

Linguistic Representation of Female Identity: Intertextuality and Semantic Inversion in Discourse

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ABSTRACT

*A substantial proportion of Caryl Churchill's female figures are not invented but imported: taken from a painting, a papal legend, a thirteenth-century Japanese memoir, a medieval exemplum, a Victorian travel narrative, an early modern demonological treatise. Criticism has catalogued these sources and has treated their presence as evidence of postmodern citation. This article argues that cataloguing the sources misses the operation that matters, because Churchill's borrowing is governed by a single describable rule: the lexical and narrative material of the source is preserved while its evaluative frame is reversed. What the source presents as virtue the play presents as damage; what the source presents as anomaly the play presents as structure; what the source silences the play permits to speak. The study proposes the term semantic inversion for this operation, distinguishes five types of it, and tests the typology against the borrowed figures of *Top Girls* and the documentary sources of *Vinegar Tom*. Three findings follow. First, inversion in Churchill is achieved without contradiction of the source: she does not deny what the source says about the woman, she relocates the utterance in a pragmatic frame in which the same words carry the opposite valuation. Second, the operation is cumulative rather than local the borrowed figures do not each carry an independent meaning but constitute, together, a paradigm of the channels through which a culture has been able to record a woman at all. Third, the technique is continuous with, rather than separable from, the Brechtian refusal of the evaluative*

authorial voice that characterises Churchill's dramaturgy as a whole. The article concludes that intertextual appropriation in Churchill is a technique of characterisation in its own right, and that the poetics of her female figures cannot be described without it.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill; intertextuality; appropriation; semantic inversion; evaluative frame; female figures; discourse analysis; British drama.

INTRODUCTION

The opening act of *Top Girls* assembles at one table a woman from a Flemish painting, a legendary female pope, a Japanese court memoirist of the thirteenth century, the obedient wife of a medieval exemplum retold by both Boccaccio and Chaucer, and a Victorian traveller who existed and left books. Five of the six women present are borrowed, and they are borrowed from five different orders of text: pictorial, legendary, autobiographical, literary and documentary. This is not decoration. It is a compositional decision of considerable consequence, and it is repeated, with different materials, across the corpus: *Vinegar Tom* takes its final figures from a demonological treatise, and its situations from the records of witch trials.

The critical literature has established which sources Churchill used. What it has not established is the rule by which she uses them. The prevailing account is that the borrowings exemplify postmodern citation the recycling of prior text characteristic of a period sceptical of originality. This is true and unhelpful. It describes a period style rather than an authorial technique, and it does not explain why these particular sources, why in this combination, and why the meanings they carry in the play are so consistently the reverse of the meanings they carry at home.

Three observations motivate the present study. The first is the *selectivity* of the borrowing. Churchill does not draw on the canon of famous women that a play of this kind might be expected to assemble; she draws on figures whose records survive in demonstrably different formats, and she includes at

least one figure the woman from the painting who has no verbal record at all. The second is the *consistency* of the transformation. In every case the valuation carried by the source is reversed in the play, and reversed in the same direction: what the source offers as consolation the play converts into evidence of constraint. The third is the *restraint* of the means. Churchill supplies no commentary. Her stage directions in this act are notably neutral, evaluatively silent, and confined to the recording of action a feature of her writing that has been connected, correctly, to the Brechtian principle of leaving judgement to the spectator (Diamond 1988). The reversal is therefore achieved without any authorial statement that it has occurred.

Taken together, these observations suggest that a mechanism is at work which existing accounts of Churchill's intertextuality do not name. The present article proposes that a single operation governs the borrowings, and names it "semantic inversion": the retention of the source's material together with the reversal of its evaluative frame. The argument proceeds by defining the operation, distinguishing its types, and testing the resulting typology against the corpus. The wider claim is that appropriation in Churchill is not an ornament attached to characterisation but a method of characterisation, and therefore that any account of the poetics of her female figures which treats intertextuality as context rather than as technique will be incomplete.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework and reviews prior scholarship. Section 3 describes the corpus and the analytical procedure. Section 4 presents the analysis, treating each type of inversion in turn and closing with the paradigm the types jointly constitute. Section 5 discusses the implications for the theory of dramatic characterisation and for the study of Churchill's poetics. Section 6 states the limitations of the study, and Section 7 offers conclusions and directions for further work.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PRIOR SCHOLARSHIP

2.1. *Intertextuality and its descriptive limits*

Three lines of theory converge on the operation described here, and none of them alone accounts for it.

Kristeva's (1980) formulation of intertextuality established that a text is constituted by its absorption and transformation of other texts, displacing the notion of an origin and replacing it with a field of relations. The formulation extends, in the direction of the written text, Bakhtin's (1981) account of the utterance as always oriented towards other utterances. It is foundational but, precisely because it is general, offers little purchase on individual cases: if every text is intertextual, the fact that a particular text borrows a particular figure requires a further apparatus to become interesting.

Genette (1997) supplied that apparatus. His taxonomy distinguishes the relations a text may entertain with prior text quotation, allusion, plagiarism on the one hand; the transformations he groups under hypertextuality, including parody, travesty and transposition, on the other. The vocabulary is descriptively powerful and will be used here. Its limitation for present purposes is that it is evaluatively neutral: it tells us that a hypertext transforms a hypotext, and by what formal means, but not what the transformation does to the valuation the hypotext carried. A transposition that preserves the valuation of its source and one that reverses it are, in Genette's (1997) terms, the same operation.

Hutcheon's (1985) account of postmodern parody supplies part of what is missing. Her central insistence is that postmodern citation is simultaneously an act of homage and of critique that it installs what it subverts, and cannot subvert without installing. This is close to the phenomenon under examination, and her related concept of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988) is directly relevant to Churchill, for whom the past is never simply available but always already textualised. Two difficulties remain. Hutcheon's model is developed for narrative fiction, and the mechanism by which reversal is effected in a dramatic text where there is no narrator to modulate the reader's relation to the cited

material is not addressed. And the model treats the critical dimension as inhering in the act of citation itself, whereas in Churchill, as will be shown, citation is not sufficient: the reversal depends on the situation in which the cited material is placed.

2.2. *Proposition and evaluative frame*

The third line is evaluative or appraisal-oriented discourse analysis, which treats valuation as a systematic and describable feature of language rather than as a matter of authorial attitude to be inferred. Martin & White (2005) distinguish the resources by which texts express attitude, graduate it, and align or disalign the reader with a position a framework developed for non-literary discourse but applicable wherever valuation is at issue.

What this tradition supplies to the present study is a single distinction of considerable analytical value: that between the *proposition* a text advances and the *evaluative frame* within which the proposition is received. The two are ordinarily fused, and in most texts the frame is not separately available for inspection; it is carried by lexical choice, by the arrangement of the narrative, by the assumed common ground of writer and reader. But they are separable in principle, and Churchill's practice separates them in fact.

Once the distinction is made, an operation becomes visible which is neither quotation nor parody in Genette's (1997) sense, and which is not quite Hutcheon's (1985) complicitous critique either. The proposition is transmitted unaltered. Only the frame is changed. It is this operation that the article calls semantic inversion, and its distinguishing feature is that it does not contradict. Churchill's *Griselda* is not made to renounce her obedience; her account of what was done to her is not corrected, glossed or interrupted by a corrective voice. The words survive; the frame that made them admirable does not.

The distinction between inversion and contradiction is worth stating carefully, because it is the point at which the present account departs from the standard reading of these scenes. Contradiction requires a second proposition incompatible with the first, and therefore requires an authority to advance it a *raisonneur*, a narrator, an evaluative stage direction (see Szondi

1987), on the disappearance of such authorities from modern dramatic form). Inversion requires none of these. It requires only that the proposition be uttered in a situation whose participants and stakes are incompatible with the frame the proposition presupposes. The audience performs the reversal; the text merely arranges the conditions under which the reversal is unavoidable.

2.3. *Churchill scholarship*

Churchill scholarship has produced substantial accounts of several features of her dramaturgy that bear on the present study. The Brechtian inheritance has been examined in detail, and Diamond (1988) has theorised the connection between epic technique and feminist critique as a distinct methodological position rather than as an influence; the wider critical context is set out by Aston (1995) and Case (1988), and the position of the spectator within it by Dolan (1988). This work supplies the context within which Churchill's evaluative restraint should be understood: the refusal to tell the audience what to think about a character is not neutrality but a positive technique with a determinate history.

The collaborative devising practice with Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment has been documented by Aston (1997) and in the essays collected by Aston and Diamond (2009), and its consequences for the plays' documentary texture are well established. *Fen* emerged from fieldwork with women agricultural workers; *Vinegar Tom* was developed with a feminist company and rests on the records of early modern prosecutions. This body of work is relevant here because it establishes that Churchill's relation to sources is habitual and methodical rather than occasional, and that documentary and literary sources are handled by the same sensibility.

Cross-casting has attracted the most sustained attention of any single technique in the corpus, and has been convincingly analysed as a means of exposing the constructedness of gender roles (Aston 1997; Aston & Diamond 2009; Case 1988). The present study takes this analysis as established and asks whether an analogous operation can be identified at the level of the

borrowed figure whether, that is, appropriation does for the historical record what cross-casting does for the body.

The borrowed figures themselves appear regularly in this literature, generally in the form of source identification followed by thematic commentary. What has not been attempted, so far as the present author is aware, is a systematic account of the transformation to which the sources are subjected, or a typology of that transformation. That is the gap the article addresses.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

3.1. *Corpus*

The corpus comprises the borrowed female figures of *Top Girls* (1982) Dull Gret, Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda and Isabella Bird and the documentary borrowings of *Vinegar Tom* (1976), in particular the play's closing use of the authors of the best-known early modern treatise on the prosecution of witches.

The selection is governed by two criteria. First, the figure must be demonstrably imported: there must be an identifiable prior text or image, external to the play, in which the figure already exists. This excludes Marlene, Joyce, Angie and the other invented characters, who are relevant to the argument as a context but are not themselves objects of the analysis. Second, the source must be recoverable in sufficient detail for its evaluative frame to be described. This is straightforward for the literary and documentary sources and requires care for the pictorial one, as discussed below.

3.2. *Procedure*

For each borrowed figure three items are established:

1. the **proposition** the source advances about the woman what the source says happened, or what it presents her as being;
2. the **evaluative frame** in which the source places that proposition what the source invites its reader or viewer to conclude from it;
3. the **substituted frame** the play supplies the situation of utterance, the audience within the fiction, and the

surrounding material against which the proposition is now received.

The relation between the second and third items yields the type of inversion. The types are then compared to determine whether they form a system, and if so what the system is a system of.

3.3. *A methodological caution*

Churchill's sources are of different kinds, and a painting does not advance a proposition in the way a treatise does. Where the source is non-verbal, the "proposition" is taken to be the interpretation stabilised by the reception tradition rather than any statement in the work itself. This is a weaker basis than the verbal sources afford, and the analysis of the pictorial case is correspondingly more tentative. A second caution concerns the legendary source: the tradition concerning a female pope is itself of contested historicity, and the analysis below concerns what the legend says and how it says it, not whether the events it reports occurred.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. *Inversion of evaluation: Patient Griselda*

The medieval exemplum presents a wife whose obedience survives a sequence of trials imposed by her husband, and presents that obedience as a virtue indeed as a model, with the trials functioning as the occasions of its demonstration. The frame is explicit in the source tradition: the reader is instructed what to admire, and the narrative is organised so that each successive deprivation increases the quantity of virtue displayed.

Churchill alters nothing in the account. Griselda relates what was done to her, and relates it without protest, in the register of the original. She does not editorialise; she does not, in the terms of the play's own dramaturgy, understand her story differently from the way her source understands it.

What changes is the situation of utterance. The story is told at a table, to other women, in response to their stories, and in the

presence of listeners for whom the loss of children is not an abstraction but the substance of their own accounts. The other guests react with impatience, with incomprehension, with a refusal to accept the terms in which the story is being offered. Their reactions do not constitute a rebuttal; nobody supplies an alternative account of what happened. They constitute a change of audience, and the change of audience is sufficient.

Within that frame the same sequence of events, unrevised, ceases to demonstrate virtue and begins to document harm. The mechanism is entirely economical: no commentary is supplied, no character corrects her, and Churchill's stage directions here as generally decline to evaluate. This is the type the study calls *inversion of evaluation*: proposition retained, valuation reversed, contradiction avoided.

The type also illustrates why the operation cannot be assimilated to parody. A parodic Griselda would exaggerate the obedience to the point of absurdity, and the exaggeration would carry the critical signal. Churchill does not exaggerate. The critical force derives from the accuracy of the reproduction, not from its distortion a difference of technique with consequences for the audience's position, since the spectator who laughs at a parody has been told what to think, while the spectator who registers an inversion has performed the judgement personally the critical position Dolan (1988) attributes to the feminist spectator.

4.2. *Inversion of medium: Dull Gret*

The source here is pictorial: a figure from a Flemish painting, armoured, striding across a landscape of disorder, silent, and available to the viewer only as image. The reception tradition has read her variously as folly, as fury, as peasant defiance, as an emblem of avarice but in every reading she is looked at rather than heard; Aston (1997) notes the consequences of this for her stage presence. She has no words in the source, and the absence of words is not a fact about her but a fact about painting.

Churchill's transposition performs the minimum possible alteration: it moves the figure from a medium in which speech is unavailable to one in which it is obligatory. She is placed at a

table where the constitutive activity is talking, where every other guest produces a narrative, and where the conventions of the scene make silence conspicuous. She barely talks. When she does, at the close of the act, she gives an account of a collective descent and an assault which is the only narrative in the scene that is not autobiographical the only one in which the speaker says "we" rather than "I".

Two consequences follow. The figure's silence, which in the painting was a property of the medium, becomes in the play a property of the character, and therefore significant: what was a limitation of the source becomes a statement about the speaker. And the inversion here operates not on valuation but on the mode of existence of the figure. The woman who could only be seen is required to speak, and the requirement exposes how much of what we know about women of the past is known in the form of images rather than utterances.

This second type may be called *inversion of medium*. It is of particular interest for the poetics of female characterisation, because it thematises the difference between being represented and being permitted to narrate a distinction that the rest of the act elaborates and that the play's contemporary scenes carry forward.

4.3. *The limit case: Lady Nijo*

Between the extremes represented by Griselda and Gret stands a figure whose source is neither an exemplum written about a woman nor an image of one, but a memoir written by one. The thirteenth-century Japanese court document from which Lady Nijo derives is self-authored: the woman speaks in the first person, describes her own life, and controls the selection of what is recorded.

This is the limit case for the argument, and it is instructive precisely because the inversion is weakest here. Nijo's material requires no reframing to be legible as an account of constraint, because the constraint is present in the source and is registered by its author. Churchill's placement adds relatively little.

What the placement does add is comparison. Nijo's self-authored record sits beside Griselda's ventriloquised one and

Gret's absent one, and the difference between them becomes visible as a difference of *access to the means of record*. The scene thereby acquires a dimension it would not have if all its figures had been drawn from the same kind of source. The apparent anomaly a figure who resists the pattern turns out to be structurally necessary to it.

4.4. *Inversion of anomaly: Pope Joan and Isabella Bird*

Two of the borrowed figures are, in their sources, exceptions. The legend of a woman who occupied the papacy is transmitted as scandal and singularity: the point of the story, in the tradition that carries it, is that such a thing could happen once and could not happen again. The Victorian traveller is celebrated, in her own century and after, as a remarkable individual who did what women did not do; the frame is admiring, and the admiration depends on the rarity.

In both cases the source frame is that of the anomaly: the woman is notable precisely because she is not the rule. Churchill's frame converts the anomaly into evidence of the rule. Joan's access to authority was conditional upon disguise, and terminated by the body that is, the legend, read as structure rather than as scandal, states the conditions under which a woman could hold that office, and states that they were incompatible with being visibly a woman. Bird's independence, similarly, was purchased within an imperial order and reported to a metropolitan readership whose appetite for such reports was itself part of that order.

Neither figure is diminished, and the play does not deny that they did what they are said to have done. What is denied is the inference the source frame invites that their achievement demonstrates possibility. Placed beside each other, and beside Marlene, they demonstrate instead the conditions under which achievement was available, which is a different and less consoling proposition.

This third type, *inversion of anomaly*, is the one that connects the borrowed figures to the play's contemporary plot. Marlene's success is presented in the office scenes in the same frame the sources use for Joan and Bird as personal achievement, as

evidence that the thing can be done and the third act supplies the conditions. The dinner scene has already taught the audience how to perform that operation.

4.5. *Inversion of authorship: Vinegar Tom*

The fourth type is the most direct and is found not in *Top Girls* but at the close of *Vinegar Tom*.

The play's material derives from the documentation of early modern witch prosecutions records in which women appear only as objects of accusation, and appear in language supplied by their accusers. The evidentiary situation is the reverse of Nijo's: nothing survives that the women wrote, and everything that survives was written to convict them.

The standard procedure for a historical play would be to dramatise the accused, restoring to them the interiority the record denies. Churchill does dramatise the accused, but she does not stop there. At the close she brings on the authors of the treatise that codified the prosecution, and does so in a register a music-hall turn, comic, anachronistic in costume and manner that exposes the manufacture of the category rather than its application. The device belongs to the repertoire of estrangement described by Diamond (1988), and its effect is the dissolution of the unified stage figure that Fuchs (1996) identifies as characteristic of post-modernist theatre and that Lehmann (2006) places among the defining features of postdramatic form.

The operation here is not inversion of valuation but *inversion of authorship*: the source is retained as a source, and what is reversed is the direction of attention, from the woman described to the apparatus that produced the description. For a study of female characterisation this type is the most consequential, because it makes explicit what the other three imply that the figures Churchill borrows have reached us already processed, and that the poetics of her female characters is in large part a poetics of that processing.

It should be noted that this is also the type in which Churchill's technique comes closest to overt commentary, and the closest her practice comes to violating the restraint described in Section 1. The final scene of *Vinegar Tom* tells the audience

something rather than arranging for it to be inferred. Whether this constitutes an exception to the rule or a permissible variant of it is a question the present study leaves open.

4.6. *The paradigm*

Set out together, the types are not a list but a system, and the system has an object.

Figure	Source type	Source frame	Substituted frame	Type of inversion
Patient Griselda	Literary exemplum	Obedience as virtue	Told to women who have lost children	Evaluation
Dull Gret	Painting	Figure to be looked at	Placed where speech is obligatory	Medium
Lady Nijo	Self-authored memoir	Constraintal ready registered	Compared with figures lacking self-record	Limit case
Pope Joan	Legend	Anomaly, Scandal	Conditions of access to authority	Anomaly
Isabella Bird	Travel narrative	Remarkable individual	Conditions of Victorian in dependence	Anomaly
<i>Vinegar Tom</i> accusers	Demonological treatise	Women as objects of accusation	Attention turned on the accusers	Authorship

Each borrowed figure represents a different channel through which a culture has been able to preserve a record of a woman: as painted image, as legend, as self-authored memoir, as literary exemplum, as published travel narrative, as forensic record. The channels differ in their tolerance for the woman's own voice, and they differ systematically the memoir permits the most, the forensic record the least, the painting none at all.

The dinner scene is therefore not merely a gathering of remarkable women. It is a display of the media of preservation themselves, arranged so that their differences become visible.

This is why the borrowings are cumulative rather than local. No individual figure carries the argument; the argument is carried by the array, and would be destroyed by substituting figures drawn from a single kind of source.

It is also why the operation deserves the status of a technique of characterisation rather than a mode of allusion, in the sense in which Genette (1997) distinguishes allusion from transformation. What is characterised, in the end, is not only the six women at the table but the conditions under which any of them could have been recorded at all.

5. DISCUSSION

Three implications follow from the analysis:

1. **For the theory of dramatic characterisation:** The received account of characterisation in drama distributes its means between what a character says, what a character does, what other characters say about her, and what the author says through stage directions. Churchill's practice adds a means not covered by this inventory: what the *source* of the character says about her, and the relation between that and the play's frame. A borrowed character arrives with a prior valuation attached, and the dramatist can operate on the valuation in the terms of Martin & White (2005), on the alignment the text invites without touching the character. This is not available to a dramatist working with invented figures, and it may explain why Churchill's borrowed characters can be so economically drawn a few minutes of stage time suffices, because the audience supplies the rest from the source.
2. **For the study of Churchill's poetics:** The technique is continuous with the evaluative restraint documented elsewhere in her work rather than separable from it. The refusal of the evaluative stage direction, the withholding of authorial sympathy, the transfer of judgement to the audience (Diamond 1988): semantic inversion is the extension of the same principle into the handling of prior text. Where a

dramatist committed to guiding the audience would rewrite Griselda's story to reveal its violence, Churchill reproduces it exactly and rearranges the room. The reproduction is a form of trust in the spectator, and it is also a form of risk, since a spectator who does not know the source will perceive less.

3. For the analysis of the female figure specifically: The four types are not distributed randomly across genders in the corpus. Churchill borrows male figures too, but the operation performed on them is generally simpler, and the systematic array described in Section 4.6 an array organised by the medium of the record has no male counterpart in these plays. This asymmetry is itself an argument: the question of how a person came to be recorded is posed as a question about women because, in the material Churchill works with, it is for women that the answer is most variable and most often unfavourable.

6. LIMITATIONS

Three limitations should be acknowledged. The typology is derived from two plays. Its extension to the wider corpus *Cloud Nine*, *Fen*, *A Mouthful of Birds*, the later plays surveyed in Aston & Diamond (2009) has not been attempted here and may require additional types or the modification of existing ones.

The analysis of the pictorial source rests on the reception tradition rather than on the work itself, as noted in Section 3.3, and is therefore weaker than the analysis of the verbal sources.

The account assumes an audience with some knowledge of the sources. The consequences of the failure of that assumption what happens to the inversion when the source frame is unavailable to the spectator are not modelled here, and would require empirical reception study.

7. CONCLUSION

Three conclusions may be stated. Churchill's appropriations are governed by a describable rule. The material of the source is preserved and its evaluative frame is replaced, an operation here

termed semantic inversion, whose distinguishing property is that it achieves reversal without contradiction: the source is not refuted but relocated. This distinguishes the operation from parody, which relies on distortion, and from correction, which requires an authority to advance a competing proposition.

The operation has four types, together with one limit case inversion of evaluation, of medium, of anomaly, and of authorship, with the self-authored memoir standing as the case in which inversion is least required. The types are distinguished by what is held constant and what is reversed. The typology is derived from the corpus rather than imposed on it, and its adequacy can be tested against further material.

The borrowed figures function as a paradigm rather than as a series of allusions. Arranged together, they display the range of channels by which a culture has recorded women, and thereby make the conditions of the record itself an object of dramatic attention. It follows that the poetics of the female figure in Churchill's drama is inseparable from her handling of prior text, and that accounts which treat her sources as background rather than as instrument will describe her characters incompletely.

Three extensions suggest themselves. A comparison with the appropriative practice of other dramatists working with historical female figures would establish whether the types identified here are idiosyncratic or general. An extension of the typology to the full corpus would test its completeness. And an examination of what happens to these figures in translation where the source frame may be unfamiliar to the receiving audience and the inversion may therefore fail would test the account under conditions in which the mechanism can be observed breaking down, and would bear directly on the staging of Churchill's plays outside the anglophone world.

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