkly and ironically with the antagonistic, brutal family of the first act.

LENNY: Why don't you buy a dog? You're a dog cook. Honest. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs.

MAX: If you don't like it get out. . . .

LENNY: What did you say?

MAX: I said shove off out of it, that's what I said.

LENNY: You'll go before me, Dad, if you talk to me in that tone of voice.

MAX: Will I, you bitch? (11, ellipsis mine)

Yet, the apparent "normalcy" of the family in the opening of Act Two is only a temporary respite. Ruth's question about the fate of Max's business deal shatters the fragile peace. The international butchers become crooks; Max's cigar becomes lousy; his previously "ideal" family becomes a burden and an embarrassment.

My mother was bedridden, my brothers were all invalids. . . . A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slutbitch of a wife--don't talk to me about the pangs of childbirth--I've suffered the

pain, I've still got the pangs--when I give a little cough my back collapses--and here I've got a lazy idle bugger of a brother won't even get to work on time. (47, ellipsis mine)

In The Homecoming, then, Pinter not only challenges the audience's conceptions about the family through his disturbing ending, but he also italicizes, throughout the entire play, the inherent dualities of the family, which exists concurrently as a micro-community of contentment and love and as a site of violence and hatred.

Although many have argued and found fault with Pinter's accuracy in depicting this contemporary British family, The Homecoming is very much a product of a post-World War II British society that was in the process of redefining the roles, functions and relationships of the family through numerous social, legal and economic changes. In fact, Pinter's play reflects some of the changing family dynamics in contemporary Britain, specifically in terms of economic affluence, the increased power of women, and challenges to the family's framework. In The Pinter Problem Austin E. Quigley discusses the play's emphasis on economics. He persuasively argues that The Homecoming is about not only the relationships in this North London family but also the individual family member's economic participation in society. Quigley contends that, in part, the economic status the characters achieve in society informs the power relationships of the family. In

considering the economic aspect of the play from a different perspective, The Homecoming also reflects the growth of an emerging economy as the younger generation, represented by Lenny (a pimp), Ruth (a former model) and Teddy (a philosophy professor), manages to surpass economically the older one: Max, who is a retired butcher, and Sam, who is a professional driver. The characterization of Ruth also reflects the growing power of women in society and the family. Upon her arrival at the house, she sends her husband up to bed after acquiring from him the key to the household, and thereby suggesting her future ownership and control. Shortly thereafter, she diffuses Lenny's two misogynistic stories by simply offering him some water from her glass. By the play's end, she has not only managed to gain control over the household and its inhabitants, but she has also reclaimed her own economic independence from the men. Pinter's play offers a sexual challenge to the traditional framework of the family just as the British family itself was in the process of undergoing a transformation due to a number of causes, including the changing economic situation, the growing power of women, and the sexual leniency of society.

The Homecoming, though, is merely one in a number of contemporary plays which reflect the changing make-up of the British family in contemporary society, and it is precisely the prevalence of these works and their



depictions of the family that is at the heart of this study. However, before outlining the parameters of this discussion, it is important that we first explore in greater detail the economic affluence, governmental regulations, and social changes which occurred after World War II in order to understand better how these real world changes influenced and informed the theatrical depictions of the British family in contemporary plays, like Harold Pinter's The Homecoming.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dominant image of the twentieth-century family originated in the nineteenth-century as Victorian society developed an idealized portrait of the family and its members. Briefly, the family should be patriarchal, with its members living off the husband's income while the wife stayed at home, taking care of domestic concerns. In essence, the family supposedly possessed the same qualities found in Max's idealized anecdote above: it was a micro-community of smiling, contented individuals existing blissfully together. Even though this idealized portrait differed greatly from its actual, physical counterparts across the country, this nineteenth-century conception of the family was the dominant image up until the midway point of the century. After World War II, though, the validity

of this idealistic, rigid family structure with its pre-conditioned roles was to be repeatedly and spiritedly challenged.

Historical and sociological changes--particularly those precipitated by World War II--accentuated this changing view of the family. As men went off to war and women filled the vacated factory positions, children were relocated to the safety of the countryside away from the Nazi bombing raids (as children both Edward Bond and Harold Pinter were sent into the country). After the war, reaffirmation of the family unit became an important governmental and societal priority, for the family's return to its traditional structure was seen as integral to restoring the country's economical and psychological vitality. As Jonathan Dollimore explains:

The family [immediately after World War II] was seen as the indispensable unit for emotional stability, mature psychosexual development and responsible citizenship; it helped to ensure the survival of all that was best in a culture, and was a powerful mainstay against the corruptions of the modern world. (60)

While the family was viewed as a panacea to post-war recovery, the institution itself encountered structural alterations, directly caused by the government's attempt to resolidify the families that had been separated during the war.

The German bombing raids destroyed countless homes, leaving large numbers of families homeless. In 1945, the

newly elected Labour government, under the control of Prime Minister Clement Attlee, made home building a post-war priority, promising to build 240,000 new houses a year.<sup>2</sup> Winston Churchill's Tory government, elected in 1951, continued to focus on building dwellings, with a promise to build 300,000 a year.<sup>3</sup> While the governmental building programs succeeded in restoring a physical sense of home to the previously displaced families, they also disrupted the fabric of the British family. According to the British historian Arthur Marwick, these new housing estates converted "the extended family of earlier times into isolated nuclear units" (British 64-5) as families who formerly lived within a block of extended family members now found themselves miles away in newly built, suburban council estates.

At the same time that the contemporary family found itself breaking into smaller units, the country's economic recovery was contributing to the family's separation from its surrounding community. In the 1950s, Britain finally escaped from the crippling austerity and rationing of the previous two decades. Graham Crow, a British sociologist,

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<sup>2</sup> A figure that the Labour government was unable to maintain due to the scarcity of materials in the immediate years after the war.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Labour, the Conservatives, who found themselves in the midst of an economic recovery, surpassed this goal every year.

explains that after World War II

the modern domestic ideal of an affluent nuclear family living in a home of their own and enjoying the benefits of leisurely home life took shape, with emphasis placed on the privacy of the individual household rather than the wider community. (20)

The increasing affluence of the country played a fundamental part in the changing condition of the contemporary family.

Propelling a major portion of the economic recovery were the plethora of increasingly affordable consumer goods, including household appliances which made everyday housework less taxing. These labor-saving devices provided more leisure time in the household, but as Crow indicates, this free time was not spent socializing with the neighbors. Instead, much of those extra moments were spent watching television, which had now become an affordable necessity, especially after the live broadcast of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. Not surprisingly, the room which held the television set replaced the kitchen as the heart of the home. The television's importance to the contemporary household found comment in one of the most popular novels of the 1950s: Alan Sillitoe's Saturday Night, Sunday Morning (1958). At one point Arthur Seaton, the book's main character, reflects on both the presence of a television set in his living room and the general effect of the British economic recovery on his father.

[Arthur] was glad to see the TV standing in a corner of the living-room, a glossy panelled box looking, he thought, like something plundered from a space-ship. The old man was happy at last, anyway, and he deserved to be happy, after all the years before the war on the dole, five kids, and the big miserying that went with no money and no way of getting any. And now he had a sit-down job at the factory, all the Woodbines he could smoke, money for a pint if he wanted one, though he didn't as a rule drink, a holiday somewhere, a jaunt on his firm's trip to Blackpool, and a television-set to look into at home. (22)<sup>4</sup>

Sillitoe's passage depicts the same contentment heralded in Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's famous speech in July of 1957, which stated that

most of our people have never had it so good. Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms, and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime--nor indeed ever in the history of this country. (qtd. in Schenk 316)

However, the increasing reliance on these household accessories and the escalating number of families with cars began to place a drain on family economics. What were once before considered luxuries were now touted as staples of contemporary life. In order to maintain this new standard of living, some families found it an economic necessity to move away from the traditional one-income family.

In fact, the Victorian notion that women should only stay home and tend to children and domestic concerns had

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<sup>4</sup> The television also became an important stage device in contemporary family drama, such as in Edward Bond's Saved (1965), Peter Nichols' Born in the Gardens (1979) and Alan Ayckbourn's Season's Greetings (1980).

been challenged during both World Wars as women across the country filled in for the absent men. After each war, though, the returning employees, the businesses, and the government encouraged the temporary workers to return to their maternal and household duties. In each case, some women opted to remain in the work force, more so after World War II. This group was disinclined to forfeit their new-found freedom in order to return to the full-time status of domestic employee. Over the ensuing years the number of women joining the work force steadily increased for a variety of reasons, including to help finance the rising household budget and to offset the labor shortage of a booming economy. In doing so, these women adopted the dual obligation of being employees in the public sector while also maintaining their status as mothers and wives in the private sector.<sup>5</sup>

In the succeeding decades after 1945, significant modifications occurred to women's familial and societal status. They were assisted not only by the country's prosperity and the job market's increasing reliance on them to fill new positions, but also by the legal decisions which freed them "from social controls going back to Victorian times" (Marwick British 18). One indication of

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter One for further discussion of the dual responsibilities that women faced as employees and mothers at the same time.

the changing attitude in British society occurred during the failed prosecution of Penguin Books, publisher of D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover, for violating the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. Although the ruling did not directly have an impact on the place of women within the family, it was significant in that the court rejected one of the central tenets of Prosecutor Mervyn Griffith-Jones's argument. Part of his case hinged on the answer being "yes" to the following question: "Is [Lady Chatterley's Lover] a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?" (qtd. in Dollimore 53).

The jury's decision was one in a number of familial, societal and governmental developments in the 1960s that empowered women. A flood of Parliamentary acts conferred more freedom to women in connection with their own bodies and lives and in relation to their families and society. In 1967 the National Health Service (Family Planning) Act commissioned the National Health Service to provide women with contraceptive protection and advice on birth control (the pill had been available throughout the 1960s). In the same year the Abortion Act made abortion legal and even specified the situations in which the National Health Service would pay for the procedure. In 1970 two acts leveled the economic disparity between the sexes. The Matrimonial Property Act stated that in a divorce a wife was entitled to receive half of the household, whether or

not she was an economic contributor to the home, while the Equal Pay Act stated that women performing the same job as men should be compensated at the same rate. At the same time that women were gaining these victories another previously marginalized group received legal recognition. In 1967, the government passed the Sexual Offences Act, which finally recognized, ten years after the recommendation of the Wolfenden report, the legality of homosexual relations between two consenting male adults (over 21) in private (lesbianism had never been illegal). This ruling, like the others, was to have a major impact on the sexual dynamics of the family.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the previously tightly-knit, patriarchal family found itself destabilized by these numerous economic, legal, and sexual decisions, prompting, not surprisingly, variations on the traditional, heterosexual structure, including families composed of divorced parents, single parents, step-parents, communal parents and also homosexual and lesbian partnerships.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the historical, legal, economical, and sociological changes in Britain after the end of World War II, see, among others, Calvocoressi; Davies and Saunders 13-50; R. Fletcher; Harris 39-58; Johnson 1-18; Lane; Marwick British; Nissel 95-119; Schenk 300-19; Segal 68-96; Stevenson 81-110; and Thane 183-208.



Clearly, the post-World War II family was and continues to be in a state of transition from its Victorian roots. The British family, though, is not the only institution that was affected by the years after World War II. The British theatre in the mid- to late 1950s also found itself in the process of undergoing innovative, topical renovations. Prior to the premiere of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger (1956), the "first" contemporary play, the London theatre had grown stagnant over the previous two decades with its reliance on revivals of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and William Shakespeare; American musicals; and predictable comedies and dramas set in the living rooms of upper-class country homes. In addition to being the voice of a new generation of "angry" writers, Osborne was also the first of a number of emerging contemporary playwrights to translate the changing structure of the British family and its relationships to the stage. After Look Back in Anger, contemporary playwrights, such as Pinter, Shelagh Delaney, Joe Orton, Alan Ayckbourn, Caryl Churchill, Stephen Poliakoff, and Sarah Daniels, continued to return to the subject matter of the family. These writers found and continue to find a wealth of theatrical material in the changing structure of the contemporary British family; their plays explore issues of gender, economics, sexuality and power that challenge the familial structure and its

relationships.

These contemporary playwrights, though, were not the first to challenge and question the nature of family in the modern era. These same issues of power relationships (economic, patriarchal, matriarchal), the changing status of women, sexuality (including incest and adultery), and the disruption of the traditional family structure are also addressed in the works of modern playwrights, like George Bernard Shaw's Candida (1895), Major Barbara (1905) and Heartbreak House (1920); Arthur Wing Pinero's Mid-Channel (1909); and Noel Coward's The Vortex (1924) and Design for Living (1933). And these works were also influential to the contemporary playwrights as they revised and updated the issues and theatrical techniques of their predecessors.

Despite the numerous critical studies exploring post-1956 drama--which has received the appellation from critics, playwrights and scholars as the second Renaissance of British drama--no definitive texts exist discussing the theatrical depiction of the contemporary British family during this important time of change. The work of British dramatists on the family is equally as powerful, timely and insightful as that of their better known counterparts in the United States, including Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Wendy Wasserstein, Marsha Norman and August Wilson. While twentieth-century American theatre is synonymous with

family drama, the same deserved recognition has not been shown to contemporary British family plays. This dissertation, in part, is written to rectify the disparity between the two groups.

Although a modicum of articles and chapters do discuss the presence of the family in contemporary British drama, these works are limited in scope. Rather than considering the larger spectrum of the British family on the contemporary stage, these studies concentrate on the family's relevance to specific playwrights: Joe Orton, Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill, and Harold Pinter, whose plays (not surprisingly) have received the widest critical considerations in this regard.<sup>7</sup> Studies extending beyond the canon of a single playwright are less numerous. Albert Wertheim has written on the Modern British "homecoming play," while Gabriele Griffin has focussed on the depiction of the mother in drama from 1890 through 1980. Yet, as informative and compelling as these articles are, they extend beyond the contemporary British stage. The only book-length, comprehensive study of the British family is Michelene Wandor's Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the

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<sup>7</sup> For Joe Orton, see Lahr Prick. For Tom Stoppard, see Corballis "Children" 261-79. For Caryl Churchill, see Swanson 49-66; and Reinelt 49-56. For Harold Pinter, see Burkman "Family Voices" 164-74; Diamond Pinter's 136-58; Gale "Harold Pinter's" 146-65; Nelson 145-63; Quigley Pinter 173-225; Storch 703-12; and Taylor "Pinter's Game" 57-65.

Family in Post-war British Drama. Wandor's discussion extends from 1956 to the early 1980s, using 1968, the year the Lord Chamberlain's authority over the theatres ended, as a point of transition. Her book contrasts the depiction of the family between the pre- and post-1968 plays as she considers, among other devices, the domestic setting, the presentation of the mother, and sexual politics.

My study of the family in contemporary British drama takes a different approach from Wandor's. Instead of relying on a strict chronological comparison, I have chosen to focus on four issues which question, challenge, and, in some cases, redefine the traditional concept of the family: maternity, incest, adultery, and alternative households. In order to discuss these four concerns, this study will rely on two supporting frameworks: socio-historical considerations of the contemporary (post-1945) era and various theatrical treatments of familial themes. The former will provide the necessary social and historical background informing the changing shape of the theatrical family, while the latter will introduce the theatrical traditions that the contemporary playwrights are continuing and, in most cases, revising. The study, as a whole, will focus on the 35-year time period between 1956, the premiere of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, and 1990, when (among others) Sarah Daniels' Beside Herself premiered. The dissertation will combine canonical works of post-1956

British drama (Joe Orton's What the Butler Saw (1969), Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine (1979)) with lesser-known plays by canonical and non-canonical writers (David Storey's Mother's Day (1976), Charlotte Keatley's My Mother Said I Never Should (1989)).

The first chapter addresses the impact of economics on the contemporary woman and mother in Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey (1958), Caryl Churchill's Owners (1972) and Top Girls (1982), and Charlotte Keatley's My Mother Said I Never Should. Whereas Delaney focuses on the economic hardships of and strained relationship between a lower class, financially strapped mother and her pregnant, unwed daughter, Churchill and Delaney consider the financial success of women in the work place and its effect on motherhood. In essence, all three playwrights ask: What effect does the surrounding economic environment have on a woman's ability to be a mother? Churchill and Keatley, who are writing after the numerous gender victories of the late 1960s and early 1970s, focus even more specifically on the question: What effect does the emerging importance of women in the work place have on the traditionally defined, domestic roles of women as mothers and homemakers?

Chapter Two considers the consequences of the forbidden act of incest, which has the potency to destroy a family. The four plays discussed are Joe Orton's What the Butler Saw, David Storey's Mother's Day, Stephen

Poliakoff's Hitting Town (1975) and Sarah Daniels' Beside Herself. Orton's and Storey's plays, both farces, create an inverted world which condones incest, positing that the prohibited relationship is a restorative agent within the family. Poliakoff and Daniels see political consequences in the forbidden relationship. Poliakoff creates an environment so deadened by the urban sprawl that even the transgressive act of incest has no effect on the surrounding violence and oppressiveness, while Daniels uses a feminist polemic in order to condemn both incest and the patriarchy, which refuses to acknowledge incest's prevalence and long-term emotional and psychological destructiveness.

The same question of family boundaries and transgressive actions is present in the third chapter, which considers the disruptive effects of adultery through four different perspectives: Alan Ayckbourn's The Norman Conquests (1974), Harold Pinter's Betrayal (1979), Peter Nichols' Passion Play (1981), and Tom Stoppard's The Real Thing (1982). While Ayckbourn humorously converts the act into a husband's attempt to define his masculinity to his wife, Pinter focuses on the levels of knowledge and power inherent in the triangular relationship between husband, wife, and lover. Nichols, meanwhile, considers the absurd and tragic characteristics of adultery. Stoppard, though, explores the theatrical variations of the ubiquitous

discovery scene, while also exploring a couple's attempt to sustain a successful marriage in the face of one of the spouse's infidelity. Not only do these plays explore the effect of adultery on marriage, but they also innovatively rejuvenate a predictable genre through their theatrical innovations of multiple perspectives, reverse narratives, alter-egos and theatrical intertextuality.

Whereas the first three chapters examine specific familial relationships (parent-child, brother-sister, husband-wife), Chapter Four contemplates three plays which challenge the framework of the family as a whole. In essence, John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane (1964) and Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine explore the formation of alternative families.

Osborne's play contests the traditional structure through the presence of a lodger, but ultimately the household returns to the traditional framework of the heterosexual couple. Orton's play, on the other hand, dismisses the traditional family structure, replacing it with a new family based on bisexuality. Likewise, in Churchill's Cloud Nine the family loses its rigid structure as it breaks down into "unconventional" family pairings: single parent and homosexual households as well as a household composed of a lesbian, homosexual, and bisexual.

Ultimately, Churchill's play depicts a family which has moved away from the traditional framework but now finds

itself in a transitional phase as its members attempt to redefine the family to fit the needs of contemporary society.

As Churchill's Cloud Nine and the entire introduction suggests, the contemporary family has been and still is in a transitional process as it redefines itself from its previous Victorian conceptions. This study then provides us with an opportunity to witness not only the actual British family in its various configurations over the last fifty years, but the changing theatrical depiction of the contemporary British family as well.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Stigma of Maternity

JO: I don't want to be a mother.  
--Shelagh Delaney, A Taste of Honey

ROSIE: I'm never having children.  
--Charlotte Keatley, My Mother Said  
I Never Should

In the first act of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, Alison explains to Cliff her reluctance to reveal her pregnant condition to her husband, the infamous Jimmy Porter.

Can't you see? He'll suspect my motives at once. . . . Tonight it might be all right--we'd make love. But later, we'd both lie awake, watching for the lights to come through that little window, and dreading it. In the morning, he'd feel hoaxed, as if I were trying to kill him in the worst way of all. He'd watch me growing bigger every day, and I wouldn't dare to look at him. (28)

Significantly, Alison concentrates not on the difficulties and anxieties of being a first-time mother, but rather on how her husband will receive the news. In anticipating Jimmy's reaction, Alison adopts his perspective in regards to her eventually prominent, expectant form. Osborne's play, then, is concerned not so much with the female condition of maternity as it is with the patriarchal reaction to it, and Jimmy's response becomes the anticipated moment of dramatic conflict. His reaction

occurs in Act Two's climax when Helena discloses Alison's condition to Jimmy. He responds in a tirade--"I don't care if she's going to have a baby. I don't care if it has two heads!" (90)--which provokes a slap from Helena and then an unexpected sexual embrace between the two antagonists.

Alison's pregnancy, however, is of no substantial threat to the Porter's marriage because Osborne conveniently has her miscarry between the second and third acts. Her condition is merely a pseudo-pregnancy created by the male playwright as a plot contrivance to provide dramatic tension and develop further the male protagonist's character. In the final analysis, Alison's pregnancy reflects more on Jimmy Porter's patriarchal view and John Osborne's manipulative playwrighting technique than it does on Alison herself and the questions surrounding maternity.

Look Back in Anger's ultimate dismissal of Alison's pregnancy is striking when compared with another important play of the late-1950s, Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey, which premiered two years after Osborne's play. Delaney's play broaches maternity and motherhood from an astute and penetrating female perspective. Rather than viewing pregnancy as merely a convenient plot device, as some of her predecessors and contemporaries have done, Delaney establishes maternity as the play's central focus by examining the strained relationship between a mother and daughter and the daughter's indifference to her own

pregnancy. According to Michelene Wandor, A Taste of Honey broke the previously "unspoken taboo on theatrical content" in its depiction of motherhood (Look 40), and it cleared the way for other female playwrights to pursue the same subject matter. In essence, pregnancy and maternity moved from manipulative plot devices to integral and central issues in the plays of the contemporary theatre's emerging female writers.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, motherhood was becoming a major concern outside of the theatre, and a brief survey of the changing images of women and mothers after World War II will help illuminate the issues and questions raised by A Taste of Honey and its successors. In the years following World War II, the British government and media stressed through scientific studies, newsreels, advertisements, and entertainment programs that the most natural and beneficial peacetime duty for a woman was not to be an "economic force," which she had performed so well during the war, but instead to be a "maternal force" in the home. In Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal, Ann Dally explains the push behind the "marketing" of motherhood:

It was expensive for the government to run the day care centres that had been set up during the war to encourage mothers to work, so there were strong political pressures to save money and

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on the theatrical presentation of maternity and motherhood, see Garner 215-24, Griffin 25-40; and Wandor Look.

reduce unemployment by pushing women back into the home and finding moral justification for so doing. (96)

One such moral justification was contained in a World Health Organization report, which stated that children required the "experience [of] a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with its mother" (qtd. in Dally 98).<sup>2</sup> Hence, this scientific, and therefore "legitimate," study bolstered the perspective that the ideal, natural and essential role for women was to be a mother and only a mother, twenty-four hours a day.

The representative characteristics of the idealized mother in Britain were, and still are, the same as in the United States: she should be loving, nurturing, caring, compassionate, self-sacrificing and sensitive to the needs and wants of her child(ren), while living in an economically secure, one income family (with the salary earned by the husband). Dally explains the recent etymological basis of this idealization:

The word 'mother' is one of the oldest in the language. But the word 'motherhood' is relatively new. . . . Only in the Victorian era did the word emerge as a concept rather than a mere statement of fact. . . . [In] the Victorian era, the idealization of the mother strengthened the idealization of the wife and woman. (17)

Whether an "ideal mother" ever really existed is open to

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<sup>2</sup> The report was written by John Bowlby, who became a recognized expert on family and the role of the mother. He later published the influential Child Care and the Growth of Love (1953).

debate and beyond the scope of this study, but these characteristics were heavily promoted and adopted as the measuring stick against which all women were appraised. (Even today, with the additional burden of two income families, women, on both sides of the Atlantic, are still required to possess these maternal characteristics while also maintaining a prominent level of successful professionalism.)

Even though the champions of domesticity were immensely successful in instilling the idealization of motherhood into contemporary society and culture, their rhetoric was not as fortunate in dissuading married women from maintaining their place in the work force. Statistics indicate that the presence of married women in paid work steadily rose from 10 per cent in 1931 to 21 per cent in 1951, 32 per cent in 1961 and 47 per cent in 1972 (E. Wilson, cited in Sinfield Literature 206). Why did the maternal campaign prove unsuccessful? In the 1950s and 1960s, women began returning to the work force precisely for the same reason that they were forced out in the previous decade: economics. Immediately after World War II, the government anticipated that the restoration of the "housewife" to the household would stimulate the fiscal recovery of Britain:

[W]omen do most of the shopping and the better a woman looks after her husband the more he is likely to earn, and the more time she has free

the more likely it is that she will pass this free time in spending the money that she encourages her husband to earn. (Dally 96-7)<sup>3</sup>

Through the purchases of "necessary" technological time savers, some household budgets became strapped. Over the subsequent years, a steadily increasing number of women, while still maintaining the role of mother, also became essential secondary earners of needed household revenue. In general, women once again returned to the male dominated work place just as they did during both wars. However, their renewed presence was now dictated by the need of their own family, instead of the need of their country.

Emerging concurrently was a small contingency of women who did not believe that their only fulfillment from and requirement of life was simply to be a mother. Sociologist M. Plaza addresses this limitation in her study of maternity: "The mama is a person who is defined by the services she gives to a child; her existence has no meaning except in relation to a child whom she must carry, bring up, attend to, serve, calm down" (qtd. in Kaplan 5). If they were full-time mothers, they felt that their talent would go unappreciated and undeveloped. For these women, the headway made in extrafamilial responsibilities was not worth sacrificing, so they balanced the two roles of mother

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<sup>3</sup>For a fascinating chapter on how United States' advertising companies played a major role in fostering this sentiment, see Friedan 206-32.

and career woman.

It is precisely these two disparate post-World War II images of women as maternal and commercial icons which informs the four plays discussed in this chapter: Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey, Caryl Churchill's Owners and Top Girls, and Charlotte Keatley's My Mother Said I Never Should. A Taste of Honey is an important opening text in this discussion because Delaney presents two lower-class, marginalized, disinterested maternal figures, Helen and Jo, whose familial and economic problems--indeed, their very existence--are unaffected by the rapidly changing economic and social progresses in the late 1950s. Delaney's play also raises interesting questions about the nature of gender roles in relation to maternity. Are maternal instincts necessarily a feminine trait? If not, can maternal feelings exist in men? By contrast, Churchill's and Keatley's texts prove useful since they were written after the start of the women's liberation movement. Both playwrights examine the effect the patriarchal work world has on career-oriented women as well as the dilemma women face in deciding between being a mother or a potential financial success in business. Is it possible, ultimately, for women to be successful in balancing their obligations in the business world as well as at home?

**A Taste of Honey: "Have I ever laid claims to being a proper mother?"**

One evening seventeen-year-old Shelagh Delaney went to the theatre to see a dissatisfying touring production of Terence Rattigan's play Variation on a Theme (1958). This purveyor of odd jobs, including shop assistant, milk depot clerk, and cinema usherette, boldly decided that she could write a much better play and did, producing A Taste of Honey.<sup>4</sup> She submitted it to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, which accepted it, made alterations, and then premiered the work on May 27, 1958 at the Theatre Royal in Stratford, East London.<sup>5</sup> It later transferred to the West End and Broadway.<sup>6</sup>

Despite some negative reviews--Alan Brien of The Spectator called it "a boozed, exaggerated, late-night

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<sup>4</sup> Delaney defined her perspective of the theatre as follows: "I see the theatre as a place where you should go not only to be entertained but where the audience has contact with *real* people, people who are *alive*" (qtd. in Leeming xx).

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion of the emendations and additions made by Littlewood to Delaney's original draft, see J. R. Taylor Anger 111-21.

<sup>6</sup> The play was such a hot property that at one point Hollywood was interested in financing the film adaptation if Audrey Hepburn committed to play the lead role of Jo. Like many projects in Hollywood, it did not come to fruition. The film was finally made in 1961 in England, and Shelagh Delaney won the British Film Academy Award for screenplay, which she shared with the director and co-writer, Tony Richardson.



anecdote of a play" (qtd. in Lloyd Evans 66)--the play became enormously popular, as reviewers heralded the meteoric rise of an exciting new playwright.<sup>7</sup> The anonymous reviewer from The Times was especially impressed by two facets of the play: Delaney's ability to make Geof, Jo's homosexual live-in friend, a compassionate "Big Sister" and her "quite remarkable command of turning the language of the streets into living stage dialogue" (3). Lindsay Anderson, writing for The Encore Reader, remarked that the play

is a real escape from the middlebrow, middle-class vacuum of the West End. . . . In fact, so truthful is Miss Delaney, so buoyant in spirit, and so keenly alive to what is preposterous, vulgar and ruthless in human beings (as well as to what is generous, creative and warm), that she makes us forget about judging. We simply respond, as to the experience itself. (78-9)

Although the play was well received and has since been revived many times, its presence in critical dialogues has languished since the mid-1960s. Edward Esche, in a recent critical discussion of Delaney's play, hazards a suggestion as to why A Taste of Honey has been absent from scholarly consideration. According to him, academics have deemed the play "fodder worthy only of the secondary-school syllabus . . . because, after all, it was written by a 'young person'

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<sup>7</sup> After A Taste of Honey, Shelagh Delaney wrote one more main stage play, The Lion in Love (1963). It failed financially and critically. Since then, she has written numerous screenplays and plays for television and radio.

and continually reveals the limitations of the 'cult of youth'" (68). Esche's article proffers an intriguing semiotic reading of the play, and in his conclusion he challenges more scholars to return to this neglected seminal work. Only time will tell whether he has successfully reintroduced Delaney's play back into academic discussion.

The play's story focuses on the relationship between Jo, a teenager, and her mother Helen, "a semi-whore." As the play opens, they have moved into a dirty, scruffy Manchester flat, sporting a view of the gas-works and slaughterhouse. Peter, a former private in the war, who has a predilection for older women, locates Helen in her new lodging and proposes marriage. Helen accepts, leaving Jo alone. Jo becomes involved with a black sailor, who promises to marry her upon his return from a six-month tour of duty. He, of course, never returns, leaving Jo pregnant. In the second act, Jo, now visibly pregnant, finds a compassionate protector in Geof, a homosexual art student, who is more concerned about the coming child than Jo is. Helen, kicked out by Peter, returns to take care of her daughter and, in turn, ousts Geof. A Taste of Honey ends ambiguously as Helen exits in search of a drink upon discovering that the father of her grandchild is black.

The opening scene establishes that Jo and Helen communicate through wisecracks, insults, whining, verbal

barbs, and dismissive comments. At times, the two women act more like squabbling sisters than mother and daughter.

HELEN: Pass me that bottle--it's in the carrier.

JO: Why should I run around after you? (*Takes whisky bottle from bag.*)

HELEN: Children owe their parents these little attentions.

JO: I don't owe you a thing.

HELEN: Except respect, and I don't seem to get any of that.

JO: Drink, drink, drink, that's all you're fit for. You make me sick. (7-8)

Clearly, their dialogue establishes the strained relationship and the battle lines drawn between the two women. The biological connection of mother and daughter does not entail any familial obligation of deference on Jo's part or any responsibility for being an influential role model on Helen's part. Equally at work in this opening scene, although not present in the above quote, is Delaney's use of a music hall device, through which Jo and Helen comment on each other to the audience. Jo says: "I'm cold and my shoes let water . . . what a place . . . and we're supposed to be living off her immoral earnings" (7), while Helen remarks: "Wouldn't she get on your nerves?" (9). Despite this lack of respect and complete frustration with one another, they still stay together, partly because of their biological and socially defined bond as mother and daughter, and partly because, for all the misery they cause one another, they have no one else on whom to depend. The entire family unit, after all, is comprised of just the two

of them. When Helen does leave Jo to go off with one of her male companions, it is only a temporary separation, for she always returns.

Despite the animosity that Jo feels towards Helen, she is doomed to emulate her mother's footsteps through a kind of generational recycling. As Gabriele Griffin notes: "Women repeat their mother's history" (34), or as Helen tells her daughter: "[W]e all end up [the] same way sooner or later" (13). Griffin argues that even though women, over the years, have socially, economically and sexually made progressive strides inside and outside the home, this maternity play depicts no intrinsic variation between the female characters from generation to generation. Instead, these characters are trapped in a repetitive cycle of reliving their mothers' experiences because even though "there are a certain number of choices open to women, women do not know how to choose or how to put the desire to break out of traditional patterns into action" (Griffin 34). Helen and Jo are trapped in their lower-class, domestic roles, and neither can find the energy to sustain a prolonged escape from these circumstances.

Delaney makes this point clear in the similarities between mother and daughter. Both women begin their "professional" careers in bars. Helen was a singer, while Jo is a barmaid. Both women instigate their first love affair because of the lack of affection to be found at

home. Originally married to a Puritan who viewed the marriage bed as only a place for a good night's rest, Helen initiated a romantic encounter one afternoon with the village idiot, with whom she believed she was in love for five minutes. Jo, likewise, found her mother lacking in any demonstration of affection. She tells Geof: "You know I used to try and hold my mother's hands, but she always used to pull them away from me. So silly really. She had so much love for everyone else, but none for me" (71-2). In response, Jo finds romance with a black sailor. From these sexual encounters (both of which were, incidentally, their first), Helen and Jo become pregnant and soon thereafter find themselves navigating the difficult path of maternity while living in a reduced economic situation. (Helen was kicked out by her husband, while Jo is left alone when Helen marries Peter.)

Maternity is, obviously, not a responsibility that Helen and Jo have actively pursued. Griffin aptly describes their situation as a case of "'accidental mothering', mothering by default rather than by design" (33). Helen never grows into the role of the nurturing and protective mother after her child is born. In fact, since she did not originally want Jo, she feels no obligation towards her.

JO: What day was I born on?

HELEN: I don't know.

JO: You should remember such an important event.

HELEN: I've always done my best to forget that.  
(28)

In falling into the same pattern as her mother, Jo also has no interest in her baby and has apathetically done no planning for its arrival. For her, breast feeding is certainly out of the question. She tells Geof: "I'm not having a little animal nibbling away at me, it's cannibalistic. . . . I hate motherhood" (56).

Delaney's play, in other words, works against the maternity campaigns of the 1950s, with their emphasis on the natural and nurturing bond between mothers and their children. Helen's and Jo's distaste and lack of interest in their maternal obligations runs counter to not only these idealized depictions of motherhood which proliferated during post-World War II culture, but also the sentimentalized conceptions about mother/daughter relations. "Failed" maternal instincts, though, are not just limited to Helen and Jo. The neglect and difficulty of motherhood is also present in the struggling, lower-class world surrounding their Manchester flat.

JO: This place stinks. . . . (*Children are heard singing in the street.*) . . . and look at those filthy children.

GEOF: It's not their fault.

JO: It's their parents' fault. There's a little boy over there and his hair, honestly, it's walking away. And his ears. Oh! He's a real mess! He never goes to school. He just sits on that front doorstep all day. I think he's a bit deficient. (54)

Delaney's play is not just the voice of "youth," as its

detractors argue, but it is also a realistic depiction of the austere social and economic effects maternity has on the less socially-enfranchised. This is exactly how Helene Keyssar interprets the play.

The importance of A Taste of Honey lies in the degree to which the audience feels the weight of Helen's last question: 'what would you do?' This can be, as it was for Littlewood, a political act that shifts responsibility from the stage to the audience. (Feminist 42)

Helen's question, "What would you do," does not just pertain to her reaction to her forthcoming biracial grandchild. It specifically encompasses all of the play's maternal questions and situations. In effect, she asks: "If your husband were like mine, what would you have done? If you were an unmarried mother with no professional skills, would you not have looked to men for financial help? If you were Jo, would you have acted any differently?" However, even more directly, Helen's question addresses the economic and social burdens which surround the play's characters.

The age of prosperity, as the 1950s were so deemed by the politicians, is nowhere to be found in this Manchester neighborhood. These characters' situation contradicts Prime Minister Harold MacMillan's famous speech which asserted that the British citizens in the 1950s "had never had it so good." Instead, A Taste of Honey debunks and explodes this notion in its depiction of a broken,

squabbling, zero-income family completely alien to the middle-class British family of the 1950s, which had begun to immerse itself in the wonders of time saving labor devices, created to help "Mother" with the housework. Delaney fervently attacks the economic bankruptcy of the single mother in a world that idealizes her status as a maternal figure, but provides no form of support for her condition and position. Helen has to provide for herself and her daughter with no recognizable, marketable skill in the legitimate work place. She has to rely on the men she picks up to pay her rent and provide her food. For Helen, her own economic position and interests come before her child's well-being. As Helen tells Jo, "When I find somewhere for us to live I have to consider something far more important than your feelings . . . the rent. It's all I can afford" (7). Delaney's play suggests that at this economic level it is impossible to approach any of society's expectations of an ideal mother. In fact, the oppressive and inescapable economic situation prohibits the maturation of any "ideal" characteristics.

This same perspective appears seven years later in Edward Bond's Saved (1965). Pam, a poor South London, unemployed mother, has even less interest in her child than Jo and Helen. In two horrifying scenes, Bond depicts not only maternal but also familial and societal apathy towards children. In the first scene, Pam and her family sit in



the living room watching television while her baby screams and chokes in the next room. In response, Pam turns up the television, Len, her ex-boyfriend (who actually displays the greatest amount of concern for the child) closes the door, but no one rises to quiet and care for the child. Later, Pam leaves her baby with its father Fred in the park. While she is gone Fred and his friends proceed to hit, spit, stone and throw lit matches on the child. When Pam returns for the child, she does not even notice the brutality that has transpired. Bond's play portrays a class of people beaten down so much by society that they are not only apathetic to the cries of a defenseless child, but they also view the killing of a child as a bit of a lark.

MIKE (*quietly*). Reckon it's all right?  
 COLIN (*quietly*). No one around.  
 PETE (*quietly*). They don't know it's us.  
 MIKE (*quietly*). She left it.  
 BARRY. It's done now.  
 PETE (*quietly*). Yer can do what yer like.  
 BARRY. Might as well enjoy ourselves.  
 PETE (*quietly*). Yer don't get a chance like this  
           everyday.  
 FRED *throws the first stone.* (79)

Ultimately, both Delaney and Bond present an unsentimentalized look at the difficult circumstances of motherhood for women without money. It is not a condition of pride, responsibility, duty and love, as the patriarchal institutions insinuate, but instead a trapped state of drudgery, darkness and oppressiveness.

Although the play does not provide a definitive answer to Helen's question: "What would you do?", it does raise an alternative question about maternity. Since Helen and Jo lack the "required" nurturing characteristics of motherhood, do these characteristics exist in any of the play's other characters? A Taste of Honey suggests that maternal instincts are not strictly a feminine trait and a male can possess nurturing characteristics. Lib Taylor remarks:

Delaney is questioning two deeply rooted conceptions; that motherhood automatically denotes fulfillment for a woman and that it remains the exclusive province of the female. She represents the maternal state as burdensome and undesirable for the women, whilst Geof, the male, demonstrates the greatest sense of care and takes on the surrogate mother role. (18-9)

A Taste of Honey crosses the expected gender roles of femininity and masculinity in the characterizations of Jo and Geof. Jo becomes a passive bystander in the upkeep of the flat, while Geof becomes an active household presence. Geof is constantly in the process of performing "feminine work" (i.e. household chores). He straightens up the flat, picks up after Jo, washes and cleans, cooks, shops, and makes baby clothes. He prepares for the arrival of the baby while mothering Jo, providing her with some of the attention and nurturing that she requires. Delaney's play is groundbreaking in its presentation of a male character who possesses maternal instincts and provides a better

nurturing environment for the child than its mother or grandmother is willing to do.

At the same time, for all the apparent originality in Delaney's characterization of Geof, the play does not maintain its transgressive presentation of gender roles. Undercutting Geof's "ideal" maternal success is his homosexuality, which is consistently italicized by the characters. Jo calls him her "big sister" and taunts: "You'd make somebody a wonderful wife" (54, 55). She also questions him about his homosexuality: "I want to know what you do. I want to know why you do it" (48). Helen and Peter address him with the following epithets: "Lana," "Mary," "Cuddles," "pansified little freak," and "little fruitcake parcel" (65-8). The characters' emphasis on his "unnatural" and marginalized sexuality suggests Geof's "ideal" maternal instincts as being an anomaly and improper. His motherly deeds are continually castigated and snickered at until Helen casts him out of the play. Even though the play is filled with marginalized characters--as Michelene Wandor notes, "single mother and part-time whore, illegitimate teenage mother, gay white man, black sailor boy" (Look 42)--a hierarchy still exists amidst them, and Geof is at the lowest rung precisely because of his sexuality, which the characters mock and society defines as immoral and illegal. For these reasons, he is ultimately deemed expendable.

In staging Geof's exclusion, then, Delaney's play, for all of its innovative depictions of non-ideal mothers, fails to sustain its transgressive staging of masculine gender roles, for it ultimately endorses the patriarchal and societal perspective that maternity is an exclusively feminine role. However, Delaney's final rendering of the family still subverts society's expectations of how a family should be composed. Both women re-establish a solely female household, independent, temporarily, from the financial, physical and mental support of the opposite sex. A Taste of Honey, in essence, has come full circle, re-installing the female world that began the play.

Or has it? This would certainly be the case if the production ended with Helen's departure from the flat for a drink. However, the final moments of the play are Jo's, as she sings the nursery rhyme, "As I was going up Pippin Hill." Her action is striking for two reasons. First, it once again reinforces the generational recycling between mother and daughter. Helen reveals: "I was putting my Christmas pudding up on a shelf when you started on me. There I was standing on a chair singing away merry as the day is long . . . " (84). Jo begins to sing just as the labor pains begin to engulf her too. Second, and even more noteworthy, the song is a nursery rhyme which Geof sang to her the first night he moved into the flat. In singing the song Jo reveals that Geof's influence has not been

completely nullified by his removal. Whether his influence will be maintained and extend into her maternal dealings with the child is uncertain, but undoubtedly, the solitary female relationship between mother and daughter which began the play is no longer the same as it was at play's end. Geof has made an impact on Jo, and the possibility that she now understands the importance of sharing and self-sacrifice is suggested in the unselfish last lines of the nursery rhyme and the play: "If I had half a crown a day, / I'd gladly spend it on you" (87). Even though Jo's youthfulness and inexperience are stressed by her recitation of the nursery rhyme, her final words indicate an awareness of the responsibility involved in being a mother. No longer can she or will she be simply looking out for herself. Now she will have to look to the needs of her child.

#### **Working Girls: Owners and Top Girls**

Whereas Delaney focussed on two economically marginal women in A Taste of Honey, Caryl Churchill in Owners and Top Girls introduced British audiences to two powerful, domineering, successful business women, while, at the same time, contrasting them with two mothers experiencing social and economic difficulties similar to those of Helen and Jo. It was in 1959, the year that Delaney's play transferred to

Wyndham's Theatre in the West End, that Caryl Churchill, as a student at Oxford University, made her first submission to the National Union of Students/Sunday Times Student Drama Festival. After graduation she married and then settled into raising her three sons, while continuing to write plays for radio and television.<sup>8</sup> Churchill's break came in 1972 with her first main stage production. Churchill explained to Catherine Itzin the impetus behind writing Owners.

I wrote it in three days. I'd just come out of [the] hospital after a particularly gruesome late miscarriage. Still quite groggy and my arm ached because they'd given me an injection that didn't work. Into it went for the first time a lot of things that had been building up in me over a long time, political attitudes as well as personal ones. (282)<sup>9</sup>

The play was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in

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<sup>8</sup> Churchill told Judith Thurman that she wrote radio plays "partly because I began having children, and partly because there was a better market for them. It was very different, in the early sixties. There wasn't anywhere near the number of fringe and lunchtime theaters, and the radio was an accessible way of having your plays done" (54). She later admitted to Laurie Stone that radio and television plays were more convenient with her hectic family life because "my attention span was short" in raising three boys (80).

<sup>9</sup> In an interview with John Hall of The Guardian Caryl Churchill also explained why she chose the then current state of England's real estate market as subject matter for the play. "We accept as part of the pattern of everyday life the fact that old houses are bought up by certain people and developed. . . . [I]t becomes more a question of whether you think of people . . . [being] as important as yourself, with feelings, or as objects to be dealt with" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 22).

December of 1972, and it received strong accolades. Martin Esslin, writing for Plays and Players, professed:

Caryl Churchill offers as bitter a critique of present-day Britain as Osborne ever did, but in a far more telling and convincing manner because she is able to express it through a strong story involving powerful and life like characters. (41)

Robert Brustein was also impressed with Churchill's playwrighting ability: "[Owners] brings a genuine human voice into a theatre which has lately been suffering not a little from stridency and polemicism" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 21). The theatrical power and relevance of Churchill's first main stage play has not faded. One month after the March 1987 premiere of Churchill's Serious Money, a rhymed couplet glance at the London Stock Exchange, the Young Vic revived Owners. John Vidal, The Guardian's reviewer, remarked that in 1972 Marion was "a far more threatening figure because she represented a potential in women." Now, in the 1980's "she seems as normal as the woman next door" (414).

Owners centers on the "normal" Marion, a highly motivated business woman. She is married to Clegg, a butcher, who finds himself in the discomfiting position of depending on his wife for economic support. As part of a business deal, Marion buys a home with sitting tenants, Lisa and Alec, both old friends of Marion and Clegg (Alec and Marion had been lovers). Marion enlists her assistant and current lover Worsely, who struggles haplessly to

commit suicide throughout the play, to bribe and then force the reluctant family out of their flat. In a fit of weakness and despair upon discovering Marion with Alec, Lisa offers Marion her child, whom the real estate maverick hungrily accepts. The remainder of the play relates Lisa's attempts to regain her child, Clegg's plans to kill Marion and Alec, and Marion's attempts to rekindle her relationship with Alec, all concluding in a fiery blaze, in which Alec dies.

While Owners is, in part, concerned with a mother's struggle to acquire possession of her child, whom she rashly gave away, Churchill's Top Girl depicts a career-oriented business woman entirely disinterested in her own daughter who was adopted by her sister immediately after the child's birth.<sup>10</sup> Alongside Cloud Nine, it is one of Caryl Churchill's best known, most performed and acclaimed plays. Churchill told Lyn Truss:

The ideas for Top Girls came from all kinds of things. A lot of it went back a really long way. The idea for Dull Gret as a character I found in some old notebook from 1977 or 78. There'd been the idea of a play about a lot of dead women having coffee with someone from the present. (8)

This latter idea inspired the "imaginative chutzpah"--so appropriately coined by Benedict Nightingale (Revival 461)--of the play's most memorable scene and one of the more

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<sup>10</sup> Top Girls premiered in August of 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre.



notable theatrical moments of the 1980s. The work opens with Marlene, managing director of Top Girls Employment Agency, celebrating her promotion with five historical and fictional woman, including: Lady Niho, a thirteenth century Japanese courtesan and later Buddhist nun; Dull Gret, a character from a Brueghel painting who leads a group of women on an attack of hell; Pope Joan, the first and only woman pontiff; and Patient Griselda, the main character of "The Clerk's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. Michael Billington, writing for The Guardian, was effusive over this scene and the entire play: "the work builds to a superb emotion-draining climax that sent me out of the theatre convinced that this is the best British play ever from a woman dramatist" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 59). Benedict Nightingale, who noted the play's timelessness after seeing the 1991 London revival, expressed in 1982 that Cloud Nine and "Top Girls, taken together, show that [Churchill] has evolved into a playwright of genuine audacity and assurance, able to use her considerable wit and intelligence in ways at once unusual, resonant and dramatically riveting" (468).

After this imaginative, time-bending first scene, where the women eat, drink and share stories about their experiences and travels, the rest of the play splits between Marlene's office, on the Monday after the weekend

dinner party, and the home of her sister Joyce.<sup>11</sup> In the Top Girls office, we meet two of Marlene's colleagues, Win and Nell, and all three counsel job seekers, ranging from a young woman who lies about her lack of work experience to a disgruntled, middle-aged, middle manager who has seen far too many young men pass her by for promotions. Meanwhile, the scenes at Joyce's home introduce us not only to Joyce, but also to Angie, Marlene's biological daughter whom Joyce has adopted, and Kit, Angie's best friend.<sup>12</sup> The play ends with Marlene's visit to the home of her sister for Angie's fifteenth birthday, and the two sisters become embroiled in an argument about family, class and politics.

An absorbing and predominant aspect of both plays is Churchill's exploration and questioning of a woman's place in society and the home. Unlike Delaney's A Taste of

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<sup>11</sup> As she did in Cloud Nine, Churchill continues to toy with her theatrical use of time. While the dinner party takes place on a Saturday evening, the scenes at the office take place on Monday morning. However, the two scenes at Joyce's home occur, first, on the Sunday afternoon after the dinner party and, second, a year earlier.

Joseph Marohl makes an astute point about Churchill's use of time: "The play moves backwards, negating its 'arguments' as it proceeds." For example: "The progress of the principal character Marlene proves to be illusory, and, in the end, she is no more morally advanced than the other characters and seems unusually dependent upon the sacrifices of others" (380-1).

<sup>12</sup> Churchill said: "Originally the idea was just that Marlene was 'writing off' her niece, Angie, because she'd never make it; I didn't yet have the plot idea that Angie was actually Marlene's own child" (Betsko, Koenig, and Mann 82).

Honey, Owners and Top Girls explore, through the juxtaposition of the two lead females, the societal, patriarchal and economic strictures which define a woman as merely a maternal figure. In Owners Lisa fulfills the contemporary representation of the mother, the favored position of women by patriarchal society, while Marion is a successful and powerful business woman, a relatively recent female role in the wake of major social and legal reformations of the 1960s. This same dichotomy appears in Top Girls through Churchill's characterizations of Marlene, managing director of an employment agency, and her sister Joyce, a single parent struggling to care for her adopted daughter.

Naturally, these two divergent classifications of women's roles in contemporary society created friction, and Kate Millett addresses this very matter in her seminal work Sexual Politics:

One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present between career woman and housewife. One envies the other her "security" and prestige, while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be the other's freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world. (38)

Millett's statement is revealing and especially germane because it addresses the primary juxtapositions in Owners and Top Girls. Churchill, though, is not concerned with "envy." In fact, neither businesswoman envies her

reciprocal mother figure, and vice versa. They despise one another for who they are, what they have done, and what they represent. Churchill, instead, is more concerned with depicting the antagonism and discord which exists between these two women.

In Owners the two women confront one another in Marion's business office, a space previously defined as "male," and, for the most part, off-limits to women, especially mothers, in modern and contemporary British drama.<sup>13</sup> Churchill's description of the characters in this setting is careful in noting that neither woman is particularly more physically attractive than the other. Lisa's obvious pregnant form is paralleled by Marion's rumpled clothing, which, according to Churchill, is expensive but always in a state of disarray. Separating the two women from their similar physical dishevelment are the stage directions which stress Marion's corporeal superiority. "MARION's office. Large desk and large street map. MARION and LISA. MARION is on her feet, eating a bar of chocolate. LISA is sitting in a chair on the client's side of the desk, huge and tired" (23). Churchill's placement of the characters clearly indicates who is dominant. Marion is not only economically Lisa's

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<sup>13</sup> One exception is George Bernard Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession, where the last act occurs in Vivie Warren's office.

better, indicated by her expensive clothing and the office belonging to her, but she also corporeally towers over her former lover's wife, who is "huge and tired." Lisa is in no shape physically, intellectually or economically to compete with Marion. She has entered an environment which is foreign to her and one in which she does not know how to behave. Churchill, through the physical setting of this scene, clearly stresses the weakness of the pregnant Lisa against the controlled, successful and authoritative presence of Marion, a childless career woman.

In order to succeed in the business world, Marion and other working women must adopt the dominant, patriarchal characteristics and philosophy. At one point, she equates herself with other "men of destiny" (31). There is no room for the assumed feminine features of "softness" and "emotion," which Lisa embodies. Instead, Marion subordinates her own feminine traits upon entering the work world.

MARION: Every one of you thinks I will give in.  
Because I'm a woman, is it? I'm meant to be  
kind. I'm meant to understand a woman's  
feelings wanting her baby back. I don't. I  
won't. I can be as terrible as anyone.  
Soldiers have stuck swords through innocents.  
I can massacre too. (63)

To Marion, motherhood and, in effect, giving birth is a weakness. Instead, she sees strength in violence and death. By equating herself with the Romans who slaughtered innocent children in their search for Jesus, she divorces

herself completely from any semblance of maternal feelings. By the end of the play Marion exemplifies this deadly characteristic by ordering Worsely to kill Alec. After his death, Marion realizes how much power she can attain. She announces: "I never knew I could do a thing like that. I might be capable of anything. I'm just beginning to find out what's possible" (67). This same ruthless philosophy and self-discovery continues ten years later in Top Girls. However, in this later play the theory is expressed in a far more controlled, professional, "classy" style, befitting the appropriately dressed savvy of Britain's top girls, who have smoothly and successfully appropriated the linguistic and professional components of the patriarchal business world.<sup>14</sup>

Although she is referring to Top Girls, Amelia Howe Kritzer's description of the dichotomy between Marlene and Joyce is equally applicable to Marion's and Lisa's situation. Kritzer articulates two types of dominant ethics: caring, associated with maternal duties, and competition, associated with the work force. As Kritzer contrasts these two types:

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting at this juncture that the styles of the two play's are exceedingly different. Churchill in her Preface admits that Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane had a major effect on the tone of Owners. Top Girls, though, is far more stylized as Churchill's writing has become increasingly aware of the dynamics of conversation. In this work she accurately replicates realistic dialogue, stressing its interruptions and incomplete sentences.

The ethic of caring informs the interpersonal responsibilities that have traditionally comprised the private, uncompensated labour of women. The ethic of competition has structured the individualistic striving associated with the more public and remunerative labour traditionally performed by men. (141)

Unquestionably, the ethic of competition applies to Marlene, her colleagues Nell and Win, and Marion, while the ethic of caring distinguishes Joyce and Lisa from their working counterparts. Sentimentality and compassion weakens a female's stance in the business world, where the end goal is to sell and close with no concern for competitors or buyers. Since men automatically assume that women are "soft," business women must overcompensate against these presumed innate and feminine qualities, as Marion and Marlene both do. Nell explains this principle of success to the young women she is interviewing.

Because that's what an employer is going to have doubts about with you a lady as I needn't tell you, whether she's got the guts to push through to a closing situation. They think we're too nice. They think we listen to the buyer's doubts. They think we consider his needs and his feelings. (61)

Nell, Win and Marlene, though, do not display the dreaded element of "niceness," supposedly inherent in the feminine mystique. Instead, they have "balls," and Marlene, in beating out Howard, her main competition, for the job as managing director, obviously has more "balls" than any of the other candidates, male or female. Like Marion in Owners, Marlene subordinates her own gender to acquire the

male signs of virility and power. This value of competition, strength and lack of nicety becomes apparent in the response to Howard's heart attack after discovering that he lost the promotion to Marlene. Nell articulates the cutthroat party line of the profession: "Lucky he didn't get the job if that's what his health's like" (66).

Although this same ethic of work and competition is shared by Marion and Marlene, the two plays articulate significant distinctions between the two characters' attitudes toward their families. Marion actually becomes a "surrogate" mother when she takes possession of Lisa's son, yet she has no interest in the nurturing components of this affiliation.<sup>15</sup> Instead, she accepts the role of motherhood because her proprietorship of the child places her in a position of power over Lisa and Alec. She now "owns" something that was formerly theirs. Marion sees her appellation of "mother" as merely a transactional title, handled through legal documents without any actual physical or emotional investment necessary on her part. She has, in effect, acquired a son, the second half of the "Clegg and Son" butcher shop, without any outlay of capital or any

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<sup>15</sup> The baby never receives a name while it is in the hands of Marion and Clegg. In fact, Marion completely forgets about the child except when she meets with Alec and Lisa. She sleeps through its cries at night, forcing Clegg to feed him. She does not even realize until the next day that Worsely removed the child from her office while she was working.



personal discomfort, such as the burdensome physicality of pregnancy and the pain of labor. Family, then, only peaks Marion's interest when it holds tempting economic possibilities or allows her to obtain a superior position over her rivals.

Marlene, though, completely dismisses any existence of family within her place at the agency. In order to attain her promotions, she divorces herself entirely from any domestic connections, even to the point of never publicly acknowledging the existence of her sister and parents nor expressing an interest in establishing her own family. Marlene counsels Jeanine, who desires a new job, that she, too, should keep her domestic life secret.

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

JEANINE. Had I better not?

MARLENE. It would probably help.

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

MARLENE. Saves taking it off. (30)

Marlene's frank last line counsels Jeanine, and other prospective female job seekers, that if a woman truly desires success in the patriarchally controlled business world, then it is imperative that any connection with husbands, children and family must be securely hidden or completely expunged.

Like Owners, Top Girls returns to the same confrontation scene between a mother and a business woman upon which Millet remarked above. Ten years later, though,

Churchill's staging has changed drastically. Whereas Lisa and Marion confronted each other in Marion's office, Churchill now has Marlene and Joyce encounter one another in Joyce's kitchen. The businesswoman has now entered the realm of the housewife/mother, and her presence is equally as awkward as Lisa's was in Marion's office. In this case, Marlene, who throughout most of the scene remains seated, slowly becomes intoxicated, while Joyce moves around the kitchen folding laundry and tending to other domestic duties. Not only has the physical placement of the characters in scene been flip-flopped, but so have the roles. Unlike Lisa, Marlene is not interested in regaining custody of the child she gave up; in fact, it has been six years since Marlene has last seen her daughter. Unlike Marion, the surrogate mother Joyce has sacrificed and devoted herself to a child that is not biologically hers.

This kitchen scene also exposes Marlene's facade of toughness. Throughout the play, she has been in control, telling others what to do, but in this scene she breaks down crying, overcome by her emotions, the alcohol, and the strain of returning home. The stress of being a career woman has had its toll on her, as she has lost touch with everyone around her, as indicated by her prolonged absence from her family and her ignorance about Joyce's separation from her husband three years earlier. Marlene has no relationships, no friends, and the men she dates accompany

her because, as she tells Joyce, they "like to be seen with a high-flying lady. Shows they've got something really good in their pants" (83). Churchill's final scene of Top Girls indicates that the economic and career success attained by Marlene has not come without a price. She has become further and further isolated from her friends, her family and herself. We come to see that the true character to revere is not Marlene but Joyce, who, in raising Marlene's daughter as her own, has personally sacrificed far more than her sister, including the miscarriage of her own baby while caring for Angie when she was an infant. In sharp contrast is Marlene, whose own egocentric and financial interests have made her an isolated, lonely woman, reduced to celebrating her promotion in a drunken, solitary stupor in front of her television set on a Saturday night.

Like A Taste of Honey, both Owners and Top Girls depict motherhood as an economically, socially, emotionally and psychologically crippling condition. The financial circumstances of Lisa and her children and Joyce and Angie are equally as perilous as Helen's and Jo's. Alec, Lisa, their two children, and his mother live in a two-bedroom flat, paying two pounds a week, which they can barely afford. From Marion's viewpoint, the precariousness of their financial situation blemishes their suitability to be parents. As Lisa fights to regain possession of her child,

Marion responds with a snide, but shrewd rejoinder to her arguments: "Have you a home that would impress a judge?" (60). Similarly, Joyce is struggling to support herself and Angie by cleaning four houses a week. In society money and gender have always been primary staples in determining the hierarchal levels of status and power. Although these two plays posit that women are overcoming the patriarchal dominance in society and the business world, they also show that the progress comes at a price to their gender. The female characters who have achieved economic security, power and status are the ones who have no children and have divorced themselves from their maternal counterparts. While Marlene and Marion enjoy their material and social successes, Lisa and Joyce exist in a separate world and make no social strides and receive no assistance. In other words, while businesswomen, as a whole, have achieved the same status as their male counterparts (and, in some cases, surpassed them), women who are full-time mothers have gained nothing from their gender's business victories. They still have no status, no power and no voice in society.

Churchill's inclusion of the historical and fictional figures in Top Girls stresses that maternity is not a burden strictly limited to the lower classes. Even though Patient Griselda and Lady Nijo are members of the "royal family," they also experience maternal anguish and anxiety.

Although Patient Griselda married into royalty, her maternal position is constantly undermined by her husband's repeated attempts to test her love for him. In fact, she dismisses her own maternal affections and duties when her husband commands that her children be removed from her care, foregrounding the voice of patriarchal authority over maternal love. The other dinner guests, shocked at Patient Griselda's willingness to give up her children, ask her how she can allow her husband to take away her six-week old daughter. She responds: "It was Walter's child to do what he liked with" (23). This same acceptance of patriarchal interference in and control over motherhood can be found in Lady Nijo's story. She is one of the Emperor's courtesans, but she, like Patient Griselda, must sacrifice her own maternal affections and progeny because of her master's prerogative and power. The emperor's courtesan can only have the emperor's children, at least, in public (all of Nijo's children, though, are offspring from her lovers). In contrast to the stoic dismissal by Griselda of her children is Lady Nijo, who suffers over the loss of her children. Her plaintiff cry of "Nobody gave me back my children" (25), in response to Griselda's reunion with her children, is a sharp rejoinder to the indifferent and unemotional acquiescence of Patient Griselda and Marlene to the dominant and omnipresent patriarchal philosophies.

While Patient Griselda's and Lady Nijo's stories

indicate the dominance of the patriarchy over maternity, Pope Joan's story warns of the dire consequences of maternity when a woman completely conforms to the rules of a patriarchal institution. In order to learn to read, a prohibited activity for a woman, Joan disguises herself as a male. Finding she excels in these endeavors, she ends up living a man's life. Like her successors Marion and Marlene, she succeeds in the male world, eventually becoming Pope. However, unlike Marion and Marlene, she becomes pregnant while a member of a patriarchal institution, in this case the Roman Catholic church. She gives birth during a papal procession and the zealous crowd denounces her and her off-spring as the work of the anti-Christ. Her story with its denunciation by society and the religious community is striking when considered in the light of Marlene's warning to Jeanine about keeping her upcoming wedding and other domestic plans secret from her bosses. While Marlene cautions that a male authority figure in the business world might not hire or promote a woman who also has domestic interests, Pope Joan's fate demonstrates a far more constraining and deadly historical era of patriarchal control where more than economic pressure is wielded by the authority figures. Joan is stoned to death and dragged through town for her indiscretion. Her story--indeed, all of the historical and fictional figures tales--shows the rigid patriarchal

control over women in terms of their educational possibilities as well as their position in society and the family. Although the contemporary scenes of Top Girls indicate the distance travelled between these historic figures and Marlene, they also illustrate that the basic oppressive tenets of patriarchal control are still present, even if their severity has been tempered.

And yet, after considering these various depictions of maternity, one question still needs to be answered: does a mother figure exist who is not apathetic, oppressed by the patriarchy, and a social outcast? The character closest to fulfilling this description is Dull Gret, another dinner guest. She manages, unlike the other mother figures, to stand up to the patriarchy, in this case, hell, as she wrecks vengeance for the death of her children. However, for all of Dull Gret's retributive spirit, she also is the least developed, intellectually, economically and socially, of all the characters. Most of her utterances, except for her one long speech, are one-word responses. She is the inherent embodiment of a completely natural existence, interested in only food and sex and free from the rules of society. If Dull Gret is supposed to be the representative figure of a successful, "ideal" mother, then returning to her condition would be impossible. Society and culture have progressed too far beyond Dull Gret's time. What then do women who work and are also mother's

supposed to do? Do they only have two choices? To be Marlene or to be Joyce? Churchill indicates in Owners and Top Girls that an investment in strictly one role is debilitating either economically, emotionally, or morally. Women who are only interested in business and success lose their femininity, acquiring "balls," while women who are strictly mothers continue to be considered second-class, reinforced by male stereotypes of femininity and maternity. The most obvious solution suggests finding a balance between both worlds, which is exactly what Churchill had to do as she managed to raise her three sons while also becoming an internationally recognized playwright. However, as we will see in Charlotte Keatley's My Mother Said I Never Should, balancing both roles of mother and careerist is equally difficult and challenging not only for the individual woman but also for the other members of the family.

**My Mother Said I Never Should: "You are always your Mother's child"**

Before her first major play, My Mother Said I Never Should, had its London premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in 1989, Charlotte Keatley had held numerous positions connected with the theatre, including playwright, choreographer, director, and play reviewer (Keatley began



the latter career as a student at her Manchester College paper before eventually writing for, among others, the Financial Times).<sup>16</sup> After its premiere in Manchester, My Mother Said I Never Should won the George Devine Award in 1987, and two years later found its way to London, where it received mixed reviews. Claire Armistead of the Financial Times noted "its great strength is its structure . . . making abundantly clear the painful, paradoxical knots between mothers, their daughters and grand-daughters" (261). Lyn Gardner of City Limits called the production "the theatrical equivalent of breaking the four minute mile . . . pointing the way for the next generation of women playwrights both in form and content" (263). Other reviewers, though, dismissed the play precisely because of its exclusive emphasis on female characters and their concerns. Milton Shulman of the Evening Standard predicted that the play "should find a receptive audience from listeners to *Woman's Hour* and readers of middle brow women's magazines" (261), while Charles Spencer of The Daily Telegraph complained:

For reasons that are no doubt impeccably feminist, Miss Keatley has also banished all the male characters from the stage. Fathers and

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<sup>16</sup> Keatley explained to me why she finally became a playwright: "I don't think it would have occurred to me to write plays if I hadn't acted and played dumb children and waitresses. You realize that you've got to write the kinds of roles that there aren't for women, the roles you haven't seen on stage" (Personal Interview).

husbands are talked about but never seen, creating a curiously lopsided impression. It is as though she is favouring her audience with only one half of the story. (262)

However, Keatley explains that the play's purpose is to do exactly what Spencer and Shulman complain of, provide a voice for female characters who have not before appeared on stage.<sup>17</sup> Keatley said: "I wrote the play because I didn't know any plays about mothers and daughters; it's as simple as that. I spread it across four generations because I feel very conscious that women now owe a debt to several generations of women" (Keatley and Goodman 131).

Through an assortment of scenes, jump cutting across the twentieth century, My Mother Said I Never Should discloses the relationships of four generations of women within one family. The matriarch of the family is Doris, who is born in 1900 and marries when she is 24, giving up her teaching position. Her daughter is Margaret, born in 1931, who marries an American pilot in 1951 and quickly joins the work force. Jackie, her daughter, is born in

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<sup>17</sup> At one point Keatley contemplated including male characters, all played by one actor: "But it seemed that to introduce a man at all, and especially only one, would be to give him a significance greater than that of any of the individual women's" (Keatley and Goodman 138).

She later expounded on this same decision to me: "I thought I just had to keep the men out because of the language and the way women behave when they are on their own together which you very, very rarely see in plays. When we are on our own, with our own gender, we do behave differently, the sense of humor and everything's different" (Personal Interview).

1952 and as an unmarried, art student becomes pregnant, eventually relinquishing her daughter, Rosie, to her mother to raise. Rosie, born in 1971, learns, when she is almost sixteen, the truth of her lineage.<sup>18</sup> Although Keatley stages moments from throughout the century, the play's main focus occurs during the late 1970s and 1980s when all four women confront the deaths of husbands and mothers and the exposure of family secrets.

Keatley's play clearly complements the previous three works. Gabriele Griffin's notion of generational recycling, present in A Taste of Honey and Top Girls,<sup>19</sup> is also tendered in My Mother Said I Never Should. To highlight the inherent connection between these four generations of women, Keatley employs a myriad of theatrical ingredients: shared phrases, which are repeated on different occasions by all four women; shared props, including a solitaire board game (given to Rosie by Doris), a baby doll and a World War II utility mug (both passed

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<sup>18</sup> Keatley remarked on her decision to include the adoption of Rosie by Margaret and Ken. "I made that up because I thought: 'What's the most taboo thing a mother can do?' I think more than to kill her child is to disown it" (Personal Interview).

<sup>19</sup> Unlike Delaney's play, which reveals the repetitiveness between the lives of mothers and daughters, Churchill's play argues, through the first scene's historical and fictional diners and the contemporary figures of Marlene and Joyce, that women, no matter their respective century, share the similar experience of maternal oppression at the hands of a patriarchal society.

from the hands of Doris to Margaret to Jackie to Rosie); Doris's piano, which remains on stage the whole time; and various articles of clothing. Griffin's assertion concerning accidental mothering, manifest in A Taste of Honey and Top Girls (through Marlene's unwanted pregnancies), is also prevalent in My Mother Said I Never Should, for both Doris and Rosie, though the latter is raised in far better circumstances, are illegitimate.

Keatley addresses issues not present in the previous three plays. For instance, the play does not rely on any non-familial relationships. No "outsiders" physically inhabit My Mother Said I Never Should, as opposed to A Taste of Honey, Owners and Top Girls, which incorporate relationships (business, sexual, and power) and characters that exist outside the confines of family. Her play shares this characteristic with the stalwart American family dramas of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard as well as her British predecessors, including Arnold Wesker's Roots (1959), Harold Pinter's The Homecoming, David Storey's In Celebration (1969), and Peter Nichols' Born in the Gardens (1979). Like these playwrights, Keatley is not merely concerned with creating an absorbing domestic drama; she also recognizes the theatrical family's ability to comment on the "state of the nation." While her male predecessors tend to focus on male perspectives and issues, Keatley examines the state of the

woman--specifically the mother--in the face of the emerging pressures since World War II.

Like Churchill, Keatley is also interested in exploring the two disparate roles of contemporary women in society: mother and careerist. Unlike Top Girls and Owners, where Churchill's characters embody either one role or the other, My Mother Said I Never Should concentrates on Margaret, who personifies both roles and in so doing differs significantly from Marion and Marlene. Churchill's two protagonists are upper-middle class, business oriented, highly motivated, authoritative, competitive and, most importantly, childless. Margaret, in turn, is equally business oriented and highly motivated, but her business acumen and status pales greatly in comparison to Churchill's two characters. Margaret is, and always has been, someone's assistant. The highest plateau she attains is personal assistant to a British Microwaves executive. Margaret admits to Jackie: "It's nothing glamorous. . . . Mr. Reece dictates, I spend the rest of the morning unravelling his grammar, otherwise British Microwaves would never have any export trade" (43). Margaret recognizes that she has attained her potential and accepts her limited status in the work force. "My typing speeds are very ordinary. It's only that I've got Pitman's Classic and most of the girls don't learn shorthand these days" (43).

Even though she lacks the intellectual, educational

and financial assets of Marlene and Marion, she does possess a similar competitive drive for work. The difference, though, is her motivation. Whereas Marlene and Marion are intently and self-interestedly absorbed in increasing their own financial power and titular status, Margaret insistently seeks employment, whether in the business realm or at home, because she believes that through work women will reduce the gap between the sexes. She views her continued presence in the work world, even as a personal assistant, as a victory for her gender, not for her ego, like Marion and Marlene. In fact, Churchill's depictions of her businesswomen suggest that their victories and actions are actually losses for the female gender, specifically, and society, in general. This point is made apparent in the last theatrical moments of Top Girls as Angie enters after having a bad dream. All she can say to her Aunt is "Frightening. . . . Frightening" (87), which echoes the audience's response after finally learning the truth behind Marlene's success.

Yet, unlike her business peers in Churchill's two plays, Margaret also recognizes that equality does not come at once. It takes numerous generations of women to close the gap, and for this reason she instills the same driving work ethic in her daughter Jackie. Margaret uses this same argument to convince Jackie to give up her three-month-old daughter: "You've got to go further than me--and Rosie

too. (*Quietly.*) Otherwise . . . what's it been worth?" (15). Margaret believes each woman needs to find a niche in the work place to maintain the progress made by her gender. If the woman is especially talented, like Jackie, then success in the work place should come before family ties and motherhood. Her philosophy, then, even though it lacks the egotistical interests of Marion and Marlene, is, at its root, as equally dismissive of maternal ties as that of Marion and Marlene.

Margaret espouses these same sentiments to her mother before she marries her American Air Force pilot.

MARGARET. I'm not going to have a family, babies and all that. . . .

DORIS. And what makes you so sure you can keep Mother Nature at bay? . . . I'm talking about the *desire* . . . for little arms reaching up and clinging around your neck. . . .

MARGARET. 'Little arms clinging' . . . There, see, that's what I don't want. That's the difference between our generations, Mother. . . . Women did so much during the war: there's nothing to stop us now. (16-7)

Margaret's dismissal of her own maternal interests at this point of the play, in Scene 7 of the first act, is ironically hollow because Jackie has already appeared in four of the prior scenes due to Keatley's temporal jumps.

Yet Margaret has maintained her presence in the work place while also being a mother. Even though Margaret does combine the two contemporary roles, she is unable to maintain a balance. Instead, her obsession with work destroys the cohesiveness of her family. Because of the

time spent working, either in the office or when she comes home, she is unable to develop with Jackie and Rosie the same nurturing mother/daughter relationship present between her and her mother Doris. Instead, Margaret has little patience with her daughters and eventually loses her husband, who leaves her. She tells Doris: "Ken married a wife, not a working mother" (40). Keatley's fine attention to phrasing is evident here because the quote reflects the various levels of "duties" for women in contemporary society: wife, mother, work. Margaret has established her own hierarchy of responsibilities and her primary concern is work, while family is second. At one point her mother is shocked to see her in Manchester during the week: "Well--you coming all the way from London like this--on a Tuesday! . . . Usually you're so busy, at that office . . . never have time to come and visit" (39). Keatley even implies that Margaret's obsession with work leads to her death. She never goes to the doctor even though she is in pain. She tells Jackie: "Surgery hours are nine till six. I'm working then" (29). She eventually dies of cancer.

Margaret's death, though, is foreshadowed from the play's opening scene, which is also one of its most innovative. Keatley explains that each actress plays all of her character's differing ages, meaning that the actress plays Doris from age five through 87; Margaret from age nine through 56; Jackie from nine through 34; and Rosie



from infancy to 16.<sup>20</sup> In the first scene of the play, and at four other times, the women come together as similarly aged children in a setting described as "*The Wasteground, a place where girls come to play*" (1).<sup>21</sup> Keatley explains in the play's preface that "the child remains inside the woman, often shouting what the adult refuses to hear. Therefore the child scenes should not be nostalgic or coy; these girls are serious, and out of the public eye they are not 'good'" (n.p.). Keatley stresses the inherent violent tendencies of little girls, who are, according to society and nursery rhyme, supposed to be "sugar and spice and everything nice."

The play begins with the four girls singing:

My Mother said I never should,  
 Play with the gypsies in the wood,  
 If I did, she would say,  
 Naughty girl to disobey. (1)

This song establishes that a mother, as perceived by her daughter, is seen as the authoritarian and disciplinarian

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<sup>20</sup> Keatley is deliberate in the casting of the production: "It's easiest to start with Margaret and Jackie, who may in real life be almost the same age, and then you can sort of go up and down from there. Rosie tends to be an actress just out of drama school. . . . You need someone into their twenties, whose got the emotional maturity to see what Rosie's done and play it. Doris tends to be an actress from her fifties upwards to eighties. I was writing it wanting this physical richness of having people with very different physiques and faces" (Personal Interview).

<sup>21</sup> In these Wasteground scenes Jackie and Margaret are the oldest at age nine, while Rosie is eight and Doris is five.

figure, making pronouncements on how her daughter should behave and with whom she should spend her time. Equally, the mother has the prerogative to categorize her daughter as either "naughty" or "nice," based on her own set of criteria. In this instance, playing with gypsies is considered a "bad" thing to do. It is exactly this controlling power of the mother over the daughter that provokes the violent outburst from the girls, especially Jackie. She turns to the others, announcing:

Let's kill our Mummy. . . . I've got a penknife. I've been keeping it for something special. . . . And we'll get some string, and take Mummy down by the railway line where there's a hole in the fence, and I think you have to put a stake through her heart. (1)<sup>22</sup>

With the death of the mother, the daughter assumes control over her own life, and a grown-up Jackie assumes that Margaret's death will finally allow her to reclaim not only her title as Rosie's mother, but also all of its emotional rewards. However, with Margaret's death also comes the death of Jackie's hopes. Before Jackie has an opportunity to tell Rosie the truth, Rosie sees her birth certificate.

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<sup>22</sup> In Delaney and Churchill this same female violence is present. At one point Geof gives Jo a baby doll with which to practice. Jo says: "The colour's wrong. (*Suddenly and violently flinging the doll to the ground.*) I'll bash it's brains out. I'll kill it" (75). Marion has Alec killed, and in Top Girls Angie wants to kill Joyce.

ANGIE. I put on this dress to kill my mother.

KIT. I suppose you thought you'd do it with a brick.

ANGIE. You can kill people with a brick.

KIT. Well you didn't, so. (44)

When Jackie tries to explain why she had to give her up, Rosie rejects her not only as a mother but as a sister, opting to live with Doris. By metaphorically "killing" her mother in the Wasteground scenes, Jackie succeeds not only in separating herself from her mother, but also in destroying her own potential relationship with Rosie.

However, Keatley's last Wasteground scene offers a final restitution between the two excluded mothers.

JACKIE. The others won't play with me any more.

MARGARET. Tell you what.

JACKIE. What?

MARGARET. You can come with me. To my secret, secret hide.

MARGARET *holds out her hand*. MARGARET and JACKIE *run off together*. (49)

The irony of this scene is that Margaret finally provides Jackie, in this liminal space, with the comfort that was absent from their familial relationship. She makes the first step toward reconciliation by offering to take her to her secret hiding place and then by holding out her hand. This latter motion is, in itself, telling, since Margaret's and Jackie's embraces throughout the play are almost non-existent, and when they do occur, they are awkward and tension-filled. It is not until Margaret and Jackie are away from the parameters and pressures of work and society, family and the secret of Rosie's lineage, in this exclusive female "Never Never Land," that they can communicate and begin to rekindle a lost mother/daughter relationship.

Although Keatley neatly resolves the strained familial

relationships--Margaret and Jackie are reunited in a space only inhabited by females and thereby free from the pressures of patriarchal society, while Rosie finally finds maternal contentment and security with her great-grandmother Doris--the play still ends on a note of poignancy and loss. The last scene of My Mother Said I Never Should is a monologue by Doris, and it occurs on the day when she was both promoted and engaged.

And, Mother, and I got promoted to Head of Infants this morning! . . . Jack was very proud when I told him, but of course he says I shan't need to work . . . Oh Mother, I'm so happy, SO HAPPY! I suppose, really and truly, this is the beginning of my life! (53)

It is a poignant and theatrical moment as Doris' naive expectation and excitement about her future are undercut by the audience's realization of her and her family's fate. However, it is also prophetic as her monologue reveals precisely the same conflict that will arise for the succeeding generations of women in the twentieth century: the increased employment opportunities for women versus the patriarchal expectations of a woman's place in the home.

Although society and culture depicts maternity as the definitive characteristic of femininity, Delaney, Churchill and Keatley indicate that in the contemporary world motherhood and the role of the mother in the family and society are fraught with difficulties, conflicts and personal costs. While Churchill and Keatley depict women

in the business world who deny their own maternal inclinations (Marlene and Jackie both give up their daughters) in order to succeed in the business world, all three playwrights depict mothers trapped by the economic limitations of their situation and, at the same time, oppressed and relegated to secondary status not only by a patriarchal society that wants to keep them at home but also by the successful business women who have adopted the same philosophy. These four plays, then, glorify neither maternity nor motherhood but instead paint a picture of women (mothers and non-mothers) who have become victims of economics (Helen, Jo, Joyce), patriarchal institutions (Marion and Marlene), and their own conceptions about the potential successes of their gender (Margaret and Jackie). It is this last element that is particularly illuminating because although the three female playwrights acknowledge the burdensome impact patriarchal society has had on motherhood, they also equally acknowledge that, at times, these mothers and non-mothers are their own worst enemies.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Keeping It in the Family:

#### Four Views of Incest

RANCE (to PRENTICE, *wild with delight*).

If you are this child's father my book can be written in good faith--she is the victim of an incestuous assault!

MRS. PRENTICE. And so am I, doctor! My son has a collection of indecent photographs which prove beyond doubt that he made free with me in the same hotel--indeed in the same linen cupboard where his conception took place.

RANCE. Oh, what joy this discovery gives me! (*Embracing* MRS. PRENTICE, GERALDINE and NICK.) Double incest is even more likely to produce a best-seller than murder--and this is as it should be for love *must* bring greater joy than violence.

--Joe Orton, What the Butler Saw

NICOLA (*quickly/nervously*) But, statistics show, don't they that a large portion of female patients in mental institutions were sexually abused by a father figure?

ROY (*scoffs*) I can't imagine where you got that so-called statistic from.

--Sarah Daniels, Beside Herself

Incestuous relationships fall into two classifications: those which occur in the real world and those which occur in the literary world. Not surprisingly, the incestuous incidents portrayed in literary form have permeated society's consciousness more than their real life counterparts. Undoubtedly, the most significant is Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, and Sigmund Freud's psychological

interpretation of the tale has thrust the troubles of the doomed ruler into living rooms and bedrooms around the world. Ever since Sophocles' transcendent tragedy, the conflict, tension and forbidden attraction of incest has continued to fascinate writers, especially playwrights.<sup>1</sup> John Ford in Tis Pity She's A Whore and Percy Bysshe Shelley in The Cenci are but two of the many significant British writers who have realized the dramatic potential of this taboo relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Like many other plays in the incest genre, the three plays above conclude with societal or familial retribution for the violation of this social, moral, sexual and familial taboo, and in the process exogamy, the custom of marrying and establishing sexual relationships outside the family, is restored. In Oedipus Rex, Jocasta, mother and wife to her son, mother and grandmother to her children, kills herself. Oedipus, the once proud head of Thebes, blinds himself and is banished from Thebes by Creon, his uncle and brother-in-law. Even though John Ford's Tis Pity She's A Whore depicts a consensual relationship of true love between Giovanni and Annabella, brother and sister,

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of incest's appearance throughout literary history, see McCabe; Rank; and Santiago 101-51.

<sup>2</sup> According to Susan Kay McLean's dissertation "'A Little More Than Kin': Incest in English Renaissance Drama," between 1560 and 1642 over eighty English plays were written that contained either incest, a threat of incest, or allusions to incest.

their "crime" still results in their deaths. Giovanni kills Annabella, removing her heart, and Vasques kills Giovanni for cuckolding Soranzo. Shelley's The Cenci presents a family gutted by the economic and sexual greediness of its paternal figure who not only ruins his sons but forces himself on his daughter Beatrice. In retaliation, the children hire two murderers to kill him. Beatrice is sentenced to death for her involvement in her father's death.

Incest in the real world, of course, is far removed from the poetic, theatrical and romantic conventions of the theatre. It is private, psychologically and sometimes physically brutal, heart-breaking, secretive, and impossible to predict. The vengeful swaths of retribution, heralding the restoration of social norms, are displaced in the real world, which lacks the mollifying closure of drama. Instead, real victims suffer the ambiguity of painful silences, psychological and social retardation, familial betrayal and distrust, and confusion over proper familial roles. In some cases, the only solution is for the victim to escape from the harmful environment. The cathartic satisfaction of the transgressor's punishment rarely occurs as the victim usually suffers in silence, threatened by the imposing adult not to divulge the truth. When the relationship is discovered, the offender may go to jail, which is a rare occurrence, or receive counselling,



which is the standard solution. In most cases, though, the defiler escapes detection completely.<sup>3</sup>

What becomes the prime consideration for this chapter, then, is this chasm between the theatre and real life in relation to the presentation of incest in the contemporary British theater. In essence, how do contemporary playwrights handle the issue? Do they continue to maintain the same conventions and customs of the incest genre by distancing the truth of incest from the stage? Or, are they more concerned with exploring new ways to address the harsher realities of incest in a manner different from its romantic, literary preconceptions? If contemporary playwrights are concerned with exploring the issue, then to what effect do they incorporate the "theatricality" of the play's production as a means of exploring the realities of incest?

I will examine four plays that address the issue of incest, beginning with a short discussion of two comedies: Joe Orton's What the Butler Saw and David Storey's Mother's Day. These two works are significant because they place incest in a farcical world where the disruption of social and sexual taboos is the norm. Unlike the traditional comic flirtation with incest, where a potentially taboo

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion of incest in this paragraph draws upon the following sources: Herman and Hirschman 735-56; Meiselman; and Renvoize.

relationship is averted, these plays disrupt the convention through their presentation of the actual transgressive relationship. Orton's play is set in a mental institution, while Storey's takes place in a council flat. Each play develops a rather casual, almost lackadaisical attitude towards incestuous relationships--father/daughter and mother/son in What the Butler Saw and brother/sister in Mother's Day. In effect, by foregrounding incest as "acceptable" behavior, Orton and Storey disrupt the prohibitiveness of this relationship. Incest is not presented as a potentially explosive and debilitating act against the family; instead, it is a restorative one. The remainder of the chapter focuses on Stephen Poliakoff's Hitting Town and Sarah Daniels' Beside Herself, both of which contrast with Orton's and Storey's humorous depictions of incest through their political interpretations of the act. Through Poliakoff's attention to setting and atmosphere, his play dramatizes a stark physical and social environment which, in essence, encourages the incestuous relationship between brother and sister. Sarah Daniels' didactic, feminist work conveys the harshness of incest, expressing the psychological and social anguish of abused women, who suffer in silence, from the sexual abuse they received as children.

**What the Butler Saw and Mother's Day: "You don't have to leave home to fuck your sister"**

In March of 1969, Joe Orton's last completed play, What the Butler Saw, premiered in London at the Queen's Theatre. The playwright, who had been murdered by his lover Kenneth Halliwell a year and a half earlier, had achieved name recognition and financial success with his previous stage plays Entertaining Mr Sloane and Loot (1966). In its initial production, though, What the Butler Saw did not garner critical acclaim from London critics and theatregoers. John Russell Taylor, reviewing the play for Plays and Players, pointedly comments: "I think What the Butler Saw is a very bad play" (25-7). Admittedly, numerous problems plagued the production, from the acting of Sir Ralph Richardson, who never completely comprehended the play's subject matter, to the set design, which included a huge metal gate which separated the actors from the audience for the last fifteen minutes of the performance.<sup>4</sup> On opening night the audience actively voiced its distaste for the posthumously produced play.

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<sup>4</sup> What the Butler Saw received a much stronger production and far more positive reviews in 1975, when the Royal Court Theatre produced their "Joe Orton Festival." The director was Lindsay Anderson, who had directed a number of David Storey's plays and would direct Mother's Day the next year. The revival of What the Butler Saw transferred to Whitehall Theatre in the West End.

Herbert Kretzmer, writing for The Daily Express, remarks:

As the play reached its berserk climax, with a stage full of half undressed people shooting and shouting at each other in a crescendo of madness, the jeers and yelps of the gallery patrons mingled oddly with the cries from the stage, creating an atmosphere tense and a little dreamlike. (18)

John Lahr's Prick Up Your Ears, the first major critical discussion of Joe Orton's plays and life, recounts the wretchedness of the opening night. Lahr writes:

At the beginning of the second act, someone in the gallery screamed at Sir Ralph Richardson 'Give back your knighthood!' Shouts of 'Filth!', 'Rubbish!', 'Find another play!', 'Take it off!' bombarded the actors as they struggled bravely through the lines. (333)

Stanley Baxter, playing the role of Dr. Prentice, told Lahr: "The gallery wanted to jump on the stage and kill us all" (333). In a later discussion of the play's opening night, Alan Sinfield clarifies that the audience response was not a spontaneous reaction to Orton's writing or the production itself. Instead, it was a carefully orchestrated response to the changes that were occurring on the British stage in the late 1960's with the removal of the Lord Chamberlain's censoring pen.

[What the Butler Saw] was booed and jeered on the opening night in London, though this was not a naive response but an organized campaign by the group of gallery first-nighters, followers of traditional theatre, that had already disrupted Colin Spencer's Spitting Image a few months previously. ("Who" 180)

Despite the play's botched premiere, with its own

Ortonesque qualities, the play currently stands as the representative work of Orton's craftsmanship.<sup>5</sup>

The farcical plot of What the Butler Saw is complex, filled with numerous surprises. As the play opens, Dr. Prentice, who is the head of a mental institution, attempts to seduce Geraldine Barclay, a secretarial candidate. The arrival of Mrs. Prentice interrupts his seduction, forcing the nearly naked temporary worker to hide behind an examination curtain. Mrs. Prentice has returned from the Station Hotel, where she was raped by Nicholas Beckett, a bell boy, who is now blackmailing her with photographs of their coupling. Complicating the plot further is the arrival of Dr. Rance, a mental institute inspector for Her Majesty's government, and Sergeant Match, who is seeking two things: Nicholas Beckett, for his role in the deflowering of numerous schoolgirls and his failure to ravish their guardian, and the missing piece of a Winston Churchill statue, which exploded and killed Geraldine

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term "currently" because in the last five to ten years a critical rebellion has emerged in the world of Orton scholarship. Critics are now attacking John Lahr's seminal work on Orton, Prick Up Your Ears, questioning the validity of its treatment of Orton's work and homosexuality. Along the same lines, the critical status and reception of his plays are under reconsideration as well. For a taste of the debate, see the following early book-length discussions of Orton and his work: Bigsby; Charney; and Lahr Prick. For the latest rereadings of Orton, see Nakayama 185-95; Shepherd "Edna's" 87-110; Shepherd Because; and Sinfield "Who" 170-86.

Barclay's foster mother. In manic action, Orton has characters undressed, cross-dressed, then re-dressed, drugged, admitted as patients, given physicals to determine gender, straight jacketed and shot. In resolving the bizarre menagerie, Orton borrows the ending of Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), but in the process adds a twist. The characters discover by way of a broken amulet, the two halves of which Nicholas and Geraldine both possess, that they are Mrs. Prentice's children and the progeny of an attack which occurred in the Station Hotel linen closet during a power cut by an unknown assailant, who turns out to be Dr. Prentice.

As Eric Bentley remarks in The Life of the Drama, the nature of farce is disruption. "[F]arce . . . wishes to damage the family, to desecrate the household gods. . . . Outrage to family piety is certainly at the heart of farce" (226-7), and Orton's play certainly disrupts the audience's expectations about the family. However, as many Orton critics have commented, What the Butler Saw is so manic and outrageous that it can be considered as a parody of farce. The playwright subverts the farcical conventions through his careful plotting--the opening scene is a classic complication of farce--his crafty one-liners, his astute allusions, and his use of the set. In Stage Right John Bull registers the importance of Orton's attention to this latter element.

In this instance the set, and indeed the very theatrical setting, was intended to mislead the audience, to cue an expectancy out of key with the events that would occur with Orton's room; a room that offered a set of theatrical and domestic signals within which the audience would be quite familiar, the action then working against, defamilialirizing, decoding even, those signals. (88)

Bull's notation on decodification and defamiliarization in regards to the set equally applies to incest's presence in the play because Orton's transgressive presentation subverts the conventional, comical presentation of incest.

In his book Incest, Drama and Nature's Law, which addresses the presence of incest in Renaissance literature, Richard McCabe explains how playwrights use incest in comedies: "The comic perspective works not merely to avert actual incest, but also to diminish the significance of the event itself through the casual ease of its potential occurrence" (128). Although What the Butler Saw does stress the casual, inadvertent ease of incest's occurrence, the play subverts the traditional staple of the thwarting of incest through the sexual coupling of Mrs. Prentice and Nicholas Beckett.<sup>6</sup> He also does not "diminish the significance of the event" but instead comically heightens it. Incest becomes the rapturous solution to the play's manic action as the characters eagerly admit to their own

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<sup>6</sup> In this case, "casual" does not possess its normal denotative measures. Casual incest is a term used by sociologists and psychologists when discussing incestuous cases involving two unsuspecting partners.

involvement in the incestuous relationships (see this chapter's first epigraph). Orton, then, relishes in the delicious contradictions of the play's forbidden finale.

Whereas comical depictions of incest avert the forbidden relationship, Orton makes it a crucial element of his play as incest initiates the play's plot. With this in mind, What the Butler Saw has more in common with an incest play like Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. In Sophocles' tragedy the murder of Laius by Oedipus, the son's killing of the father, is the initial step towards incest. With the father dispatched, Oedipus marries his mother Jocasta, reuniting mother and son in the guise of wife and husband. Their relations are, in effect, casual, not consensual. Yet, their unacknowledged and accidental interruption of established familial, social and moral norms heralds the plague. Accidental incest provides the same result in What the Butler Saw. The liaison between Nicholas and Mrs. Prentice in the linen closet and Dr. Prentice's attempted seduction of Geraldine prompt the play's chaotic action, including gunshots, bloodshed, incarceration, mental anguish, and confusion, that overtakes the mental institution.

While Oedipus Rex and What the Butler Saw both share the initiation of action by incest, their resolutions are, obviously, quite different, since one is a tragedy and the other a farce. In Oedipus Rex the acknowledgement of the



incestuous relationship leads to the removal of the plague as well as sacrifice and punishment. Jocasta kills herself, Oedipus blinds himself, and Oedipus and his incestuous offspring are expelled. With the removal of the plague of incest, Thebes can once again thrive. Orton's play subverts this well-established denouement of *katharsis* and the re-establishment of social, sexual and familial norms. Like Oedipus Rex, the discovery that all four characters are related halts the frenzied incidents which have upset the "normal" work day at the mental institute, just as the discovery of Oedipus' crime clears the plague from Thebes, but unlike the tragedy, there is no punishment imposed for the familial infractions.

Instead of destroying the Prentice family, incest reunifies them. Randall S. Nakayama notes the paradoxical nature of the play's ending.

That this family was begotten by rape and is reunited by adultery, blackmail, attempted seduction, transvestism, gunshot wounds, copious amounts of whiskey, forced drugging, and incest suggests that Orton was, at the very least, skeptical about . . . familial ties. (190)

In fact, like the endings of Entertaining Mr. Sloane and Loot, What the Butler Saw ends with the sanctioning of the principles of endogamy, where marriage or sexual relationships transpire within the same family. In Entertaining Mr. Sloane, Kath, Ed and Sloane create a nuclear family based on sharing a murderous youth. In Loot

Dennis, Hal and Fay form a household based on the sexual relationship between the three of them. Incest, in What the Butler Saw, is the bountiful harvest for a happy family and the restorer of familial trust and love. The act has, in effect, been stripped of its "taboo" connotations. Once Mrs. Prentice, Dr. Prentice, Nicholas and Geraldine have discovered their respective societal designations of "mother," "father," "brother" and "sister," titles they had never consciously possessed before, they are then able to "face the world" and exit by way of the sky light. Unlike Creon, the figure of authority Dr. Rance does not punish the guilty parties. Instead, he gleefully greets the discovery because not only was his original prognosis of Geraldine correct--she was the victim of incest--but the case is actually a situation of double incest and, hence, he can write his best-selling book on the subject. What destroyed the family in Oedipus Rex as well as Tis Pity She's A Whore and The Cenci, now in What the Butler Saw brings the family together and even receives a material stamp of approval.

An interesting contrast can be made with another farce which premiered seven years after What the Butler Saw. David Storey's Mother's Day also included an incestuous relationship amidst its own attempts to disrupt the

audience's expectations of the family.<sup>7</sup> Storey's idea was to present a family which did not conform to the usual standards associated with the theatrical British family. In an interview with William Hutchings, David Storey remarked:

Mother's Day was supposed to be a family where every traditional value was carefully inverted and the obverse was true of everyday reality. The family lived out a life which was the reverse of every traditional practice. Everything which was against the rule and totally unacceptable in family life was the norm in this family. [Laughter.] The critics all reacted like members of a normal family would do . . . (115)

In other words, the critics were not amused. The play was greeted derisively and critically drubbed.<sup>8</sup> Geoff Brown, a reviewer for Plays and Players, writes that the notices were so bad that

the Royal Court were forced to advertise [the reviewers'] objections ('a stinker', 'grisly', 'a loud fart in a cathedral') as a means of inveigling customers inside ('Custodians of the English cultural tradition are up in arms . . . Step ahead of your time and see Mother's Day').

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<sup>7</sup> Mother's Day opened at the Royal Court Theatre in September 1976.

<sup>8</sup> An amusing anecdote, though, did emerge from the critical lashing Storey's play received. Michael Billington was particularly harsh on the play, calling it "a stinker" and "a calculated exercise in bad taste" (qtd. in Randall "Another" 187). In response, David Storey knocked down Billington in the Royal Court Theatre bar. The critic later called a press conference to denounce Storey for his reliance on fisticuffs. "Mr. Storey, a rugged ex-rugby player, responded by saying that critics should be in better physical shape if they planned to challenge playwrights in print" (Gussow "When Writers" 5).

(36)<sup>9</sup>

Albert Kalson likewise found the production problematic, labelling it "a tasteless frolic" and identifying the play as an exercise in the Ortonesque without the Orton talent. Kalson goes on to remark: "Storey is uncomfortable with his caricatures, and the audience shares his discomfort" ("Mother's Day" 261). On the play's Ortonesque attempts Hutchings also comments: "Storey's play lacks both the epigrammatic wit and the satiric iconoclasm that were Orton's most distinctive characteristics" (117).<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately for Storey, Mother's Day has not yet experienced the same phoenix-like resurgence as What the Butler Saw. Despite its box office failure, though, Mother's Day has not completely vanished. In the last few years it has begun to receive its share of critical attention, most recently in two books on David Storey's works.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brown's response followed those of his colleagues in the dailies. At one point he made the following simile in trying to describe the painful process of watching one of the scenes: "It's rather like having a nail driven into one's head with repeated blows on a mallet" (36).

<sup>10</sup> One of the few positive responses to the play appeared in Oleg Kerensky's The New British Drama, where he highly praised Mother's Day. "The audience at the preview I attended, before any reviews had appeared, enjoyed the play hugely. Personally I found it more amusing and more theatrical than many of Storey's highly praised earlier efforts" (12).

<sup>11</sup> See Hutchings 110-7; and Randall "Another" 187-98.

Like Orton's farce, the plot is complex and filled with surprise twists and turns. The play takes place in a council flat occupied by the Johnson family. Mr. Johnson claims to be related to the father of the dictionary, Samuel Johnson, while Mrs. Johnson claims kin with the de John family, inventors of the toilet. Making up the rest of the Johnson brood is: Gordon, Mrs. Johnson's favorite child, who is sexually voracious, seducing and making love to any woman in sight, including his sisters; Lily, the daughter who lives in the cupboard and is constantly bombarded with the epithet of "Liar" by her mother; Edna, a seemingly normal daughter; and Harold, a member of the RAF, who has come home on leave to save his father from Gordon's attempts at murder. Into this household enters Judy and Farrer, who have rented the back room, as a means to elope, and a detective who is searching for the couple. A great deal of plot machinations ensue, including, but not limited to, blackmail, sexual switching of partners, cross-dressing and mistaken identities. The play finally dissolves into an embracing of the Johnson family's way of life by all the non-Johnson's of the play. The traditional, straitlaced norms are rejected in favor of the family's transgressive, taboo tendencies.

Whereas the early plot complications and humor of What the Butler Saw hinge on Dr. Prentice hiding the existence not only of his sexual attraction for Geraldine Barclay but

also of Barclay herself, Mother's Day revels in the frank demonstrations and declarations of the characters' sexual desires. Storey told Oleg Kerensky: "English urban life is sexually rapacious, and the play embodies that. Everybody involved in it is screwing everybody else, which is a reflection of the world we live in" (17). Even if Storey's statement is true about the prevalence of English sexual ongoings, the codes of society stress that one's sexuality and sexual activity, whether active or absent, should be kept private. Storey's play debunks this notion.

The Johnsons are, perhaps, one of the most candid families ever to grace the British stage. No thought, no urge, no desire goes unannounced and unquenched. Gordon, for example, desires Judy, the new lodger, and he has her the first night she stays in the house. The next morning he reveals to his mother and Judy's husband the deeds that were performed.

GORDON. I've just been fucking your wife upstairs. I fucked her everywhere I could. I fucked her up the front, then I fucked her up the back, then I fucked her in the throat, then I fucked her between her breasts, then I fucked her between her thighs. She's resting now. It's been quite a night.

MRS. JOHNSON. Gordon always was active as a child. (207-8)

Gordon "fucks" his sisters. He even tries to seduce Peters, the private detective, who comes to the Johnson house disguised as Judy's mother. Gordon's father also pursues Judy as well as Judy's real mother. The codes and

strictures of society which govern the "normal" actions of individuals have no jurisdiction in the Johnson household. It is a family which openly embraces and expresses the very items that society tells us we should keep secret. For example, Gordon reveals to Judy how his parents came to be married.

My mother comes from a titled family. . . . One day my father--younger than he is now--came to paint the windows. He put the ladder up one morning, saw my mother lying naked on her bed: climbed in, fucked her, and two nights later they eloped. (186)

Gordon's retelling of his parents' "first date" completely shatters the shell of decorum that is supposed to exist between parent and child, especially concerning the parents' sex life.

The two quotes above are also telling in the choice of Gordon's language. The act of having sex is denoted by the word "fuck," a harsh and gritty slang term, which emphasizes brutality and corporeality over emotional and spiritual union. In fact, none of these relationships are based on any type of emotional investiture on behalf of the characters. Instead, everything is based on physical attractiveness and lust. With these disruptions of common family etiquette, it is unsurprising, then, that incest would fall as a perfectly normal act within the Johnson family. Mrs. Johnson even casually wonders whether the de John and Johnson family are related, which would make the

entire brood incestuous. Harold and Edna, Gordon's brother and sister, decide that they want to marry one another. As can be expected, the physical union between them causes no consternation.

HAROLD. Mother: I want to get married.

MRS. JOHNSON. Who to?

HAROLD. Edna.

MRS. JOHNSON. She's your sister.

HAROLD. Then that makes it all the better, Mam!

MRS. JOHNSON. You don't have to leave home to  
fuck your sister. (242-3)

The emphasis once again is placed on the physical aspect of the relationship. The Johnsons do not believe in the conventional societal designation that one needs to be married to have sex. Instead, Harold should go ahead and "fuck" his sister and not worry about being tied down by a religious and societal ceremony.

When one compares these two farces, it becomes apparent that What the Butler Saw presents incest not only as a restorative agent at the play's denouement but also as the deluxe topping on a cake composed of broken sexual and societal taboos, including homosexuality, lesbianism, cross-dressing, adultery, medical misconduct, voyeurism, rape, lies and drugs. In Mother's Day, though, incest exists in a position of equality with the other disrupted norms, including attempted patricide, adultery, frank discussions of sexual longings with one's parents, open vulgarity, and the housing of progeny in cabinets.



Even though Orton's play ends with an incestuous discovery and re-unification, his characters still embrace some exogamic principles. Dr. Rance, after flourishing the phallus of Winston Churchill over the characters and the audience, advises: "Let us put our clothes on and face the world" (448).<sup>12</sup> The characters leave the space of the stage and return to the realm of society, lead by the voice of authority, the Queen's authority, Dr. Rance. Their actions to this point had been entirely endogamic, but with the recreation of the family, they can now turn outward and mingle with the community and society. Storey's play, though, does not end with society's approval of the family's actions. Instead, the play posits a family which is multiplying through its incorporation of the community within its ranks. Where Orton's ending suggests a return of the Prentice family to the macro-community of society, Storey's conclusion is entirely endogamic. The philosophy of the Johnson home is quickly appropriated by each and every visitor. No one leaves the council house without

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<sup>12</sup> Winston Churchill's phallus was excised from the original production by Sir Ralph Richardson but reinserted by Lindsay Anderson in the 1975 production. Its presence in the play has generated a great deal of scholarly discussion. However, one of the most astute reflections on it comes from Frank Robinson in Comic Moments, who notices that the audience and characters have become so involved and desensitized to all the transgressive shenanigans in this farcical world that neither group ever questions why a statue of Winston Churchill would have a penis in the first place (81).

being converted to their way of life. Equally, all the characters, once they have embraced the Johnsonian principles, immediately become family members, either uncles or aunts, nieces or nephews. Through his play Storey subverts not only the expectations of how the typical British family should behave, but also the working relationship between community and the family. Instead of heeding the established tradition of looking to the surrounding community for a spouse, the Johnson family envelops the community, member by member. In the process, their brood maintains its members, while continuing to increase in number. If this procedure persists, eventually the entire community will become composed of Johnsons, and society will be based completely on "incestuous" relationships. Mother's Day, then, mutes the domination of the community and society and replaces them with a homogeneous, ever expanding, endogamic family.

**Hitting Town: "We've just done sex together, my sister and me"**

Whereas Orton and Storey present incest through a comical perspective, Poliakoff in Hitting Town takes a far more serious glance at the events which prompt a brother and sister to engage in incest. Along with City Sugar, Hitting Town won Stephen Poliakoff the Evening Standard

award for "Most Promising Playwright" in 1975.<sup>13</sup> As is often the case, the two plays were not Poliakoff's first theatrical endeavors. By 1975, Poliakoff had already authored ten plays, including Lay-By (with David Hare, Howard Brenton, Snoo Wilson, Trevor Griffiths, Brian Clark and Hugh Stoddard).

Oleg Kerensky, who claims some credit in New British Dramatists for discovering Poliakoff, suggests that even though "incest dominated a lot of the publicity aroused by Hitting Town, . . . the play is mainly about the emptiness of urban life and how some people deliberately flout conventions to relieve their boredom" (257). Eric Salmon writes that the combination of Hitting Town and City Sugar "provide the most complete and the most devastating of Poliakoff's portraits of the modern urban wasteland" (415). Salmon's comment identifies one of the most defining characteristics about Poliakoff's plays in the seventies: his meticulous attention to his theatrical landscapes. These plays take place in "urban canyons"--Poliakoff's own term. Depicting the troubles and turmoil of the inner cities and communities of England, his vistas are filled with blank youths, bleakness, noise, and unexpected

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<sup>13</sup> In this study I will only be discussing Hitting Town. City Sugar is a companion play in that it retains two characters from Hitting Town, the disc jockey Leonard Brazil and the vapid teenager Nicola, who become involved in a contest of wills during a radio contest.

violence, as seen in Hitting Town as well as in Strawberry Fields (1977), Poliakoff's most successful play of the 1970's. These works also depict "the alienating effects of fast-food shops and discos, the banality of pop radio D.J.s." (Bull "Poliakoff" 537). Poliakoff, though, avoids didacticism. He tells his stories, leaving the audience to search for their own solutions.

Hitting Town details the one night escapade of Clare, a tired, thirty-year-old fashion designer, and her brother Ralph, a restless, twenty-year-old Birmingham architecture student. The play's seven scenes move from Clare's small, dirty flat through a desolate landscape pocked with graffiti, apathetic waitresses, and an empty disco before returning to her home. The question, though, that subtextually dominates the play is whether or not Ralph and Clare will have sex. Unlike the most well known brother-sister incest play, John Ford's Tis Pity She's A Whore, where the incestuous relationship provides the spark for the play's action, Hitting Town examines the events preceding the relationship's consummation late in the play.

In Poliakoff's play, though, there are no profanations of love, no spiritual unions between the brother and sister. Instead, their sexual attraction confuses the siblings. In his comment above, Kerensky explains that Ralph and Clare have sex to relieve their boredom, but his interpretation does not provide a completely satisfying

rationale for their actions. True, these two characters are bored, but they are also emotionally and physically starved, hungering for someone to show some compassion, even just to touch them. The reason for their incestuous relationship as well as their social deprivation can be resolved through a closer consideration of the play's setting and atmosphere. In effect, Poliakoff's play argues that Ralph and Clare embrace one another precisely because of the physical and social disintegration of the British urban environment. Since the natural socializing process of turning away from the family towards society is repeatedly rebuffed in this landscape, family members are left with one another as the only conduit for social and physical contact.

From Hitting Town's commencement, Poliakoff methodically sketches in his "urban canyon." Clare's room is "a bare, wooden," "modern, hideous," "featureless nasty blank box" (74-5). The walls are thin. Clumps of dead bugs dot the floor. A communal phone box sits outside her door (Clare removed her own phone because of prank calls). At night youths destroy items in the apartment courtyard. Her stifling domicile remains on stage, even while the couple "hits town," reminding the audience that the characters have not really escaped the cramped, depressing features of Clare's living space. Its continual presence also provides a juxtaposition with the town's environment,

which is not any more appetizing, composed of "concrete blocks . . . litter bins, and bright striking graffiti" (74). The Wimpy fast food restaurant they patronize is equally hideous, a modern manifestation of fast-food emptiness. The non-existent service prompts them to create their own dinner out of brown sauce, mustard, old crisps, an unfinished Mars bar, tranquilizers, vinegar, and tomato sauce, which comes in a tomato-shaped dispenser. As if it were a turkey, they carve up the plastic tomato, finding refuse from previous diners: some gum, half of a sardine, cigarette butts, and a tooth. The wretched contents only underscore the grievous, physically loathsome society and environment in which Ralph and Clare live. (What is even more surprising than the tooth in the plastic tomato is Ralph's and Clare's lack of surprise at its presence.) In Wimpy's they meet Nicola, an off-duty waitress who stoically watches the couple ravage the booth. They follow her outside and eventually to a disco, which is supposedly filled with people, but Poliakoff chooses to present only Clare, Ralph and Nicola on stage, indicating the isolation, lack of communication, and failed socializing processes among members of the same generation.

Hitting Town depicts a Britain filled with apathetic inhabitants. People communicate and express themselves through spray-painted epithets on walls, obscene phone calls, pranks, and "spots," either on call-in radio shows,

where participants are processed into disembodied voices emitting from a speaker, or in the disco, where Nicola sings along with a pre-recorded song. This latter incident is particularly unnerving as she first stumbles through the song and then, at its conclusion, screams, which is the only sign she exhibits of her individuality. But what does her scream signify? Fear, hate, pain, agony, a cry for help? Or, is it merely a meaningless gesture in a society which has grown accustomed to screams? Poliakoff never provides an opportunity to answer these questions because after this scene Nicola disappears from the rest of the play. Her disturbing exit and its lack of dramatic closure or interest from Ralph and Clare only emphasizes the disconnectedness between the inhabitants of Poliakoff's urban wasteland.

The atmosphere of the play is not the only component Poliakoff uses to establish his urban canyon. Sound is also an essential feature. From start to finish an endless stream of background noise confronts the characters: sirens, cars, muzak, screams, disco music and burglar alarms. Ralph attempts to disrupt the din, but he succeeds in only increasing the volume. When he makes a prank call to Leonard Brazil, claiming to be an eleven-year-old boy who just slept with his same age sister, he provokes Brazil's verbal wrath as the disc jockey becomes obsessed with finding the prankster. However, a subtle distinction

exists between the numerous sounds of the play. There are the predictable beats of the disco music, muzak and rush of cars, all of which are omnipresent and have become familiar background noises of the city. But then, there are the quick pulsating noises which startle and terrify: sirens, burglar alarms, the shouts of Ralph, the piercing screams of Nicola, and perhaps the loudest noise, which takes place before the play even begins, the fatal car bombs that exploded in Birmingham.<sup>14</sup>

These unexpected sounds have the greatest impact on the characters. As Eric Salmon notes, throughout Hitting Town there is a "constant feeling of frustration and the equally constant sense of an impending explosion, violent in impact but unspecified in nature" (414). With the knowledge that potential violence can result from the smallest, most innocuous thing, the characters, especially Clare, live on edge, uncertain of what might happen. Ralph constantly harps on his sister's fear. At one point, he holds a match beneath his can of soda before placing it on

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Poliakoff in his introduction to his first volume of collected plays explains that the car bombings in England in the mid-1970s influenced him to write Hitting Town: "It was written in February 1975, soon after the Birmingham and Guildford bombings, that have so recently come back to haunt us. I was living at the time near Selfridges, where all the windows were blown out one day near Christmas, leaving pieces of decorations and clothes scattered all over Oxford Street. It was a time when, as you walked down the street, you expected cars to blow up in front of you" (x-xi).



the ground.

RALPH. Keep your eyes fixed on that. It's only small . . . but when I pour your ice cold drink over it, it should . . .

CLARE (*getting up, backing away*). No stop it . . . please.

RALPH. Where are you going? Ready. Watch! *Clare backs away. Ralph with a very sudden movement pours her drink over his can.*  
Silence. (84)

An innocuous soda can now becomes a realistic threat, encapsulating a society conditioned to expect explosions from innocent, small items. A constant danger lurks around every corner, waiting to explode.

Ralph, though, is not threatened by these explosions. In fact, he seeks out the violence and bloodshed. He tells Clare about an incident which occurred on the street in Birmingham.

RALPH. And you know, the day before yesterday I saw a car parked. And I knew just like that it had a bomb in it, you see. It was a dirty green mini, vicious looking. Are you listening? -- And I went up and leant against it, Clare, yes. It was hot--the metal was--though the air was freezing. And I leant right on it. But nothing happened. (118-9)

He can either be a victim (but he cannot find a bomb to kill him) or an aggressor (but his bomb threats to various locations around town are empty gestures)--Ralph's dilemma indicates that life has become a battle zone. In Poliakoff's vision of Britain, violence occurs unexpectedly, without explanation or warning. For precisely this reason Ralph cannot find any real bombs, and

his continual attempts to define himself through violence indicate how it has become a societal constant instead of an anomaly.

The violence, the noise, the oppressive environment and the absence of sociability have beaten and driven these characters into a guise of inaction and futility. Clare suffers through the drudgery of her job and then returns alone to her apartment. Nicola's emotional range is nonexistent as she lives for her three minutes to perform her song. Equally, all facets of expression have been depleted. Slogans are meaningless, written on walls and easily spray painted over the next day. Student demonstrations, which Ralph had first participated in, no longer serve any purpose. Ralph seeks attention while at the same time wallowing in inaction. He can dirty a booth in a fast food restaurant, spout vituperative expressions and flirt with his sister, but any action effecting political or social change is absent from his demeanor. He is the Jimmy Porter for the seventies: angry, young and completely powerless, but he has lost Porter's gift for rhetoric. Unlike Look Back in Anger, no long speeches dominate this play. In fact, language is a constant stumbling block for all the characters, especially Ralph, who attempts to articulate his passion for his sister through mumbles, giggles and half-completed sentences. The icon of British anger with his rousing speeches has been

reduced, twenty years later, to a sniffling, angry youth who does not know where to turn or who to blame for his troubles. He lacks the ability to express his rage at his powerlessness as the youths in Edward Bond's Saved are able to do when they murder Pam's baby. And unlike Harold Pinter's characters, he cannot box his feelings in, suppressing his anger through deliberately couched, yet violent banter. Instead, he feebly attempts to define himself in a world which is not interested.

Not surprisingly, family relationships have been affected by this oppressive environment. Before Ralph's appearance at Clare's flat, they had not spoken for five months. Clare repeatedly reminds her brother to call their mother, which he never does. Nicola has a brother with whom she does not socialize. Yet, even though family relations are strained, they still exist. They cannot be broken, and it is no surprise that the characters, needing to socialize, would eventually turn to someone familiar for companionship. Within this deficient, hostile environment, the relationship between brother and sister becomes the play's focal point.

Besides Leonard Brazil's rumblings, which are more bluster than bite, Nicola's reaction to Ralph's and Clare's relationship is mute. Ralph reveals to Nicola the truth of his relationship with Clare, but the waitress exhibits no shock or disgust. She just looks at them puzzled until she

finally asks Clare:

NICOLA (*staring straight at them*). I mean, does he touch you and things . . . and . . .

CLARE. Don't be vulgar. Of course not. Don't worry.

NICOLA. Maybe he will. (107)

Nicola's question encapsulates one of the many elements lacking in the play's environment. She does not ask for details of what they do, but just "does he touch you?" The emphasis is on physical contact between two people. Through touching one not only realizes that someone else is present but one also determines his/her own presence.

After their night on the town, the brother and sister return back to the flat. Clare, the older sibling, finally takes the initiative in completing what Ralph had half-jokingly started. However, before the two retire off-stage to Clare's bedroom, Poliakov returns to Nicola's question as he emphasizes the physical contact Clare inaugurates with her brother.

CLARE. You've made up your mind?

RALPH. Yes.

CLARE. That's a change. Good. (*She casually strokes his hair then gives him a very sexual kiss.*) You're very cold. Why are you so cold? (*Looking at him.*) You've got the same bad complexion as I have . . . (*quiet*) Are you clean then, everywhere?

RALPH. Of course I am.

CLARE. Let's have a look. (*She moves his head slightly.*) Not very, no. But you'll do. I think. (*She is staring straight at him, touching him, caressing him.*) Won't you?  
(114-5)

It is this element of contact that makes their incest

redemptive, a respite from the isolationism of society. For all their suffering and loneliness, it is important that Ralph and Clare find contact somehow. Humans need to socialize, need to be touched, need to be loved. The incestuous act, classified as taboo, provides the only means for escape from a world where no one and nothing is important, where everything has been reduced to absence, loneliness, insensitivity, selfishness, and violence.

A brief glance at Clare's language is also telling. She tells Ralph "you'll do," indicating that their act of making love will provide a momentary escape, but it does not entail a long-term commitment. It is only for the evening, as a means of comfort. Even though their sleeping together obviously reflects on the communicative breakdown of British society, Ralph and Clare still have not completely become desensitized by their everyday surroundings like the vapid, zombie Nicola. Their act demonstrates that the basic guiding human principles of needing to be held, desiring to be touched, longing for affection have not completely been demolished in Poliakoff's urban canyon.

After they have left the bed and each other's arms, though, they still must go out into that miserably cramped, horrible room as the noises grow from the neighboring apartment and the city street below. They then will separate, facing life in the canyon on their own once

again. In Hitting Town, incest, along with its elements of touching, desire, and kisses, provides an unconventional respite, a chance to escape, from a contemporary British society that has become bankrupt in all facets.

**Beside Herself: "I remember being raped by you"**

While Poliakoff in Hitting Town depicts how an apathetic society and cruel urban landscape can initiate an incestuous relationship, Sarah Daniels in Beside Herself confronts, from an indicting feminist perspective, the seriously damaging consequences of incest on its female victims. Sarah Daniels came to the attention of the London theatre world with her first play, Ripen our Darkness (1981), performed at the Royal Court Theatre.<sup>15</sup> Her political, moralistic, but still creatively rough feminist voice was fresh as it emerged from the wake of an explosion of feminist dramatists in the 1970s. Sarah Daniels remarked: "Ninety percent of British audiences are white. Ninety percent of British playwrights are white males. Voices like mine tend to be less heard, less accepted"

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<sup>15</sup> In her introduction to Plays: One, she writes: "I didn't set out to be a 'Feminist Playwright'. I didn't set out to be a playwright at all. . . . I didn't even like drama. . . . To my amazement, I found that the first time I went to the theatre I enjoyed it. . . . Convinced that my life needed 'putting in order' . . . I started to write a play" (ix).

(Minwalla 29). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Daniels has maintained her status as one of Britain's leading young dramatists without having had a West End smash.<sup>16</sup> The reviews of her plays have always been mixed, mainly because of the didacticism her works demonstrate as she slides "misogynist society under a penetrating spotlight" (Minwalla 29).<sup>17</sup> Beside Herself is an equally divisive play and the critics, as usual, were split in their reactions. Charles Osborne writing for The Daily Telegraph states:

Beside Herself veers between a number of styles and genres, among them fantasy, documentary, Ortonesque black comedy and farce, but finally comes to rest as adult soap opera. Unfortunately, Sarah Daniels proves to be less than adept in each of these forms, and has not learned how to construct a scene, let alone a play. Yet she appears to have written at least seven others. (469)

The rambunctious Irving Wardle of the Independent on Sunday asks: "Do not boys get abused too? If themes were all that

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<sup>16</sup> The closest she has come is Neaptide (1986), which opened at the National Theatre's Cottesloe Theatre. Her best known work is Masterpieces (1983), a stark, confrontational piece attacking pornography and its detrimental effect on the relationships between men and women.

<sup>17</sup> Despite the difference in critical opinion, few critics have disputed her tendency to confront highly provocative and inflammatory issues: incest, pornography, violence against women, lesbianism. Perhaps Daniels does not possess the same theatrical acumen that many contemporary playwrights have--she admits to her own tendency towards melodrama--but what craftsmanship she lacks she offsets through her ability to provoke audiences to take sides on the issues discussed.

counted, this would be an important play. What Daniels offers here serves mainly to endorse the feminist theory that plot construction is tyranny imposed by men" (471). However, critics were also positive in their response. Lyn Gardner of City Limits writes: "[The play] may not be perfect (what play is?) but it is undeniably one of the most important plays of the last ten years" (468) and Michael Coveney of the Observer notes: "Here is the dramatic analogue of a contemporary social tragedy which exists on a scale we are only just beginning to comprehend" (469).

Beside Herself opens with an amusing, pun-filled prologue between Eve, Delilah, Mrs. Lot, and Jezebel, who are doomed to perpetual hell in a grocery store, as they exist invisibly among the shoppers and aisles of canned food and frozen vegetables. The play then follows the mental breakdown of Evelyn and her alter ego Eve, as she finally confronts her father over his incestuous attacks of her when she was a child. Evelyn, married to a Member of Parliament, is on the board of a number of various charitable causes, one being St. Dymphna's, a halfway house for mentally ill patients. This home and its patients, employees, and supervisors become the central catalyst for Evelyn's confrontation with her past. Through this setting three other incest victims are also introduced: Nicola (a nurse), Dawn (a patient), and Gaynor's daughter (the latter



two characters do not appear on stage but their stories are told by others).

Daniels admits that her purpose in writing the play was not just to emphasize the horrific repercussions of incest, but also to stress that incest is sexual abuse (Personal Interview).<sup>18</sup> The distinction of terminology is telling and effective. "Sexual abuse" is a harsher and far more indicting term than "incest," which has become romanticized through literature and Freud's psychological theories. In her book Incest, Karin Meiselman notes that there is a "special aura of forbiddenness that attaches to the term incest" (83). Forbiddenness suggests an inescapable attractiveness for an act which has been designated as off-limits. Even though incest and sexual abuse both provoke the common reactions of horror, disgust and shock, incest also carries a wealth of psychological, social, erotic, and cultural baggage. Sexual abuse, though, is free from these literary and cultural accessories. In effect, while incest has belonged to two different worlds, literary and real, sexual abuse has always belonged to just the real world, until Daniels' play.

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<sup>18</sup> Incest, in most cases, is sexual abuse. Rarely does incest occur consensually, as in Poliakoff's Hitting Town and Ford's Tis Pity She's A Whore, or casually and accidentally as in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Orton's What the Butler Saw.

Unlike What the Butler Saw, Mother's Day and Hitting Town, Beside Herself does not document the effect of incest on merely one family or even one economic class. Instead, incest pervades the entire socio-economic spectrum as represented by the four victims. Their accounts reflect the more realistic incest relationships which occur in the non-literary world: father/daughter (Evelyn and Dawn), uncle/niece (Gaynor's daughter), and step-father/step-daughter (Nicola). Daniel's play argues what many sociologists and psychologists have already acknowledged: the pervasiveness and complexity of incest is not encapsulated by the simplistic legal definition in England. "English law defines incest as being sexual intercourse between a male and female whom the man knows to be his daughter, sister, half-sister, grand-daughter or mother" (Renvoize 24). Jean Renvoize's definition is far more encompassing and specific:

[I]ncest is a sexual relationship that may continue for years or be expressed overtly by nothing more than a single act, that takes place between a young person under the age of consent and an older person who has a close family tie, which is either a blood tie as with father/daughter/son, mother/daughter/son, brother/sister, or is a substitute for such relationships, as with step-parent or parent's lover where the substitute has effectively taken over the role of the missing parent. (31)

Renvoize's definition parallels Daniels own theatrical version of incest/sexual abuse, where the victims are young girls, abused by their father, step-father or another male

relative who is supposed to provide and maintain an environment of protection, trust and caring. Orton's, Storey's and Poliakoff's plays fail not only in exploring the issue of familial betrayal and authoritarian misconduct, but also in considering the repercussions of the act on the victims because they depict consensual incestuous relationships. Beside Herself, by contrast, returns to the elements of pain and suffering found in Oedipus Rex, Tis Pity She's A Whore and The Cenci.

Daniels, however, has turned from the cathartic, physical punishments of Sophocles', Ford's and Shelley's plays in order to examine the psychological and social batterings these women experience.

Beside Herself accentuates the disquieting pervasiveness of sexual abuse in society, whether it is publicly acknowledged or privately concealed. In this community, sexual abuse wounds, stultifies, silences and handicaps its victims in varying degrees and in all cases disrupts the families, causing conflict and strife between the abuser and victim as well as between the victim and mother. In Evelyn's situation, once a week her father would take her to the zoo and then molest her on the way home. When she would stay longer and longer at the zoo, he began molesting her before they arrived. The pain, betrayal and memories of those afternoons have had a devastating effect emotionally and socially on Evelyn who

now avoids conflict whenever possible. Instead, she prefers to hide in her interior decorating shell, concerning herself only with color schemes and fabric patterns. Dawn, who never appears on stage, has suffered an even greater social displacement than Evelyn. She lost her hearing, perhaps because of her father's beatings; her baby, the product of her father's advances; and the comfort and security of her family. She now is supported by the government because of her woefully undeveloped social skills.

One of Daniels' main arguments is that incest/sexual abuse betrays the relationship between the male parent and the female child, between protector and protected. In one stroke the same man who tells his daughter that he loves her abuses her. Rarely does the child have any one to turn to for guidance. In Beside Herself, as in many incest cases, the mothers fall deaf to the pleas of their daughters, believing their husbands before their child.<sup>19</sup> The child also fears what will happen if the relationship is ever discovered. Evelyn reveals: "And the threats got worse. What would be done to me, to him, to my mother. And I wanted none of these things to happen" (81). Incest, in effect, deepens the despair of women who are already

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<sup>19</sup> Karin Meiselman notes that incest takes place between three people, the abuser, the child, and the spouse who remains silent.

trapped in a male-dominated world. Not only have their voices been overruled, but the main blame for the incestuous relations is not placed on the aggressor.

GREG: I agree [incest] happens in all classes but [it] is the product of a dysfunctional family where the man is looking for affection and nurturing, albeit inappropriately, and therefore the whole family, starting with the mother, need re-educating into their appropriate roles. (37)

As in Poliakoff's Hitting Town, the various settings of the play are directly related to the presentation of incest. The play moves from the supermarket to St. Dymphna's to various households, including the homes of Evelyn's father George and Nicola's mother and step-father, Lil and Tony. The most revealing set is St. Dymphna's, the half-way house for mental patients, which, upon its first appearance, has been ransacked and looted by angry neighbors who do not want it in their neighborhood. Daniels' stage directions indicate: *"The only decipherable word 'Loonies' has pride of place between the picture rail and frame of the mirror over the fireplace. The mirror is smashed. The fragments lie scattered over the floor"* (14). At one point Richard, a disgruntled homeowner, explains in a monologue his reservations about the presence of St. Dymphna's in his neighborhood:

My wife's never been what you might call solid as a rock in the upstairs department. She's always been rather edgy. Living close to people who are really disturbed might tip the balance. She might go mad. My daughter might take drugs. My

son might get AIDS and I've worked all my life to be a normal family man. (61)

Richard articulates the feelings of an uneducated and irrationally afraid community, concerned with themselves rather than with the problems and recovery processes of others. A St. Dymphna board member shares these same uninformed concerns. Teddy is a clergyman, but refuses to offer aid to a homosexual resident who has died of an heart attack. "I can't touch him. . . . He disgusts me" (66). Teddy, Roy and numerous other characters are Daniels' depiction of the "hands-off" attitude which emerged in the money-hungry, self-absorbed decade of the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. Close-mindedness and self-preservation are the dominant creeds for this society.<sup>20</sup>

The horror and monumental tragedy of this entire attitude towards the patients and the victims of incest is symbolized in the print that Evelyn brings to St. Dymphna's to cover the painted epithet of "Loonies." It is Pieter Brueghel the Elder's Fall of Icarus, depicting Icarus' terrifying fall into the ocean, which goes unnoticed, even

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<sup>20</sup> In Hitting Town we can already see Poliakoff anticipating this change in English demeanor in his "urban canyon" plays. Other playwrights in the 1980's also were critical of the attitudes being fostered by Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, including Caryl Churchill in Top Girls and Serious Money, Alan Ayckbourn in A Small Family Business (1987), Tony Marchant in Speculators (1987), and David Hare in The Secret Rapture (1988), to name a few.

though the landscape is populated with laborers and a ship. W. H. Auden's addresses this painting's theme in "Musée des Beaux Arts."

About suffering they were never wrong,  
 The Old Masters: how well they understood  
 Its human position; how it takes place  
 While someone else is eating or opening a window  
           or just walking dully along;  
 . . . . .  
 In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance, how  
           everything turns away  
 Quite leisurely from the disaster. (1-4, 14-15)

This perspective is precisely what Daniels articulates in the actions and behavior of her male characters, who continually deny the widespread existence and prevalence of incest. Life for the patriarchy continues unabated as Roy and Greg, both doctors and St. Dymphna board members, casually dismiss incest and place the blame on the mothers, while forgiving the men. When the board is discussing Dawn's case history of sexual abuse, Roy argues: "And where was Dawn's mother in all this. Two safe bets, either gadding about relinquishing her responsibilities or turning a blind eye" (35).

Unlike Icarus, Evelyn's suffering continues every day. It grows to a desperate fury every fortnight when she goes grocery shopping for her father. Visiting him in his kitchen is terrifying, as she maintains her distance from him so he can not touch her. Her past gnaws away at her in the guise of Eve, her alter ego, who continually follows her around, mocking her every word to her father and

verbally attacking her for her submissiveness before him: "You're thick," "Dunce," "You're pathetic" (10-3). In hopes of avoiding being pinned down to one topic and one thought, Evelyn rushes from committee meeting to committee meeting. Whenever an uncomfortable topic is discussed, such as Dawn and her abusive father or the pervasiveness of incest in British society, Evelyn/Eve escapes by reciting interior decorating colors: "Prussian blue, spectrum blue, ultramarine . . . blue violet, light violet, dark violet, imperial purple . . . deep cadmium, lemon cadmium" (36-7), blocking out any conversation that might remind her of her own past.

Finally, her escape route ends. One afternoon Evelyn is forced to confront the death of one of the patients while also trying to deal with Gaynor and Richard, who are community representatives against St. Dymphna's. Eve immediately notices and recoils away from Dave's dead body on the living room sofa, but Evelyn tries to ignore him, wanting to maintain the status quo of no conflict in her life. However, she can no longer hide behind her interior decorating, empty comments and feigned smile. She must now brave a crisis situation, something which she does not know how to do. Confronted by the board members over why she did not realize that Dave was dead, her inner self Eve finally snaps. The violence, anger and frustration finally erupts internally while Evelyn still remains sitting



passively.

EVE: While they stand and point and tell each other you're to blame, I am smashing my fist, splitting my skull. Inside my head someone is wielding an axe. I am smashing all the things in my father's house. Everything is splintering around me. (75)

After this scene, Evelyn decides to face her past. She confides her story to the nurse Nicola, who, of the play's four incest victims, has best adapted socially and professionally to her own past (although Evelyn does not realize that Nicola was also abused). Evelyn then confronts her father George: "I remember screaming in the back of your car. . . . I remember being raped by you" (85). Her father denies his actions at first, but then admits to it, claiming: "You were special, vulnerable. I wanted to keep you to me. It was the only way I knew to show love" (86). It is a powerful and cathartic scene for Evelyn, who has been plagued by demons. She now stands up and asserts herself, admitting that she has told her husband, daughter and her father's medical co-workers about his abuse of her. "No, Father," she explains. "I don't want revenge. What could I possibly do to you that would undo what you've done to me? I've lived with it and I don't want to any longer. You can live with it" (88). In effect, Evelyn replaces the onus of being a victim with the strength of being a survivor.

Certainly, Evelyn's confrontation with her father is a

psychological, emotional and spiritual purging, but there is no final decisive victory for her. While George confesses to the deed in private, he does not take public responsibility for his actions. He does not understand the amount of suffering he has inflicted on his daughter. Likewise, after hearing that his daughter has told his family and co-workers of his actions, he tells her that no one will believe her. In the patriarchal society of Daniels' play, the denial of George, a respected medical authority, will be privileged by his colleagues over the accusation of his eccentric daughter, who has already been described by the priest Teddy as a "good egg but absolutely barking mad" (41).

The play though does not end with Evelyn. Daniels returns to Nicola, who, after counseling Evelyn, decides to return home. (Lil, Nicola's mother, had refused to believe her daughter's accusations about Tony, her step-father, and in response Nicola ran away). The play closes with a brief scene of Nicola finally facing her mother on the family doorstep, while her step-father bellows: "Who the hell is it?" Lil responds: "It's for me" as she draws the door behind her (90). The ending is ambiguous, since we have no idea of what the outcome of this first step towards a new dialogue will be, but perhaps what is more significant is that the end of the play finally heralds a coming together of mothers and daughters, who had previously been separated

by the mothers' support of their husbands' claims of innocence. In the play's final scene, then, Daniels depicts females seeking one another for advice and help, instead of refusing to listen to one another.

In conclusion, Daniels' presentation of sexual abuse is vitriolic, controversial, and feminist, as she blames men for the act of incest as well as the lack of concern after it happens. By contrast, Poliakoff's play indicts British society as a whole for creating and condoning an empty, mind-numbing, and hideous environment which encourages incest. His play recalls George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-four (1949), where everyone lives separately and socializing and romantic relationships are discouraged. Because of the urban environment, Clare and Ralph are drawn to one another for a brief respite from such a stultifying atmosphere. Daniels, though, identifies the cause of incest as existing in the relationships between the sexes. It is the men in the powerful positions who abuse their trust and turn a blind eye to the taboo relationship. Sexual abuse, for Daniels and her characters, is not a matter of consensual choice as in Hitting Town or in the upside down, topsy-turvy world of Mother's Day; it is not a matter of accidental relations as in What the Butler Saw. Instead, Daniels depicts the achingly brutal world of contemporary society where fathers, uncles, and step-fathers exploit their positions

as protectors and care providers and force themselves upon their young child or ward, creating mental anguish, madness, social retardation as well as disrupting the entire family balance of roles and relationships. By stripping away the literary romanticization of incest--for example, there are no cathartic slayings--Daniels leaves us with the uncomfortable knowledge of the prevalence of sexual abuse which exists, but is unknown and unidentified. Evelyn and Nicola manage to exorcise their demons and come to terms with their pasts, but the off-stage fate of Dawn and Gaynor's daughter remains unresolved, uncertain. The faceless victims continue to experience the terror of abuse, while the rest of patriarchal society blindly goes on with their lives, just as "the dogs" from Auden's poem

go on with their doggy life and the  
torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree. (12-3)

## CHAPTER THREE

### Love, Sex, and Power:

#### Infidelity in Contemporary Marriage

DEBBIE: Well, it wasn't about anything, except did she have it off or didn't she? What a crisis. Infidelity among the architect class. Again.

--Tom Stoppard, The Real Thing

The dramatic and comedic possibilities of adultery have long made it a reliable staple of the theatre. Even though the theme is an extremely prevalent one on the contemporary English stage, as demonstrated by the omnipresent sex farces which dot the West End,<sup>1</sup> the adultery play may have achieved its apex of theatrical depiction during the latter half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> At this time, it was the thematic centerpiece for many popular kinds of plays, including: domestic comedy, which usually involved an unsuccessful attempt at adultery; farcical comedy, which

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<sup>1</sup> Two writers, Ray Cooney and Michael Pertwee, have been especially successful with the sex farce in contemporary British theatre. For a discussion of these two farceurs, see Smith 85-119.

<sup>2</sup> For two discussions of adultery in twentieth-century drama, see Fan; and Troxel "Theater."

made light of marital dishonesty; and melodrama.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, adultery became such a commonplace subject matter on the modern British stage that George Bernard Shaw, in the Preface to his one act farce Overruled (1912), denounced the prevalence of these types of plays on the stage and rebuked those individuals who contended "that a play that is not about adultery is not a play at all" (68). The principal weakness of these plays, according to Shaw, is that they fail to fulfill their titillating promise. According to Martin Meisel, Shaw "held that the contemporary farcical comedy, no less than the contemporary drama of adultery, merely professed a subject-matter of sex, and presented instead only legal dilemmas and plot puzzles" (262). Shaw argued that this deliberate avoidance on the part of the playwrights created mind-numbing drama with predictable third acts. "Conventional farcical comedies," Shaw writes, "are always finally tedious because the heart of them, the inevitable conjugal infidelity, is always evaded" (74-5). He insists that these types of plays need to change:

I want the unfaithful husband or the unfaithful wife . . . to tell me how and why married couples are unfaithful. I don't want to hear the lies they tell one another to conceal what they have done, but the truths they tell one another when they have to face what they have done without concealment or excuse. (76)

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of these three genres, see Meisel 184-268.

With this declaration stated, Shaw proceeds to introduce his own adultery play, Overruled. The work opens with two lovers, Mrs. Juno and Gregory Lunn, professing words of love to one another. Hearing their spouses arrive, they hide and overhear their partners speaking the same sweet nothings. Mrs. Juno and Lunn emerge from their hiding place and confront their spouses. After some bickering and a public acknowledgement of what has transpired between each couple, all four contentedly retire to dinner with the men sporting their new loves on their arms.

Shaw dispenses with the shenanigans and subterfuges of guilty concealment, which have been and still are a popular comical property of theatrical adultery. Instead, both couples readily and heartily admit to their transgressions, illustrating Shaw's adultery play manifesto against lying. The author of Overruled, though, is not completely successful in his explanation of how and why these two married couples are unfaithful. Evidently, the impetus behind his characters' adulterous relations is that their marriages are far too happy and, thus, all too boring.

Juno admits:

You get so sick of being happily married. It's always the happy marriages that break up. At last my wife and I agreed that we ought to take a holiday . . . from one another. . . . She said it was an excellent idea; that domestic felicity was making us perfectly idiotic. (89)

A happy marriage, then, is a bad thing and a valid reason

for infidelity. Although Shaw does create an intriguing comical oxymoron, he does not really provide a viable and believable motive for adultery. Like the playwrights he criticizes in his preface, he still fails to explain why infidelity occurs.

Despite Shaw's rumblings, the adultery play still continued to be popular choice among modern dramatic and comedic playwrights, even well-known playwrights like Noel Coward. Coward made adultery the focus of a number of his plays, including Fallen Angels (1925), Hay Fever (1925), Private Lives (1930), Design for Living, and Blithe Spirit (1941). In these works the characters perceive marriage as something other than a commitment. Fallen Angels is a case in point. The presence of romantic passion in this marriage has disappeared, replaced by boredom and taciturnity. The couple is no longer in love, as the husband tells his wife of five years: "You know perfectly well we've reached a remarkable sublime plane of affection and good comradeship" (9). In response, the characters look outside their marriage in an attempt to re-incite the excitement and surprise which accompanies the act of courting. Gone are the fears of scandal and societal recriminations, which drove the plots of, among others, Victorien Sardou's plays, Oscar Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan (1892), and modern and contemporary British sex farces. In Coward's theatrical world adultery and scandal are no



longer co-dependent. Instead, his comedies contain witty repartee with either the occasional lies about adultery, as in Fallen Angels, or a completely open marriage, as in Hay Fever and Design for Living.

Coward, like the writers that Shaw attacked in his preface to Overruled, is not concerned with exploring the reasons behind his characters' adulterous inclinations. Instead, he is more interested in presenting an upper-class society where style, wit and grace are foregrounded before emotional and romantic attachments. His plays, then, take place in fashionable, jet-setting parlors, sitting rooms and balconies in New York, Paris and London. In stressing elegance, affluence, and epigrams, his productions awakened a genre that had become predictable and commonplace. After Coward, though, the adultery play re-settled into its predictable but audience pleasing patterns and was not reawakened again until the 1970s and 1980s.

At this time four contemporary writers, Alan Ayckbourn, Harold Pinter, Peter Nichols, and Tom Stoppard, rose above the one-dimensional characters, predictable jokes and tired masquerades of the eternal triangle scenario. In the process they released it from the fodder of contemporary sex farceurs, whose interests were, and still are, imbedded in double entendre jokes, manic action, improbable scenarios, mistaken identities, and formulaic structures. In striking contrast to these banal,

adulterous depictions, Ayckbourn's The Norman Conquests, Pinter's Betrayal, Nichols' Passion Play and Stoppard's The Real Thing not only confront, through humor, the distress and disharmony that adultery causes, but also rejuvenate the conventions of the genre through their innovative theatrical techniques.

Adultery, in fact, is not a new theatrical subject matter for any of these four writers. In Alan Ayckbourn's canon, for example, it is a staple. Infidelity can be found in Relatively Speaking (1967) and How the Other Half Loves (1970), his first two West End successes; Absurd Person Singular (1973), where adultery is the spark for manic, comedic attempts at suicide; Season's Greetings (1980), where a fumbled adultery attempt under the Christmas tree erupts into an explosion of lights and music; and A Chorus of Disapproval (1985), where the protagonist sleeps with all the actresses in a community production of John Gay's The Beggar's Opera. Harold Pinter's plays, as well, rely on adultery, as either a theme, plot device, or subtextual possibility. In The Birthday Party (1958), Pinter insinuates that Stanley and Meg may be having a sexual relationship, while in A Slight Ache (1959) a wife selects a silent matchseller to replace her husband. In The Homecoming a wife agrees to become a prostitute for her husband's family, while in Landscape (1968) a wife relates the instances of an affair which

occurred on a beach.<sup>4</sup> Peter Nichols has written about adultery in his television plays and in Chez Nous (1974), where a thirteen-year-old girl seduces and becomes pregnant by a married friend of the family. In 1966, Tom Stoppard wrote a television play Teeth about a dentist cum cuckolded husband, who maneuvers his wife's lover into his examination chair. Before writing The Real Thing, Tom Stoppard returned briefly to adultery in Dirty Linen (1976), where 119 Members of Parliament have romanced Ms. Gotobed, and Night and Day (1978), where, in a sub-plot, a wife must confront the consequences of an affair she had with a newspaper reporter while on holiday in London. Most recently, in Stoppard's Olivier-award-winning Arcadia (1993), a nineteenth-century affair fuels, in the 1990s, scholarly speculation about Lord Byron and sexual tension between two academics.

It is immediately worth noting, though, that these four playwrights do not completely jettison the usual conventions and characteristics of the adultery genre. They still rely on the traditional elements: alibis, illicit letters, frilly underwear (or even no underwear), slips of the tongue, lustful middle-aged men, young lascivious women, hasty excuses, secret phone calls,

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<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the presence of betrayal in Pinter's plays, see Knowles 33-44; and Troxel "Theater" 309-404.

weekend plans, and furtive moments of secrecy. However, unlike many of their predecessors, Ayckbourn, Pinter, Nichols and Stoppard also depict the complexity of the triangular relationship. They recognize the lasting repercussions infidelity has on marital power, knowledge, faith, friendship, compassion, myth making, honor and self-realization. Because these playwrights provide a fresh and theatrically innovative glimpse into marriages, relationships and the family, their plays distinguish themselves from the multitude of hum-drum, predictable adultery plays which comprise most of the genre's canon.

**The Norman Conquests: "I only wanted to make you happy"**

The Norman Conquests differs from the rest of the plays discussed in this study because it is not one play, but three. Alan Ayckbourn explains that he decided to write the trilogy because it was "a challenge and something of an adventure for the actors and for me as a director" (Preface 9).<sup>5</sup> Covering late Saturday afternoon through Monday morning, each play occurs in a different location of a Sussex home: the dining room in Table Manners, the living room in Living Together, and the garden in Round and Round

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<sup>5</sup> Ayckbourn made sure each play of the trilogy could stand alone because he could not rely on his audience, mostly comprised of Scarborough vacationers, to return for two more performances.

the Garden.

The three plays detail the amorous adventures of Assistant Librarian Norman Dewers, during a weekend visit to his mother-in-law's home. Norman is best described as "a baggy-trouserred, woolly-capped, scruffy, dog-like, sexually itchy Peter Pan" (Billington Ayckbourn 70). He is unhappily married to Ruth, a motivated business woman who has little time, patience or energy for her husband's childish games and grandstanding attempts for attention. Ruth has a brother Reg and a sister Annie, both of whom are far from content in their own romantic relationships. Reg, an inventor of complicated board games, which are tested out on disinclined family members, is married to Sarah, a no-nonsense woman, who finds great comfort in order and cleanliness and wishes the family could just have one quiet, calm meal together. Annie is single and still lives with their ailing, invalid mother. Occasionally visiting her is a dull, dense vet named Tom, her pseudo-suitor, whose social skills are woefully inadequate. During the previous Christmas, Norman and Annie wrestled on the living room rug, and now Norman plans to take Annie away to East Grinstead for a dirty weekend. Sarah, though, discovers their surreptitious plot and foils their getaway. The three plays detail the difficulties, tensions, amorous wooings and couplings, fights, games, meals and drunken binges which transpire over the weekend.

The end result of Ayckbourn's effort was a highly praised three nights of theatre, and many critics consider the trilogy to be his watershed work.<sup>6</sup> J. W. Lambert, the theatre critic for the Sunday Times, writes: "[T]hese plays, and their current performance, have an organic inner power, a truly classical grip. . . . Mr. Ayckbourn, the Kingsley Amis of the stage, is the most remarkable British dramatist to have emerged since Harold Pinter" (qtd. in Elsom Criticism 239).

Part of the ingenuity of The Norman Conquests is that at any given performance the enjoyment level of each audience member differs because as "soon as one play is read or seen, the other two plays are automatically coloured and affected by the foreknowledge gained from the first" (Ayckbourn Preface 12). As Albert Kalson notes, "although the entire audience is being entertained, the veterans among them are having a better time than the newcomers to the situation" (74). At the same time, Ayckbourn tantalizes the uninitiated by making references to instances which are occurring or have already occurred in the other plays, thus tweaking the audience's interest

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<sup>6</sup> Ayckbourn voiced the usual regrets about one work being touted as his best: "It's a huge sort of thing to live up to. Everyone went overboard about it and so you always found it was being used as a yardstick against which all the other stuff was being written. Is this as good as The Norman Conquests or is this worse than The Norman Conquests? Oh, forget about The Norman Conquests" (Personal Interview).

to return. For instance, in Table Manners Tom enters the dining room and reveals that Norman, who is in the garden, has just shown him his pajamas, immediately prompting the prudish Sarah to go outside to rebuke the wayward librarian. Round and Round the Garden provides the explanation for Norman's exhibition of his sleep wear and what transpires upon Sarah's entrance.

In retelling the same story from three different perspectives, Ayckbourn acquires a greater freedom in developing his characters as well as their familial relationships in more detail. As John Elsom notes in discussing The Norman Conquests, "[I]f we see only part of a situation, we can jump to the wrong conclusions about the whole" ("Plays" 152). Ayckbourn's three plays underscore the limited viewpoint of conventional, one play storytelling. Instead of providing a two-and-a-half-hour glimpse of a situation, the three play format affords a seven to eight hour look at a forty-hour weekend gathering. Albert Bermel notes that in The Norman Conquests "five of the six roles appear at first to be straightforward, comic-farcical types" (116); if we only see one of the plays, this interpretation is reinforced. Yet, taken as a whole, the three plays shed these stereotypical characteristics. Through this structure Ayckbourn fleshes out his characters who would, in most adultery plays, remain one-dimensional. While Norman's presence dominates each play of the trilogy,

the other five characters are rounded out through different plays: Sarah, for example, in Table Manners, Reg in Living Together and Tom in Round and Round the Garden.

But more importantly, the format of a trilogy allows Ayckbourn to have three different conclusions. In seeing only Table Manners and/or Living Together, audience members miss the final irony of Round and Round the Garden's closing moments.<sup>7</sup> Chronologically, Living Together ends first, and Norman has only conquered two women, Ruth (who is more of a reconquest) and Sarah.<sup>8</sup> By the end of Table Manners, Norman has beguiled all three women, as Annie rekindles her affection for Norman after fighting with Tom. At Round and Round the Garden's conclusion, though, Norman's romantic schemes are discovered. After realizing that Norman has consciously crashed his car into Reg's so that he can have an extra day with all three women, Ruth, Annie and Sarah leave him standing alone on stage. Elmer Blistein argues that the trilogy must end in this manner

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<sup>7</sup> As Ayckbourn himself suggests, in order to keep all the action straight and "since each character's attitude and development had to fit in with the general time structure, I decided in the case of The Norman Conquests to write them crosswise" (Preface 11). Hence, within an eight day period Ayckbourn wrote the entire trilogy in chronological order, starting with Scene 1 of Round and Round the Garden to the last scene of Round and Round the Garden, the first and last moments of the trilogy.

<sup>8</sup> The last moments of Living Together have Reg discovering that Norman has been tempting Sarah--a potentially interesting conflict that is never developed in the last moments of Round and Round the Garden.



because Norman "must get his comeuppance so that our bourgeois prejudices may be appeased" (33). Yet, Blistein's argument is problematic for two reasons. First, he assumes that his audience shares the same moral code. It is true that Norman flirts a great deal, but the likelihood that he will follow through with any of his plans is doubtful. (Norman is more of a talker than a doer.) Furthermore, even though Norman slept with Annie a year earlier, over the course of the play's action, Norman only engages in sexual relations with his wife Ruth. If anything, Norman's actions (sexually at least) reinforce monogamy. Second, it is questionable whether Norman ever really receives his "comeuppance" for his schemes.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the end of Round and Round the Garden resembles a child getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar. There is a sly, guilty, sheepish look to Norman, and perhaps he will experience some uncomfortableness with Ruth, but ultimately, no punishment occurs. In fact, by the trilogy's end, everything still remains the same; the marriages still remain intact. No one has changed as all of the characters are still trapped in their relationships and jobs. It is doubtful that anything has been learned by Norman, Annie, Ruth or Sarah in this final scene and even

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<sup>9</sup> It is even arguable that Norman wanted to get caught, just so he can have the challenge of trying to win the three women back over to his side.

conceivable that Norman will try again to work his charms on the women once again.

Norman, though, is not the only adulterous character. Hovering in her bed one flight above the weekend fray is the mother of Ruth, Reg and Annie.<sup>10</sup> She is the matriarch of the family, and during her prime, she was incessant in her adulterous relationships. Her uninhibited pursuits of the opposite sex and unquestioned dominion in her household, where she forced her husband into quiet seclusion and a silent acceptance of her dalliances, has made a lasting impact on her children. Reg and Annie recall one instance when their mother picked up a sailor while the family was on holiday.

REG: He kept throwing that ball half a mile down the beach. Trying to get us all to run after it. Run along, kids. Go and fetch it. Let me talk to your Mum.

ANNIE: And Ruth wouldn't go.

REG: No, she wouldn't budge.

ANNIE: "I'm staying here to look after Mother. I don't trust him . . ." There was Mother saying, "Run along, Ruth dear. Run along and play." (38)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The mother is just another one of Ayckbourn's memorable off-stage characters who affects the actions of the on-stage characters, including the bed-ridden husband in Absent Friends (1974) and Dick and Lottie Potter in Absurd Person Singular.

<sup>11</sup> The connection between fiction and Ayckbourn's own childhood blurs in this passage. Ayckbourn's mother, Mary Jones, revealed in an interview her surprise after seeing this scene: "It gave me an awful shock, because that was me. I thought Alan was too young to even know about it: he was only four. I think my God, what else does he remember?" (qtd. in Kalson 72).

Here again, Ayckbourn introduces an element missing from the traditional adultery play: children and the affect adultery has on them. As Billington notes, the adulterous actions of the mother has lasting repercussions on her children: "the mother's sexual voracity has driven Reg into his private bolt-hole, Ruth into the escape route of work and poor Annie into a lifetime of careworn subservience" (Ayckbourn 73). Gabriele Griffin's theory of generational recycling, introduced in the discussion of A Taste of Honey in Chapter One, is also present in The Norman Conquests. The three plays depict a continuing downward spiral of generational repetition, passed on from the mother to Annie and Reg.<sup>12</sup> Annie has surpassed her mother's adulterous

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<sup>12</sup> The effect of the parent's actions on the children is marvelously captured by Philip Larkin in his poem "This Be the Verse," written two years prior to the trilogy.

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn  
By fools in old-style hats and coats,  
Who half the time were soppy-stern  
And half at one another's throats. (1-8)

In a personal interview Ayckbourn echoed the first line of the poem in reference to Time of My Life (1990), which is about parents "who had fucked up their children" (Personal Interview). His plays in the eighties and nineties move to include and explore the relationships between parents and children. In A Small Family Business an entire family, three generations, falls victim to the greed of Thatcher's government, while the youngest member of the family, a teenage girl, who has been ignored by her family, begins shoplifting, develops a drug habit, and eventually commits

exploits by sleeping with her sister's husband, while Ruth was in bed upstairs. Upon discovering that Annie intended to go away with Norman for a dirty weekend, Reg is not shocked. Instead, he releases a great "whoop" of excitement. For these two, adultery does not carry any stigma against the sanctity of marital relationships, even when one of their own siblings is a victim of the adultery.

In contrast to her siblings, Ruth has been affected quite differently by her mother's extramarital affairs. She has lost her faith in marriage and the sanctity of the family. She sees matrimony as nothing more than a contract, a temporary option made by two people on one another's time. Her relationship with Norman is a disposable one, easily voided over time. After learning about the planned weekend getaway, she tells Annie:

You couldn't possibly take Norman away from me. That assumes I own him in the first place. I've never done that. I always feel with Norman that I have him on loan from somewhere. Like one of his library books. I'll get a card one day informing me he's overdue and there's a fine to pay on him. (64)

Unlike Noel Coward's characters, who take world cruises or hop over to Paris on a whim to escape their marital woes, Ruth, a member of Ayckbourn's working middle class, can only turn to her job for fulfillment, but even there she is

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murder. The same darkness is present in Henceforward (1988), where the daughter joins a gang to escape being a pawn in her parents' wrangling over their divorce.

unable to escape from Norman.

RUTH: As it is, you've held my career back about ten years. You interrupt me at meetings with embarrassing phone calls . . .

NORMAN: To tell you I love you, that's all. Is that wrong? . . .

RUTH: Yes, I love you, too, Norman, but please leave me alone. (49-50)

Ruth's plaintive last line certainly embodies a Cowardesque tone of marital (dis)harmony, but Ruth's pain is far more apparent than any of Coward's adulterous characters. She wants Norman, unlike her mother, to keep his adulterous intentions secret, which is not his style; he enjoys having an audience and being the center of attention. As a result, Ruth finds herself reliving her parent's situation with the gender roles now reversed.

The difficult and strained marital relationship between Norman and Ruth is central to Ayckbourn's domestic theatrical world. The majority of Ayckbourn's plays focus on marriage, one of the most painful, unpredictable and agony-filled relationships. In an interview with Brian Connell, Ayckbourn said: "[M]y plays are best appreciated if you've had at least one unhappy marriage or at least one unhappy relationship, otherwise you won't know what we're going on about" (qtd. in M. Page Ayckbourn 89).<sup>13</sup>

Adultery, according to the playwright, is an inevitable

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<sup>13</sup> Ayckbourn had his own unhappy marriage. At the age of 19, he married an actress six years his senior. They divorced eight years later. He has not remarried.

aspect of marriage.

In one sense it's an act of betrayal which gets to all of us. Whether we're gay or heterosexual, most of us inevitably make some sort of fair bonding and most of us either have [betrayed someone] or have been betrayed. That tends to happen in marriages and it happens and maybe [the marriage] is mended or it happens and [the marriage] is destroyed and I think it's a curiously, great fascinating aspect of human behavior. (Personal interview)

In The Norman Conquests the marriages are based on distrust, boredom and apathy, and the characters cannot even explain why they married in the first place. Reg admits: "Mother always says the same thing. What did you go and marry her for? Biggest mistake of your life. You'll live to regret it. Trouble is, I can never think of a convincing answer" (30). Reg has buckled under to Sarah's dominance, and, in effect, he is following in the footsteps of his father, who also allowed himself to be cowed by his domineering wife. Reg's philosophy is simple: "I prefer being told what to do really. I often think if nobody told me what to do I'd never do anything at all" (130).

Ruth's and Norman's marital situation is diametrically opposed to that of Reg and Sarah. The main components of their marriage are Ruth's impatient tolerance of her husband and Norman's unpredictable emotional displays. They form a bickering, antagonistic couple, battling for space and dominance in their relationship, and Ruth's

recollection of Norman's marriage proposal espouses the violence which exists just below the marriage's surface.

She tells Annie:

He proposed to me in a crowded lift. It was total blackmail. He sounded so appealing he won the sympathy of everyone round us. Had I been heartless enough to refuse him, they'd have probably dropped me down the lift shaft. . . . I remember that was the first time I really felt like throttling Norman. (132)

Ayckbourn's marital world is obviously different from Coward's upper-class couples, living their life of leisure. Ayckbourn's characters, by contrast, are middle-class; as Richard Hornby notes, "Ayckbourn typically focuses on ordinary business people working for large, faceless corporations" (105). They are part of the machinery, becoming worn down over time. The relationships in The Norman Conquests--indeed, in all of Ayckbourn's plays--are isolated because marital communication has broken down. The characters are trapped by tedious, daily rituals, boredom, economics and society. While in Coward's plays the couples are not distressed by the failure of their marriage and even jocularly acceptant of their situation, Ayckbourn's characters are fully cognizant of their stagnation and of their spouse's infidelities. In response, they become frustrated, attempting suicide, experiencing nervous breakdowns, and, in some cases, pursuing their own affairs. Emerging out of this disparity between the two playwrights, though, is Ayckbourn's concern

with answering Shaw's question on the nature of adultery. Ayckbourn's plays comment not only on how and why adultery occurs, but also on how and why people, who supposedly are in love, behave so terribly to one another.

In The Deceived Husband, Alison Sinclair suggests an interesting reason for male adultery, which illuminates Norman's adulterous behavior:

[I]s it possible to be both man and husband, or does the fact of becoming the latter endanger one's status as the former? . . . Whereas a woman can with ease visibly prove herself to be a woman by having a child, proofs of manhood are much less visible, much less clearly witnessed. (18-9)

While Sinclair correctly points out the relative "ease" of a woman defining her femininity through the birth of a child, she fails to discuss an extremely visible and conventional role associated with masculinity, and that is as "the head of the household" or "the man of the house." Traditional patriarchal conceptions of the family designate that the man should be the physical, economic, moral, and disciplining head of the household (see Act I of Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine). In holding this position a man visibly and vocally asserts his masculinity and control over his family as he "puts food on the table" and "a roof over his family's head." The well-being and sustenance of the family relies on this role being filled. However, while giving birth is an exclusive and innate sign of femininity, being head of the household is not. It is this



flexibility of the position, which can also be filled by a woman, which prompts the adulterous action of The Norman Conquests. In the relationship between Norman and Ruth, the "man of the house" is not Norman; instead, it is Ruth. Like Marion in Owners, Ruth acquires this dominant position in the household. Norman, then, turns to adultery precisely because he is unable to assert his masculinity.

Although Norman is employed, he is unable to seize the traditionally masculine crown of "man of the house" because Ruth's job allows her to make more money. In Ayckbourn's theatrical world, as in society, money, no matter the gender, equals power. Norman's own job as Assistant Librarian certainly does not help him. In fact, his job title of "Assistant" is only another reminder of his status at home. While Norman has managed to make himself indispensable at work by re-filing the entire library to his own personal system, he cannot duplicate the same trick at home. Ruth does not look to her husband for guidance or advice. Instead, all the economic pressures and burdens of their relationship hang over her at work as the household budget is reliant upon her salary.

RUTH: I have two full reports that have to be in tomorrow. If they are not in, I shall probably be fired. If I'm fired, we will have no money to pay the mortgage, no money for three-quarters of the gas and electricity bills . . .

NORMAN: All right, I'm a kept man. A married ponce.

RUTH: I don't mind keeping you. Not in the least. But I cannot continually chase after

you all over the countryside. (49)

Norman's situation is reminiscent of Clegg's in Owners, whose own sense of masculinity is eclipsed by his wife's economic power. In response, Clegg chooses a two-fold counterattack: he plots with Worsley to kill Marion and sleeps with Lisa. Although Norman does not replicate Clegg's plan to kill his wife, he does have a brief liaison with Annie and tries to seduce Sarah away for the weekend. Through these relationships Norman can reassert his lost manhood, unlike Reg and Reg's father, who have already relinquished their masculinity to their wives' household dominance. As Sinclair notes, though, visible proof, like a baby for a woman's femininity, is needed. An affair with a nameless person may prove his masculine worth to himself, but ultimately the one he wants to demonstrate it to is Ruth. For this reason, Norman does not chase any anonymous, faceless pick-up but instead female members of his wife's family. In seducing these women, Norman not only proves his desirability outside his marriage, but also affirms his masculine dominance to himself and his wife, who learns of affairs. However, even though Norman succeeds in having an affair, he still retains the same secondary status in his marriage. In proving his masculinity, he has not gained anything at all.

Despite all the troubles in their marital relationship, Ruth and Norman inextricably remain together.

Why? Ruth perhaps provides the best explanation when she is talking to Reg about the nature of her relationship with Norman: "You know, I have found quite often it's the people you look at and say, well they won't last long, who cling on grimly till death. Maybe they're so aware of public opinion, they're determined to prove it wrong" (129).

There is a stubbornness in maintaining their marriage, and certainly this idea applies to all of Ayckbourn's characters in The Norman Conquests as the three troubled relationships still remain intact: Ruth and Norman, Sarah and Reg, Annie and Tom. Indeed, the same can be said for all of Ayckbourn's characters. His couples grimly hang on, battling the odds, trying to prove the others wrong, and for their pains, they remain comically miserable, as they ward off disillusionment, apathy and their spouses' adulterous flings. In Ayckbourn's mind, it is a fate meant not only for his characters, but for all of us.

**Betrayal:** "I don't think we don't love each other"

In 1978, a "mature and distilled Pinter," according to Martin Esslin (Pinter 199), introduced his latest full-length play at the National Theatre: Betrayal, which technically and thematically extends the theatrical presentation of adultery. The play covers nine years from 1968-1977, but the story is told chronologically backwards

over nine scenes. The original image for the play was two people sitting in a pub, but the play's format did not completely materialize until Pinter discovered what they were talking about. Pinter states: "They were talking about the past. So, I thought I'd better go back there. . . . The actual structure of the play seemed to dictate itself. When I realized what was going on, this movement in time, I was very excited by it" (Gussow "Pinter" 5).

The two characters in the pub turned out to be Pinter's adulterers Jerry, a literary agent, married to Judith, who never appears on stage, and Emma, married to Robert, a publisher and Jerry's longtime best friend. The opening pub scene takes place two years after their affair has ended. The play then proceeds backwards through their relationship, concluding with its commencement, when an inebriated Jerry propositions Emma in her and Robert's bedroom. The retrospective view is twice splintered as Pinter also presents scenes which move forward in time. Scene Two between Jerry and Robert takes place a few hours after Scene One, when Emma reveals to Jerry the break-up of her marriage, while Scene Six, between Jerry and Emma, and Scene Seven, between Jerry and Robert, take place a few weeks after Scene Five, when Robert discovers his wife's

and best friend's infidelity.<sup>14</sup> Within these brief nine scenes, Pinter creatively focuses the audience's attention on infidelity and the nature of betrayal, while also effectively attacking British society. He does so by displaying its pretensions and empty social rituals through characters who disseminate lies, misleading their spouses, friends, lovers, clients, children, and themselves.

The initial production of the play, like many of Pinter's others, did not receive much critical praise.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Austin E. Quigley documents the thoroughness of Pinter's structure as he dissects the scenes by character appearance.

- |                  |                 |                  |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. Jerry, Emma   |                 | 6. Jerry, Emma   |
| 2. Jerry, Robert | 5. Robert, Emma | 7. Jerry, Robert |
| 3. Jerry, Emma   |                 | 8. Jerry, Emma   |
| 4. Jerry, Emma   |                 | 9. Jerry, Emma   |
| and Robert       |                 | and Robert       |

Numerically and dramatically, Scene Five is the center of the play. It is the scene when Robert learns of Emma's and Jerry's betrayal and the only scene where Jerry does not appear (Modern 230).

<sup>15</sup> In fact, critics were unduly harsh. Comments like the following were the norm. Herbert Kretzmer of The Daily Express wrote: "Harold Pinter's Betrayal . . . is a woman's magazine romance that goes backwards until it disappears up its own pauses" (qtd. in Elsom Criticism 251). Clive Hirschhorn, reviewer for the Sunday Express, said: "Harold Pinter's Betrayal has so many pregnant pauses throughout its two short acts, it would not have surprised me had the stage at the Lyttelton Theatre suddenly turned into a maternity ward" (qtd. in Elsom Criticism 251).

Benedict Nightingale, writing for New Statesman, was one of the few newspaper reviewers to write a laudatory notice: "Pinter has sometimes earned a reputation for profundity simply by taking us to the edge of the psychological well and pointing out its depth. He has allowed us to hear the echoes rumbling up from inside, and even smell the rising stench, but he has not often given us

It was not until the 1991 revival at the Almeida Theatre that the London reviewers began to recognize and appreciate the craftsmanship of Betrayal.<sup>16</sup> Pinter scholars, though, were immediately taken with Pinter's leap into the adultery genre, and articles quickly began appearing that discussed the play's significance and its relation to the rest of his canon, particularly its two predecessors: Old Times (1971) and No Man's Land (1975).

Pinter relies on some of the same elements which compose a large number of adultery plays. In the introduction to his second volume of collected plays, Noel Coward identifies the elements which comprise the domestic plays of Arthur Wing Pinero, W. Somerset Maugham, and even Oscar Wilde.

All of these "Drawing-room Dramas" dealt with the psychological and social problems of the upper middle classes. The characters in them were, as a general rule, wealthy, well-bred, articulate and motivated by the exigencies of the world to which they belonged. This world was snobbish, conventional, polite, and limited by its own

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a direct, detailed look at the frogs, tin-cans, used contraceptives, water-beetles, and all the rest of the mess festering in the ooze at the bottom" (qtd. in Elsom Criticism 255).

<sup>16</sup> Pinter's frustration with theatre reviewers is understandable. In a 1979 interview with Mel Gussow Pinter said: "Apart from The Caretaker, which is a hell of a long time ago, I've never really been well received by the critics. The critics don't like play "C," but, invariably, when play "D" arrives, they point immediately to the virtues that play "C" possessed and regard play "D" as a deviation" ("Pinter" 7).

codes and rules of behaviour, and it was the contravention of these codes and rules--to our eyes so foolish and old-fashioned--that supplied the dramatic content . . . (viii-ix)

Coward precisely describes the social and economic world at the center of Pinter's gaze.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of form and ritual to adultery is suggested early in Betrayal through Jerry's and Emma's pub conversation. She inquires after his and Judith's children. Jerry corrects her: "You remember the form. I ask about your husband, you ask about my wife" (161). Just as a procedure of conduct and secrecy exists when one is involved in an adulterous relationship, there is also an established dramatic format, whether it be the conventions of the well-made play or farce, for the presentation of adultery on the stage. Like his mentor Samuel Beckett, who, in Play (1963), steals adultery away from the realm of the upper class drawing room comedy and relocates it within the world of interrogation and disembodied heads answering "a hellish half-light" (152), Pinter equally disregards the established format. Not only does he temporally dislodge the play from the traditional beginning-to-end, cause-and-effect format, but he also extends the significance of

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<sup>17</sup> It was also this world that Coward attacked in his own plays. In fact, Pinter and Coward are similar in a myriad of ways, as numerous critics have noted. Sheridan Morley even surmised that Pinter was inspired to write Betrayal after directing Coward's Blithe Spirit, another triangular play, at the National Theatre in 1976 (Shooting 155).

lying by focussing on the power attained through falsehoods, a prominent element in the genre. For example, in sex farce lies provide much of the comic pace and invention, complicating the already manic pace of mistaken identities and misinformation. The lies in Pinter's Betrayal are told to escape detection and withhold secrets. However, the prevarications in the play also have a deeper function. Whereas the typical sex farce adulterer, lies, and usually outlandishly, to protect himself from detection of spouse, friend, business partner, lover or policeman, in Pinter the adulterer lies to possess power. Martin Esslin discusses this aspect of the play.

What Pinter is drawing attention to is precisely this element in betrayal, adultery, that makes it so attractive: the feeling of power, of superiority, it gives to the one who knows what is happening over the victim who is totally oblivious of it. (Pinter 192)

While the adulterous characters of Betrayal enjoy their secrets and the power it bestows, in sex farce no time exists for relishing a superior position of knowledge because the precariousness of the lies are always at the forefront of the audience's and characters' attention. This is not the case in Pinter's play, which occurs over nine years, instead of the usual one evening of sex farce. Through his extension of the time element, Pinter provides his characters the opportunity to relish the superiority of knowledge that lies bestow. However, his backwards



chronology also places a different emphasis on them. Since the play opens with all of the characters' secrets disclosed, the lies which are told in the ensuing scenes are not just means of plot complication. Instead, they now deepen the play's characterizations and relationships as the audience becomes more conscious of who lies to whom and when and why. The futility of the lies are also ironically emphasized, since the audience knows that they are ultimately useless.

This idea of who knows what about whom and when as well as the power game connected with it can be found in Scene Five of Betrayal. Here Pinter coyly introduces the ever popular, damning love letter, but in his treatment the missive never appears on stage. Robert possessed the letter at the American Express office, but he left it there, choosing not to confront Emma with the actual physical evidence. Instead, he challenges Emma with *his* knowledge of the letter. Judith Roof notes that "the betrayals of Betrayal have to do with when the characters know what: when Robert knows, when Emma knows Robert knows, when Emma tells Jerry Robert knows, when Robert tells Jerry Emma knew that he knew, and in our wanting to know any of it" (80). In Scene Two, Pinter establishes this theme through a short exchange between Robert and Jerry.

ROBERT: I thought you knew.

JERRY: Knew what?

ROBERT: That I knew. That I've known for years.

I thought you knew that.  
JERRY: You thought I knew?  
ROBERT: She said you didn't. But I didn't  
believe that.  
*Pause*  
Anyway I think I thought you knew. (182)

Silvio Gaggi has also commented on the fact that the characters "compete with each other in a game in which one scores when one does manage successfully to keep a secret" (504). Jerry is, in fact, quite certain of his success in keeping secret his affair with Emma, and it is the lack of knowledge on everyone else's part that makes the affair so sweet. He believes that they have fooled everyone. As he tells her in the pub:

I nearly said, now look, she may be having the occasional drink with Casey, who cares, but she and I had an affair for seven years and none of you bastards had the faintest idea it was happening. . . . We were brilliant. Nobody knew.  
(169)

Possessing knowledge that no one else has allows Jerry to feel socially and intellectually superior to all others, as he sleeps with his best friend's wife. The affair, in essence, is a game to him.

Jerry, however, does not realize that he lost the game four years previously to Robert, the most intriguing character in the play. Even though he only appears in five of the play's nine scenes (Jerry appears in eight, while Emma is in seven), Robert is never presented in a naive state about his wife's infidelity. Chronologically, he appears before the affair begins and then reappears after

having seen the letter at the American Express office.<sup>18</sup>

Richard Allen Cave argues that "Robert will not admit he knows about [their infidelity] lest he chance to end a good business relationship and lose face with one who has been taken in over the years by his stance of controlled detachment" (33). No doubt there is some validity to Cave's statement. Yet it is not quite that simple. Pinter's dramatic interest is not in Robert's relationship with Emma and Jerry during the period when he knows nothing about the affair. Instead, he is more interested in the repercussions of Robert *consciously* withholding the information he possesses about the affair. In fact, only Scenes Eight and Nine are chronologically earlier than the confrontation scene, indicating that the remaining seven scenes concern themselves with what happens when knowledge is held about adultery and *not* released. Through this careful arrangement of the play's temporal structure, Pinter stresses the lingering subtext of knowledge and lies which take place in the discussions between the three characters, and one of the most significant ones occurs

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<sup>18</sup> In the film version, starring Jeremy Irons, Ben Kingsley and Patricia Hodge, Pinter adds some new scenes, including one that depicts Robert calling Jerry at the office about playing squash before he discovers the affair, but they never share the same screen space. Along similar lines, in the play Robert never appears alone with Emma after Scene 5; however, Pinter adds a brief scene after the discovery of the affair where Emma comes downstairs to comfort a crying Ned, while Robert sits beside the crib and does nothing.

between Robert and Jerry.

As Pinter indicates in his interview with Mel Gussow: "The play is about a nine-year relationship between two men who are best friends" ("Pinter" 7). When Robert and Jerry meet in the Italian restaurant in Scene Seven, a palpable tension exists between the betrayed meeting his betrayer. In this first meeting between the two men since Robert's return from Italy, Robert does not tell Jerry that he knows the truth; Jerry, who is not an observant person, senses that something is bothering Robert, but he dismisses the tension to his friend's drinking and nothing else. Robert, though, is playing the Pinteresque game of "taking a piss," a phrase Peter Hall uses to describe the relationship between the family members in Pinter's The Homecoming.

Why, in The Homecoming, is Lenny so obsessed from the word go with destroying his father? . . . Because I think at the base of a good deal of Harold's work is the cockney game of taking the piss: and part of that game is that you should not be quite sure whether the piss is being taken or not. In fact, if you know I'm taking the piss, I'm not really doing it very well: and a good deal of Harold's tone has to do with that very veiled kind of mockery. (74)

The game, now continuing thirteen years later in Betrayal, has been slightly modified because the economic and social world of Pinter's plays in the 1970s is far different from that of The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming. In the seventies his characters live uptown in their fine, large Hampstead houses. Instead of

concentrating on landladies, boxers and pimps, Pinter now focusses on upper-middle-class artists, publishers, and agents. The knock-down verbal brutality at the heart of "taking a piss" is still present, but it has been modified from its frank coarseness into sarcastic, ironic, slashing stabs. Characters no longer goad, as they did in The Homecoming: "You paralysed prat!" (15) or "I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house!" (42). Pinter's plays of the seventies follow an established deportment of content, manners and politeness.

It is under these new auspices of propriety that Robert "takes a piss" out of both Jerry and Emma. He challenges Jerry twice, both through long speeches, but each time Jerry fails to rise to the bait, like Teddy, who falls back from Lenny's philosophical queries. Gaggi identifies the method of Robert's assault: "Robert manipulates language to restrict and confuse the amount of information he releases, keeping his 'opponent' in a state of uncertainty and maintaining his dominance" (508). Jerry is unable to play the game. He is too self-centered, as many critics have noted, and for that reason he does not recognize that a challenge has been laid down to him. In Scene Four, after Robert's lengthy speech about squash, Jerry responds: "I haven't played squash for years" (210). At lunch Robert also overwhelms Jerry through his use of

language. As Alan Varley notes, from the point that Robert takes up the subject of publishing to the end of the scene "Jerry is only allowed another twenty five words against more than 350 for Robert" (97). Robert is an overpowering foe. They may play a fairly competitive game of squash, where each man relies on his physical skills, but in this intellectual realm of verbal jousts and kept secrets, Robert is the far more superior player.

Robert, though, never directly challenges Jerry on his infidelity with Emma, since to do so, as Cave noted earlier, would be a sign of weakness, like Sam's collapse at the end of The Homecoming when he can no longer tolerate the family's negotiation with Ruth to become a prostitute. Jerry is far weaker than Robert: once he discovers that Robert knows of his and Emma's affair, Jerry immediately calls him. He cannot stand the pressure of knowing that Robert knows. In the play's most important game of knowledge, Jerry loses face.

Even though Robert will not initiate the subject of infidelity, he will respond if it is mentioned by another party. A case in point is Scene Five, where Robert wants to find out why Jerry is writing to Emma during their vacation in Venice. However, he refuses to ask directly. Emma tries to fend off his questions with short answers, but Robert steadily and deliberately continues. Emma finally begins to tremble, a Pinteresque sign of weakness

in the usually unruffled facade of his characters. Although Emma is trying to play the game, she realizes that, ultimately, it is futile to continue to battle Robert.

ROBERT: Was there any message for me, in his letter?

*Pause*

I mean in the line of business, to do with the world of publishing. Has he discovered any new and original talent? He's quite talented at uncovering talent, old Jerry.

EMMA: No message.

ROBERT: No message. Not even his love?

*Silence*

EMMA: We're lovers. (221-2)

The silence here is crucial as Robert uses it to pressure her. Throughout the scene he has been circling her, darting around adultery and betrayal by discussing Spinks' new novel on adultery (which she is reading), changing the subject to the American Express office, asking about their forthcoming trip to Torcello, and then returning to the letter at the American Express office. Occasionally, he allows his pauses to stretch into silences, placing the burden of the question and its subject matter on her. The silence in the above quotation is prolonged and held and carries Robert's last spoken word between the two of them: "love." This same term, in turn, is picked up by Emma who responds: "We're lovers," immediately parrying Robert's original question: "Was there any message for me, in his letter? . . . Not even his love?" The love, as Robert has come to realize, exists not between Jerry and himself, but

instead between Emma and Jerry.

Written at the perfect pitch, this scene contrasts significantly with the confrontation scenes of the adultery genre. In place of the lightheartedness of Coward, where husbands and wives pass off each other's infidelities with casual indifference, Pinter tenders brutal questions, abbreviated discussions, silences and pauses which mark hesitancies and uncertainty, and a domineering and deliberately steered conversation by Robert. The comedy is still present, as in Robert's speech about the Italian employees at the American Express office, but there is also menace and threat. Pinter controls the scene's tension through questions and statements which seemingly ask and say nothing, while subtextually layers of venom and threat are seeking a crack in the other character's demeanor.

If we establish a hierarchy of power through knowledge in the play, then Emma, not Robert, would possess the greater power, like Pinter's other strong female characters: Ruth in The Homecoming and Kate in Old Times. Robert admits to Jerry in Scene Two that he thought Emma had told Jerry about his awareness of the affair, even though she told him that she had not. Robert, though, does not trust his wife, so he cannot be completely certain about what information Emma has decided to pass on to Jerry. For that reason, she manages to keep both Jerry and Robert in the dark about each other. Robert, who holds



secrets of his own, including his own affairs, places a close second behind Emma, and Jerry is left in the weakest spot of all, since he has no secrets. He has continued to play the same role for four years without realizing that he has been open to exposure. The power rests in Emma's hands to disrupt the flow of Jerry's ignorance, but she never does. She even lies to him in Scene One concerning Robert's discovery of their affair, changing the story to the previous night rather than four years earlier. Gaggi notes: "Her unwillingness to reveal information, at least until she is ready to, suggests a dominance on her part which seems to spring from a broader understanding of what has been going on between Jerry, Robert and herself" (506). By constantly lying to Jerry, as she has done throughout the play, she maintains a superior position above him.<sup>19</sup> Pinter's hierarchy of power disrupts the usual pattern of the husband always being the proverbial "last to know" and, in many cases, a comical cuckold figure. Pinter subverts this established aspect of the adultery play because the lover has now become "the last to know." Pinter, then, reverses the usual pattern as the husband and wife fool the lover instead of the more conventional pairing of the lover and wife fooling the husband.

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<sup>19</sup> For more in-depth discussions of Pinter's depiction of Emma, see Ben-Zvi 227-37; Burkman, "Harold Pinter's" 505-18; and Sakellaridou 107-19;.

The power that comes through knowledge is not limited to the relationships on stage; it also occurs in the relationship between the audience and the characters. In most plays the two groups travel the same road together, discovering secrets and surprise endings in tandem. Pinter's temporal structure disrupts that theatrical convention. Linda S. Wells makes the point that "Because the play is structured through a regression in time, in any particular scene the audience has greater knowledge than do the characters" (23). Her statement is true for the majority of the play except for the opening two scenes when the characters possess more knowledge than we do. For instance, in Scene One when Jerry and Emma exchange small talk:

JERRY: Ned's five, isn't he?

EMMA: You remember.

JERRY: Well, I would remember that. (162)

At this juncture we do not know why it is significant that Jerry would remember Ned's age. It is not until Scene Five, when Ned's legitimacy is questioned, and Scene Eight, when we actually see Jerry react to Emma's pregnancy, that we completely understand the implication of these three lines. The same follows for the table cloth that Emma buys in Venice, the flat that Jerry and Emma rent, books by Casey and Spinks, and Yeats' poetry. Early on, the audience is unaware of the relevance of these items, while, in turn, the characters attach a great amount of meaning

and resonance to them. The further back we travel into their past, though, the more significance the items have for us and the less importance they possess for them. In essence, these items, like the lies the characters tell, come to possess an ironic resonance for us: we know their future (in)significance, while the characters do not realize the futility of their purchases. Their unknown future becomes our acquired past since we have already witnessed it. While Jerry and Emma enjoy the pleasures of their infidelity, we have already witnessed its failure in the future. As Enoch Brater writes: "It is not so much *what we know* but *when we know it* that is responsible for the real tension that bristles so ferociously beneath the contained surface of this work" ("Cinematic" 109).

With this temporal narrative shift, Pinter dislodges our expectations of the genre, since nothing follows as it should. There is no conclusive confrontation scene. There are no professions of love between lovers or spouses. The lies, which are pervasive in the text, do not descend into mistaken identities and embarrassing cover-ups, accompanied by a crescendo of doors slamming. In essence, Pinter has repainted the genre, making the audience requestion not only its format but the dramatic form itself. As Harriet Deer suggests:

If the discovery of the affair is not climatic, if it does not bring about a confrontation with important consequences, as we were taught in our

high school and college drama classes that such a central discovery inevitably must, then what is the nature and importance of dramatic climaxes?  
(68)

Yet in studying Pinter we realize that redefining drama has always been a part of his canon. He constantly introduces familiar theatrical scenes, but then he drags the carpet out from underneath us, making us understand that the conventions of the stage are not stagnant. Tom Stoppard is one writer who has grasped the theatrical changes inherent in Pinter's drama. In an interview with T. E. Kalem, Stoppard states:

Pinter invented something . . . the notion that you do not necessarily believe what people tell you in a theatre. . . . In Pinter's plays there is no surface reason for not telling the truth, but he has persuaded an entire generation of theatregoers that people are not necessarily telling the truth, even when they have no reason for not doing so. He broke the first rule of the theatre: that you do not betray the audience.  
(qtd. in M. Page Stoppard 87-8)

In Betrayal we can see that Pinter has reversed this notion. Now he is betraying his characters. In his earlier plays, like The Birthday Party, they possessed the knowledge that the audience did not, much to the distress of theatregoers and critics alike. Here Pinter sacrifices his characters' past for the benefit of the audience's education. We now possess the knowledge of their past. As Elin Diamond notes: "Though Pinter's time technique dehumanizes the characters, it seduces audience interest. The movement from present to past makes us secondary

authors, completing the scenario with details we accumulate" (Pinter's 209). This play is unlike any other Pinter play because we are not merely witnesses, but actively involved in the unchangeable and tragic path of the characters. Again, Martin Esslin:

[T]hematically, Betrayal continues and develops Pinter's preoccupation with the operation of memory: the way in which the passage of time changes our perception of what the past was like and what we were like--who we were--in that past. (Pinter 189)

Pinter involves the audience emotionally and mentally in the adultery play. Yet his purpose is not just to depict an adulterous triangle, but, more importantly, betrayal and the uncertainties within marriages, social circles, the world of business, and even the theatre. The world is a place of constant misinformation, especially within the theatre, but Pinter, the master of misinformation and misleading clues, suspends his previous endeavors to "betray the audience" and in the process transforms a predictable theme into the realm of critical discussion and innovatively challenging theatre.

**Passion Play: "I don't want anyone to die for love of me"**

Betrayal was the first in a triumvirate of adultery plays written by respected and critically established playwrights. Following Pinter's play came Peter Nichols'

Passion Play in 1981 and then Tom Stoppard's The Real Thing in 1982.<sup>20</sup> Benedict Nightingale in reviewing Passion Play compared Pinter's play with Nichols':

Betrayal successfully concentrated, not on the flouting of the old absolutes, but on deception, suspicion, unease, internal confusion; to precisely which list Passion Play adds two vital and indisputably contemporary ingredients, namely pain and damage. (8)

During the height of his playwrighting fame in the 1970s, Nichols became known as "the playwright of pain." This appellation stems from his first stage play A Day in the Death of Joe Egg (1967), which presented, in a form reminiscent of music hall, a married couple coping with the vegetative state of their daughter. The play's story was based on Nichols' and his wife's personal experience with

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Nichols has been asked numerous times about the significance of these three plays appearing within such close proximity to one another. In 1985, he told William Demastes: "I should say that it's because we are all getting rather middle aged. What's interesting, I suppose, are the differences. Harold's is about, well, betrayal, about dissolution, the inevitability of missed experience overall, passionate regret. . . . I suppose Tom's was about levels of reality. Mine is about trying to lay a girl!" (109-10).

In a later interview in 1994 he remarked: "I don't know why it was. Was it middle aged men who were having an affair? I suppose, or I don't know. We're all at a certain age--I mean, Tom's younger, Harold's about three years younger than I am. I'm the oldest playwright in the world. I don't think there was any particular reason for it except just personal. It happened to happen. But very often they're made up, completely invented. I mean, Chez Nous is completely invented. . . . What you do is write the conclusion of something that was hinted at in life" (Personal interview).

their first child. Before his foray into the theatre, he wrote television plays in the 1960s, most with a domestic theme, and he continued his exploration of the disruption of the British family in his main stage works, including Forget-Me-Not Lane (1971), Chez Nous, and Born in the Gardens. It is not surprising then that his dramatic gaze would eventually come to rest on adultery with its explosive power to disrupt matrimonial relationships and inflict pain.

In Passion Play, Nichols' characters inhabit a social and economic world similar to that of the characters in Betrayal. James, an art restorer, is married to Eleanor, a teacher of voice and a professional choral member. Both are middle-aged. James, bored with his static life, becomes involved in an affair with Kate, a photographer half his age. The affair is revealed by Agnes, a previous victim of Kate's extra-marital endeavors, who shows Eleanor a steamy letter from James to Kate. James admits to his infidelity, and Eleanor reveals that she too had a brief affair a number of years before, with Agnes' husband. James publicly resolves to give up Kate, but privately continues the assignation. In the second act Eleanor relearns of Kate's and James' relationship, which delivers a far more resounding and irreconcilable blow to their marriage. Nichols, though, has added an extra theatrical twist through the introduction of Jim and Nell, dual selves

of James and Eleanor who articulate the uncommunicated thoughts of the husband and wife. Jim appears on stage once James lies for the first time to Eleanor about Kate, while Nell appears upon Eleanor's discovery of James' letter. Through this technique Nichols provides an emotional and lustful inner glimpse beneath the calm, reserved and sometimes icy British exterior of gentility and propriety.

Passion Play, considered by many to be Nichols' best play, garnered his third Evening Standard Best Play of the Year award. Michael Billington's review of the initial production notes that the play is "both sensitive to the sadness at the heart of many modern marriages while at the same time conveying the absurd side of adultery" (7). In her article on Passion Play June Schlueter commends the play's ability to transcend the usual level of mediocrity that accompanies the genre:

In the past decade, a host of modern British plays have affirmed that there are a limited number of dramatic variations on the theme of adultery, all of which have worn thin. Yet Passion Play succeeds not only in treating adultery on the contemporary stage but in examining the failures of a contemporary life in which, as Agnes tells Nell, "Faith is a luxury you can't afford now. Or ever again." (545)

What makes this play important is exactly what Billington and Schlueter note: through his keen comedic ear and eye, Nichols depicts both the absurdity of sex and the failure of Christian faith and morals in contemporary marriage.



Many of Nichols' plays, including Forget-Me-Not Lane and Chez Nous, aptly demonstrate the absurdity of overactive imaginations in pursuit of sex. Passion Play is no different, suggesting that Nichols' dramatic world of adultery has far more in common with the manic sexuality present in contemporary sex farce than Ayckbourn's and Pinter's plays. His characters are frank about their sexual needs and deeds. When Kate returns from her trip around the world (which she took after her affair with James was discovered), she reveals to an astounded, but also slightly excited James/Jim and Eleanor/Nell the numerous and gymnastically varied sexual antics in which she was involved, including making love to a truck driver (while he has driving) and an unsatisfactory participation in a threesome. James is the typical male lead in a Nichols play--undersexed as a child, oversexed as an adult.<sup>21</sup> His and Eleanor's sexual relationship is still energetic, perhaps a bit too energetic for her. At one point James attempts to seduce Eleanor on the landing, but she refuses, opting for the safety and comfort of their bedroom. Her lack of sexual experimentation and excitement prods James to begin his affair with Kate.

Whereas Ayckbourn views adultery as an attempt to

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<sup>21</sup> Nichols attributes this staple characteristic of his male leads to his own lack of sexual conquests and encounters as a youngster (Personal Interview).

exert one's masculine identity and Pinter suggests that adultery and the lies it prompts allows one to attain power, Nichols posits that adultery occurs strictly for the sexual thrill. James, therefore, turns to Kate, craving the sexual excitement absent from his marriage. However, the sexual spontaneity that James longs for is non-existent in his adulterous relationship. Even though James detests having to schedule an appointment with Eleanor to make love, he must do the same thing with Kate. At one point they cannot even agree on a date.

JAMES. When am I going to see you again?

KATE (*shrugs*). Name the day.

JAMES. It's not that easy. Eleanor's hardly ever out. Once or twice I rang from home while she was shopping but you weren't there. . . .

KATE. Tonight's not good.

JAMES. No, not tonight. . . . But how about next Monday? Eleanor's rehearsing, the first time for weeks.

KATE. Oh, bloody hell, I can't.

JAMES. Never mind. (376)

Nichols also demonstrates the absurdity of James' and Kate's affair. In one instance they listen to a radio broadcast of Verdi's Requiem, realizing that they must finish their love making by a certain choral passage, so that James can be home before Eleanor returns from the concert.

Contemporary popular culture (the movies, television, and novels) portrays adulterous sex as exciting precisely because it is illicit, dangerous and forbidden, but James discovers that sex with Kate is not transcendent. All his

expectation, fear, guilt and morality checks go for naught.

KATE. I hope you think it was worth waiting for.

JAMES. Absolutely.

JIM. Well--

JAMES. I'm surprised you need to ask

JIM. But since you did, it wasn't, no.

JAMES. And thank you--

JIM. Wasn't worth the lying and fear and risk of discovery, no. (365)

Sex outside his marriage is an attractive proposition for James, especially with a partner who is half his age and more agile and aggressive than his wife. Yet, it is precisely her excessive sexuality that hinders his enjoyment at first. With his disappointment, though, comes the relief that the sex was not good. As James kisses Kate, Jim says: "Thank God it wasn't very good. It's better with Eleanor. Thank Christ. And what's more to the point, thank you [to Kate] for reminding me that I am naturally monogamous. I love my wife. So let's go home" (369). Since he did not enjoy his transgression, he can return to his marriage with the idea that his infidelity is not harmful. After all, how can he be unfaithful, if the act itself was unfulfilling? James' monogamous identity, though, is short-lived, as his sexual longing overcomes his initial misgivings.

Whereas the unfettered sexuality of the play suggests a tenuous connection with sex farce, it is the presence of infidelity amidst the omnipresent moral ethic of Christianity that distinguishes Nichols' play from his

predecessors' and contemporaries'. In his review of the 1984 revival of the play, Michael Billington comments on the tentative co-existence of religion and adultery.

But what makes this one of Nichols's finest achievements is that he sees adultery in the context of social detail, real emotion and our own rudderless modern world in which many of us live agnostically while being haunted by the moral commandments of the Christian ethos we cannot ever shake off. (310)

Even though Nichols' characters are not religious--Eleanor says she is an atheist--and therefore, do not follow the strictures of organized religion, Passion Play still depicts the predominant cultural presence of a Christian ethos. The characters' actions and statements suggest that a spiritual and moral reliance on religious precepts is futile. However, they are still unable to escape its societal and cultural presence. In fact, at home James and Eleanor are surrounded by it visually and aurally because their work is entirely embedded in Christian culture. Throughout most of the play, James attempts to restore a painting of the crucifixion from the Victorian era, suggesting a similar decadent time when Christian morals, gentility, and righteousness were held up as a facade for its tawdry underside. Eleanor listens to, reads and performs various scores of Requiems. The musical pieces she performs and teaches are merely seen as "work" and aesthetic entertainment. None of these representations of Christianity signify any cultural or spiritual relevance

for them, and, therefore, Christ's death, even though it is omnipresent in their work, has lost its significance.

The play's title, Passion Play, also suggests this dichotomy. Elizabeth Hale Winkler writes:

The passion of the title can thus be interpreted in subtly complex ways: physical and sexual passion; individual emotional passion; the exhilaration of artistic (especially musical) creation; spiritual communion; suffering in all its gradations, physical, emotional and spiritual; and the passion of Christ. (275)

While "Passion play" describes the cycle of medieval plays celebrating Christ's life, teachings, and his sacrificial death made on behalf of humanity, the same two words also suggest a romantic encounter, as in "He is making a passion play for her." Needless to say, there are numerous passion plays being made by Kate for James and vice versa. But it is worth noting that the "passion" occurs between adulterers, not between husband and wife. In this instance, passion suggests a relationship based on the allure of sexual attraction. The term, then, has descended from a connotation of spirituality to mere physicality. James/Jim and Kate embody this worship of the self and the pleasure that they can receive and give to one another. In contrast is Eleanor/Nell, who, even though she lacks a religious faith, does not feel comfortable embracing desire (she felt far too much guilt in betraying her husband and Agnes when she had her one night affair). As she tries to cope with and understand her husband's actions, she finds

that she has no support system on which to fall back; even psychiatric help fails in providing her any guidance. Without anything to embrace, having no belief in Christian doctrine or the hedonistic stronghold of her husband and his lover, Eleanor topples and attempts suicide. Ultimately, Eleanor/Nell embodies an alternative version of passion from Kate and James/Jim: suffering.

Integral in revealing these aspects of James/Jim and Eleanor/Nell is Nichols' use of the dual selves, which is new to the adultery genre, although not dramatically new--both Eugene O'Neill and Brian Friel exploited it. This theatrical device provides an innovative glance into the private thoughts of his upper-class characters. The public Eleanor and James maintain their passivity, politeness, and distance, but Nell and Jim provide the true inner, emotional explosions, blasting out from behind the facade of respectfulness and gentility. Richard Allen Cave remarks:

For once we hear what inwardly fills the silences when a character tries to regain calm and register the pain that lies behind the stiff-upper-lip and the brave wit when that character seeks to create the impression of being totally self-possessed. (60-1)

Like Ayckbourn's three room/three play structure, the dramatic device of alter egos provides a new level of dramatic observation. Through these *doppelgänger*s Nichols provides an innovative glimpse into the countless

repeated scenes of the genre: the first lie, the discovery of the adultery by the spurned spouse, and the confrontation between the husband and wife. While James calmly and rather blandly lies to Eleanor that the traffic was the reason why he was late, Jim revels in the illicitness of his first meeting with Kate and the French kiss he exchanged with her: "--her tongue straight to the back of my mouth, circling like a snake inside--" (358). When Agnes reveals that James and Kate are having an affair, Nichols alternates a polite, almost apologetic Eleanor--"I knew she fancied James. In fact, I told him" (383)--with a wounded and pained Nell--"Make your mind a blank" (383). And in a moment equally as compelling as Emma's confession in Betrayal, a silent Eleanor tries to avoid looking at her husband after discovering his transgression, while Nell vilifies him for his moral and sexual weakness: "Bastard! . . . Bastard sod!" (387).

In the second act, though, Nichols no longer maintains the rigidity of the public (Eleanor and James) and private (Nell and Jim) personas. Now the characters mix with one another: James talks to Nell, Eleanor talks to Jim, Nell talks to Jim; and it is through this cross cutting of private and public personalities that Nichols' most original scene of the play comes to fruition: Nell's attempted suicide. The alter egos act out the attempted suicide, while James and Eleanor watch and interpret,

deconstructing their own actions and providing the audience with a running commentary on their emotional state. At one point Nell makes retching noises.

ELEANOR: What did you feel for me?

JAMES: At this moment? Let me think . . .

ELEANOR: Love?

JAMES: Christ, no! Hadn't we had enough of love? It was love that brought us to that! *He points to the scene above.* (437)

It is a chillingly effective moment of theatre. Unlike melodramatic adultery plays, such as Arthur Wing Pinero's Mid-Channel and Terence Rattigan's The Deep Blue Sea (1952), Passion Play does not use suicide or a suicide attempt as a convenient device to conclude the play. Instead, the suicide attempt symbolizes not only the extent of Eleanor's passion (her love and suffering for James/Jim), but also the collapse of the marriage. Even though Eleanor is willing to sacrifice her life over the loss of her husband, her action is unappreciated by James, who maintains his affair with Kate while nursing his wife through her recovery. Nichols shows us that a man like James, who dismisses Christ as an "insipid eunuch" and considers the significance of His death as "The self-pity. Sickly. Sentimental" (400), cannot be expected to understand and be spiritually, emotionally and psychologically affected by a similar sacrifice made by his own wife.

It is, ultimately, James inability to recognize the



true passion Eleanor has for him and their marriage that finally leads Eleanor/Nell to leave him in the play's final scene. Nichols explains in his note to the revised ending of the production that either Eleanor or Nell can leave: "[T]he point being that where the wives have learned from and been changed by the events in the play, the husbands have not" (342). While Eleanor/Nell has achieved a greater understanding of the complexity of passion, James/Jim still privileges it at its base level: sexuality. Eleanor's departure, during a Christmas party, goes unnoticed by the husbands. As James stares out into the audience, Jim kneels before and kisses the naked body of Kate. The significance of Jim's continued worship of pure flesh contrasts sharply with the religious significance of the holiday, which worships the birth and death of Christ and His passion for humanity. Eleanor/Nell, despite her own lack of faith, has finally recognized the significance of this type of passion in terms of her family and herself, but Jim/James retains his cynicism, continuing to worship the material elements of the body, rather than the immaterial and imprecise principles of faith, devotion, sacrifice, caring, and love.

**The Real Thing: "It's only a couple of marriages"**

With the opening of Tom Stoppard's The Real Thing in

November, 1982, the author of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1967), Jumpers (1972) and Travesties (1974) had finally accomplished what many of his critics thought he could never do: create "real, breathing, suffering human" characters (Billington Stoppard 15) and write "an erudite and witty comedy that dealt passionately with personal relationships" (Gordon 46). At the same time, Stoppard continued to rely on his typical theatrical flourishes, such as his deft wordplay, acknowledgement of his literary predecessors and "audience ambushes," a phrase coined by Hersh Zeifman (303). While The Real Thing centers on adultery, it also, through its multi-textured levels, challenges preconceived concepts about music, writing, love, politics and language.

In The Real Thing, Henry, author of the West End hit House of Cards, is married to Charlotte, an actress and current lead in the same play.<sup>22</sup> Annie, an actress as well, is married to Max, who co-stars with Charlotte in Henry's play. Annie and Henry are lovers, and their affair is inadvertently discovered by Max via a bloody handkerchief. But instead of following the dramatic consequences of this discovery and its repercussions on the

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<sup>22</sup> As Stoppard has acknowledged, The Real Thing is the closest to autobiography of all his plays, especially since Henry is a playwright. "I don't know if the play is autobiographical, but a lot of it is auto-something" (Gussow "Real" 23).

two marriages, Stoppard propels the action forward, focussing on the newly formed marriage of Annie and Henry. Unlike The Norman Conquests, Betrayal, and Passion Play, The Real Thing confronts the question of whether a marriage based on infidelity can succeed, especially when adultery re-emerges in their relationship (Annie has an affair with Billy, her co-star in Tis Pity She's A Whore).

Like Betrayal and Passion Play, The Real Thing also depicts the confrontation scene as an integral part of the adultery play. While Pinter's confrontation scene is at the center of his play, Nichols revisits it twice (once in both acts) and also adds a public and private interpretation through his use of alter egos. In The Real Thing Stoppard does Nichols one better. Like Ayckbourn in his trilogy, Stoppard is interested in seeing the scene enacted from three different perspectives. Stoppard pictured a man sitting in a room, waiting for his wife to arrive, so that he could accuse her of infidelity. "In The Real Thing, one of the stimuli has to do with [that] situation being repeated three times. That gave me two landmarks to head for" (Gussow "Real" 23). In the play's first scene, Max and Charlotte perform a scene from House of Cards, where Max accuses Charlotte of infidelity because she travelled to Switzerland without her passport. Scene Three depicts Max confronting Annie about her affair with Henry, while Scene Nine shows Henry confronting Annie over

her affair with Billy.<sup>23</sup>

Stoppard has a great deal of fun with the first of the three scenarios. Since the confrontation scene is a familiar theatrical event, the audience immediately and comfortably places themselves within Stoppard's dramatic world. He makes it even more familiar by relying on references to and similarities with other plays. For instance, the scene begins where A Doll's House ends: with a door slam. Max's jibes and puns suggest the witticisms of Noel Coward's characters.<sup>24</sup> Max's diatribe on Japanese digital watches versus the craftsmanship of Swiss watches is reminiscent of Robert's speech in Betrayal about the inefficiencies of the Venetian American Express workers. In essence, through this opening scene the audience is led to believe that there is nothing new in The Real Thing. In so doing, Stoppard allows

the audience the pleasure of recognising the well-worn motifs of the West End play about middle class adultery with its histrionic climaxes carefully contrived around stage business conventionally used to represent familiar middle class social rituals. (Gordon 101-2)

The scene suggests that The Real Thing will merely continue the adultery play stereotype of a financially well-off

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<sup>23</sup> In his stage directions, Stoppard states that each individual scene should be physically reminiscent of the other two.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, there are many references to Noel Coward's plays throughout the entire text.

couple, comprised of the sympathetic and witty husband and the hypocritical, shrewish wife.

However, half-way through the play's second scene Stoppard reveals that what we have previously seen was not a "real" scene from his play. As Hersh Zeifman notes:

This kind of ambush in Stoppard's plays is fundamentally comic--an audience laughs when it discovers it has been tricked, laughs at the sheer audacity of the trick. But it is also disconcerting; it is so easy to be tricked, so difficult to know precisely what is "real."  
(303)<sup>25</sup>

Zeifman identifies one of the main questions of the play: what exactly is "the real thing." The play's title immediately conjures up the cliché of "the real thing" in terms of love, relationships and marriage. Stoppard, though, like Pinter with "betrayal" and Nichols with "passion," also extends the concept of "the real thing" into the realms of language, writing, politics and music. But as Zeifman notes above, "the real thing" can also be extended to refer to the theatre and what we are seeing on stage. Michael Billington explains that "what Stoppard is concerned with, above all, in [Scene One] is showing the unreality of conventional stage adultery" (Stoppard 147). In this first scene, then, Stoppard reiterates the

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<sup>25</sup> Stoppard, throughout the rest of the play, continues to blur the distinction between "real" life and "dramatic" life, as he shows us rehearsals of scenes from Miss Julie, Tis Pity She's A Whore, and Brodie and Henry's play. The characters also quote extensively from other plays and from previous scenes in The Real Thing.

conventional framework (a wife's return home, a husband's accusation, damning evidence) and verbal dexterity (Noel Coward-like witticisms unclouded by emotions) of the traditional adultery play confrontation scene, which will be revised in his next two explorations of the scene.

Stoppard's second confrontation scene mixes theatricality and realism in a presentation of a husband's emotional loss and a wife's disinterest at the break-up of their marriage. Immediately apparent are Stoppard's theatrical flourishes. The incriminating evidence is a bloody handkerchief, which suggests William Shakespeare's Othello, but in this scenario the handkerchief is truthfully damning. Stoppard's use of the linen locates the scene well within the tradition of the adultery play, which relies on props such as a letter, as in Betrayal and Passion Play, or a fan, as in Lady Windermere's Fan, to reveal the well-kept secret. Equally, Stoppard relies on theatrical coincidence and irony. While Max's and Annie's marriage falls apart, Henry, the cause of the marital disharmony, happens to be on the radio program Desert Island Classics, which Max is listening to when Annie returns home (even though Henry is not physically present, he is aurally present). Finally, "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" closes out the scene after Annie tells Max that she is leaving him.

Although the above instances are obvious but also

effective theatrical manipulations of the confrontation scene, Max's and Annie's scene differs from the first confrontation scene because of the authentic human emotion injected by Stoppard. Max now finds himself replaying the same scene at home that he performs eight times a week in the theatre. At first, he attempts to handle the situation as his dramatic alter ego does in Henry's House of Cards. He adopts the same lackadaisical tone of his character, who easily spins off confusing questions about Swiss towns and currency to his adulterous wife Charlotte--"Franc doing well? . . . The Swiss franc. Is it doing well?" (11). In Scene Three, Max asks Annie: "How's Julie? . . . Julie. Miss Julie. Strindberg's Miss Julie" (36), but his repeated emphasis of "Julie" over and over again makes it apparent that he does not possess the bravado, courage or wit to carry it through.

In fact, Max rapidly loses his gift of language (although it is debatable whether he ever possessed it in the first place). In House of Cards and many other comic adultery plays, the characters stoically handle themselves, keeping their own emotions in check while delivering comic verbal thrusts at their spouses. The failure of this element, especially in light of its prevalence in Scene One, is telling. Max bumbles his way through an accusation as he holds the soiled handkerchief before Annie.

It looks filthy. It's dried filthy.

You're filthy.  
You filthy cow.  
You rotten filthy--  
(*He starts to cry, barely audible, immobile.*  
ANNIE waits.) (36)

His sentences are reduced to short staccato bursts, filled with repetitive phrases and words. His breakdown in language is only a precursor to his own emotional breakdown. "*He flings himself upon ANNIE in something like an assault which turns immediately into an embrace*" (37). Here is a betrayed husband who does not shield his feelings, build a protective barrier between himself and his spouse, or provide witty responses in the tradition of Coward. Instead, Max reacts with a definite un-English show of emotions, and Stoppard concludes the short scene around his conflicting passions--love and hate--present in Max's attacking hug. In contrast to Max, Annie's face remains a blank. For her, the relationship is over, and her silence is just as theatrically effective and telling about her reaction to her marriage's break-up as her husband's broken sentences and sobs. Stoppard ends the scene with the audience staring into Annie's blank face while "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" plays on the radio.

Finally, in Scene Nine Stoppard presents a confrontation with no theatrical flourishes. Whereas the second scenario depicted an actor confronting in his real life a scene similar to one in his professional life, the third scenario shows an author of an adultery play having



to deal with his own personal confrontation scene. In so doing Henry comes to realize the difference between the theatrical artificiality of House of Cards and his own reality of adultery. As Charlotte remarks early on:

You don't really think that if Henry caught me out with a lover, he'd sit around being witty about place mats? Like hell he would. He'd come apart like a pick-a-sticks. His sentence structure would go to pot . . . (22)

Charlotte is correct. Like Max in Scene Three, Henry loses his glibness.<sup>26</sup> Instead, he becomes interrogatory--asking Annie at least twenty-seven questions in five pages of dialogue. When he does speak for an extended period of time, he only speaks in short phrases and incomplete sentences and finishes with a run-on sentence. It is in striking contrast with his own ability to wax rhetorical on the significance of cricket bats and coffee cups. The grammarian, whose main love, besides Annie, is language, has found that at this critical and emotional juncture of his life, language, like Annie, has betrayed him as well.

While this is the first time Henry appears in a confrontation scene, it is Annie's second, and the difference between her two responses is revealing about the nature of her relationship with Henry. While she remains

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<sup>26</sup> Henry wants nothing to do with the glibness of Coward or of his own creation. He tells Annie: "I don't believe in debonair relationships. 'How's your lover today, Amanda?' 'In the pink, Charles. How's yours?' I believe in mess, tears, pain, self-abasement, loss of self-respect, nakedness" (72).

stoically silent with Max as he emotionally falls apart, she does the opposite with Henry, engaging him in a dialogue as she tries to explain to him the nature of the affair. "If I had an affair, it would be out of need. Care about that. You won't play on my guilt or remorse. I'd have none" (72). Annie is very much a subtle tactician in their exchange as she turns the burden of her infidelity and its repercussions upon Henry rather than herself.

ANNIE: Don't be like this, Hen. You're not like this.

HENRY: Yes, I am.

ANNIE: I don't want you to. It's humiliating.

HENRY: I really am not trying to humiliate you.

ANNIE: For you, I mean. It's humiliating for you. (69)

She wants him to understand that he is as much to blame for her extramarital relationship as she is.

However, what makes this scene different from the previous two is that the marriage does not end. Despite her infidelity, both Annie and Henry want the marriage to continue. She tells him: "You weren't replaced, or even replaceable. But I like it, being older for once, in charge, my pupil" (78). While Annie admits that she still wants to stay with her husband, she also reveals that the relationship with Billy is one she enjoys, and she is not willing to give her lover up yet. It is an interesting dichotomy. Unlike James who pledges to give up Kate but continues to see her in secret, Annie announces that she will keep on seeing Billy. It is something that she needs

which is missing from her relationship with Henry. At one point she tries to convey to her husband the apparent contradictory nature of her feelings: "This is the me who loves you, this me who won't tell Billy to go and rot, and I know I'm yours so I'm not afraid for you--I have to choose who I hurt and I choose you because I'm yours" (78).

It is precisely Annie's comprehension of her complex emotional commitment which separates her from her husband. While she recognizes the intricacies of marriage and love, Henry does not. The playwright sees marriage as something that is settled, a commitment for life that needs no tending. A few years after their divorce, Charlotte finally confronts Henry about his single-minded viewpoint towards marriage: "There are no commitments, only bargains. And they have to be made again every day. You think making a commitment is it. Finish. You think it sets like a concrete platform and it'll take any strain you want to put on it" (65-6). In Henry's mind, the world is broken into two distinct halves, and everything in his life conforms to this even split: love, politics, music, language, and writing. He does not acknowledge the gray area representing the complex, convoluted, imprecise ground between these two points, and it is precisely this area that he must come to recognize if he wants to understand Annie's needs.

A perfect example of Henry's splitting the world into

two sections can be found in his cricket speech. After having read the stiff, autobiographical film script by Brodie, an imprisoned soldier Annie is trying to free from prison, Henry attempts to explain his own theory of writing to Annie. (Henry only sees users of language occupying one of two camps: writers and non-writers.) He equates writing with a cricket bat. If you properly make the cricket bat, he elucidates, "the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, and all you've done is give it a knock. . . . What we're trying to do is write cricket bats" (52). He then compares the script written by Brodie to a piece of wood impersonating a cricket bat. "If you hit a ball with it, the ball will travel about ten feet and you will drop the bat and dance about shouting 'Ouch!' with your hands stuck under your armpits" (52). Henry, though, is too limited in his perspective towards writing. There is far more gray area apparent, which Stoppard makes clear through the vastly different writing styles present in the play. There are Brodie's original script, Henry's doctored version, excerpts from John Ford's Tis Pity She's A Whore and August Strindberg's Miss Julie, a scene from House of Cards, and a short bit from Henry's science-fiction script. The Real Thing shows that language and writing run the gamut of experience and expression, and Henry's casual dismissal of Brodie's script only indicates his own misconception, even snobbishness, about the complexities of

writing. (The same argument can be made about Henry's view of music and politics.) Annie's arguments to Henry in this confrontation scene and the entire play posit that marriage, love, and infidelity elude the precise designations which Henry wants to impose on them. As Richard Allen Cave notes: "Throughout Act Two of The Real Thing Stoppard demonstrates that love is not a feeling that can be stated in the way Henry yearns for, but a total condition of being" (91).

Henry, then, must come to recognize the gray area not only in language, music, politics, but also in his marriage. To do so he must turn to Annie and learn from her. Susan Rusinko states that "the play is about Henry's education in love, an education that involves both pain and joy. Henry's second wife, Annie, is his teacher" (135). As Anthony Jenkins indicates in his discussion of Henry's dilemma, Henry must learn that "Love is untidy, irrational, undefinable" (169). Where Stoppard's first two confrontation scenes, then, were about distrust and the absence of passion, his final one focusses on the issue of love, specifically Henry's realization that his own inflexible concepts of love and marriage need to be tempered and rethought.<sup>27</sup> If he succeeds, then he will be

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<sup>27</sup> Stoppard in his conversation with Mel Gussow reveals that The Real Thing is the closest thing he has written about the subject of love. "Night and Day was a first go at it. As far as I'm concerned, this is all I'll

closer to finding "the real thing" with Annie.

Henry eventually does learn to love (although the learning process takes place off-stage), and Annie breaks off her tenuous, platonic relationship with Brodie and her affair with Billy, returning to the warm confines of her home with Henry. Paul Delaney astutely identifies that The Real Thing is about "the affirmation of commitment, fidelity, trust between lovers who were themselves brought together by infidelity, the breaking of commitments, the betrayal of trust" (155). And it is this element of love, which is woefully absent from the relationships in The Norman Conquests, Betrayal and Passion Play, that is the separating characteristic between these works and The Real Thing. Even though the play articulates that love is elusive and not everyone can possess it, Annie and Henry do not give up on it. Instead of ending with rejection as in The Norman Conquests; with, chronologically, a divorce and, structurally, a drunken announcement of desire as in Betrayal; with a suicide attempt and a departure as in Passion Play, Stoppard's conclusion shows that a marriage troubled by adultery can be patched and that love and marriage can blissfully exist together. Delaney writes:

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do. For better or worse, that's it--the love play! I've been aware of the process that's lasted 25 years, of shedding inhibition about self-revelation. I wouldn't have dreamed of writing about it 10 years ago, but as you get older, you think, who cares?" ("Real" 28).

As the curtain descends on that luminous bedroom portal, the play ends not--as in Shakespearean comedy--with marriage as restoration, but--having attained the more mature vision of Shakespearean romance--with a restoration within marriage.  
(162)

With Delaney's keen distinction in mind, we can appreciate the final satisfaction of the play as The Real Thing "leaves us with something rare in modern drama: an optimistic conclusion" (Billington Stoppard 155).

CHAPTER FOUR:  
Redefining the Family

BETTY: I'm going to ask you a question, both of you. I have a little money from your grandmother. And the three of you are living in that tiny flat with two children. I wonder if we could get a house and all live in it together?  
--Caryl Churchill, Cloud Nine

After having had surprisingly unfulfilling affairs with Otto, a painter, and then Leo, a playwright, in the first two acts of Noel Coward's Design for Living,<sup>1</sup> Gilda, an interior decorator, decides to marry Ernest, an art dealer. Matrimony, however, holds no satisfaction for her either because she misses both Otto and Leo: "We're all of a piece, the three of us" (137). In the third act her two former lovers, who have been travelling around the world together, reappear to reclaim her, and Gilda happily opts to live with them, leaving Ernest angry and confused.

GILDA (*peaceably*): Once and for all, Ernest, don't be bitter and so dreadfully outraged! Please, please calm down and you'll find it much easier to understand.

ERNEST: You overrate my capacity for understanding! I don't understand; the whole situation is revolting to me. I never shall understand; I never could understand this

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<sup>1</sup> Design for Living premiered in 1933 in New York City, starring Coward, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontane in the roles of Leo, Otto and Gilda, respectively.



disgusting three-sided erotic hotch-potch!  
(137-8)

Ernest's frustration with this new family unit, comprised of Otto, Leo and Gilda, is understandable. After all, like much of the rest of society at that time, he maintains that the structure of the family should be based upon the traditional infrastructure: a heterosexual couple legally bound through a sanctioned matrimonial ceremony. Gilda's appeal, needless to say, is unsuccessful in altering Ernest's abhorrence to their *menage à trois*, and, as he trips out the door, he denounces them as "unscrupulous, worthless degenerates" (138). The play's curtain comes down as the threesome laugh uncontrollably in each other's arms.<sup>2</sup>

Ernest, though, was not the only one to fume at the play's final combination. In his introduction to Play Parade Coward addresses the various responses Design for Living received:

It has been liked and disliked, and hated and admired, but never, I think, sufficiently loved by any but its three leading actors. This, perhaps, was only to be expected, as its central theme, from the point of view of the average,

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<sup>2</sup> Coward addressed the meaning of this jocular ending in his introduction to Play Parade, the first volume of his collected plays: "Some saw in it a lascivious anticipation of a sort of triangular carnal frolic. Others, with less ribald imaginations, regarded it as a meaningless and slightly inept excuse to bring the curtain down. I as author, however, prefer to think that Gilda and Otto and Leo were laughing at themselves" (xvii).

must appear to be definitely antisocial. . . . it seemed, to many of them, "unpleasant." (xvi)

Sharing the "average" theatregoer's feeling of unpleasantness was the Lord Chamberlain, who banned the play from the London stage for six years.

Coward's concluding *menage à trois* is a provocative dismissal of the traditional composition of the family, and Frances Gray's description of a photograph taken of the original production's ending sheds some light on the make-up of this socially unorthodox grouping. In the photo Coward and the Lunts are on a sofa "physically entwined in a complicated three-cornered knot, a circle impossible to break from inside or outside" (Coward 167). In forming this circular relationship, the three artists have created a union socially, sexually and familially stronger than the traditional heterosexual foundation of the family, which is, in contrast, finite and linear. In place of the traditional, monogamous heterosexual husband/wife pairing, Design for Living proposes a triumvirate of one part heterosexuality and two parts bisexuality, a previously marginalized sexual status. The circular family, as presented in Coward's play, has no identifiable end or beginning; therefore, this "three-cornered knot" provides a multi-faceted, sturdy, alternative "design for living." In so doing, Robert F. Kiernan argues, "the play celebrates the irrationalism of human bonding, its victories over . .

. the marriage contract, and heterosexual orthodoxy" (47). Coward's play also posits that this familial framework is based upon individual choice and sexual self-interest rather than the strictures established by society. This idea becomes apparent when Gilda says: "From now on we shall have to live and die our own way. No one else's way is any good, we don't fit." Leo echoes her a few moments later as he tells Ernest: "We have our own decencies. We have our own ethics. Our lives are a different shape from yours" (137).

And yet, for all of its subversion of the traditional family format, Design for Living is tethered by the conventions of the modern theatre and dramatically fails to explore its newly-formed household. In reviewing the 1939 London production for The Bystander, Herbert Farjeon comments that the play "ends too soon because when Gilda . . . brings down the curtain by going off to live with both Otto and Leo in a *ménage à trois*, we feel that we have reached the really interesting part of the story" (qtd. in J. Russell 53). Since Coward's audience expected to be entertained by the pangs, disruptions, pleasures and successes of heterosexual romance, the play focuses on Gilda's heterosexual relationships with Otto, Leo and Ernest. In his study of Coward's plays, Clive Fisher remarks:

Design for Living is typical of Coward's comedies

in its lightness of plot. But what does not happen in it is as revealing as what does. He can just get away with making Gilda have an affair with Leo and with Otto, but he knew that the final, and obvious, permutation, an affair between Leo and Otto, was out of the question. The most he could hope for was that the possibility would flutter, unformulated, in the minds of his audience. (114)

The homosexual relationship between Leo and Otto must transpire during the intermission between the second and third acts.

In an even more intriguing turn, Coward refuses to acknowledge the play's "design for living" as applicable to anyone else but his three characters (Introduction Parade xvi). In his biography of Coward, Sheridan Morley supports this assertion by arguing that since all three characters are artists, they live "in a world of their own that has little in common with, and cannot be invaded by, ordinary mortals" (Talent 226). (Morley fails to note that they are rich artists, which also separates them from "ordinary mortals.") From this point of view, the image and rules of the traditional, heterosexual family are only relevant for the middle and working classes, while the witty, wealthy upper class are able to question, escape from and redefine the moral, familial and societal conventions governing the British family. This elitist contention about the state of the family is one of the main divergences between Coward and more contemporary playwrights who are also interested in challenging the traditional conception of the family's

framework. These post-1956 playwrights, including John Osborne, Joe Orton and Caryl Churchill, do not consider class as a prerequisite in theatrical family experimentation. As a matter of fact, the works in the following pages eschew the wealthy and instead focus on the disruption and reconfiguration of the traditional British family image in middle and working class households. They question the rigidity of the family by reinforcing Coward's implication that the institution is a malleable form susceptible to the creativity and self-interests of individual members.

Interestingly, the radical family grouping of Design for Living was not immediately emulated during the initial years of the second British Renaissance. A number of plays, like John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, do question and occasionally stretch the boundaries of the British family, but ultimately these works retreat from any permanent structural disruption through their reinstatement of the traditional family by the play's end. It would not be until ten years after Look Back in Anger that a playwright would duplicate Coward's subversiveness. This chapter then will trace these alternative households in contemporary British drama by examining Osborne's Look Back in Anger, Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane and Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine. Osborne's seminal play initially challenges familial conceptions and boundaries with the

introduction of a household threesome, composed of a lodger and a married couple. However, it ends with the restoration of the married couple as the lodger leaves. Orton's and Churchill's plays extend Osborne's examination by successfully disrupting the traditional familial structure through the creation of alternative families. Much like Design for Living, Orton's play ends with a *menage à trois*, but in this instance the triangle hinges on a bisexual lodger, who becomes the sexual partner of his landlady and her brother. Churchill's Cloud Nine first dismantles the Victorian idealization of the family before exploring a sexually modified contemporary British family, where the previously marginalized--women, homosexuals and children--are empowered to determine the shape and focus of family relationships.

#### **The Third Man: Look Back in Anger**

After waiting six years for the English premiere of Design for Living, London in 1939 was unimpressed with Coward's theatrical effort. The play had become dated, and the country was far more concerned with the ominous advance of World War II. The same tepid, disinterested response that Coward's play received was not to be the case for John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, which has been credited with

rejuvenating a comatose British theatre.<sup>3</sup> One of the most provocative and original aspects of the play, at that time, was that its protagonist, Jimmy Porter, was a verbose, lower-class owner of a candy stall. William Gaskill, George Devine's successor as the head of the English Stage Company, which first produced Look Back in Anger, explains the significance of Jimmy Porter's class standing: "You have to remember that up to 1956 working class parts were always comic, that actors never used a regional accent in a straight part, and that plays did only depict one section of society" (qtd. in Bull Stage 41).<sup>4</sup> That "one section of society" is, of course, the upper class, and Osborne has included his own representative in the Porter household, Jimmy's wife Alison, who receives the brunt of her husband's attacks precisely because of her affluent and

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<sup>3</sup> The immediate critical response to Look Back in Anger and its lingering effect on contemporary British drama is far too extensive for this study. For preliminary information on the contemporary critical reception to the play, see, among others, J. R. Taylor, Anger 37-58; and J. R. Taylor, ed., Osborne. For a later summation of the play's importance to contemporary British drama, see, among others, Bierhaus 47-55; and Edgar 11-3.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Tynan also remarked on the presence of the lower classes in plays produced before Look Back in Anger: "The poor were seldom with us, except when making antic contributions to broad farce or venturing, tongue-tied with embarrassment and clutching cloth caps, into the gracious salons of middle-class comedy, where they were expected to preface every remark with 'Beggin' yer pardon, Mum.' To become eligible for detailed dramatic treatment, it was usually necessary either to have an annual income of more than three thousand pounds net or to be murdered in the house of someone who did" (250).

privileged past.<sup>5</sup> This class difference between the two spouses informs the play's disruption of the traditional form of the British family.

Look Back in Anger takes place in a cramped, one-room attic flat, where Jimmy and Alison are joined by Cliff, best friend to both characters.<sup>6</sup> The household is in constant animation due to the mood shifts and tirades of Jimmy, who harangues against anything British, including Sunday newspapers, which are scattered around the flat; intellectual elitists; and, closer to home, Alison and her family. At the end of the first act, the threesome becomes a foursome with the arrival of Helena, a friend of Alison's. Distressed by Jimmy's treatment of his wife and its possible effect on her pregnancy, Helena encourages Alison to leave Jimmy, which she does at the end of Act Two. Helena, though, remains, taking Alison's place. In the third act Alison returns, after having had a miscarriage.<sup>7</sup> The play ends with the married couple reconciled, but only through the assistance of their make-

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<sup>5</sup> This pairing of diverse social classes is, of course, not new to literary works. August Strindberg's Miss Julie (1888) focusses on this relationship, as does John Braine's Room at the Top (1958), a contemporary of Look Back in Anger, to name just a few.

<sup>6</sup> Cliff does not sleep in the flat with them. He has a small room next door, but he spends all of his waking, non-working hours in the flat with Alison and Jimmy.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter One for a discussion of Alison's pregnancy.



believe world of bears and squirrels.

Osborne's inclusion of Cliff in the household places Look Back in Anger within a sub-genre of modern and contemporary family plays that concern themselves with lodgers--individuals who enter households and disrupt, either positively or (in most instances) negatively, the familial proceedings which transpire there.<sup>8</sup> The lodger poses an interesting dilemma within the dynamics of the family. Essentially, a lodger is a non-kin outsider, who takes up residence in a private home and, in some cases, pays rent for the privilege. His physical presence within the family domicile, though, does not automatically qualify him with familial status. Instead, the lodger exists in a liminal state of semi-acceptance, possessing partial privileges of the family. For example, the household itself is divided into two domains: the private (bedrooms) and the public (the dining room, living room, kitchen). The lodger and family share the public spaces, while only family members have unrestricted access to both.

Graham Allan, a British sociologist specializing in the British family, has probed the physical and sociological boundaries of the family and its household.

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the plays in this category include Henrik George Bernard Shaw's Heartbreak House (1920), Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party and The Caretaker, Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane, Edward Bond's Saved, and Stephen Poliakoff's Coming into Land (1987).

In one of his studies he identifies the difficulty an outsider faces in living with a family and not being considered a family member.

For example, lodgers, *au pairs* and live-in nannies are likely to be conscious of their status as outsiders, even though, in contemporary fashion, they may to some extent be encouraged to treat the house as their own. They are usually aware of having to fit around arrangements others determine rather than having much right to impose their own ways. Indeed, it would seem that tensions quickly develop if *au pairs*, lodgers and the like ever do take the invitation to treat the house like their home too literally. (144)

Osborne's play, though, contests Allan's theory of distance between the lodger and family members because neither Jimmy nor Alison deems Cliff an "outsider." In fact, within this attic flat no demarcation between private and public spaces exists, since Alison's and Jimmy's bed rests in open view of anyone who enters the flat. Equally, Cliff's bedroom, which is off-stage, is also a public space as Jimmy uses it to escape from Alison. Cliff, then, is very much an "insider" and an integral part of this family.

And yet, a family, is usually composed of a husband and wife, not a husband, wife and best friend. Unlike Leo, Otto and Gilda in Design for Living, this menage is not based on an open sexual relationship between the threesome, even though sexual tension does exist in the household. In fact, there are questionable aspects to Cliff's relationship with each spouse. Cliff and Alison are inordinately affectionate with one another as they hold

hands, embrace and kiss longer than would be considered normal for mere friends. Helena notes these passionate embraces and asks Alison about them.

ALISON: We're simply fond of each other--there's no more to it than that.

HELENA: Darling, really! It can't be as simple as that.

ALISON: You mean there must be something physical too? I suppose there is, but it's not exactly a consuming passion with either of us. It's just a relaxed, cheerful sort of thing, like being warm in bed. You're too comfortable to bother about moving for the sake of some other pleasure. (46)

Alison's comments and actions are revealing in how they reflect on her relationship with her husband. Cliff provides her with the comforting assurances which are not forthcoming from Jimmy. When she burns her arm on the iron, for instance, she sends Jimmy out of the room, allowing Cliff to bandage it and comfort her. Cliff also becomes Alison's confidante--as she reveals her pregnancy to him but not to her husband--and vocal defender against her husband's brutish actions, though he has little power to stop them.

Cliff's and Jimmy's relationship is also sexually suggestive, especially when they rough house with one another in the flat. E. G. Bierhaus contends that Jimmy and Cliff have a homosexual relationship: "although it is the women who make advances to Jimmy--they slap him or kiss him or clasp his legs--it is Jimmy who makes advances to Cliff. But Jimmy can only give Cliff ulcers, whereas he

can make Alison pregnant" (53). Admittedly, a homosexual subtext is present in the play.

JIMMY: It's a funny thing. You've been loyal, generous and a good friend. But I'm quite prepared to see you wander off, find a new home, and make out on your own. And all because of something I want from [Helena] downstairs, something I know in my heart she's incapable of giving. You're worth a half a dozen Helenas to me or to anyone. (104)

And Jimmy seems to share the same type of sado-masochistic relationship with Cliff as he does with Alison--at one point Jimmy walks behind Cliff and twists his ears for no apparent reason. "*Cliff roars with pain. Jimmy grins back at him*" (14). Even with these instances taken into account, Bierhaus' argument lacks any substantial proof and is, therefore, unconvincing. A more probable explanation is that Cliff provides Jimmy with companionship and comfort, just as he does with Alison.

If Osborne's menage is unlike Coward's in not being based on sexual relationships between the characters, then what purpose does Cliff provide as a chosen member of the Porter household? Critics have stumbled over this question since Look Back in Anger's premiere. Michelene Wandor, who describes the household of Alison, Jimmy and Cliff as an "oddball family," writes that Cliff is "a substitute--an adult stand-in--for the child they do not have" (Look 12). Bierhaus views Cliff as an essential conductor for their relationship: "The only way Jimmy and Alison can reach out

to one another is through Cliff whom they each have to touch in some manner before they can touch one another" (51). Simon Trussler suggests that Cliff is a peacemaker "who has become a sort of buffer-state between the disputed boundaries of the marriage" (Osborne 46).<sup>9</sup> For the most part, the critics agree that Cliff acts as an essential and badly needed third presence in the Porter's marriage, whether it be as their "child" or as a buffer to smooth over the frayed edges. Cliff even acknowledges his importance to the marriage's longevity. He tells Helena: "This has always been a battlefield, but I'm pretty certain that if I hadn't been here, everything would have been over between these two long ago. I've been a--a no-man's land between them" (72). Cliff's presence provides an occasional respite, allowing them to escape their own economic differences, which is the main point of skirmish on this household's metaphoric battlefield. This alternative family, then, is not based on the usual familial defining principles of sexual relations, marriage, or blood ties but instead on Cliff's ability to shelter the two spouses from one another.

The character who has made the decision to include

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<sup>9</sup> Simon Trussler also notes that one of the weaknesses of the text is the lack of development in the secondary characters. He cites Cliff as serving a "casual, catalytic function" and then argues: "Part of the trouble is that both Cliff and Helena function rather as chemical agents than as characters" (Osborne 46, 49).

Cliff in the family is Jimmy Porter. Even though Jimmy extends the framework of the traditional family through this action, he still reinforces its rigidity through his patriarchal dominance over the household. Whereas Otto, Leo and Gilda collectively decide to form their threesome, the trio in Look Back in Anger is regulated by Jimmy, the potentate of the attic flat. The other members of the household have no say in the matter of its structure. After all, everything is his, from the Sunday papers to the play's longest speeches. When he is off-stage, he is the subject of the other characters' conversations, and while they try to converse, he plays a trumpet off-stage.

Jimmy's domination is apparent before the first words of the play are even spoken. Look Back in Anger opens with Cliff and Jimmy shielded from the audience's view by the Sunday newspapers they are reading, while Alison stands behind an ironing board, dressed in Jimmy's shirt. In this tableau, each character has a protective barrier separating him/her from the other two (certainly a far cry from the jovial circular embrace which ends Coward's play). However, Osborne's stage directions indicate that Jimmy can easily circumvent these obstructions. In wearing Jimmy's shirt, Alison indicates that she is already his possession; at the same time, his pipe smoke permeates the entire room, easily bypassing the buffer of Cliff's newspaper and Alison's ironing board. Jimmy, like his pipe smoke, is not

constrained by these erected barriers. Osborne's opening image is effective in conveying the power of the family dynamics, where Jimmy's dominion and rhetoric is as pervasive and inescapable as his smoke. Although this household is alternatively structured, it still retains the patriarchal power present in the traditional family.

While the idealized image of the family is disrupted through the tripartite structure of the household, Jimmy unremittingly deconstructs the traditional and representative British family through his attacks on the upper-class, imperialist family, which is also the focus of Churchill's parodic criticism in Cloud Nine. He does so by verbally dissecting each of Alison's immediate family members into boorish caricatures: Daddy, who is "still casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from his comfortable, disenfranchised wilderness" (9); Brother Nigel, "The straight-backed, chinless wonder from Sandhurst" (14); Mummy, who is so evil minded that she will "kick you in the groin while you're handing your hat to the maid" (15-6); and Alison, "the Lady Pusillanimous" (17). In razing these characters Jimmy debunks the heralded and previously untouchable position of the upper class, while also dismissing the importance and significance of England's representative family. In Jimmy's mind, its time

is past.<sup>10</sup> Jimmy replaces this traditional family with the members of his household, which is centered around him, his interests, relationships and allegiances. As Alison explains to Helena, Jimmy "expects you to be pretty literal about [his interests]. Not only about himself and all the things he believes in, his present and his future, but his past as well. All the people he admires and loves, and has loved" (46).

Jimmy's alternative family, though, does not last. With Helena's arrival, the framework begins to buckle.<sup>11</sup> Alison's departure creates a tentative, new threesome of Helena, Jimmy and Cliff, but Cliff's presence is contingent on Jimmy and Alison. He has no purpose in the replacement relationship of Jimmy and Helena. Instead, he has now become an outsider, and he opts to leave. With Alison's return and the departure of Helena, the household, then, undergoes a major shift from an alternative arrangement to the reinstatement of the same conventional structure that Jimmy so despises. The play, in essence, ends with the

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<sup>10</sup> Osborne's fictional invective was confirmed a few months after the play's premiere as the Suez Crisis finally verified what many had surmised and feared since the end of World War II: not only was England's extensive empire--upon which the sun never set--deteriorating, but so was its status as a world leader as both the United States and U.S.S.R. censured Britain for its involvement in the Middle-Eastern fiasco.

<sup>11</sup> The foursome of Jimmy, Alison, Cliff and Helena, a potentially fascinating dynamic, is never dramatically explored by Osborne.



"remarriage" of Jimmy and Alison as they begin an exclusive relationship not reliant upon the presence of outsiders.

However, the couple's return to the more conventional conception of the family is problematic because when Jimmy and Alison are alone, they are unable to communicate with one another. They first realized this situation after their initial alternative household disbanded. Immediately after marrying, Jimmy and Alison moved in with Hugh, Jimmy's best friend, and the three proceeded to crash upper-class parties thrown by friends of Alison's family. When Hugh left to go overseas, Jimmy lost his best friend and Alison found herself displaced from her previous social standing due to Jimmy's and Hugh's behavior at the parties. The married couple then were left uncomfortably and unfamiliarly alone for the first time. In order to combat the painful awkwardness of their new situation as well as escape the emptiness of a society in which neither one fits anymore, they invented the game of bears and squirrels, based on the two stuffed animals they possessed. "It was the one way of escaping," Alison tells Helena, "from everything--a sort of unholy priest-hole of being animals to one another. . . . A silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer" (54). Their reliance on such a device indicates the failure of the traditional family structure. The family, after all, is supposed to provide an escape and a sense of

security from the outside world. With its failure, Alison and Jimmy, then, must retreat even further from one another and society, into the make-believe forest of their stuffed animals, where the pressures of class, family and relationships are absent. There, they are able to exist in a naturalistic fantasy, simply enjoying each other's company.

ALISON: Well, you're a jolly super bear, too. A really sooooooooooooooooooper, marvellous bear.

JIMMY: Bears and squirrels are marvellous.

ALISON: Marvellous and beautiful.

*She jumps up and down excitedly, making little "paw gestures".*

Ooooooooooh! Ooooooooooh!

JIMMY: What the hell's that?

ALISON: That's a dance squirrels do when they're happy.

*They embrace again. (34)*

This fantasy world, though, is not free from the same patriarchal dominance that Jimmy exhibits in his real world relationships. After all, Jimmy is the bear and Alison is the squirrel. Even though the bear and the squirrel may be able to co-exist together in the woods, there are times when the bear will become hungry--perhaps even for a squirrel. Osborne makes this aggressive and dangerous aspect of their relationship apparent in Jimmy's and Alison's real world marriage. After Alison has burned her arm on the iron due to Jimmy's roughhousing, her husband apologizes.

JIMMY: I'm sorry.

ALISON: I know.

JIMMY: I mean it.

ALISON: There's no need.

JIMMY: I did it on purpose. (32-3)

In the play's last speech, Jimmy makes it clear that their make-believe world no longer offers them the same level of safety and stability of escape, which it previously did. The hostility which threatens their real world marriage has now moved into their game.

JIMMY: And you'll . . . help me keep my claws in order, because I'm a bit of a soppy, scruffy sort of bear. And I'll see that you keep that sleek, bushy tail glistening as it should . . . [but] we've got to be careful. There are cruel steel traps lying about everywhere, just waiting for rather mad, slightly satanic, and very timid little animals. (119)

The only protection the couple had from these dangers existed within the unconventional framework of Cliff's presence, as he provided a shield from the pressures of the outside world and their own relationship. With Cliff's decision to leave the household, these two lovers/combatants are now forced once again into directly viewing each other and their relationship without barriers or protection. They now must face one another and the surrounding "cruel steel traps" which are of their own making.

**Entertaining Mr Sloane:** "I never had no family of my own"

Like Look Back in Anger, Entertaining Mr. Sloane, Joe Orton's first main stage production, also focusses on a

lodger's presence in the household, but unlike Osborne's play, Orton's work begins with a traditional familial structure before ending with a *menage à trois*.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Coward in Design for Living, whose characters, in dissatisfaction with the protocol and monogamy of the early twentieth century family, formed their own household, Orton in Entertaining Mr. Sloane finds the traditional family structure useless, and in response deconstructs it, creating a new tripartite family whose foundation is based on the death of the patriarch.

The reviewers, for the most part, were unappreciative of Orton's writing style, subject matter, and humor. Herbert Kretzmer, writing for The Daily Express, stated quite simply: "This is not a play to recommend" (10), while W. A. Darlington of The Daily Telegraph admitted: "Not for a long time have I disliked a play so much as I disliked Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane. . . . I felt as if snakes had been writhing around my feet" (18).<sup>13</sup> Atypical

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<sup>12</sup> Entertaining Mr. Sloane opened in London in May of 1964 at the New Arts Theatre and then transferred to the West End, where it played at Wyndham's Theatre.

<sup>13</sup> Orton managed to flame the publicity for and outrage over Entertaining Mr. Sloane by sending letters, under numerous pseudonyms, to editors of London newspapers in praise or condemnation of the play. At one juncture Orton sent the following laudatory letter under the name of Alan Crosby: "What, not one word in favour of poor 'Mr. Sloane'? Well, here goes: I myself consider--a) the dialogue brilliant; b) the comedy breathtaking; c) the drama satisfying; d) the play as a whole well-written if not profound" (Diaries 283).

was a review like John Mortimer's in The Evening Standard: "All good comes to him who stands and waits, and after what now seems a long time waiting round the moth-eaten wings of the commercial theatre something really quite good has come to me at last" (4).

Entertaining Mr. Sloane features a young, smooth-skinned man, named Sloane, who rents a room in Kath's house. Kath is a lonely nymphomaniac and has more than a passing interest in her lodger. Ed, Kath's brother, is also attracted to the youth; he pays the youth's rent and hires him to be his chauffeur.<sup>14</sup> The first act ends with Kath successfully seducing Sloane during his first night's stay. The remainder of the action takes place six months later with Kath visibly pregnant. While keeping Kath's pregnancy secret from her brother, Sloane manages to enjoy the sexual benefits of the over-affectionate Kath and the material rewards from an increasingly possessive Ed. However, Kemp, the siblings' father, has recognized Sloane as the murderer of his former boss and decides to tell the police. Before the old man can do so, Sloane beats and kicks him to death. Kath and Ed elect not to report the murder and instead blackmail the youth into living with each sibling six months out of the year.

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<sup>14</sup> The subject matter and humor of Orton's play pricked the ears of the Lord Chamberlain, but, according to Orton, "he cut all the heterosexual bits and kept in all the homosexual bits" (qtd. in Lahr 191).

While Simon Shepherd accurately contends that Orton's conclusion "means accepting a social set-up that totally perverts our assumptions about the family" ("Edna" 102), the unconventional construction of this family and the torpedoing of the traditional family in the play's final moments should not surprise the audience. According to Shepherd, Orton views institutions, like the family, but also businesses, mental hospitals, and the government, as structures which control and exploit its members ("Edna" 95). In his three main stage plays and most of his television dramas, Orton proceeds to deconstruct these powerful British institutions. With this in mind, it is no wonder, then, that throughout Entertaining Mr. Sloane, Orton questions and dismantles the traditional image, traits and power structures of the British family, the country's most omnipresent and representative institution.

Orton begins this process through his strategic location of the family domicile. In general, the family is an active participant within the public macro-community surrounding the family home, while, at the same, it is diligent in preserving its dual position as a private micro-community. According to Leonore Davidoff, Jean L'Esperance and Howard Newby, all sociologists who have studied the parameters of the home, the separation between society and the family "is doubly enforced by the physical walls of the house, by the physical boundaries of hedges,

fences and walls surrounding its garden setting" (140-1), so that the family is "small, self-sufficient and sharply differentiated from the outside world" (152). In Entertaining Mr. Sloane Kemp's and Kath's house maintains that distance between the family and society, but to an extreme as it is completely isolated from the city and other homes. In looking out the window, Sloane comments:

SLOANE. A perfect skyline you've got here. . . .  
 Stunning it is. Stunning. . . . Who built it  
 then? Was he a mad financier? The bloke who  
 conceived the idea of building a house in the  
 midst of a rubbish dump?  
 KEMP. It was intended to be the first of a row.  
 (72)

Orton's play suggests that the family, as symbolized by the row house, an omnipresent structure in England and home to many middle and working class families, is only worthy of keeping company with the other refuse of society. This estrangement of the home and its occupants from the city indicates that these family members and this family no longer serves any useful function within the framework of society. An explanation for this dismissal can be found in the unconventional society that surrounds the landfill. Instead of being controlled by heterosexual individuals, Ed and his other business partners, all of whom are openly homosexual, are figures of authority in the city and possess a great deal of power. Heterosexual judgements and values then have been replaced by homosexual ones. Therefore, an institution, like the traditional family,

with its emphatic accent on heterosexual relationships, has no value in such an environment and is, therefore, relegated to its outskirts.

Like Look Back in Anger, Entertaining Mr. Sloane questions Graham Allan's statements about the separation between the lodgers and the family. Kath, like Jimmy Porter, does not maintain any distance between her family and Sloane. When the youth is deciding whether to take the room, Kath asks: "You'll live with us then as one of the family?" (67). She immediately decides to adopt him, so that she can become the mother figure which has been absent from the orphan's life--both his parents died when he was eight (Sloane tells Kath: "I've an idea that they had a suicide pact" (68)). Kath, likewise, sees Sloane as filling the void left by the removal of her illegitimate son, whom Ed took away from her when she was a teenager.<sup>15</sup> (In an Oedipal twist, Sloane is the same age as her absent child.) Orton subverts this mother/son "reunion" because the bond between Kath and Sloane is not grounded in the conventional conception of asexual, maternal devotion. Instead, Orton presents a relationship where the maternal and the sexual are inextricably entwined. The co-existence of the two elements become apparent as Kath seduces him:

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<sup>15</sup> Kath had seduced one of Ed's mates and in revenge he broke up their intended marriage and had the child sent away.



"I'll be your mamma. I need to be loved. Gently. Oh! I shall be so ashamed in the morning. (*Switches off the light.*) What a big heavy baby you are. Such a big heavy baby" (95).

After complicating the maternal position through the suggestive introduction of an incestuous relationship, Orton proceeds to deconstruct the authority of the father.<sup>16</sup> According to the traditional hierarchy of the family, Kemp should be the authority figure. But in Entertaining Mr. Sloane, this is not the case. Adrian Page remarks: "In this situation the absolute authority of the Father is absent" (145). Just as the lone row house's solitary placement indicates the tenuousness of the family, Kemp represents the irrelevance of the patriarch, as he shuffles through the house half-deaf and half-blind. Upon first meeting Sloane, he misidentifies him as Ed. Kath talks to and treats her father as if he were a child: "Let [Sloane] shake your hand. Go on" (69). The most prevalent example of Kemp's lack of authority occurs when he stabs Sloane in the leg. In this act the "father" of the family has directly rejected Sloane, the newly deemed "son," and yet Sloane remains because Kath and Ed place no value on Kemp's judgements. The patriarch's ability to control the

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<sup>16</sup> Attacking the authority of the father figure is a constant aspect of his plays, as can also be seen in Orton's depiction of McLeavey in Loot and Dr. Prentice in What the Butler Saw.

actions of his family are obsolete.

With Kemp's murder, the last remnant of the traditional family is removed. Kath and Ed do not mourn his death but immediately use his homicide as the foundation for their new family. By deciding not to tell the police of Sloane's involvement, the siblings place the youth in a Persephone-like relationship, in which they will each live with Sloane six months out of the year, with the occasional conjugal visit permitted. The play, then, ends with the creation of a new, polymorphous family. Yet, this family lacks permanence; it does not possess the unbreakable "design" of Leo, Otto and Gilda:

SLOANE: Is it going to be O.K.?

ED: Well . . . perhaps.

SLOANE: I'll be grateful.

ED: Will you?

SLOANE: Eternally.

ED: Not eternally, boy. Just a few years. (148)

With the dismissal of the conventional family structure, membership is no longer permanent. Instead, the family becomes open to the flexibility of the individuals, and affiliation can easily be offered or revoked. With this hetero-, homo-, bisexual triangle, Orton dismisses the exclusiveness of the family, replacing it with a more open posture in its relationship with society. No longer will consanguinity be a basis for family membership. Instead, prospective individuals will be inducted based upon the sexual favors that they can provide, and once an individual

is no longer sexually useful, he or she will be replaced, making room for new members to join the family.

**Cloud Nine: "The Empire is one large family"**

Coward's Design for Living and Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane are not peerless in their theatrical introduction of these non-exclusive, heterosexual households. In fact, these two plays belong to a cluster of works which examine "alternative" families, households which are not based on heterosexual conventions and expectations. Although Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie Forte stress the significance of this burgeoning genre for contemporary feminist playwrights, their comments are equally germane to Orton and Coward:

[T]he traditional canon of plays with its focus on the heterosexual love story prescribes the conventional ending of marriage as that which mends all tearings in the social fabric. The new desiring subject found by many feminist playwrights breaks with this entire tradition, through the alternative of homosexual desire, to open up the exploration of many alternative desires. It is a gateway to the future political stage, where the dramatic subject may appear, beyond gender and beyond the oppression of patriarchal codes of desire. (65)

The year 1968, when the Lord Chamberlain's control over the London theatre ended, is crucial to the production of plays dealing with homosexual desire. With the Lord Chamberlain's absence, playwrights like Colin Spencer,

Michelene Wandor, Sarah Daniels and Caryl Churchill, were free to delve into the midst of these previously unexplored households, unlike Coward and Orton, who could only conclude with the initial formation of such a domicile. One of the first post-1968 plays to depict an alternative household was Colin Spencer's Spitting Image (1969). The play entertains two fantastical questions: What happens when a homosexual couple gives birth to a child and how would the British government respond? The issue of homosexual parenting also arises in two plays by Michelene Wandor which address the emerging visual presence of lesbian mothers in society: Care and Control (1977) and AID Thy Neighbour (1978). The former examines three custody battles between husbands and their lesbian wives, and Wandor, like Spencer, is interested in how the government interprets a homosexual's right and competence to be a parent. The latter play contrasts a lesbian couple with their heterosexual neighbors, both of whom are attempting to have a child through the scientific technology of AID, artificial insemination by donor. A more recent example can be found in Sarah Daniels' Neaptide (1986), which premiered at the National Theatre, thereby obtaining the widest mainstream exposure of these four plays. The play focuses on a lesbian mother who must deal with her husband's legal challenges to her custody of their child, her sister's nervous breakdown, and the coming out of a

lesbian student at her place of work, an all-girl's school. These examples are merely a few of the plays, which, like Design for Living, Entertaining Mr. Sloane and Cloud Nine, have begun to explore homosexual relationships and their effect on the traditional conceptions of the British family.

Churchill's Cloud Nine was written in collaboration with and performed by the Joint Stock Company.<sup>17</sup> Many critics were ecstatic about the production, including Robert Cushman, The Observer's reviewer, who noted that the second act "is almost the best thing to arrive in the London theatre this young and dismal year" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 42). However, the play also had its detractors. J. C. Trewin of the Birmingham Post wrote: "What does one call this? A treatise on bisexuality? A view of parents and children? Anyway, it strikes me as superfluous" (qtd. in Lloyd Evans 235). Michael Billington of The Guardian was "sorry that Ms. Churchill's play opts not for a detailed exploration of one area but for a frivolously superficial jog around the whole complex and fascinating territory of sexual relations" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 42). Despite these reservations, Churchill's play became an international hit and established her status

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<sup>17</sup> It premiered at the Darlington College of Arts in February of 1979 before moving to London, where it ran successfully at the Royal Court Theatre in March 1979.

as a major British playwright.

Cloud Nine is structured in two distinct parts. The first half is set in Victorian Imperialist Africa and focuses on Clive and his family: his wife, Betty; their two children, Edward and Victoria; the children's nanny, Ellen; Betty's mother, Maud; and the houseboy, Joshua. Rounding out the characters are Mrs. Saunders, a neighboring widow, and Harry Bagley, an explorer. While an unsuccessful native rebellion lingers in the background, in the foreground the audience is made privy to a farcical array of sexual rebellions: Harry's homosexual involvement with Joshua and Edward; Ellen's lesbian interest in Betty; and Clive's adulterous passion for Mrs. Saunders. Late in the act Harry, misunderstanding Clive's fondness for male company, propositions him. In the act's final scene, Clive marries Harry off to Ellen, hoping to reform his friend of this "most revolting perversion" (283).

The second act progresses 100 years to 1979, while the family members have only aged 25 years. Confronting the numerous troubles plaguing the contemporary family, Churchill focusses on Betty, who has left Clive, and her children. Victoria and Edward are coping with their own troubled relationships: Victoria with her husband Martin, who is frustratingly indecisive, and Edward with his lover Gerry, who wants to escape Edward's feminine inclinations. Meanwhile, Lin, Victoria's lesbian friend and eventual

lover, is trying to raise her daughter Cathy on her own. Eventually Edward, Victoria and Tommy, Victoria's son, move in with Lin and Cathy. This unconventional household, though, is disbanded, and no alternative restructuring is offered. The play ends in a state of tentativeness as the family members find themselves in a state of irresolution.

Churchill has admitted to her dissatisfaction with the traditional framework of the family. In an interview with John Simon, Churchill remarked:

I think it is wrong if you feel the family has to be in the traditional form--an authoritarian man and subservient woman and children who will obey, and the whole family an instrument upholding an authoritarian society. . . . [Y]ou can have a family which may or may not be a man and a woman and two children. It may also be two gay men and maybe a woman who wants to live with them and have a child by someone else. And they could be a family unit. It is important to be open to people having whatever kind of family they want.  
(130)

In Cloud Nine's manic first act, Churchill debunks the Victorian idealization of the family, while in the calmer second act she presents a redefined notion of the contemporary family, with all of its problems. In doing so, Churchill replaces the first act's patriarchal authority with the dominance of the previously marginalized, stifled, and ignored: women, homosexuals and children.

The authoritative figure at the play's start is Clive, who firmly controls his family and makes decisions about

its appearance in society. Clive's power is indisputable as he reigns not only over his family, but also over Harry, Mrs. Saunders, and the natives. This pervasive authority of Clive as Queen's representative and, more generally, the father is reinforced by Maud, who tells Betty: "It is enough for you that Clive knows what is happening. Clive will know what to do. Your father always knew what to do" (274). Clive expresses the same kind of homilies about the behavior and attitudes of his family members. For example, Clive's rejoinder to Edward for insulting him is: "You should always respect and love me, Edward, not for myself, I may not deserve it, but as I respected and loved my own father, because he was my father. Through our father we love our Queen and our God, Edward" (276). Clive's advice to Edward reveals the prestigious position as well as the extent of the father's power during this time period. In such company as Queen Victoria and God, the father attains an equal, all-powerful status in this Victorian Trinity.

With this power imbedded in the figure of the father, the Victorian family privileges the status and position of the title holder, even if he possesses questionable qualities as a husband or parent, like Clive, who sleeps with Mrs. Saunders. For those persons who are not fathers or heterosexual, adult males, Cloud Nine shows that the Victorian family is an intensely rigid and controlling institution, which regulates their actions. When Clive



discovers that Betty has a fondness for Harry Bagley, he tells her: "Women can be treacherous and evil. They are darker and more dangerous than men. The family protects us from that. . . . But I can't feel the same about you as I did" (277-8). The husband is free to roam and rove with no damage done to his status as father, but when a woman does not maintain her devotion, she soils not only his affection for her, but also her titles of "wife" and "mother," the family, England, and God. Errors and mistakes within the framework of this family extend beyond the small micro-community. They ripple throughout not only the British Empire but also the British Church.

Clive's condemnation of Betty's desire is also revealing in that it reinforces the uncompromising position of women within the Victorian family. Women must adhere to the strict rules and regulations which govern and fetter them. They are not individuals; they are instead "mothers," "daughters" and "wives." Harry Bagley dismisses the possibility of an affair with Betty by identifying her precisely within these boundaries: "You are a mother. And a daughter. And a wife" (268).<sup>18</sup> In being defined through her relationship with other family members, Betty

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<sup>18</sup> Even though the female characters are restrained by these titles, they still continue to propagate their own oppression through their use of them. When Clive reminds Betty that she has her mother to keep her company, Betty dismisses her mother as a viable form of social company: "My mother is my mother" (254).

has no individuality, no personality and, therefore, no disposition to develop her own interests. Churchill's use of cross-casting makes this concept even more apparent since Betty is played by a male. The playwright, in her introduction to Cloud Nine, explains that "Betty, Clive's wife, is played by a man because she wants to be what men want her to be" (245).<sup>19</sup> Betty enunciates this idea in her Brechtian introduction:

I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life  
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.  
I am a man's creation as you see,  
And what men want is what I want to be. (251)

Having Betty played by a man completely excises any sense of "real" female individuality to her character. Her actions, thoughts, and emotions are not her own; instead, she only embodies those traits which Clive sees in her and feels a woman should possess.

Churchill establishes Clive's patriarchal power in order to subvert it. She does so by presenting alternative relationships and desires, which exist below the traditional family facade that Clive maintains. While Clive sees his family proudly representing the spirit of

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<sup>19</sup> Betty is not the only character cross-dressed in the first act. Churchill explains: "Joshua, the black servant, is played by a white man because he wants to be what whites want him to be." Edward is played by a woman to highlight "the way Clive tries to impose traditional male behaviour on him" (245). Churchill also demonstrates the maxim that children, especially females, should be seen and not heard by having Victoria represented by a doll.

England in Africa, Churchill indicates that the patriarchally deemed, secondary figures, females, homosexual males, children and servants, exist in a much more disheveled and complicated state. Mrs. Saunders is a case in point. Her independence and strength is manifest to the audience, especially in Scene Three when some of the natives suspected of rebellion are whipped. While Maud tries to squelch discussion among the women of the punishment, Mrs. Saunders continues to question and hypothesize about what is taking place in the compound-- "Who actually does the flogging? . . . I imagine Joshua" (273)--and, eventually, leaves the room to join the men outside. Clive, though, misunderstands her independence, revelling in the sexual illicitness of it.

CLIVE: Caroline, if you were shot with poisoned arrows do you know what I'd do? I'd fuck your dead body and poison myself. Caroline, you smell amazing. You terrify me. You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous. When you rode through the night. When you fainted in my arms. When I came to you in your bed, when I lifted the mosquito netting, when I said let me in, let me in. Oh don't shut me out, Caroline, let me in. (263)

At the same time that Clive finds her strength a sexual aphrodisiac, he also deems her independence something "mysterious" and "treacherous." She is classified, then, as dangerous because she does not behave as a woman should.

Ellen is also a prime representative of Churchill's alternative view of Victorian family and society. The

following exchange highlights not only the alternative desires which exist beyond Clive's gaze, but also the sexual complication, which arise from Churchill's use of cross-dressing.

BETTY: I want [Harry] to put his arm around my waist.

ELLEN: Like this, Betty?

BETTY: Yes, oh I want him to kiss me again.

ELLEN: Like this, Betty?

*(Ellen kisses Betty.)*

BETTY: Ellen, whatever are you doing? It's not a joke. . . . Oh Ellen, you don't know what I suffer. You don't know what love is. Everyone will hate me, but it's worth it for Harry's love.

ELLEN: I don't hate you, Betty, I love you.

(271)

Clearly, Betty does not understand Ellen's actions and statements. She is, after all, everything "a wife should be" and therefore possesses the same blindness as her husband. (When Joshua informs Clive that Ellen "talks of love to your wife, sir. I have seen them. Bad women," Clive responds: "Joshua, you go too far. Get out of my sight" (285).) In the mind of traditional Victorian society only one proper relationship existed: a heterosexual marriage. Anything else was perverse. Churchill, though, indicates that this limited attitude was unsuccessful in suppressing these alternative desires and relationships from occurring. In fact, her use of cross-dressing only further complicates the tapestry of these "perverse" and even "non-existent" sexualities. On one level, the above exchange can be read as a straightforward

depiction of Ellen's lesbian desire for Betty. However, this desire is further complicated by the fact that Betty is played by a man, which suggests in the actual staging of the scene a heterosexual dynamic between Betty and Ellen. To expound further on this idea, Betty's "maleness" infers a homosexual attraction for Harry as she wants him to kiss her again. Finally, the cross-dressing of the male actor also suggests an element of transsexuality. While Clive and Betty fail to recognize the existence of Ellen's desire, Churchill suggests that all four of these sexualities--lesbianism, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and transsexuality--exist concurrently below the surface of Victorian society. The voices of these marginalized figures (in terms of sexuality or gender) are crucial not only to this play, but also Churchill's canon. Jane Thomas argues that Churchill's plays privilege and articulate "deviant or subversive knowledges which have been silenced or disqualified in the interests of social control and normilisation--knowledges which belong to women, children, homosexuals, racial minorities, [and] the working class" (162-3).

Mrs. Saunders and Ellen are not the only characters who do not conform to Victorian expectations. Churchill presents a number of sexual, racial, and generational relationships which are also invisible to the patriarchal figure. There is Harry and Joshua (a bi-racial homosexual

relationship which is played by two white men); Harry and Edward (a homosexual relationship between a man and boy depicted by a man and woman); and even Clive and Betty (a heterosexual relationship which is represented by a man and woman). This latter relationship is perhaps the most revealing about the limitation of Clive's viewpoint. He sees his own marriage strictly in heterosexual terms, but Churchill's cross-casting once again invokes the varying layers of sexuality: heterosexuality, homosexuality and transsexuality. It becomes an especially ironic undercurrent to Clive's discovery of Harry's homosexuality. In chastising his friend for his perverseness, he fails to recognize that at some subconscious level he desires the exact kind of relationship. The cross-dressing of Betty, while complicating the role of the Victorian woman and the male expectation of them, also reveals the hypocrisy of the patriarchy towards the homosexuality that exists within their own marriages.

Churchill's cross casting, then, proves to be an innovative means to undermine the authority of the patriarchal figure and the Victorian society that designates a relationship as either socially correct (monogamous heterosexuality, although authoritarian figures like Clive are allowed to diverge from the monogamous restriction) or perverse (homosexuality, adulterous wives, etc.). Relationships, though, are not so easily classified

into categories as "acceptable" or "unacceptable."

Churchill's final proof occurs in the act's last scene as Clive forces Harry, a homosexual, to marry Ellen, a lesbian, neither of whom knows how the basic component of the marriage (sex) should work.

ELLEN: Betty, what happens with a man? I don't know what to do.

BETTY: You just keep still.

ELLEN: And what does he do?

BETTY: Harry will know what to do. (286)

Clive sees marriage (with its rigid, heterosexual doctrine of the family) as an institution that has the power to convert and rectify the degenerate desires of members, like Harry, who have strayed from the path of heterosexuality. In effect, this marriage mainstreams two divergent voices (one recognized, one unrecognized) into the heterosexual male rhetoric which Clive espouses. While Clive believes that the unsightly, immoral and "perverted" is now counteracted by the "restorative" powers of the family, Churchill shows us that Clive's solution has not solved anything. The power of marriage and family will not change Harry and Ellen. Instead, the Victorian family will continue to be used (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) to hide, suppress and convert those individuals who have differing desires from the heterogeneous whole.

The "perverse" relationships which existed underneath the Victorian family facade are openly accepted in the contemporary second act as Churchill stresses that the

rigid, limited viewpoint of the patriarchy is now at an end. In fact, no one voice controls the actions or dictates the relationships of the family--if one discounts the various studies and laws imposed by governments as to how children should be raised.

VICTORIA: They've just banned war toys in Sweden.

LIN: The kids'll just hit each other more.

VICTORIA: Well, psychologists do differ in their opinions as to whether or not aggression is innate. (291)

While a heterosexual male was the strongest character in the first act, a lesbian Lin possess the greatest influence in the second act.<sup>20</sup> The only heterosexual male character present in the second act is Martin, Victoria's husband. Martin differs from Clive in that he does not tell his wife how to think or behave. He tells Victoria: "Whatever you want to do, I'll be delighted. If you could just let me know what it is I'm to be delighted about" (299). Equally, while Clive is more interested in his own sexual satiation than Mrs. Saunders, Martin is far more interested in

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<sup>20</sup> During rehearsals for Cloud Nine the actors participated in an exercise using a deck of cards. "Each member of the company picked a card at random, which then defined his or her 'status'--rank in the pecking order--for the encounters which were to follow" (Thurman 54). Churchill explained to Judith Thurman that they played the same game again while Churchill was rewriting the second act: "We played the status game with characters, and everyone felt that Lin, the lesbian mother, was a two. I suddenly thought: My God, what have I done? She is the person who ought to be on top. And that helped me shift the whole balance of the act" (54-7).



providing sexual gratification to his wife--"My one aim is to give you pleasure" (300). And yet, at the same time that he professes to want Victoria to have her freedom, he dominates her, as evidenced by his non-stop speeches about the freedom he is trying to impose on her. Like Clive, he too engages in extra-marital relationships, and as much as he acknowledges a woman's individuality, Martin still views them as potential sexual partners. When he and Victoria are discussing the job in Manchester, he suggests: "I could take that room in Barbara's house . . . You think that means I want to fuck Barbara. I don't. Well, I do, but I won't. And even if I did, what's a fuck between friends?" (299). Because of this contradiction, Churchill reduces him to being one of the weakest characters (in terms of power). He is a ridiculous figure--he is bullied by a four-year old--as he exists on the periphery of the main action. In essence, Martin's placement in the play parallels that of Maud, who, in the first act, also has no power. Even though she is part of the family, she has been relegated to the fringes, just as Martin has been in the second act.

With this absence of the stiff Victorian control, the family, its relationships and structure now becomes redefinable according to the individual needs and wants of the family members. As in Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane, permanence is no longer a required component of the family.

Betty leaves Clive. Gerry, Edward's lover, leaves him. Victoria leaves Martin. Lin has left her husband. The family is now splitting into smaller groups than its Victorian counterpart (which also counted Ellen and Joshua as members). By contrast, the contemporary parents are also more involved with their children than Clive and Betty. The characters view their children as individuals with feelings and needs rather than dolls, as in the first act (at one point Clive tosses Victoria from his knee to the governess). The setting reflects this changing attitude as the action takes place in a park right next to a playground. Finally, the importance of children is stressed through the prologue to the second act, spoken by Cathy, who recites a limerick and then a bastardized nursery rhyme (Cathy is the only second act character who is cross-casted):<sup>21</sup>

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick,  
 Jack jump over the candlestick.  
 Silly Jack, he should jump higher,  
 Goodness gracious, great balls of fire. (289)

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<sup>21</sup> Churchill explains her decision for this cross casting: "Cathy is played by a man, partly as a simple reversal of Edward being played by a woman, partly because the size and presence of a man on stage seemed appropriate to the emotional force of young children, and partly, as with Edward, to show more clearly the issues involved in learning what is considered correct behaviour for a girl" (Introduction 246). In an interesting turn the original production featured the actor playing Clive playing Cathy in the second act, supplying an incredibly rich juxtaposition between the two characters as "Clive" is now converted into a vocal and demonstrative child.

The freedom of expression available to Cathy parallels the same freedom the contemporary members of the family now have.

With the breakdown of traditional Victorian restraints, a new household is created based on alternative sexual desires. Lin, Edward and Victoria celebrate their non-heterosexuality in their new menage. They create a heterogenous family composed of a lesbian, her bisexual lover, and her homosexual brother. Between the three of them, they share the responsibilities for the two children from the women's previous marriages. While sexual relationships have become more open and flexible, the grouping of Lin, Victoria and Edward suggests that the family has also become more openly complicated. Churchill makes this clear in the last song of the play as the characters sing about what happens when the family finally reaches Cloud Nine:<sup>22</sup>

The wife's lover's children and my lover's wife  
Cooking in my kitchen, confusing my life.  
And it's upside down when you reach Cloud Nine.  
(312)

As the lyrics indicate, the boundaries of the contemporary family's membership are no longer limited to "mother,"

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<sup>22</sup> Caryl Churchill told Judith Thurman that the play's title came from the older woman who ran the canteen next to the rehearsal space. In discussing her relationship with her husband, she told the actors: "'We may not do it as often as you young people, but when we have our organisms [sic], we're on Cloud Nine'" (57).

"father," "sister," etc. They have been expanded to include affiliations based on complicated possessive relationships: "My wife's lover's children" and "my lover's wife."

This change in the family structure between the two acts is telling about these familial relationships. As discussed in the study's introduction, the Victorian concept of the extended family, where newlyweds would move into a home down the street from their parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents, lasted through the end of World War II. After the war, the family began breaking into smaller, nuclear units, created through the growing number of suburbs and the replacement of houses damaged during the war. In 1979, though, Churchill depicts the family in a state of transition. The nuclear family is breaking into even smaller households composed of only a few members, such as a divorced mother and her daughter, a divorced wife, or maybe a lone brother. At the same time that the family simplifies into microhouseholds, it also gains the new flexibility to merge with other microhouseholds to form a much larger and more complicated grouping, such as the household of Lin, Victoria, and Edward or the relationships described in the lyrics to the song "Cloud Nine." At the same time, these microhouseholds also have the freedom to detach from these polymorphous relationships. These latter two examples suggest that the same concept of the pre-war

extended household has been, in part, appropriated by the contemporary family, but Churchill suggests that this grouping does not return to its traditional consanguineous definition. Instead, it is based on the alternative sexual relationships and desires of the family members.

Cloud Nine also indicates that the family's and the individual member's freedom from Victorian rigidity introduces a realm of previously unconsidered problems. If anything, these quandaries have become more complex and challenging than they were in the Victorian era. Whereas Betty's main concerns were having to entertain guests and deal with unruly servants, Victoria must confront the unsuitability of her sex life with her husband, her own experimentation with lesbianism, a prospective job offer in Manchester, her son's disappearance from the playground, her mother's decision to leave her father, and her children's day care scheduling.

Churchill, though, is honest in her appraisal of the contemporary family she has created and explored. Perhaps inevitably with the complexity comes disillusion and dismantlement. The alternative household of Lin, Edward and Victoria is not a final solution to the previous rigidity of the Victorian family. Yet, it has not failed; it has served its purpose. This alternative household allowed these individuals an opportunity to address problems, find companionship, and create a comfortable and

reliable environment for their children. Unlike those plays that mend "all [the] tearings in the social fabric" (Case and Forte 65), Cloud Nine does not return to the traditional structure of marriage as a means to familial salvation. Instead, Churchill's act ends not only with the dismantling of this extended household, but also with the further dispersal of the microhouseholds. Martin is alone. Betty is alone. Victoria and Tommy are moving away to Manchester. Lin and Cathy are once again alone. The only hint of reconciliation occurs between Edward and Gerry, who are probing the possibility that they might get back together. The contemporary family, then, finds itself in a transitional state as it openly accepts the diversification of individual family members rather than trying to fit everyone into a homogeneous whole, as did Clive and the Victorian society he represents in Act One.

Ultimately, what we find in Churchill's Cloud Nine, Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane and the other alternative family plays is an echo of Coward's Design for Living. No longer do family members have to conform to society's conceptions about the way a family should be. Instead, the wide range of family members and relationships, including heterosexuals, homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, children, men, women, brothers, sisters, husbands, and wives, have embraced a philosophy similar to their modern predecessors Leo, Gilda and Otto. In short, and in a slight paraphrase

of Leo's rejoinder to Ernest, these characters state: "We have our own decencies. We have our own ethics. Our families are a different shape from before."

## AFTERWORD

### Wrestling with the Family

REF: For the first time in any wrestling ring, a man and a woman, fighting to the finish. This will be a catchweight contest of eight five-minute rounds, two falls, two submissions or a knockout to decide the winner. . . . And remember, ladies and gentlemen, the loser of tonight's contest has agreed to quit the wrestling ring and become a housewife.

--Claire Luckham, Trafford Tanzi

Claire Luckham's Trafford Tanzi, as the above epigraph indicates, enters strikingly new theatrical territory with its staging of a wrestling match between a husband and wife in order to resolve a familial disagreement.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the entire play embraces the wrestling motif as Luckham explores her protagonist's feminist awakening in the midst of a family and society governed by rigidly patriarchal conceptions of femininity. Through ten short scenes--described as rounds by the narrating Ref--Luckham depicts Tanzi Green's victorious emergence from her marginalized existence in her home, school and marriage. Tanzi escapes from her home where her parent's preferred a son (her Mom

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<sup>1</sup> In the winter of 1981 Claire Luckham's play Trafford Tanzi had its London premiere at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio. It later moved to the Mermaid Theatre in the autumn of 1982.



sings: "I wanted a boy/ I wanted a lad,/ I wanted a boy,/ And so did her Dad" (79)); her school (Dr. Grope, the school psychologist, quashes Tanzi's developing sense of feminine individuality by "throttling" her until she correctly recites "Jane Helps Mum Wash the Dishes" (83)); and her patronizing husband (Dean Rebel treats her as if she were a child: "Now when I say 'go' I want you--to press--the little button: on the top [of the stopwatch]. Do you understand? (87)). She eventually becomes the European Ladies Wrestling Champion and inventor of the wrestling move: the Venus Flytrap. The play concludes with Tanzi's greatest victory as she beats her husband, Dean Rebel, in the wrestling match, establishing her household dominance while relegating him to the role of a housewife.

Luckham's choice of a wrestling ring for the play's setting is innovative in staging the family and its contentious relationships. The wrestling ring is an obvious, but also fitting, metaphor for the contests which await Tanzi in her familial and societal relationships. The symbolism is direct: the actors *do*, indeed, wrestle. According to the playwright, Trafford Tanzi "does hurt to do . . . properly, and whilst you don't have to be an athlete, you do have to be fit and brave" (Afterword 96). Not only does she use the wrestling motif, but Luckham also appropriates the components of professional wrestling matches into the play. Her characters are gaudily dressed-

-Mom wears a leather jacket sporting the word "Mom" on the back and wrestling boots. Like their real life wrestling counterparts, the actors repeatedly interact with and taunt the audience. Music blares when the wrestlers enter the ring--before Tanzi fights with Dean, her theme song "The Ride of the Valkyrie" trumpets throughout the house. Equally, the actors execute familiar wrestling moves, provoking appreciative responses to the athleticism and also the primal violence of a smashing good "Irish whip" or an inescapable "full Nelson." Through this spectacle of wrestling, then, Luckham depicts a family and society regimentally and physically enforcing the dogma of male superiority and female subordination. As Mom tells Tanzi, after her daughter discovers that Dean has had an affair with Platinum Sue, a former childhood friend: "You need a man to look after you at a time like this. Women are nothing alone" (88-9).

Through its wrestling motif, Trafford Tanzi depicts the contested negotiations of the family's relationships, roles, boundaries, and framework. For precisely this reason Trafford Tanzi is an appropriate work to close out this study, for it refocuses our attention, through its untraditional format and presentation, on two of the main components which have recurred throughout this discussion: the changing role of women in society and the family and the disruption of the family's traditional framework.

Trafford Tanzi presents the intense struggle and roadblocks women face in overcoming their patriarchally deemed secondary status in society. When Tanzi defeats Dean in the ring, it is not just an individual victory for herself, but one for her entire gender. It is precisely this same idea of women wrestling for control over their lives that is at the heart of many of the contemporary family plays discussed. Certainly, this same idea informs maternity plays such as A Taste of Honey, Owners, Top Girls and My Mother Said I Never Should, where women are trying to balance the impact of economics on their own maternal inclinations, but it is also central to Beside Herself as female victims of incest struggle with their past in an unsympathetic, patriarchal environment. However, feminist playwrights, like Delaney, Churchill, Keatley, Daniels, and Luckham, are not the only ones addressing this issue. In glancing over the adultery chapter, all four male playwrights depict working women: Ruth in The Norman Conquests, Emma in Betrayal, Eleanor and Kate in Passion Play, and Annie and Charlotte in The Real Thing. The prominence of female characters in these non-domestic roles in male mainstream drama indicates that at least part of the campaign for recognition has been won.

While battling against the traditional enclosure of women within the home, Trafford Tanzi also redefines the roles and structures of the family. The play concludes

with a reversal of typical gender roles: Tanzi becomes the "husband," while Dean becomes the "housewife." This element of challenging the family and transgressing against its boundaries is not just limited to the alternative polymorphous constructions present in Look Back in Anger, Entertaining Mr. Sloane, and Cloud Nine. In fact, all of the chapters in this discussion have challenged the boundaries and roles of the family, especially in terms of the family members' sexuality. Adultery and its repercussions have reconfigured marital relationships. Incest has challenged not only society's exogamic order, but also the fragile relationships within the family structure. The legality of homosexuality has requested the heterosexual assumptions about the nature of the family. Finally, the emerging presence of women in the work force has also redefined the boundaries of motherhood and the role of women in the family.

Ultimately, what we learn from Trafford Tanzi and the other family plays is that no matter the various changes to the family, as it is stretched, distorted, reconfigured, disrupted, and even downsized, the basic relationships and roles of "father," "mother," "sister," and "brother" still remain. However, what is now unspecified are the figures who will assume these essential roles. Instead of a woman, a man might become a housewife (Dean in Trafford Tanzi); instead of a man and a woman, one man may become the

paternal and maternal figure (Max in The Homecoming); and instead of one woman, two women may fill the role of mother of the household (Lin and Victoria in Cloud Nine). And yet, despite the contemporary family's subversion of Victorian conceptions of the institution and the resulting flexibility of role assignments, the British family, in all its various stages and depictions, still endures.

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### VITA

William Clura Boles was born in Atlanta, Georgia in April, 1966. After having criss-crossed the United States in pursuit of a secondary education, including stops in Raleigh, North Carolina and Maple Valley, Washington, William finally procured his high school degree from Middletown High School South in Middletown, New Jersey. Proceeding to an institution of higher education, William graduated from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in May of 1988. While there, he majored in English; minored, amazingly, in Mathematics; received tremendous recognition for his life-like rendition of the not-too-bright brother in The Rainmaker; and met his wife-to-be, Leslie Susan Tate, whom he married in June of 1990. Due to a dearth of jobs, William opted for graduate school. Because of a quirk in his genetic make-up, he selected the University of Maine at Orono, from which he received a Master of Arts in English in May of 1990. After working for a year in an advertising company in Alexandria, Virginia, where William enjoyed the perks of the business world, he re-entered the academic world and became a candidate for a Ph.D. in English at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. In December of 1995, he will

receive his degree. Starting in August of 1995, William will join the faculty of Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida as an Assistant Professor of English. Accompanying William will be Leslie Tate Boles, his wife; Brunelleschi, Bougereau, and Bigguns, their pet cats; a land hermit crab, which does not have a name; and a mighty powerful air-conditioner.