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Communal Creativity and Continual Re-Invention: A Feminist Reading of Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information*

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Whilst a feminist analysis of Caryl Churchill is hardly new, in exploring Churchill's work not just in relation to feminism but a feminist critique of literary creativity, it becomes possible to explore not just the product but also the process of Churchill's writing in a feminist light. This is most prevalent in Churchill's play *Love and Information*, as will be explored in this essay through an analysis of the narrative structure, presentation of characters, use of dialogue, and subject matter. Despite her engagement to some extent with feminist theorists arguing for an unashamed assertion of femininity in creativity such as Hélène Cixous, Churchill's brand of feminist creativity is revealed to be one less of difference and rigid boundaries and more one of fluidity and equality between genders, seen in the writings of Adrienne Rich, Ursula Le Guin, and Annette Kolodny. This can be seen in how her creative process and the product of this creative process shows more agreement with theories acknowledging this fluidity and equality. This mainly manifests itself in *Love and Information* through an increased focus on the relationship between the audience and text – partially stemming from its genre as a play – and encouraging creative interpretation, engagement, and adaptation of this text. Not only does this involve the audience within Churchill's creative process and therefore unite the spheres of both female writer and female reader in the feminist debate of creativity, but also serves to allow Churchill herself to continually re-engage and re-write her own text, and therefore with herself and the wider female community.

In relation to feminism, a notable aspect of Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* is the narrative structure. This is clarified in the 'Note on Text' which states 'the sections should be played in the order given but the scenes can be played in any order within each section'.[1] This allows for a large margin of creativity and is particularly relevant to Adrienne Rich's concept of 're-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction',[2] in that the play itself is continually classed as old and new and therefore constantly undergoing a state of re-vision. This 'new critical direction' in Churchill's text leads to the constant generation of new relationships between scenes in different structural combinations. For example, Churchill also highlights 'there are random scenes, see at the end, which can happen at any time'.[3] These random 'Optional' scenes are far shorter than the main scenes and therefore focus on the small yet dramatic changes they can create. For example, the 'Optional' scene 'Cold' simply reads '*someone sneezes*'[4]. Placed at the end of 'Sleep', 'Cold' would act to perpetuate the normality of the scene. However, with a scene like 'Terminal', 'Cold' could act to theatrically raise the stakes and develop the scene's storyline. Therefore, in terms of re-vision, previous portrayals of scenes and characters are re-evaluated in future performances, consistent with how Rich uses re-vision to re-evaluate the stereotypical literary tropes of women. This is also true of how the 'Optional' scenes do not necessarily have to be included and so re-vision can occur not just in the relationship between scenes themselves, but in the choice to include and exclude certain scenes. Rich states that re-vision is 'a refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society'[5]. The concept of re-vision in this way is clearly applicable to the narrative structure of *Love and Information*, as the very nature of the narrative structure encourages continual creativity, in itself a 'refusal of…self-destructiveness'.

The feminist nature of the narrative structure of *Love and Information* is even more prominently highlighted by Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory' of creativity and fiction. Le Guin states 'the Hero has decreed…that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear'[6], effectively framing the linear narrative within a discourse of glorified masculine conflict, whilst also contesting this

[1] Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012), p.4.
[2] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966 – 1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) p.35
[3] Churchill, *Love and Information* , p.4.
[4] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.77.
[5] Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, p.35.
[6] Ursula Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Women, Words, and Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), p.168.

representation of narrative and suggesting 'the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag'[7]. Although Le Guin is applying this theory to novels (science fiction novels specifically), it is difficult not to read the narrative of *Love and Information* in relation to Le Guin. In stating that the scenes of the play can be played in any order, the contents page becomes less the running order of the narrative and more a list of the resources which can be combined to form the narrative, a 'great heavy sack of stuff'[8] which can be interacted with to avoid the restrictive 'linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode'[9] of narrative structure. Indeed, Le Guin does state 'science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction…is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack'[10]. As shown previously in light of Rich's theory of re-vision, part of the basis of *Love and Information* is primarily in 'how people relate to everything else' and the relation of the elements of one scene to another. This is further highlighted in its very genre as a play which requires an audience and therefore the relationship between viewer and performer becomes a key aspect of the text itself. In this way, the more overtly masculine form of narrative that seeks to simply transport the story from one place to another is replaced with a more feminist narrative structure that combines a direct masculine linear narrative with a more feminine indirect narrative course. In this way, the narrative aims to embrace the journey of creativity and emphasise the relationship between elements of the story rather than the end goal.

Another uniquely feminist aspect of *Love and Information* is Churchill's presentation of characters. Whilst Churchill states in the 'Note on Text' that 'the characters are different in every scene'[11], there is no concrete way of knowing this from the actual text itself as it does not use any character names. For example, the beginning of the scene 'Secret' runs,

'Please please tell me
no
please because I'll never
don't ask don't ask
I'll never tell
no'.[12]

Whilst the line endings suggest a new character is speaking, this is only an inference. Therefore, Churchill highlights the dependence of directors and readers have on her intentions and her authority in the creation of the text. In Hélène Cixous's terms, Churchill is not afraid to mark her text as a 'female-sexed text'[13] and in this way, her text can be read as an example of her 'writ[ing] woman'[14]. Churchill uses her voice as a woman to assert authority over her own text, marking her voice as a feminine one which must be heard.

However, excluding character names as an active marker of gender shows that Churchill's text has priorities other than the display of gender difference associated with Cixous's feminism. Indeed, exerting a rigid binary gender dichotomy over her text would only act to restrict creativity. Churchill's use of feminism seeks not to establish difference but to allow the discovery of connections and relations, a view far more resonant with Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory'. Indeed, Le Guin asserts that women in traditional masculine narratives of conflict are seen as 'possibly not human at all, certainly defective'.[15] Therefore, Le Guin's view of asserting gender difference serves less to empower and more to further isolate women. Annette Kolodny shares this view, championing a pluralist approach which states feminist creators 'do not give up the search for patterns of opposition and connection…what we give up is simply the arrogance of claiming that our work is either exhaustive or definitive.'[16]

An example of this pluralist take on feminist creativity is most clearly seen in the 'Depression' scenes included at the end of the play in the 'Random' scenes section. Here Churchill openly invites a

[7] Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, p.169.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, p.170.
[11] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.4.
[12] Churchill, *Love and Information*, Churchill, p.4.
[13] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p.2041.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, p.167.
[16] Annette Kolodny, 'Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p.2163.

variety of readings, asserting that these scenes are 'the only possible exception'[17] to the necessity of character difference between scenes and suggesting they 'can be the same each time, or the depressed person can be the same and the others different, or they can all be different'[18], allowing for all possible interpretations of difference in these scenes. However, Churchill also asserts that, the 'Depression' random scenes are 'an essential part of the play'[19], suggesting this possibility of continuity of character must be given the opportunity to be acknowledged. This is indeed consistent with Kolodny's pluralist reading of feminist creativity, which advocates for the generating of 'an ongoing dialogue of competing potential possibilities'[20]. However, placing these scenes at the end in effect marginalises them, an issue which easily resonates with Churchill as a woman. Therefore, placing these scenes at the end but highlighting their necessity forces the director to also engage with issues of marginalisation.

Churchill in some sense does indeed adopt Cixous's model of feminism in relation to creativity by not being afraid to assert her authority as the creator of the text. However, as a play, Churchill's text is made to be interpreted by others and performed by others to an audience and therefore the role of the other is of paramount importance to the functioning of Churchill's text. This is something which Cixous's model of feminism as difference does not truly allow room for. Therefore a more inclusive model of feminism in creativity which focuses on community such as Le Guin's model or Kolodny's pluralist approach are required. Churchill's use of character is aimed at other women using and responding to her text and characters in order to find contact with themselves, therefore focusing not only on the issues between the writer but also the reader and creativity.

This focus on a female audience is also prevalent in Churchill's elliptical and abrupt dialogue. One example is in the extract from the scene 'Memory House',

'to improve my mind
no but you've got a good
my memory to improve
forget a lot?
not not
like names'.[21]

One function this dialogue serves is to quicken the pace, indicated by the lack of punctuation and capitals. This can be viewed through Rich's theory of re-vision, which states one problem for woman writers is 'energy and survival'[22]. However, this problem can be transferred to a female audience. In not having access to female works which perpetuate energy and survival, this quickening of pace allows female viewers access to a female work as a vivid display of energy, something which Rich sees as considerably lacking in female literature. Churchill's piece gives female viewers access to this resource and therefore can be seen to empower a female audience.

However, this elliptical style can also be viewed through Rich's original lens of problems for the female writer. Rich identifies not just 'problems of energy and survival', but also of 'contact with herself'[23] and 'language and style'[24], all combatted by Churchill's application of an elliptical dialogue. Firstly, Churchill's elliptical dialogue creates a surviving energy not just for her audience but for herself in terms of encouraging creativity. Whilst there is the increase of pace which links the lines together more fluidly, there is also the creation of an informational gap and therefore, to some extent, silence. This can be seen more clearly in the shorter scenes, such as 'Small Thing' which runs,

'What are you looking at?
A snail.
Is that the same snail?
Yes. I've been looking at it for a while.
And?
I'm just looking at it.'[25]

[17] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.4.
[18] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.74.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Kolodny, 'Dancing through the Minefield', p.2162.
[21] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.39.
[22] Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence,* p.37.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.69.

The informational gap here, exemplified in the short answer 'A snail' and the one word question 'And?', is also emphasised by the seemingly unimportant subject topic. In the midst of more serious conversation topics such as mental illness and religion, an apparently menial conversation about a snail seems out of place and so naturally a deeper meaning is assumed. However, in not writing down the meaning behind this scene, Churchill leaves her own ideas open to interpretation from herself as well as her audience. This is complemented by Churchill's dialogue visually showing these apparent silences, therefore encouraging a certain level of creative interpretation. In this way, Churchill's elliptical style encourages a certain level of creative energy to thrive in her work, as well as the survival of this energy through continually renewing interpretations.

This elliptical dialogue is also used by Churchill to overcome problems of contact with the self. Viewing Churchill's elliptical style from the point of view of Cixous and how 'woman must put herself into the text'[26], these informational gaps could easily be viewed as a textual manifestation of female silence in general created by a patriarchal society. In this way, Churchill uses this feminine silence to empower herself and other women by positioning it overtly in the text and therefore somewhere it can be noticed and interacted with.

However, despite this elliptical dialogue being the most prominent style throughout the play, Churchill adopts other styles at different points, allowing her to confront the final set of problems of 'language and style'. Churchill also adopts far lengthier styles of writing to act as a contrast with the general elliptical tone, seen in the following extract from the scene 'Manic',

> 'red cars have the most accidents because people are excited by red or people who are already excited like to have red, I'd like to have red, I'll buy a red car this afternoon and we can go for a drive'.[27]

Consistent with the scene's title, the dialogue relays this sense of mania through a lack of pauses and a less balanced conversation. Since this is in such vast contrast to the more abrupt dialogue, the scene draws more attention and therefore potential for discussion of the issue to itself. In altering her dialogue for specific issues, Churchill comes to experiment with her own socially restricted feminine experience of writing by exploring all possible options and therefore fully coming into contact with herself as a female writer as well as the female audience she is writing for, confronting the problems Rich identifies.

Equally relevant to the feminist branch of creativity is the topic of love and relationships analysed by Churchill throughout the play. Indeed, the title itself *Love and Information* already belies a relatively feminist reading of the topic of relationships. The source of the title can be found in the scene 'Sex' in Act 5, where one character states sex is 'information and also love'[28]. This contradicts popularly romanticised views of sex perpetuated throughout literature. In these romanticised views, sex is often elevated to a mythical level but also portrayed as heteronormative and relatively patriarchal, meaning the woman is often portrayed as subservient to the man. Rich notes this, suggesting 'woman has been a luxury for man, and has served as the painter's model and the poet's muse'[29], and citing this as evidence for the need for re-vision. Churchill's approach to sex engages in a re-vision of the traditional representation of sex and relationships and therefore traditional gender roles within these relationships. Firstly, the omission of characters' names favours a more interpretive view of character and gender. Therefore as a concept sex and relationships become more inclusive in the text. However, this also removes not only the position of the woman as the 'subservient' muse in the sexual relationship, but also the position of a 'subservient' sexualised muse at all. In this way, Churchill utilises feminist creativity and indeed engages in Rich's theory of re-vision in order to re-establish potentially harmful patriarchal norms, presenting sex not as a dominant conflicting power struggle but as a fluid unity. This could be further interpreted as a reflection of Churchill's overall view of creativity. Indeed, in terms of Cixous and female writing being a representation of the female body, sex in terms of the female body is a creative process and therefore Churchill honours this in keeping with her own creative process. In this way, Churchill's attitude to sex throughout the play reflects her chosen creative process in relation to feminism.

Whilst Churchill's piece is not focused entirely on sex and love, it is primarily focused on relationships. This is seen not only in the previously discussed narrative structure, but also in the structure of the scenes themselves, being written in a conversational format. Furthermore, whilst these

[26] Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p.2039.
[27] Churchill, *Love and Information*, pp.62-3.
[28] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.49.
[29] Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p.36.

relationships between people are most definitely not always sexual, Churchill frames them within the frame of a romantic relationship through not just the title as a euphemism for sex but also the last scene. The final scene of the production is entitled 'Last Scene: Facts', presumably implying that whilst the scenes can be re-ordered in any way, this final scene must be left as the final scene. This scene is a turn taking exchange where a trivial question is asked and then answered with the appropriate trivial information. For example, 'What is the smallest village in Central Asia?/Qat.'[30] This pattern continues throughout the scene until line 23 where the question 'do you love me?'[31] is asked. At first the immediate response is 'don't do that'[32] but after several more lines of the question-answer interaction format, the final lines are, 'By what name do we usually refer to Oceanus Australensis Picardia?/I do yes I do. Sea anemone.'[33] The 'I do yes I do' is a delayed response to the question 'do you love me?' By ending the scene and indeed the play on a line which combines love ('I do yes I do') and information ('sea anemone'), this final line comes to be emblematic of the title *Love and Information*. For Churchill, these two factors are inextricably linked and, in terms of Rich's theory of re-vision, could be further emblematic of an equal and therefore feminist relationship between men and women. If Rich's description of the woman as stereotypically the artist's muse is read as 'love', then 'information' could very likely be the male artist as the interpreter of the female muse as 'love', therefore the provider of 'information'. In this way, Churchill's presentation of sex and relationships is not only further cemented by this inference of it being presented as an equal union between man and woman, but also comes to contextualise the entire play in this feminist frame of equality in being the final message the play has to offer to its audience.

In conclusion, whilst *Love and Information* does draw on feminist approaches prioritising a more rigid understanding of feminism and gender, Churchill chooses to mainly engage with a feminist view of creativity encouraging equality between genders and therefore acts as a far more inclusive creative environment. This is shown in the inherent need for interpretation and creative engagement that Churchill highlights in the narrative structure's requirement of continual adaptation as well as the need to interpret the representation of characters and the reading of the dialogue. However, Churchill also shows an application of this feminist creativity in her approach to the subject matter of love, relationships, and sex, an aspect of thought which previous feminist critique has already identified as an area in great need of revision. In championing communal creativity in the production of her text, Churchill prioritises not just her role as the writer in changing these perceptions of love, relationships, and sex for a feminist purpose, but also the role of the community and the reader in participating in this process of change as well. Overall, *Love and Information* highlights this need for community and conversation, within creativity, feminism, and a feminist critique of creativity, in order to benefit both the individual and the wider feminist community.

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[30] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.70.
[31] Churchill, *Love and Information*, p.71.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.