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# Vinegar Tom: Caryl Churchill's Contribution to Feminist Theatre

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## ABSTRACT

Caryl Churchill's remarkable dramatic achievements have marked her as a post-modernist who has procured a revolution in contemporary theatre by creating a particular language to communicate the plight of women in Western societies. Semiologically, critics believe, she has created a unique sign system through which she represents crucial social and political issues at the same time that, along with her revolutionary techniques and views, she benefits from her predecessors in drama. One of her famous Feministic achievements is her play *Vinegar Tom* in which Churchill vehemently criticizes unjust treatment of women throughout the patriarchal history of man. In this play, she displays her outstanding novel techniques of writer- director-actor cooperation, use of songs and special use of time, the methods which are going to be elaborated in this study.

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## Introduction

The figure to be treated in this study is the very well-known playwright Caryl Churchill who is the product of a long-term of avant-garde theatre and a similarly long-term evolution of post-modern critical theory. The discussion will take on a double stage treatment which incidentally matches with the particular contributions of Caryl Churchill to modern dramatic theory and theatre. On the one hand, her revolutionary stance in the genre calls for a theoretical appraisal which is supposed to distinguish her from her predecessors and her contemporaries; on the other hand, her practical achievements (as an example her select work *Vinegar Tom*) claim their place in the favored taxonomy of the so-called Hegelian tragedies of the modern era.

In an attempt to account for Churchill's innovative mechanism of dramatic theory, Elaine Aston maintains that the "kinds of questions which Churchill asks through her theatre reflect her feminist and socialist viewpoints, but allied to her interrogative, political mode of writing is her experimental approach to dramatic and theatrical form." As she further elaborates "Churchill's theatre is not just a question of politics, but a *politics of style*" [my Italics] (80). Eileen Shahnazari, referring to the critics' opinions, asserts that Churchill has managed to turn the British theatre upside down; she has also managed to alter the structure of performances: "None of her plays follow the traditional pattern" (22). Aston paraphrases Gillian Hanna, the influential actress of Alice's role in the first performance and one of the founders of Monstrous Regiment, the theatrical organization with which Churchill cooperates, to explicate the notion that "this style was a response to breaking down conventions of dramatic form. . ." (27). In the same text, Aston summarizes the major features of this style by quoting Hanna directly: "we knew that we had to have the music to smash that regular and acceptable theatrical form", in the interests of exploring what she identified as a 'counter-cultural', feminist style of performance" (Aston 27). Similarly, Ann Wilson maintains that "Caryl Churchill's plays are characterized by their stunning theatricality which the playwright marshals to critique social relations" (152).

The above comments lead one to the exploration of Churchill's unique language and style, which Aston calls the

"politics of style." Shahnazari's research indicates a demand for a "different reading of the staged world" in order to appreciate Churchill's experimental style: a staged world where "rules are broken and meaning is constantly made and unmade through the language of performance" (23).

This language is especially unique in its establishing a process of writer/actor. One of the members of Monstrous Regiment tells us about the writer/group collaboration in which Caryl Churchill herself attends all the rehearsals:

It isn't easy to pinpoint where specific ideas came from. One production element that certainly came from the company was the decision to cast the women's parts against what would normally be regarded as 'type'. We wanted to challenge those stereotypes, and in addition give ourselves the opportunity as actors to expand into parts normally forbidden to us because we were too young/old/thin/fat. (Wandor 41)

In his priceless article, the occasional contributor to *Original Articles*, John Price declares that Churchill's "postmodern language" both disturbs the linear traditional male structure and reveals an "awareness of the actor and director's creative process" (par. 2). Very paradoxically, this unique language and post modern structure associates her with other contemporary playwrights like Pinter and Mamet who often intimidate Feminist critics than otherwise. However, Churchill joins these great and "of the theatre" playwrights in their sound understanding of the actor/director process. Besides, Price elaborates on the way *Vinegar Tom* contains both Churchill's "original writing method" and the influence of improvisational cooperation and thus renders an example of the development of Churchill's duplicitous, semiological language: a language which serves as a sign-system flaying the social and political plight of women while readily and simultaneously communicating instructions from writer to the actor (par. 3). Price also adds that Churchill's critics are usually so much obsessed and carried away by her feministic and political concerns that they overlook this communicative aspect of her language. Churchill herself explains how the writer/actor process worked: "You don't collaborate on writing the play, you still go away and write it yourself. What's different is that you've had a period of researching something together, not just

information, but your attitudes to it, and possible ways of showing things" (Betsko and Koeing 79). Thus three years after beginning the influential playwright-actor collaboration, Churchill developed a sign system unique to theatre semiotics and revolutionary to traditional dialogue structures (Price, par. 12). Price, moreover, draws our attention to some of the clues which this process provides for characterization and which have escaped the critics' attention (par. 7).

The other idiosyncrasy of Churchill's dramatic technique is her concern with time. Geraldine Cousin by emphasizing this fact that theatre is a concentration of energy within a particular place and time, draws our attention to Churchill's fascination with time which originates from her understanding of the power of theatre; according to her, Churchill exploits this energy to increase awareness and to present yet people against critical moments in their lives "when new ways of seeing open up and change becomes a viable possibility" (45). Shahnazari adopts the view that Churchill subverts the linear narrative and creates moments where past, present and future are simultaneously present (23). This provides a possibility for fluidity and change and through creation of double vision, Churchill puts women out of history which indispensably shapes them and hence creates multiplicity rather than unity in order to locate spaces for radical change (23). Thus by manipulating time, Caryl Churchill presents a history which can be rearranged and reinterpreted. In *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill dramatizes an event in the past which is supposed to be removed from present experience due to its temporal frame. She "manipulates this time frame in order to reveal that the 'personal is political'" (Shahnazari 29).

Churchill's unique technique is known to contribute greatly to Feminist theory. Price asserts, "For over twenty years, the plays of Caryl Churchill have furthered feminist performance theory and broadened traditional views of gender roles. Feminist theory and gender politics identify major themes in Churchill's work" (par. 1). In her experimentation with form, Churchill tries to discover the possible reaches of feminist aesthetic to reveal the "value of eccentric individual over the concentricities of an explosive social order" (Shahnazari 22). Price adds that her dramatic structure and actor-oriented language follows, in part, the desires of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva for a form of writing that violates the "phallogocentric model" (par. 2). She also actively participates, performs and directs her plays in feminist theatre companies like Monstrous Regiment and Joint Stock Theatre Groups. Her dramatic language, technique and theory form a style of writing which serves as a typical feminist sign system, especially through the use of songs:

'Something to Burn' thematizes the marginalization of oppressed groups—not just women, but also 'lunatics', 'blacks', and 'Jews'. 'If You Float' highlights women's situation as a 'catch 22': float and you are a witch; sink and you die anyway. The song critiques patriarchal 'logic' which manipulates sign-systems, arbitrarily inventing and re-inventing the 'signs' of women's 'evil' doing. (Aston 29)

Furthermore, Price maintains that such a semiological style presented through punctuation, pauses and positional power plays conveys meaning, emotion, and action to both the actor and the audience. The result is a technique that develops feminist theory while challenging acting theory (par. 10).

Yet, however unique and typically feministic, Caryl Churchill has not been an isolated dramatist unaffected by her contemporaries. In fact, there have been many critics commenting on the Brechtian elements of Churchill's works including Elin Diamond, Amelia Howe Kritzer, and Lisa Merill.

Moreover, Robert L. Neblett traces Brechtian techniques which Churchill utilizes in her songs and shows the affinity of the songs with the action and the plot of the play, an advantage in the works of Churchill which has been ignored or dismissed by many other critics; he considers the songs as "distanced" elements in the fashion of Brecht. Shahnazari refers to Churchill's imitation of Brechtian forms during the mid-seventies; she follows Brecht in his "historicizing representation in order to expose its economic and social determinants" (22). The plot of *Vinegar Tom* is constantly interrupted by modern rock music songs sung by actors and actresses in modern dress. In this way, following Brecht, she alienates the audience from the very regular and acceptable conventions and dramatic forms (30). This link between the past witch-hunting scenes and quite modern rock music and songs gives the audience the feeling that past is repeated in the present and women, despite the three-century lapse of time, are still subjugated by contemporary patriarchal system of values which continues to victimize them. However, finding Brechtian techniques inadequate to satisfy her evolving interest in the production of knowledge about gender and power, she moves away from social history, realism and Brecht after writing *Vinegar Tom* (Shahnazari 30).

Besides Brecht, the next influence on Churchill's works is Harold Pinter. Ruby Cohn provides the clearest connection between Pinter and Churchill's foundational, pre-collaborative works. Churchill "indulges in Pinter's verbal techniques of contradiction, tautology, disjunction, as well as repetition of words, beat, and gesture however, her idiom varies with each play" (*Anglo-American* 106-107). Then Cohn draws some linguistic similarities between Churchill and Pinter's style for which Pinter has been for a long time acclaimed by the critics. Billington points out that Pinter's language cannot be divorced from character or situation: "The characters have a different rhythm and tone that reflects the speaker's thought processes and the dramatic situation" (123-24).

### Main Discussion

Thus *Vinegar Tom* also represents all the above characteristics inherent in Caryl Churchill's works. This play is one of her most feminist early plays. Neal Learner calls it "a feminist representation of the English witch hunts of the 17th century" (par. 4). The story is the story of Alice, an unconventional young single mother, who is accused of being a witch by jealous neighbors and avaricious mountebanks whose profession is the condemnation of witches. Alice and several other women from the society's fringes are driven closer to the gallows each time that they speak their minds or challenge the patriarchal status quo. Dalt Wonk reflects the director's notes to the recent Talane production of *Vinegar Tom*, which are "a mosaic of quotes on the issue of witchcraft" (par. 1). Wonk quotes feminist writers like Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor who state the following attitude in their book *The Great Cosmic Mother*:

Men in patriarchal societies learn, or reveal, a great jealousy and fear of natural women—of the sexual, mental and spiritual abilities of fully evolved women living in harmony with the consequences of our own bodies. The menstrual taboo is the consequence of this fear and resentment. There is the 'good little ovulating wife' who is supposed to be passive and not very sexual. (par. 3)

Shahnazari refers to the fact that in order to guarantee its monopoly, the church decided to hunt down and burn alive those believers in old religion during the 17th century. They were thought to be witches who had sold their souls to Satan. In this

way hundreds of women, accused of witchcraft, were arrested and burnt during the “burning time” which lasted until 1792 under the present religious pretext. The witchhunt was sanctioned by the line in Exodus: “Thou shalt not permit a sorceress to live (Gen.22:18)” (66).

Recently the theme of witchhunt has turned into a favorite subject for the feminist dramatists who tend to represent oppression and exploitation of women even in the present epoch. They try to show how this gender-based humanity has needed its own scapegoats like Jews and blacks (and, of course, today other ethnic minority groups) who have been persecuted throughout the ages. In *Vinegar Tom*, the song “Something to Burn” overtly states the theme of social discrimination: “Sometimes it’s witches, or what will you choose? / Sometimes it’s lunatics, shut them away. / It’s blacks and it’s women and often it’s Jews” (26; vii). As will be discussed later, Churchill deliberately has utilized this 17th century setting and has fused it with modern costumes, songs and themes to convey that women’s plight has not altered yet and that women are still the same sacrificial lambs they were in the past.

Kramer and Sprenger who are supposed to have written a book about witchhunts entitled *Malleus Maleficarum*, (*the Hammer of Witches*) express their belief that women are more concerned with flesh than men and, being formed from a man’s bent rib, they are merely “imperfect animals,” who perfectly live up to their name i.e., female which in a seemingly invalidated and funny etymological play of words is interpreted as “Fe mina,” meaning “faith minus” (37; xxi). And at the end, the two theological philosophers thank God for protecting the male sex from “so great a crime,” namely witchcraft (38; xxi).

In *Vinegar Tom*, the characters are women who are condemned and humiliated while at the same time representing the historically oppressed and deprived groups of society: A poor woman (Joan), an unmarried girl (Betty), a single mother (Alice), and “unmotherly” (Susan). These double miseries motivate them to speak out, but they are immediately shut down, both by men and women (Shahnazari 68). Pertinent to this socio-historical subjugation is Aston’s note on the horrible resemblance between Packer’s cross examination scene and the 1990’s crusade against “lone mothers” and “home alone” children by politicians (30). Besides the very conspicuous feminist bearings of the play, the setting is chosen so to display the miserable plight of women from old time to the present. Learner quotes Neblett’s words on this issue: “This play forces the audience to question contemporary historical contexts by showing the past in such a way that events from 300 years ago don’t look so different to us today (par. 6). Meanwhile, Caryl Churchill tells us about her choice of setting herself:

Over Easter on Dartmoor I read books, Monstrous Regiment’s Suggestions and others I had found; rapidly left aside the interesting theory that witchcraft has existed as a survival of suppressed pre-Christian religions and went instead for the theory that witchcraft existed in the minds of its persecutors, that ‘witches’ were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks. I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes to women in general. The women accused of witchcraft were often those on the edges of society, old, poor, single, sexually unconventional; the old herbal medical tradition of the cunning woman was suppressed by the rising professionalism of the male doctor. I didn’t base the play on any precise historical events, but set it rather loosely in the 17th century, partly because it was

the time of the last major English witchhunts, and partly because the social upheavals, class changes, rising professionalism and great hardship among the poor were the context of the kind of witchhunt I wanted to write about; partly of course because it was the period I was really reading about for Joint Stock. One of the things that struck me reading the detailed accounts of witch trials in Essex (*Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, Macfarlane) was how petty and everyday the witches’ offences were, and how different the atmosphere of actual English witchhunts seemed to be from my received idea, based on slight knowledge of the European witchhunts and films and fiction, of burnings, hysteria and sexual orgies. I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves. (Wandor 39)

And thus through the choice of setting, Churchill writes a play with no witches in it, by merely presenting the way the pressure of poverty, humiliation and prejudice is responsible for women’s moral laxity for which women are considered criminals, an accusation that men can conveniently evade since they have a cultural immunity against moral corruption.

There is a lot said about the organic significance of the songs. Neblett in his article defends the “intrinsic merit of the songs as necessary components of the play’s overall dramatic worth” by employing many examples from his findings as a director of the piece. Moreover, Price believes that Churchill’s post-modern inclusion of the songs resonates Cixous’ belief that “feminine writing is not merely a new style of writing; it is the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards” (par. 5). Price also stresses the significance of the songs: “The structural placement of the songs emphasizes the feminist position against traditional male dramatic structures, while simultaneously criticizing traditional patriarchal mistreatment of women” (par. 6). One of the members of Monstrous Regiment explains about the idea of inserting the songs and their significance:

We all felt a frustration with the way we had seen music used so often in the theatre. We were determined that ours should be original in style and should have an intellectual and creative life of its own—pushing the action along almost as much as the dialogue, not simply existing as a decoration or breathing space in the plot. Accordingly during rehearsals we decided, with Caryl, that the music should be performed in modern dress and provide a contemporary commentary on the action. The instruments (piano, congas and guitar) and the voices were all acoustic, so Helen was able to compose music that was in keeping with the period yet could strongly embrace twentieth century idioms. (Wandor 41)

Price by analyzing the language of the dialogue between Alice and Packer in scene xvii displays a language which functions as a sign system criticizing the social plight of women: Note the short, clipped, emotionally restrained language of Alice compared to the longer, emotionally even and controlled language of Packer, signifying the conflict between and within the characters. The questioning pushes Alice to an emotional breaking point as she bursts forth with need and desperation in her last and longest line. Churchill’s language structure devised, in part, from actors’ improvisations, provides acting clues through the semiotics of her dialogue. (par. 4)

This is the same difference which makes Aston refer to the discrepancy of the languages which somehow represents Alice

as a member of the “economically deprived single-mother group” and Packer’s questioning reminds us of the frightening similarity with the 1990’s crusade against lonely mothers and children by the politicians (80).

Consequently, the disparity between the two languages reflects on the surface layer of interpretation the more traditionally prominent conflicts between the male/female, exploiter/exploited, good/evil and finally strong/weak, and on a deeper layer of reading leads us to the typical paradoxes which qualify the play *Vinegar Tom* to Hegelian view of dramatic tension; viz., the diabolical position of women characters in the opposition of good/evil, exploiter/exploited, etc. . On the deliberately highlighted layer of signification, we assign the negative term of “the antagonists” to the male characters and those of their female accomplices who recognize “the protagonists” (the oppressed female majority) detrimental to the welfare of the community and “State” whom they accuse of witchcraft. Whereas these “protagonists” consider themselves innocent and righteous to have security and respect as individuals since they find the community and its pressures responsible for their misery. Whether the conventions which the latter group flouts are sacred and beneficial to the community at large is a question whose answer can lead to the violation of the established feminist hierarchy (as presented above) and urge us to seek for the victimizer in the very character of the victim.

The whole subject of the play, its setting, language songs and types of characters all signify the ethical conflicts. The story contains two initial major conflicts between Alice, an outcast prostitute, and an anonymous aristocrat known as “Man,” on the one hand, and Alice and her mother with a bourgeois couple, who are small landowners of the prosperous peasant class, on the other. In the previous discussion, the language was dealt with to show the conflict “between and within the characters.” Thus Alice and her mother Joan suffer not only from gender discrimination but also from class distinction; this changes the play to a modern tragedy of women exploited by the masculine community.

Alice is considered a criminal for doing what a man is never punished for (Wandor 11-12). We do remember what happened to “Shakespeare’s sister” in the essay by Virginia Woolf for being desirous to become a reputed actress, the desire for which her brother William Shakespeare was celebrated, glorified and famed; yet she was dishonored and doomed. On a similarly feminist reading as that of Woolf, Alice, displaying the same potentiality for a genius as remarked by Ellen, could be identified as a more realistic rendition of “Shakespeare’s sister,” who is hanged only after she has yielded to the oppressive male community and been dishonored. Of course, the motivation of “Shakespeare’s sister” was a noble one and that of Alice is not, only because society has not given her a worthier one; yet they share the same destiny.

Thus the central conflict of the play, according to the feminists’ view, is again an ethical one which is determined as such by the patriarchal value system. The unknown and devilish man at the beginning abuses Alice shamelessly and when she asks him to marry her (to sanction the relationship) and take her and her child to London, he cruelly insults and reminds her of her being nothing more than a worthless prostitute. Churchill’s use of obscene and daring language for the man with which the play abruptly and shockingly starts is supposed to display the man’s sinister and lecherous character.

Meanwhile, Jack and Margery blame their own sexual impotence and fecundity on Alice and the accidental disasters to

Joan, Alice’s mother. Joan is also found a witch since coincidentally she has the same features that a witch was thought to possess. The above contrasts establish the play’s binary oppositions of male/female, poor/rich, powerful/powerless which are all the sources of Alice, Betty and Ellen’s victimization and their subsequent execution. The conflict is imposed on the women by the patriarchal community and is resolved through their execution.

In the development of the above attitudes and the predominant binary oppositions, the songs play a crucial role. The same way that Churchill intentionally presents characters as signifying various types of women with different problems, she provides the play with various songs to contribute to the representation of women’s conditions. What the audience is supposed to bear in mind is that even the so-called “negative” characters like Alice are the product of poverty, humiliation and prejudice.

The characters present variety of problems with which women may confront in a society: Alice is a prostitute; Joan, a woman whose appearance happens to be witch-like (her cat associates her with witchcraft too); Betty, a girl who refuses to marry the man chosen for her; Susan is a deficient mother accused of infanticide; and Ellen is simply a healer who tries to alleviate women’s menstrual pain with herbal medication, an act which is considered sinful since a woman’s punishment is to suffer the pain God has determined for her: “They do say the pain is what is sent to a woman for her sins” (22; v).

Alice expresses her disgust of being a woman; she sees menstruation as an abhorring biological phenomenon imposed on a woman’s structure. When women are young, they have to undergo the menstrual pain and when they get old no one is going to love them anymore. The song “Nobody Sings” is an expression of the fact that in youth women satisfy men’s sexual desires, but later they are despised: “They were blinded by my beauty, now/ They are blinded by my age” (20; iii). Betty is given to “hysteria” due to her physical anomalies which take place during her menstruation and thus “hysteria is a woman’s weakness” (24; vi). Ironically the very natural biological mechanism, which if looked at positively is associated with a woman’s generating ability, turns to a means of humiliation for her. Semiotically speaking, menstruation in a patriarchal sign system is a signifier whose signified is the punishment of a woman’s evil nature which in turn she has supposedly inherited from Eve. That is why, Betty in her “hysteria” begs the doctor to heal her, but in her speeches she reflects what the patriarchal system has inculcated in her:

I know I’m sad.

I may be sick.

I may be bad.

Please cure me quick,

oh doctor (24; vi).

She is terrified by her sickness as a sign of her evil. Nevertheless, Betty in her “hysteria” expresses her repulsion of the doctor’s anatomizing her and entreats him to put the body straight where it should be:

Stop looking up me with your metal eyes.

Stop cutting me apart before I die.

Stop, put me back.

Put back my body

.....

I want to see myself.

I want to see inside myself.

Give me back my head.

I'll put my heart in straight" (24-5; vi).

Yet the doctor ironically tries to cure Betty and prepare her for an unwanted marriage; he tells Betty, "You will soon be well enough to be married" (24; vi). And Betty, who has escaped from home to avoid this marriage, feels terribly guilty for what she has done: "Why was I bad? Because I was happy. Why was I happy? Because I ran out by myself and got away from them [her parents] and—why was I screaming? Because I'm bad" (24; vi). The chain of similar statements goes on and seems to offer a series of causes and effects for Betty's evil; she feels terribly guilty since she has for once done what she thinks right to do!

The song "If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me" (29; xii) emphasizes the domestic and filial duties and responsibilities of a woman. If children are clean, polite, well-disciplined and if a woman obeys her husband, there will be a happy family. Thus, happiness of the country heavily relies on the woman's being the "angel in the house" for which she is not given any credit or privilege; on the contrary, her negligence of such a task causes a catastrophe for which she is to pay a heavy retribution: "Oh, the country's what it is because/ the family's what it is because/ the wife is what she is/ to her man." And if she is not submissive to "her man" she will be isolated and insecure: "I try to do what's right,/ so I'll never be alone and afraid in the night./ and nobody comes knocking at my door in the night." (29; xii). Therefore, the reward a woman receives for doing all she does is only not to remain alone. Susan, who has concealed her miscarriages from her husband and is terrified that her secret may be unleashed, feels happy and content that her husband is so "kind" that he does not beat her (23; v). Then the song, which is supposed to reflect the woman's consciousness and the formulated expectations of the patriarchal system, goes on with the conditional reverence that the community pays a woman. They are loved only as long as they are young and as long as they submit completely to the demands of the community: "Nobody loves a scold, / nobody loves a slut, / nobody loves you when you're old,/ unless you're someone's gran" (29; xii). Women are not supposed to expect love when they are old unless they are grand mothers and receive affectionate attention from their grand children. And when they are young, they are loved only if they fulfill their slave-like duties:

**Nobody loves you**

unless you keep your mouth shut.

Nobody loves you/ if you don't support your man.

Oh you can,

oh you can

have a happy family." (29; xii)

The only advantage a woman "can" have is to have a happy family which she herself must secure.

However, the song tells us that despite all these maternal achievements "you'll often be ignored;" the female speaker in the song flatters and soothes herself that "but in your heart you'll know you are/ adored" and she goes on consoling herself and the female members of the audience that if you are a real "angel" then "your dreams will all come true. / You'll make your country strong" (29; xii). The refrains, reiterated throughout the songs, reinforce the ironic overtones of the songs.

However, Caryl Churchill in her songs which are directly related to her characterization deconstructs the masculine value system. She gives metallic eyes to the doctor and devilish association to the unknown "Man." He comes from nowhere, abuses Alice and disappears. No one questions his crime, but Alice is persecuted for her relationship with him; the man turns

into a testimony against Alice who is thought to have a meeting with Satan. The professionals also, with the pretext of cross-examining women to find the devil's sign in their bodies, abuse them (32; xiv). Therefore, the dichotomies of morality/immorality and good/evil, being respectively associated with the binary opposition of male/female, are clearly violated to the point that one is wont to ask as who is good and who is evil? Is what the "Man" does to Alice and what the professionals, who consider themselves the "saviors" of their community, do to women good and moral? Would ends justify the means even if the ends could be reckoned as just? Alice's sinfulness which is committed under the pressure of poverty and humiliation—what she has inherited from her community—may affect her own life and a few others, but the evil of those, with the epithet of "professionals," actually harms the human integrity of half of the human race.

Yet Alice, Joan and the innocent Ellen, who is neither "sinful" as Alice is nor "vicious" as Joan is supposed to be, have to be sacrificed as scapegoats to rid the community of chaos. The song "Something to Burn" very sarcastically refers to the fact that the society seeks a scapegoat who is inevitably supposed to be a woman:

What can we do, there's nothing to do,

About sickness and hunger and dying.

What can we do, there's nothing to do,

Nothing but cursing and crying.

Find something to burn.

Let it go up in smoke.

Burn your troubles away.

Sometimes it's witches, or what will you choose?

Sometimes it's lunatics, shut them away.

It's blacks and it's women and often it's Jews.

We'd all be quite happy if they'd go away. (26; vii)

Hence in search of more victims to be sacrificed for the welfare of society, they also find Betty a "lunatic" who will represent a greater majority of her sex in their socio-historical plight. Ultimately, the victims' hanged bodies are trophies of a patriarchal value system which prides itself for saving the "State"! Therefore, the play, representing Churchill's Feministic view and dramatic art, leaves nothing unexpressed about women's subjugation. On its primary layer of interpretation, the play is indeed the epitome of feminist theory presented through new dramatic techniques. That is why Neblett finds any admiration for *Vinegar Tom*: "I love this play's strength of plot, character and imagery" (Learner par. 6).

Contrary to the miserable plight of women, we witness absolute exemption of men from all charges. This discussion brings us to the scrutiny of one of the true victims in the play, Ellen. The play presents us with two healers, the doctor and Ellen. The doctor, being a man, practices securely and respectfully while trying to prepare Betty for an imposed marriage; whereas, his counterpart is executed for being a woman and trying to alleviate women's pain. Symbolically speaking, the play implies that the order and security of patriarchal community depends on the suffering of women. If women's suffering is alleviated then chaos occurs to the masculine world. Then the masculine world has to stabilize its order and health by augmenting women's pain, an end which requires Ellen's inclusion in victimization.

**Conclusion**

Subconsciously affected by her modern (post-Hegelian) context, Churchill, the very extremist advocate of feminist values in the British theatrical scene, unwittingly and for that

matter paradoxically drives us to unravel the hidden meanings implanted in the text by dislocating the binary sets within the seemingly established feministic hierarchies. Such an attempt will probably account for the inclusion of *Vinegar Tom*, as a typical thesis play which may be found to be discordant with modern tragedy as defined in the present work for the work's apparently obvious distinction between good and evil.

To commence the deconstructive process, it seems inevitable to pose a question regarding women's role in their very plight as derived from the text. In different stages of the play, women are implemented to enforce women's oppression and persecution: Susan betrays her friend Alice and turns into a victimizer; Margery blames all the disasters which befall her on Alice and Joan, thus adding fuel to the fire causing them to perish; Goody is also a woman who, having been trained and brainwashed in the patriarchal value system, feels she is nobly serving her country by detecting "witches" and wiping them out of the face of the earth; and finally there are Kramer and Sprenger whose roles Churchill stresses in her note to be played by women to render the "ideal doubling" for Ellen and Joan hanged at the end (Wandor 40). In the last scene, the song of "Evil Woman," which is imbued with very common and unfair charges against women clearly reflecting the masculine mentality which is supposed to "justify" the condemnation and execution of women as "witches" is sung by the two remaining female characters on the stage. Finally, Ellen, the only so far left-over female character is curiously found responsible for the victimization of her sex one way or another: whoever consults her is strangely linked with witchcraft at the end and thus we are reminded of her profession as the only real "witch" in the play. Almost all of her suggestions to her customers yield themselves to deconstructive readings which recognize women as responsible for their subjugation: she goads Betty to give in to a forced marriage, Susan to surrender to her sense of inferiority reflected in her fright of childbirth, Alice to seek out her ideal He-devil for further exploitation by the male sex, Margery to think that she does see what she wishes to see in the crystal i.e., the image of another female victim, Joan. Is Churchill's unconscious playing tricks on her and the Monstrous Regiment? The answer is provided by Hegel already.

As another example to flout the established interpretation, the dichotomy of powerful/powerless or strength/weakness—again respectively associated with male/female—turns to an absurd subversion as well. In the almost hilarious scene where Jack reproaches Alice for his sexual impotence, this is Jack who practically looks powerless and ridiculously foolish; the obscenity of the scene reflected in the dispossession of the phallic element by the male character and its restoration by the female personage leads to a symbolic humor which is self-contained. Also Jack and his wife Margery blame all the

accidental calamities which fall on them on Joan who, they believe, has bewitched their life. When resistance against the charges of witchcraft is anyway futile, Joan indulges herself in making them believe that she does possess such a power in order to revenge them; whereas Jack and Margery, rich bourgeois people, look desperate and helpless. The couple's futile and foolish attempts to save themselves ironically make them sink more deeply in misery whose blame again falls on Joan. Very ironically, Ellen, Joan and Alice turn to powerful figures through the same witchcraft which ultimately ruins them and the modern reader once more wonders as to who is at fault?

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