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# **Into the Spotlight: the Construction and Representation of Women in Contemporary Feminist Drama: Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Marina Carr's *The Mai***

**Máster Universitario en Investigación en Literaturas Anglófonas e Hispánicas Contemporáneas**

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## Abstracts

In spite of the significant role theatre has historically had in most cultures, women have been, one way or another, banned from it, whether in terms of authorship, on-stage presence, or complex characterisation. From legal prohibitions that forbid women from professionally acting, to the social pressure that prevented female dramatists from seeing their plays staged, it has not been until relatively recently that women have been allowed to occupy a more significant place within the theatrical arena. The almost total male domination of the theatrical sphere that existed both in England and Ireland has been defied in the last century by a new wave of female playwrights, who have drawn on often controversial topics that had never been tackled before on stage, or if they had, only from an exclusively male viewpoint. Contemporary dramatists, among them Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr, have taken the baton and have tried to expose, criticise, and even subvert the ever-present male bias when it comes to the representation of women and the female experience in drama.

Through two of their more representative plays, *Top Girls* (1982) and *The Mai* (1994) respectively, the aim of this dissertation is to analyse the female theatrical tradition that has been influential in contemporary female-written drama. Moreover, it will explore the construction of the different female characters that appear in the aforementioned plays in depth, especially regarding the representation of the female experience from the perspective of these women, the way they appropriate and redefine traditionally male spaces, the depiction of motherhood and family dysfunctionality, and the influence of religious institutions in perpetuating oppression. Simultaneously, taking into account the historical framework provided, the goal is also to discuss the role of both Churchill and Carr in reshaping the previously established female figure in the dramatic tradition, rather archetypal and biased. Challenging gender roles instead, both playwrights allow their characters to reclaim their genuine voices and experiences, this time, from their own perspectives, finally stepping into the spotlight denied to them for so long.

**Key words:** Caryl Churchill, Marina Carr, feminist theatre, feminist criticism, female characterisation.

A pesar del papel tan importante que el teatro ha jugado en la mayoría de culturas, la mujer, de una manera u otra, y tanto si hablamos de autoría, presencia en el escenario, o de una caracterización compleja de personajes femeninos, ha sido sistemáticamente excluida de él. Desde las leyes que prohibían a las mujeres actuar de manera profesional a la presión social que impedía que las obras a manos de dramaturgas fueran puestas en escena, no ha sido hasta hace relativamente poco que se les ha permitido ocupar un papel sustancial dentro del teatro. La práctica total dominación masculina del contexto teatral tanto británico como irlandés ha sido desafiada por una ola de dramaturgas que se han centrado en la exploración de temas ciertamente controvertidos que, o nunca habían sido tratados de manera tan explícita o, por el contrario, habían sido reflejados desde una perspectiva exclusivamente masculina. Estas autoras contemporáneas, incluyendo a Caryl Churchill y Marina Carr, han tomado el testigo y han intentado exponer, criticar, incluso subvertir la constante parcialidad masculina en la representación de la mujer y la experiencia femenina sobre las tablas.

A través de dos de sus obras más representativas, *Top Girls* (1982) y *The Mai* (1994) respectivamente, el objetivo de este estudio es analizar la tradición teatral femenina que ha influido en el teatro contemporáneo de estas dos autoras. Además, examina en profundidad la construcción de los distintos personajes femeninos que encontramos en las obras previamente mencionadas, prestando especial atención a la representación de la experiencia femenina desde el punto de vista de estas mujeres, la forma en la que se redefinen espacios tradicionalmente masculinos, la representación de la maternidad y la disfuncionalidad familiar, así como la influencia de las instituciones religiosas en la perpetuación de la opresión femenina. Al mismo tiempo, y teniendo en cuenta el marco teórico e histórico proporcionado, el objetivo es también discutir el papel que tanto Churchill como Carr han tenido a la hora de redefinir la figura de la mujer previamente establecida en la tradición teatral, y que generalmente quedó limitada a arquetipos. Ambas autoras desafían roles de género, y permiten que sus personajes reclamen sus propias voces y experiencias, finalmente ocupando el papel protagonista que se les ha negado durante tanto tiempo.

**Palabras clave:** Caryl Churchill, Marina Carr, teatro feminista, caracterización femenina, crítica feminista.

## 1. Introduction

“Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing,  
from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ...  
woman must put herself into the text –as into the world and into history”  
(Hélène Cixous 875)

Throughout the history of literature, the image of women has often been used as a motif, a scapegoat to show the audience how evil or tortured the male protagonist really is, or to add complexity to his character and storyline. Female characters, more often than not, have been relegated to the background of the action, accessory rather than protagonists. If we focus on theatre, this is equally true. From Greek drama to the more contemporary scene, the light that has shone on women on stage has been dim, indeed. Nevertheless, drama, as a very performative and public medium, lends itself as a vehicle to expose, challenge, and subvert –or at least try to– certain images, behaviours, and representations very present in society.

That is one reason why, in the last decades, more and more female playwrights have turned to drama as an attempt to challenge the previous representation of women in theatre and provide their own twist on the construction of female characters on stage. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a renaissance of those voices that had been previously silenced within the theatrical spheres finally started to take place. In their plays, women playwrights deal with topics that had been usually overlooked: the female experience, patriarchal and sexist attitudes, female identity, and so on. Moreover, we finally find female characters that are protagonists rather than residual characters, free to finally shine under the spotlight. In recent years, there has been a collective demand –especially carried out by female authors–, to revisit and challenge the bias and representation that female characters have had on the stage, as well as to explore these historical accounts from female perspectives providing them with much more depth and complexity.

Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that literature written by women has been historically regarded by some scholars and critics largely as second-rate, a fact that is especially noticeable in drama. However, according to Christian W. Thomsen, some female novelists and even poets have enjoyed a certain recognition in several countries – including both Britain and Ireland–, female theatre has been often considered inconsequential, irrelevant, and thus has been ignored and displaced to a secondary status (165). Authors like Cathy Leeney have argued that playwrights have found it harder to break into the canon than it has been for poets or novelists, precisely because theatre is a public medium (2018: 313). As she highlights, “public spaces are dominated by men, while domestic space is the realm of women” (314). Because of this, dramatists – especially women– and their works have always been under a much more severe scrutiny. Evidently, that is not to say that female playwrights have not existed, or that they have not tried to break into this forbidden space, but rather that the ones that did, have been widely underrepresented in anthologies and dramatic collections, as well as ignored by the academia, at least until relatively recently. As Heather Ingman and Clíona Ó Gallchoir accurately put it, “the development of these more nuanced, flexible and inclusive frameworks” in literary scholarship has emerged as a response to the increasing of social and political feminist criticism and a necessity to claim women in literature –both in authorship and in fiction– as more than “elevated symbols of femininity”, while at the same time, exposing the way in which women’s voices and experiences have been silenced (4).

Nowadays, one of the reasons why the demand for feminist drama has consistently grown is mostly because female authors have always been very aware of their limitations and exclusions from the stage, as well as how the female experience has been depicted by their male counterparts. They have strived to develop more nuanced, rich, complex,

and real images of women, and through that, fight against the same stereotypes and constraints they have been subjected to. The main aim of these authors is indeed to expose, comment on, and challenge patriarchal values and structures that have limited women in real life, in literature, and more specifically, in the realm of theatre. According to Mária Kurdi, drama written by female playwrights displays “a high degree of sensitivity to the contradictions and problems related to the re-rendering of earlier achievements in women’s emancipation” and equally, it addresses these topics through new and innovative dramatic strategies regarding thematic scope and characterization (2018: 801). Moreover, female theatre has also particularly focused on criticising the way women have been marginalized and excluded from political and social structures (Ó Gallchoir 55).

The almost total male domination of the theatrical sphere that existed both in England and Ireland has been defied by a new wave of female playwrights, who draw on topics that had never been depicted before, or if they had, had been from an exclusively male viewpoint. In English drama, one of the established household names is undoubtedly that of Caryl Churchill. Similarly in Ireland, Marina Carr quickly made a place for herself as one of the most promising playwrights and has strengthened that position ever since. Due to the vast body of work produced by both authors, it would be impossible to deal with all of their female characters in this study, which means that I will primarily focus on those that appear in two particular plays: Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982), and Marina Carr’s *The Mai* (1994), both perfect representatives of their respective careers as playwrights. To begin with, *Top Girls* is one of Churchill’s most well-known and internationally acclaimed plays, which completely revolutionised the 1980s stage. On the other hand, *The Mai* is acknowledged as one of Carr’s most mature works, depicting issues that concern Irish society, and particularly, women, at a time when most of the

topics were seen as taboo, and to a certain extent, still are. Although they share similar standpoints in the way they tackle certain topics and themes, these two plays are different and unique enough in their exploration of female identity and representation to warrant a critical comparison to analyse how they both approach the subject. Comparing both literary traditions, this study will explore the parallelisms and differences between them, paying particular attention to the female characters created by Churchill and Carr, and how they are inevitably influenced by different political and social issues regarding their own contexts.

Therefore, and considering all this contextual information, the aim of this dissertation is to analyse the female theatrical tradition that has been influential in the contemporary drama written by women. Moreover, I will explore in depth the construction of the different female characters that appear in the aforementioned plays: the representation of the female experience from the perspective of these women, the way they are portrayed in traditionally male spaces, motherhood and family dysfunctionality, and the influence of religion on gender roles within the framework of feminist literary criticism. Simultaneously, taking into account the historical framework provided, the goal is also to discuss the role of both Churchill and Carr in redefining the previously established female figure in the dramatic tradition.

## **2. State of the art**

In the last few decades, the analysis of female authored drama has resurfaced within literary criticism. Both Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr, due to their relevance in their respective contexts, have inspired a considerable amount of scholarship devoted to the study of their works (in Churchill's case, *Top Girls* has received especial attention). However, it is worth mentioning that there has been no comparative examination of both



*Top Girls* and *The Mai* simultaneously. The main bibliography employed for both the theoretical framework and the analysis carried out in this dissertation has relied mainly on the works of several academics that are considered to be experts in the field, especially regarding the study of the aforementioned playwrights.

As for the construction of a more historical review of drama in both England and Ireland, Christopher Innes' *Modern British Drama*, although relatively outdated since its publication in 1992, has nevertheless proven useful in its overview of the evolution of British theatre and its main characteristics and influences throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature* (2018) has provided a rather insightful and comprehensive summary of female Irish literature, including drama. In it, Clíona Ó Gallchoir's chapter "Eighteenth-Century Writing" has offered a thorough study of the evolution of female drama. Similarly, Cathy Leeney's various works (particularly her chapter "Women's Traditions in Theatre, 1920-2015", included in the aforementioned anthology) have been quite helpful for the understanding of the situation of contemporary female drama in Ireland throughout the last hundred years.

Focusing on specialised criticism regarding the authors explored, one of the scholars whose contribution has been essential for the development of this dissertation on the subject of Churchill and *Top Girls* has been Elaine Aston, both on her own (*Feminist Views on the English Stage*, 2003) and also in collaboration with other experts devoted to Churchillian drama, who contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (2009), including Janelle Reinelt. As regards Marina Carr, the works of two academics in particular have featured heavily in this study and have been key for the analysis of *The Mai*. Firstly, several scholarly articles by Mária Kurdi have contemporary Irish dramatists, particularly Marina Carr. Lastly, Melissa Sihra has written extensively on Carr's body of work, especially in her monographic study *Marina Carr: Pastures of the*

*Unknown* (2018). Due to its recent publication, this book has been essential for the completion of this dissertation because of its depth in the exhaustive critical examination of Carr's plays, influences, and her relevance in the current Irish stage.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The figure of the on-stage woman has been, for the most part, controlled by both male playwrights and actors. From the exclusion of women's presence in the construction of plays, to the banishment of actresses from the scene, men have been the dominant force in drama, whether by writing female characters or by bringing them to life. Playwrights like Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr have taken the baton and risen to meet the challenge of rectifying the disbarred role and situation female figures have had in literature, in an attempt to unearth the silenced and oppressed voices present in previous narratives, giving them a central role and bringing female characters to the forefront of the narrative (Harris 177).

#### **3.1 Women and drama: a chronology**

In society, according to Lesley Ferris, men have always assumed a more "active, cultural" role, while women have been regarded as "passive, natural" instead, a dynamic that is also perceived in drama. In fact, she argues, "the very act of men assuming the costume and mask of a woman reinforces the idea of woman as symbol, and so maintains male hegemony in the auditorium of cultural invention and ingenuity" (29). In time, women were considered superfluous and systematically banned from performing – encouraged by the ever-growing power and influence of the Catholic Church– and soon audiences "not only accepted the playing of female characters by men, but assumed the actor's ability to take on many roles, both male and female", further pushing women out of the stage (Keyssar 3-4).

If we trace back to ancient Greece, theatre emerged from various religious festivals, and the acting profession “was one of both privilege and good repute. Greek actors played an honoured role in the practice of the state religion, and as a result they often received special rewards for their performances” (Ferris 31). These religious events did include women, but experts have widely discussed the extent to which they had a place in these dramatic circles. In spite of the extensive participation of female characters in Greek drama –most of whom have passed on to become literary symbols, revisited again and again, and greatly influential in most theatrical traditions afterwards–, women’s relevance within the genre has unfortunately not been profusely documented. Because they did take part in religious celebrations, it is more than feasible to assume that they would be members of theatrical productions as well. However, it seems as though, at least in the plays that have survived, women were likely not present on stage, for men were usually the ones performing their roles. Additionally, the fact is that women were not even a significant part of the audiences that attended these performances (Kluth 2020).

If we focus on authorship, all the ancient Greek playwrights whose works have come down to us were men, and there is no recollection of any female dramatists to have authored theatrical works back then. As the expansion of Roman culture and influence gained force, “the theatre's religious links disappeared ... and theatrical events often became little more than exercises in crowd manipulation” (Ferris 31). Thus, theatre adopted a much more propagandistic and political role. With it, the already limited position that women had held became even more reduced. Moreover, the venerated and respected position Greek actors enjoyed “was not maintained, and during the Roman Republic the prejudice against actors multiplied”. They were unable to hold public office, and even banished from exerting their right to vote, or change their profession if they wished to, becoming almost social outcasts within Roman society (Ferris 32). Safe to say,

for a woman to be on stage at this time –in any capacity– was considered an aberration, and the profession of actress started to be equated to that of a prostitute.

This situation prevailed throughout the Middle Ages until the Renaissance. Along the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in France for instance, playwrights were free to write female roles knowing that women were actually allowed to play them. In Italy – especially within the world of the *Commedia dell'Arte*– women performers were quite usual.<sup>1</sup> In Britain, contrarily, they were nowhere to be seen on stage: in fact, they were banished from theatre altogether. As Juliet Dusinberre points out, Elizabethan authors explored what it meant to be female under social conditions that rendered women worthless, and the “struggle that it is to try and be human in a world which declares them only female” (92-93). In Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre women were actually forbidden from professionally acting in public, so young boys were purposely cast for the female roles, since only men were allowed to perform, even though at that time, the audiences that attended these performances were largely female. This practice was so common and ingrained in the theatrical tradition, that it was considered a matter of “verisimilitude” by the Elizabethan spectators, who unquestioningly accepted it as part of the performance (Jardine 9).

Women, thus, did not have a prominent literal –or symbolical– presence on stage. It will not be until the Restoration that theatre bans slowly began to disappear and women were progressively included back on the stage. This policy, among others, perfectly illustrates the way in which, in society, women were limited to a very secondary status,

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<sup>1</sup> “Unlike other forms of theatre, the female roles [in *commedia dell'arte*] ... were actually portrayed by women ... respected and valued for their ability to perform and their own individual qualities. However, they were at times badly denigrated by critics, and for a period in Italy, a short-lived effort was made to ban women from the *Commedia* stage. But by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century their presence was largely accepted” in spite of the efforts from the Church to remove women completely from public spaces (King 2018).

not free to choose a profession. This also accounts for the comparatively smaller number of female characters in drama, as well as their overall importance and relevance within it. It exemplifies just how much is left to be desired when it comes to the representation of the female experience. Not only were female characters written, but also performed by men –providing a very biased perspective–, which resulted in very stereotypical, unilateral, and simplistic individuals that, in general, lacked depth and texture.

As the 17<sup>th</sup> century came to an end, even more women started attending plays, something that naturally brought about a change in the taste of audiences. In fact, throughout Charles II's reign “the characteristic combination of wit, satire and comedy which reflected the tastes of the predominantly male and aristocratic audience ... as well as the structuring Restoration themes of sex and money, had grown stale” (Ferris 82). This shift inevitably influenced the themes and tone of the plays that were being staged, in an effort to try and cater for the new interests and preferences of that increasingly female and modern audience. Later on, during Queen Anne's reign, a new thematic scope emerged, and women adopted a more central role in dramatic narratives, not only within depictions of marriage, but also the portrayal of relationships among women were becoming more common (Ferris 170). This largely contributed to the more recurrent presence and complex characterization of women on stage. Furthermore, the influence of the new Enlightenment ideas throughout the rest of the century, “prompted claims for women's intellectual equality and their shared participation in a culture of reason”, which sparked new debates about women and women related issues, something that had not been so widespread before (Ó Gallchoir 37).

However, at the same time, and especially in Ireland, the problem of female authorship regarding publicly displayed art, like drama, was emphasised due to the restrictions on the Catholic community, which created a “massively uneven distribution

of power and wealth” that disproportionately affected Catholics and unsurprisingly “created very different contexts for women’s access to literacy and the printed word” (Ó Gallchoir 37). Moreover, because of its colonial background, themes and narratives of resistance arose within Irish theatre, demanding justice and independence from the British yoke and an end to the oppression Irish people have endured in terms of religion, economy, language, and culture. For women, this colonial situation positioned them “as doubly othered, subaltern of the ex-subaltern”, and the figure of the artist women, playwrights included, was essentially overlooked (Leeney 2018: 313). Some playwrights that were important at this time, and who laid the foundations and influenced subsequent authors, include Mary Davys, Elizabeth Griffith and Frances Sheridan. Unfortunately, and in spite of their achievements, their work had been practically forgotten until recently, which reflects the “critical amnesia” displayed when it comes to female playwrights, as Ó Gallchoir puts it (50).

A century later, towards the late 1890s, the New Woman movement started gaining force in Britain by “creating fictional feminists who prevailed against all odds” (O’Toole 114). This wave, which started predominantly with the novel and later extended to drama as well, continued to be highly influential in subsequent theatre all the way to contemporary feminist drama today. The New Woman dramatists of 1894 were greatly inspired by Henrik Ibsen’s plays. However, they did not enjoy the same popularity as their novelist counterparts, even though they addressed the same concerns on stage. Dramatists like Bernard Shaw –in spite of his radicality when it came to other issues–, were “characteristically unimpressed by anything that emanated from the pen of a female playwright” and extremely reticent to consider any female-authored work as worthy (Ledger 51). Some topics addressed by this New Woman drama were the “expression of maternal anguish” (Ledger 51), which questioned and challenged the inherent social idea

of motherhood, and the negotiation of “the social status of the sexually experienced woman who has defied social mores concerning the marriage vow” (53). Besides, it also explored other themes regarded within the scope of female experience: domestic settings and sexual relationships –in and outside marriage–, which had either not been addressed before, or depicted from a male standpoint.

At this time, women’s writing in Ireland was, generally, quite traditional in both formal and thematical terms. According to Paige Reynolds, this more conservative stance was largely due to the religious influence and pressure women were subjected to, as well as by the nationalist movement that was gaining strength. In fact, in portraying more traditional gender roles in drama, playwrights also promoted the Irish Revival’s national ideals through the role women had in upholding and transmitting those same ideals (132). Surprisingly though, at the same time, they also questioned “the dominant values and recalibrated limiting tropes, seeking in their writing to advance progressive notions of religion, class, gender and community in the incipient Irish nation” (Reynolds 132). Some recognisable female dramatists were Eva Gore-Booth and, undoubtedly one of Ireland’s household names, Lady Augusta Gregory.

Feminist drama became more and more popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reaching a decisive point in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. In its opening decades, drama was characterised by the rise of the Suffragette movement in England, and the continuity of the Revival and the fight for independence in Ireland. Playwrights –especially women– used their work as a political tool to spark debate and provoke change. At this time, according to Christopher Innes, the nature of theatre’s reception evolved, as well as the combination of content and form. Playwrights and scholars alike soon discovered the potential drama had when it came to its influence on audiences in the questioning of what was being represented on stage (1). In England, the drama of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

was heavily dominated by suffragist theatre, “which ranged from public-hall skits to full-length plays in West End theatres, was at once conservative and radical” (Carlson 99). Radical, on the one hand, because of its ideals and courage to advocate for and demanding the vote and more freedom for women in many different areas such as education for women, gender roles, family, taxation, and a fairer position for women in the eyes of the law. Nevertheless, it was still quite conservative because of its nature as a movement that was being pushed mainly by privileged middle-class women (Carlson 99). This drama’s main purpose was propagandistic, and it used to be performed mainly on public spaces with the intention of gathering as large audiences as possible.<sup>2</sup> The plays from this period were essentially provocative, but also “lively, sometimes raw, sometimes refined” (Carlson 100), and quite short so that they could be performed at meetings and rallies, with a very clear, accessible “politically instructive, and entertaining” message (Aston and Reinelt 4). Although it faded away once its main objective –female suffrage– was achieved<sup>3</sup>, it nevertheless served as an inspiration for subsequent political and feminist drama, and as Carlson states, “it made new assumptions about theatrical space” and “catapulted women into the full range of roles in theatre; and it played a key role in women writers’ conceptions of dramatic form” (107).

Simultaneously in Ireland, as we have mentioned before, drama –especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries– was primarily at the service of the struggle for independence and Home Rule, in which the Abbey Theatre played a key role (one of its prime examples being Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats’ *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*) (Merriman 9). During this time, playwrights “depicted social changes manifest in the rise of feminism and

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<sup>2</sup> It was primarily organised by affiliated theatrical groups, such as the Actresses’ Franchise League (AFL) and the Women Writer’s Suffrage League.

<sup>3</sup> Female suffrage was won in England 1918, although unfortunately it was only applicable to a limited number of women.



secularism; they considered contemporary wars, labour struggles and other political conflicts at home and abroad” (Reynolds 131). One of the female associations that devoted their efforts to write theatre with a propagandistic intention in favour of Irish independence were the Daughters of Ireland, as well as the Irish Dramatic Movement. However, the role of women in theatre was still very much irrelevant from a social point of view. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Melissa Sihra highlights, Irish theatre has been “a highly charged and controversial space of cultural enactment regarding notions of woman and gender”, and further argues that the image of “woman” as the national embodiment of the Irish nation needs to still be interrogated (2007b: 1). Moreover, she defends how “the social and cultural position of woman [that] has historically been one of symbolic centrality and subjective disavowal as both colonial ideology and nationalist movements” is responsible for the “feminized concepts of the nation, while subordinating women in everyday life” (2007b: 1).

In general terms, although more women playwrights managed to publish and/or stage their works throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Keyssar points out, the companies that had not only the power, but also the money, to be able to bring theatre to the public “remained not only primarily controlled by men but intimidatingly impenetrable for most women” until as late as the 1960s (18). In spite of the new opportunities available to women, the theatre industry was still a male-heavy space: in terms of writing, directing, but also, acting, as the more common and relevant roles were still being written primarily for men. More and more women were starting to be recognised for their contributions to the stage, but when it came to their inclusion in the classical canon, they were still on the periphery at best. According to dramatist and critic Michelene Wandor, the plays included in said canon were both written from very male-centred perspectives, but also performed by primarily male protagonists, a dynamic that became universal (53).

All in all, 1970s Britain “witnessed a profound change in the consciousness of women as a group” due to the changes in areas such as “law, publishing and the media, the arts, attitudes to public morality and in social habits combined in a relatively short period to alter radically the base from which women viewed their lives” (Naismith 42-43). In terms of social advancement, women enjoyed a period of more freedom and independence towards the end of the 60s. Methods of contraception were widely available for the first time, which “meant that sexual choice and decisions about motherhood were – in theory, at any rate – greater for women than they had ever been” (Wandor 55). In this vein, abortion was legalised in 1967, the same year as male homosexuality, yet only in England and Wales. The Equal Pay Act was approved in 1970, and in 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act was passed. This situation, which coincided with the feminist activist movement that was gaining ground at the end of the decade, revealed the need for better and more female representation in literature, and particularly, in theatre. This explosion of feminist drama was a response to the previous and still conspicuous exclusion of women from the stage, and focused, precisely, on bringing the female experience back into the spotlight.

Similarly, Ireland in the 1970s witnessed a tremendous cultural and social change, especially regarding women. Although a few years later than in England, changes in social legislation were necessary in order to improve women’s position and the achievement of freedom. Contraception became available in 1985, and divorce was legalised in 1995. As in Britain, theatre was dominated by men well into the 80s (Sihra 2007a: 151). It was at this time that a new generation of female playwrights emerged to make a place for themselves in both the British and Irish theatrical sphere, including Michelene Wandor, Claire Luckham, Louise Page, Bryony Lavery, Elizabeth Robins, Anne Jellicoe, Jill Posner, Shelagh Delaney or Mary O’Malley. Later on, came two

women who, for a long time, became the tokenistic female playwrights: Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill (Pattie 388).

If we focus on the British context, scholars such as Innes have argued that the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has turned out to be one of the most prolific and vital periods in English drama since the Elizabethan age, due to its ambition regarding thematic and subject matter as well as style, reinventing and developing traditional forms and transforming them into something exciting (1). In part, these new and much more subversive forms have developed mostly thanks to the feminist theatre. Feminist authors –both male and female– “consciously reject conventional forms as inherently masculinist, and as a consequence their criteria demand separate treatment” (Innes 7). This movement started to gain ground at the end of the 1980s, resurfacing as the next step in the evolution of the abovementioned suffragist drama from the first part of the century.

On the other hand, academics such as Cath Leeney have studied the evolution of Irish theatre and, in particular, the female figure, both as an author and as a character. As it has been discussed throughout this section, the presence of women in the theatrical context has been, at best, precarious. In the last decades, and parallel to the situation of English dramatists, Irish playwrights have defied patriarchy and masculine hegemony, as well as explored sexual and familiar dynamics. Throughout the social, cultural, and political changes Ireland has undergone in the last century, the female experience has been reflected and vindicated through theatre, and more specifically, female theatre. Moreover, we continuously find elements like the dichotomy between both Irish and British, and Irish and European identity, the relationship between women and the Catholic church, as well as their physical autonomy when it comes to issues such as abortion or divorce. As Leeney argues, these new works by Irish playwrights recuperate stories, explore human issues from a different perspective to that of the canon, and manage to

renovate the genre completely (2018: 330). Thus, drama has served as the perfect vehicle through which to re-invent and accommodate that female experience on stage, so that it is finally visible and fairly represented. To this, Leeney adds that, because gender identities and patriarchal hierarchy have dominated theatre and are “powerfully asserted through access to space, especially public space”, the fact that women have somehow intruded in that traditionally male space and have marked their place in it –whether by acting, directing or writing– is in itself an extremely transgressive act (2018: 313). Some of these dramatists have been Dorothy Macardle, Teresa Deevy, Mary Manning, Maura Laverty, Máiréad Ní Ghráda, Patricia Burke Brogan, or Marina Carr.

### **3.2 Feminist approaches to drama**

“This world has always belonged to men and still retains the form they have imprinted on it” (Simone de Beauvoir 738)

Back in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir argued that men have always dominated women and have been keen on maintaining them in an inferior position, subjected to their power and in a state of dependence and obedience, establishing them as “the Other” (163). From a feminist standpoint, many scholars have studied the timelessness of those patriarchal structures that have been perpetuated until today, exploring the social, physical, psychological, economic and political oppression women have endured, which places them time and again in a position of inequality. Critics, including French feminists Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, have continued to explore how women have been kept in the margins of society, and assigned fixed identities by the aforementioned dominant patriarchal structures, creating and perpetuating fixed gender roles. Thus, the qualities and behaviours that have been conventionally labelled as typically female have had the objective of perpetuating these assumptions, forcing women to stay within clearly defined limits. As Linda C. Pelzer states, the subordinate

position women have always occupied –marginalised, objectified– has rendered them powerless, devoid of agency, freedom, or self-identity (45).

Female identity –and what constitutes it– has been one of the major themes feminist literature has explored. In this respect, there is no denying the influence of patriarchal structures in shaping that female identity. According to Ann Branaman, both female identity and the term “woman” are intrinsically related to the “experiences of marginalization and subordination” women have experienced throughout history, thus making female subordination an inevitable part of what shapes female identity (32). Consequently, the vindication of female identity has been based on the idea that women should “resist (exclusive) self-identification with the narrow, devalued, and disempowering roles of wife, mother, and object of men’s sexual desire ... the subsuming of their own self-identities under those of their husbands and families” (Branaman 31). Bearing this objective in mind, authors in the last few decades –Churchill and Carr included– have paid special attention to the depiction, deconstruction and reconstruction of female identity, in an attempt to explore the search for women’s experiences. From the role they have in the stories, to their bodies and their sexuality, female characters had been previously devoid of self-identity, always dependent on that of the male characters that surround them. Feminist literature challenges binary oppositions that always render women as the inferior one in the sexual hierarchy:

This basic male/female dichotomy accounts, then, for the privileged status of such elements as the active (male) over the passive (female); the mind (male) over the body (female); and the rational (male) over the irrational (female), with the male element of the binary opposition being the dominant and the female element being the subordinate. In this way, the duality always asserts a superiority of the masculine over the feminine. (Moss 63)

Topics that have been heavily anatomised by feminist thinkers –especially after the second-wave feminism– are mostly related to motherhood, sexuality, and gender. In the 1970s, gynocriticism emerged as the study of women writers, as well as traditionally “female” approaches and topics. With it, issues such as gender, family, motherhood and female sexuality started to become more central to feminist concerns. In contemporary literature, including drama, one of the key elements is the struggle –almost incompatibility– between women as mothers and wives, and successful professional women. As a matter of fact, one of the themes that has been pivotal in the feminist agenda has been the balance and relationship between women, family, and work. As Janelle Reinelt explains,

it was not about equality –feminists agreed that women should be treated fairly and equitably in the workplace– but about how that actually worked out for women in various positions (working-class women in factories, middle-class women in professions, and unemployed women as either rich stay-at-homers or poor unmarried mothers without jobs at all). (2009: 29)

Moreover, the idea of the institutionalisation of motherhood, tackled by Adrienne Rich among others, is also examined in depth through the discussion of the complexities of motherhood and the reinterpretation of the figure of “mother”: presenting motherhood not only as a female experience, but also as a political entity designed to control women. Lynette McGrath adds that women’s ability to reproduce has been “held hostage by the patriarchy” for economic purposes (355). Both patriarchy and religion have worked hand in hand to monitor women, including their own reproductive rights. This appropriation of motherhood has been discussed as well in relation to family dynamics and dysfunctionality. This approach to the dysfunctionality that exists within the family circles is used in feminist literature (particularly in Ireland) as a mechanism to question

the traditional position of both men and women in the family and in society: on the one hand, it demystifies the woman as the nexus of the nuclear family, responsible for its correct functioning (Koch 206), and on the other, it also explores the role of the father as the figure that embodies the patriarchal authority within the family.

On the other hand, religion, and more specifically, religious institutions have always been in charge of establishing, enforcing, and policing social and moral behaviours. As Alice Jasper proposes, most religions have been, and continue to be, based on and organised in authoritative patriarchal systems (125). From a feminist standpoint, the criticism towards the practice of religious beliefs that are rely on “exposing the effects of privileging a particular perspective, typically a male perspective” as well as the role it plays when it comes to stop certain sectors from “being seen or heard at all” –in this case, women– is one of the foundations (Jasper 125).

### **3.3 Women and drama: what comes next?**

Contemporary playwrights have taken upon themselves to explore the abovementioned areas of the female experience that have been repeatedly neglected and misrepresented from a feminist perspective, by means of employing experimental techniques regarding language and staging to challenge the previous dramatic standards. Towards the 90s, one of the main conceptions about British theatre was that, partly because of the Thatcherite’s policies and the political effect on the genre, it was in a critical state. However, according to Elaine Aston, it was precisely the emergence of female playwrights that was considered to be a renovating element, “given their political drive and desire to experiment” (2003: 1). The female playwrights of this decade were stylistically very different, but as Aston comments, they found common ground, as we have seen, particularly in the themes they explore (15).

Unlike England, the 90s in Ireland were a period of splendour, mostly due to the rising success not only of female dramatists, but also directors, a success that Ireland still enjoys today, with such prominent voices as Enda Walsh and Marina Carr (Wallace and Pilný 43). Partly due the transformation that the country underwent at the time of the Celtic Tiger, the changes in Irish society have been more than noticeable, a time of prosperity in which “Irish identity has, unsurprisingly, been in the throes of some considerable redefinition” (Wallace and Pilný 44). In theatre, as a consequence, Mária Kurdi argues that “the process of diversification that had begun earlier was gaining momentum, clearing as well as securing a space for the appearance and practice of an array of non-traditional approaches and experimental forms” (2009: 59). Moreover, she adds that the fast-changing pace of Ireland at the time, including drama,

is hallmarked by the spectacular upsurge of women's work ... notably contributing not only to the enrichment but also to the challenging of the national canon ... while tending to bring certain ambiguities to the surface, women playwrights in Ireland confront critical aspects of issues related to individual autonomy, gendered behaviour, marital pressures as well as the binding power of family heritage. (2010: 227)

Contemporary female Irish drama reshapes the way in which the female experience has been presented before through innovative techniques and the creation of female characters that “take on life and energy and are conceived of as heroic, passionate, subversive” (Eagleton 110). Authors revolve around the depiction of familiar relationships, motherhood, marriage, gender, and the body, addressing them in relation to “the socially constructed relations between men and women, and between women and institutions against the backdrop of history and dominant ideologies” (Kurdi 2009: 60). Issues that, until recently, had been excluded from the traditional stage. Because of their



efforts, women “are no longer represented in the image men created of them or as the conveyors of male-centered ideological positionings and ideas, but embody and stand for their distinct experiences and ambitions” (Kurdi 2009: 61), gaining self-identity and agency in the process, through the transgression of the pre-established patterns.

Because of the efforts of authors such as Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr, women have partially stopped being represented throughout extremely male lenses, but rather depicted in a more nuanced way, paying especial attention to their own experiences and ambitions (Kurdi 2009: 61). Caryl Churchill (London, 1938) was born into a middle-class family, and began writing at an early age. She moved to Montreal, Canada, and came back to England in 1956 to study at Oxford. She arrived in 1972 to the Royal Court Theatre, which at the time was considered to be a “haven” for aspiring dramatists, especially women (Keyssar 78). Like many working mothers, she struggled with the balance of devoting her life to her writing, and spending time raising her children, something that is clearly reflected in her work (especially in *Top Girls*). Her awareness of this duality and her involvement in feminism emerged from personal experience, the “growing discontent with the isolated conditions of her domestic life” she felt as she was trying to start her career (Aston and Diamond 3). In spite of the lack of funding theatre (and women in particular) was receiving, she managed to make a place for herself in the scene. Throughout her career, it is clear how she has developed a unique vision and theatrical techniques that have made her stand out in the genre. She has written over 50 plays for both radio and theatre, and she is still quite active. Her first works already started showing a noticeable interest in the intersection between feminism and socialism, something that continued to be of utmost important in her subsequent body of work. Her earlier plays combined a wish for experimentation, as well as a criticism, more often than

not, from a very satiric perspective, towards gender norms, imperialism, and capitalism, among other issues.

It was not until works like *Top Girls* that she “established herself as a major international playwright” (Reinelt 2000: 179). However, and not surprisingly, most of Churchill’s plays were received negatively by male critics because of her portrayal of the female experience. Her plays have always questioned and challenged the established theatrical conventions. Thematically, her interest in socialism increased with the rising to power of Margaret Thatcher, something that she clearly portrays in her plays. At that time, “there was talk about whether it was an advance to have a woman prime minister if it was someone with policies like hers” (Tyser 19). In fact, many experts agree that the situation for women was even worse under Thatcherite rule. *Top Girls* was written as a response to the political and social context and events of those years. In this vein, contextualizing the play in its time is crucial to understand its implications (Tyser 13). We cannot deny that history has a very important role when it comes to the feminist movement. What authors such as Churchill do is to pick up those historical female figures that have been forgotten, to bring them back and give them, literally, a central place on stage. In her plays, history is reinterpreted from a new perspective, defying conventions, and subverting roles. At the same time, she manages to compare women’s situation and place in society both in the past and in the present, making her audience arrive to the conclusion that, unfortunately, those changes for the better have been superficial at best.

At the other end of the Irish Sea, Marina Carr (Dublin, 1964) is, often together with Brian Friel, considered nowadays “one of Ireland’s most important playwrights since Beckett” (Finn 45). The uniqueness and quality of her work has been recognised as a massive contribution to contemporary Irish theatre, and she has managed to make a name for herself as one of the country’s most renowned playwrights. Her plays deal with

the reinterpretation of mythological themes applied to current affairs by (in a way, similarly to Churchill) placing past and present side by side and studying the presence – or rather absence– of change. The value of Carr’s work resides in her tireless fight against patriarchal values present in Irish society, reinterpreting women on stage in a much more complex, realistic, and nuanced way. As Leeney very accurately puts it, her plays are marked by “creativity, restless courage and epic ambition” (2006: 509).

Her early dramas tackle, in an experimental and almost Beckettian way, issues like gender, relationships, and motherhood<sup>4</sup>, displaying “experimental forms and playful comedic tones within a strongly intuitive, at times radical, feminist awareness” (Sihra 2018: 39). Her second period, according to several scholars, begins with *The Mai*<sup>5</sup> (1994), the first in her Midlands’ cycle, followed by *Portia Coughlan* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) and *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000). In these more complex plays, the focus is on “the fraught relationship between woman, family and home in rural Irish settings” (Sihra 2007c: 201). At the same time, she openly discusses topics such as divorce, abortion, and female sexuality, especially from a female perspective, at a time when most of these issues were not only taboo, but also illegal (divorce was not legal until 1995, and abortion as late as 2018). Later on, her plays became more philosophical and experimental, all of them much less particular to the Irish context (Finn 43). In these more recent plays, she “blends the contemporary and the classic, the mythic and the real, frequently revisiting the tragedies of Shakespeare and ancient Greece”, examining family dysfunction, rewriting many of them and bringing them back to life in a more contemporary setting and “placing female protagonists at the fulcrum of the tragic action” (Finn 43). In spite

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<sup>4</sup> *Low in the Dark* (1989), for instance, was a pioneering work in dealing with issues such as abortion on the Irish stage.

<sup>5</sup> *The Mai*, which was firstly staged on the Peacock Theatre in Dublin, was extremely well received by audiences and critics.

of the fact that many contemporary dramatists have been negatively reviewed because of their particular and non-male centred approach to certain subjects –mentioned above–, Carr, similarly to Churchill in England, has succeeded in breaking the glass ceiling. According to Sihra, she is “exceptionally rare as she is the only Irish woman to have her plays produced on Ireland’s main stages in recent years” (2007b: 19).

Thus, in the works of playwrights like Churchill and Carr, we find that there is a strong element of subversion that contests the systematic oppression women have been subjected to. By creating female figures that question and challenge these established patterns, the aforementioned issues and concerns have a space in which they can be exposed, discussed, and potentially overcome. The reinvention of new theatrical forms, dramatic structures, and most of all, the new and complex characterization of female figures have been key in furthering the struggle for the rights of women to express their own experiences from a much more realistic and unbiased perspective, denouncing and renouncing gender, class, sexual and racial stereotypes. Even though, as we have seen, in the last decades feminist theatre has been exponentially growing –in quantity, quality, and appreciation at the hands of the academy– we cannot ignore the fact that it is still being utterly underrepresented within the canon. Thus, the purpose of this study is to try to contribute in furthering the visibility and analysis of these two dramatists and their plays.

#### **4. *Top Girls* and *The Mai*: new approaches to the female experience on stage**

Since its origins, and mainly because of its public dimension, theatre has acted as one of the catalysts through which a massively illiterate society had access to knowledge, literature, and storytelling. Dramatic productions are, in essence, meant to be staged and performed for a public audience, and their primary aim is, and always has been, to be a

source of entertainment. However, whether because of religious influence, colonialist propaganda, or monarchic endorsement, theatre –as a performative and public medium– has also been employed as an instrument for political and moral indoctrination, with the intention to perpetuate and encourage certain behaviours and attitudes. Contrarily, at the same time it has also had an important role in exposing, challenging and subverting those same attitudes and beliefs present in society, denouncing oppression and injustice. In particular, when it comes to patriarchal values, many authors have turned to drama –from political suffragist productions to more contemporary theatre– to unveil how the patriarchal system and the structures that are set in place have always failed to defy the misogynistic and oppressive attitudes women have been exposed to, not only in society, but also in their representation on the stage itself. Because of this, drama has always functioned as a trigger for social commentary and change. In the case of female representation, it is important to have in mind that, until relatively recently, the stage has been a predominantly male space from which women have been banned from: literally, as actresses and performers, but even more importantly, in terms of authorship as well.

As Luce Irigaray stated, society has traditionally imposed a very limited array of roles on women: they are either angelic virgins, devoted mothers, or prostitutes and witches (186). Inevitably, literature has mirrored this simplistic classification, and throughout its history, most female characters have been, directly or indirectly, forced to fall into this mould. When it comes to theatre particularly, in the last decades, there has been a conscious effort to stop depicting these universal female archetypes and symbols in drama. Because of the social, political, and cultural change that has occurred –and still does–, it has become far more important to reassess and reimagine those archetypes and reinvent them as different female figures on stage (de Gay 13). In fact, one of the challenges and aspirations –especially for women dramatists– has been precisely to avoid

this kind of fixed archetypes, which present women as either victims or villains, opting instead for the creation of more independent and complex beings: fully-fleshed women that provide a much more realistic representation of the female experience, who, at the same time, interrogate, confront, and subvert the very foundations of the structures and systems that have been responsible for their previous characterization.

Both Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr, within their own particular contexts and styles, have worked tirelessly throughout their careers to meet this challenge. In most of their plays, we see a degree of subversion in the construction of female characters, presenting them as multi-layered individuals, thus blurring the lines between the aforementioned overly simplified categorizations. In particular, the aim of this study is to explore how both playwrights have depicted women in two of their most well-known works: *Top Girls* (1982) and *The Mai* (1994) respectively. In spite of being heirs to different traditions and influences, there are some elements both authors share, in structural and thematic terms. To begin with, Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr often rely on satire and humour in their works, something that is present at large in both *Top Girls* and *The Mai*. It is certainly surprising the tone that both plays adopt, each in its own way, when it comes to the exploration of relevant and, sometimes, profound topics. There is a constant juxtaposition between tragedy and comedy, both important and irrelevant matters being discussed simultaneously. In *Top Girls*, we find female characters talking about and sharing their traumatic experiences –sexual abuse, oppression, and death, to name a few– while they order their food and get progressively drunk as the scene goes on. The play does not present long monologues about how unfair their lives as women have been, but we see that through the characters’ comments, as silly and understated as they might seem sometimes, that this is in fact the case: “But my father was the mainspring of my life and when he died I was so grieved. I’ll have the chicken please”

(*TG* 58); “Grief always overwhelmed me at the time / What I fancy is a rare steak” (*TG* 59). This combination of humour and *gravitas* surprises the audience, and makes them more engaged, but it also makes the conversation between the different characters not only more interesting and complex, but much more real as well. Similarly, according to Eric Weitz, Carr equally “deploys what may on the surface seem like comic distractions to woo the spectator, as it were, thereby intensifying the stage world’s emotional purchase” (151). In *The Mai*, we find a comparable dynamic in tone to that of *Top Girls*, mainly in the figure of Grandma Fraochlán. She proves to be a sort of comic relief throughout the play, as her interventions tend to be rather impulsive and spontaneous. This produces a certain humorous effect and levity that makes the final outcome –when certain topics are mentioned in more depth– even more hard-hitting, in which the tone changes suddenly to being more sombre, serious, and tragic: “The Lord put grapes and tobacco on the earth so his people could get plastered at every available opportunity” (*TM* 138).

Another characteristic that is common not only to Churchill and Carr, but to many other contemporary dramatists is their formal and structural experimentation. In this sense, both plays are quite interesting in the way they deal with temporality. On the one hand, if we focus on *Top Girls*, we see that the play’s layout is extremely innovative, something generally not at all strange in Churchill’s body of work. It is divided into three acts, but the differences, especially regarding themes and characters, are quite noticeable. This makes the audience feel as though they were almost watching three separate and independent plays in which Marlene, the principal character, becomes the common thread of them all, the only constant that unites and brings the rest of the characters together. Moreover, the temporal structure of the play proves to be equally interesting. To begin with, we have a group of women that come from different periods and cultures in act one

and that later on disappear. Curiously, this fact is unquestioned and not presented as anything out of the ordinary or unrealistic, which from the beginning, indicates the experimental nature of the play. As regards to the temporal structure of the three acts, as R. Darren Gobert comments, whereas the majority of dramas follow the chronological tradition in the way they reveal the plot through temporally ordered scenes, “*Top Girls* borrows a device more common to fiction: it reveals its chronological story ... in a non-consecutive arrangement” (3). The first act is set on a Saturday night, the second on the next Monday –firstly at Top Girls’ headquarters, and then at Marlene’s sister’s house– and in the third, the audience is transported all the way back a year. Thus, the author presents the climax of the story in advance, and then explores how the characters have reached that point.

On the other hand, Carr tends to be much more conventional structure-wise in her work, as she draws on more established dramatic forms. The overall design of *The Mai* may seem perhaps less experimental and more traditional than that of Churchill’s work. Nevertheless, there is still a central element in her plays, *The Mai* in particular, which makes them circular, following “flows in rhythmic cycles of repetition to reflect the lives of the characters”, as Sihra points out (2018: 278). Regarding form, the action moves back and forth in time: we know the central character, The Mai, is going to die since the end of act one –something Millie, her daughter, anticipates–, and then in act two, we follow the events that lead to her passing. Moreover, in terms of themes and characterization, we can see a tendency to repetition when it comes to the characters’ patterns and behaviours through the different generations of women in the family we meet, which constantly reinforces this sense of circularity that is so prevalent throughout the entirety of the narrative.



Although we can certainly find many parallelisms and similarities between Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr's styles, something this dissertation will analyse in more depth is the way both dramatists share an interest in dealing with and dissecting social issues that directly affect women, or that have always been considered to be within the female realm. From the construction of female characters and the depiction of their experiences, to the discussion of issues that, at the time both plays were staged and brought to the public, were nothing short of taboo, their efforts reside precisely in bringing these issues to light in order to, not only criticise and challenge them, but to open a debate around them. Through the ebb and flow between past and present and the generational gaps between the women that star in them –both from a historical and familiar perspective–, *Top Girls* and *The Mai* delve into the way in which women have broken into traditionally male spaces –or how they have reimagined spaces that have always been considered to be under female domain–, family dysfunctionality, relationships among women, the social influence of religion and its role in perpetuating gender roles and oppression, the institutionalisation of motherhood, and the constant battle between familiar and professional life.

#### **4.1 Churchill and Carr's unlikely women**

From the exploration of female identity, to the reconstruction of forgotten female historical figures, both Churchill and Carr's plays have challenged the way women have been silenced, even ostracised, in texts that had previously only been approached from a very male standpoint. Stereotypes are defied through revisiting and reinterpreting history from a female perspective of the female experience. As Funda Dörschel puts it, it is only a female-oriented approach that can bring awareness “about the constructed nature of gender roles and the illusive universality of androcentric ideology” (279). To this, Maggie Humm adds that in order to subvert the traditional depiction of women in literature, a re-

examination of male-authored texts is needed, to bring down the “prevailing social, cultural and ideological norms” by questioning the representation that women have traditionally had throughout literature (8).

#### **4.1.1 *Herstory: historical perspectives in Top Girls***

In *Top Girls* Caryl Churchill explores the idea of what it means to be a successful woman in 1980s England, portraying female success as an obstacle-ridden journey that is very frequently achieved at the expense of other women. The play begins with an iconic restaurant scene in which Marlene, a contemporary and career-driven woman, brings together Nijo (a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese courtesan), Isabella Bird (a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish traveller), Joan (who, disguised as a man, became Pope in the 9<sup>th</sup> century), Gret (the subject of one of Brueghel’s painting) and Griselda (the devoted wife in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*) to celebrate her new promotion as head of the job agency Top Girls. In this opening scene, they all reminisce about their past and what it meant to be a woman in their own periods. Later on, we also follow Marlene into her offices, where we see just how limited, competitive and brutal the “top” can be for women, and we get to know Marlene’s sister and niece, who is really her daughter, as we witness the argument between both sisters when they discuss motherhood, career, politics, and their past. In act one, Churchill gives a voice to these five women, from both history and fiction, and also provides them with a safe space, free of judgement, in which to revisit their personal narratives knowing that other women who have confronted and endured similar obstacles are listening to them, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

In the first scene we encounter a setting that is quite innovative and unique, and which has been considered tremendously revolutionary and influential in later drama. In the abovementioned restaurant scene, we find six women –Marlene, Nijo, Isabella, Gret, Joan and Griselda– in the spotlight and as the sole protagonists. This already establishes

from the very beginning the tone of the play in terms of characterization: this is a play about women, and starred solely by women. We get to know the five guests invited to dinner little by little, as they arrive separately, and we get a sense of who they are and their personalities as they are being progressively introduced. This group of extraordinary women, both real and fictional, are somehow exceptions to the norm when it came to female behaviour, and yet of all them have been victims and have experienced the yoke of the patriarchal system just for having been born women: they have gone through the same issues, expectations, and traumas, and have been exposed to similar types of abuse. According to Innes, in spite of their exceptionality, what all of them have in common is their “submissiveness to the men in their lives –authoritarian fathers, sexist lovers, brutal husband”, which has inevitably influenced them and their sense of identity as women (465). These women have lived caged within the gender expectations that are established by an unbending and unforgiving patriarchal system and are now just able to explore those experiences as they share them with each other.

Firstly, we meet Isabella Bird, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish traveller and explorer. Through her interventions, we know she has an adventurous and independent spirit, and has devoted her life to travel to exotic locations and discover the world, a life far from the pious, obedient, and self-sacrificing one she should have lived as the daughter of a clergyman. Instead of learning to do needlepoint, sing, and play music, Isabella’s existence has been much freer than that of her peers, not so restrained by society’s expectations of female behaviour and marriage, refusing to adhere a path that was not the right one for her: “I cannot, and will not live the life of a lady” (*TG* 80). Because of her achievements, Isabella is still considered “abnormal” for a woman of her time in Britain, who should have had marriage and children instead as her primary goal rather than

fanciful dreams about becoming an explorer, something for which, as the rest of women, she is cast aside or punished for.

The second woman is Lady Nijo, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century courtesan to the Japanese Emperor, who later on, became a nomad Buddhist nun. As such, her role in the society she was brought up in was inflexible and pre-established. Chosen from a very young age –groomed by her father– to become the Emperor’s lover, Nijo was used as an object by the men in her life, exchanged for favours, status, and money: “Then the Emperor passed his sake cup to my father and said ‘Let the wild goose come to me this spring’” (*TG* 56). Her position at court was an extremely submissive, secondary, and passive, her safety – and that of her family– always determined by the whims of the emperor. Nijo recalls how, once she lost the Emperor’s support, she was discarded and thrown away: “There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor’s favour” (*TG* 66). Therefore, Nijo lost her purpose in the world, for which she had been educated all her life, and had no other choice than to turn to religion. Looking back on her past, she has convinced herself that her situation, at least compared to that of other women, was not as bad as it could have been, had she never been required by the Emperor. This explains the reason why she finds it so difficult to confront that submissive mentality at first.

Dull Gret emerges as the play’s first fictional character, subject to Brueghel’s painting *Dulle Griet*.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the other women, Gret’s participation in the conversation is minimal, and barely utters a word throughout the whole dinner. It is only at the end that she intervenes to tell her story, and describes the horrors she endured, and, most importantly, how she fought back. When her village was attacked by soldiers, and

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<sup>6</sup> In this Renaissance Flemish painting, thought to have been produced around 1563, Brueghel depicts a peasant woman leading a revolt through Hell. Although it has been argued that the painter’s intention was to condemn and mock violence and madness in women, we see how Churchill turns it around to endow this figure with a much more empowered role.

her family killed, she took up arms and led a revolt to fight the intruders rather than remaining at home waiting, like it might have been expected from her:

We'd all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword. I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards.... I said, 'Come on, we're going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out'.... You just keep running on and fighting / you didn't stop for nothing. Oh we give them devils such a beating. (*TG* 81-82)

Joan, considered to be just as much a product of fiction as of history, is the next one to arrive. Rumoured to have been Pope in the mid 9<sup>th</sup>-century, in the play she remembers her life as a young girl with a deep passion for learning, an endeavour that at the time was reserved exclusively to men: "There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with pursuit of the truth" (*TG* 66). Disguised as a boy, Joan was encouraged to pursue her studies, and because she proved to stand out, nobody questioned she could be anything but male. She managed to even be elected Pope. However, she got used to the life and the image she was pretending to be –one that she could not have had access to as a woman–, to the point where she "forgot I was pretending" (*TG* 63). Because she lived avoiding and a stranger to life as a woman, she never knew she was pregnant until, as she recalls, she gave birth in the middle of a procession. After her true identity was revealed, she and her baby were punished for her outrageous appropriation of a masculine image –a Pope, no more, no less: "Well, you were a woman" / "Exactly, and I shouldn't have been a woman" (*TG* 69). For her sin, she was, quite literally, stoned to death: "They took me by my feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death" (*TG* 71).

Another fictional character, Patient Griselda, emerges from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, mirroring the obedient girl from "The Clerk's Tale". She epitomises

the perfect image of the passive and submissive wife, chosen by her royal husband in spite of her humble origins. In order to prove her obedience to him, she is forced to give up her children, whom she thinks of as dead for years, only to be “rewarded” in the end for her loyalty when they are returned to her, grown-up and healthy: “He couldn’t believe I would always obey him. He had to prove it” (*TG* 76). Even when confronted with the horror displayed by the rest of the women at the table, she justifies her husband’s behaviour and ignores it because everything turned well in the end: “So you forgave him and lived with him?” / “He suffered so much all those years” (*TG* 79). Even though Griselda enjoys the very much sought-after happy ending, we see how, as she becomes more comfortable telling her story, she starts to realise that, perhaps, the trauma caused by her husband’s actions and abominable treatment she endures at his hands should be, at least, questioned. Through her, we see that the traditional narrative and the role of women in fairy tales and traditional stories are challenged and criticised. Churchill is openly questioning the idea of “happy ending” in relation to what the protagonists have to go through in order to get there, while male counterparts are always forgiven for their cruelties and injustices.

Finally, the main character, Marlene, acts as the common acquaintance throughout the scene, the one who brings together the rest of women in order to celebrate her promotion. As Joseph Marohl states, her function –especially in the first act– is to “serve as interviewer and interlocutor”, so that the rest of the characters have a way in which to tell their stories (316). We get an inside into her social life (first act), and later on her professional life (second act), and her private and familiar life (second and third acts, respectively). We witness how her role in these three areas, and her attitude and relationships with the women in them, contribute to the construction of her self-identity as a woman in the space and time she lives in. In the aforementioned restaurant scene,

because Marlene is the one person all of them have in common, and especially because she is the contemporary figure with whom the audience relates to more easily, she seems often placed outside the rest of the group, bringing them together, but still separated from them as a more modern woman. We, as the audience, become her in this conversation, shocked to hear the rest of the women describe their experiences, which have inevitably determined their growth and existence. She, like the audience does, feels frustration and sometimes even incredulity and anger as she takes part in their stories: for instance, when she listens to Nijo's feelings of sadness and her idealisation of the life she led as a, basically, a sexual slave: "Don't you get angry? I get angry" (*TG* 59), or when Griselda justifies her husband's behaviour and attitude towards her: "Marlene, you are always so critical of him" (*TG* 76).

The play draws on history and the past, using them to portray and discuss ongoing issues about women that are, unfortunately, visibly relevant nowadays. As the six women share their different experiences throughout their lives –what being a woman entails, motherhood, marriage, sexual violence, religion–, we soon realise that despite the conspicuous historical gap, locations, and cultural backgrounds they all come from, the similarities between one and the other as women are more than obvious. As Innes points out, their experiences "are compatible; and their descriptions of achievement are simultaneously accounts of rape, personal deprivation and psychological battering" (465). They all have succeeded, or at least achieved recognition and fame, either through "taking roles reserved for men" –like Joan or Gret– or, on the other hand, by embodying "archetypal feminine qualities", like Nijo or Griselda (Innes 465). Each of them has been punished, in one way or another, for deviating from the behaviour that was expected of them: they have been rejected and cast aside, abandoned, robbed of their children, even publicly executed, and worst of all, raised in and by a society that indoctrinated them to

believe that they were deserving of it. Even now, when confronted with the perspectives and the reality of the situation of contemporary women such as Marlene, they are still reluctant to admit the problematic with their own pasts, at least at the beginning.

Some scholars, like Marohl, have argued that this reunion “dramatizes the lack of unity among persons of the same sex, effected by the lack of ideological unity” since they have different views on these topics because they have experienced them in different ways (314). As a matter of fact, one of Caryl Churchill’s most credited innovative elements, widely praised and commented on, is the way in which she presents interweaving and overlapping dialogues among the six women. Some have defended these interruptions as a testament to the fact that they are disrespectful to and of each other, and all of them seek to be the centre of attention, while some others, like Elaine Aston, have pointed out that this technique has “fostered ideas about breaking up language in the interests of finding a ‘voice’ in which women’s concerns might be heard, or heard differently” (2003: 21). In agreement with Aston, I would advocate that the reason for this is that, in their aim to make themselves heard –now that they finally have the chance, after centuries of being unheard and silenced–, they cannot help tripping over themselves and interrupting one another in order to do so. We could argue that there is a sort of bonding among them towards the end, when they have shared their stories and have found common ground, realising the unfairness of their situations, and that of the rest of women. As they get progressively more drunk and comfortable with each other, they are able to recognise not only the injustices they have been victims of in their own pasts, but also in the rest of the attendants to the dinner. We see how they start questioning the role they have been assigned to play by the men in their lives and validating their own choices and rebellious spirits: Nijo recalls, with pride, how she hit the emperor, Griselda wonders if perhaps her husband was actually cruel, and Isabella refuses to feel sorry for



not living and behaving as she should have done. As Marohl further argues, the different characters are indeed able to perceive the injustice of the ordeals and “sexual tyranny” in the rest of the attendees to the dinner (319), but are in turn much more oblivious when it comes to recognising their own shortcomings, proving just how deeply rooted and ingrained those behaviours really are. In the end, there is a certain confrontation with their past, and an underlying complaint and criticism towards their previous experiences. Furthermore, they are able to celebrate their accomplishments, reclaiming their value as women in this meeting: “We’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (*TG* 67).

As we have seen, throughout the first act, Churchill provides a historical recollection and reflection on female identity and the role of women in society across time and space: in spite of their differences, their walks of life and stories seem sadly universal and common. Although through Marlene, the representative of a modern audience and of a contemporary woman, these experiences and the treatment the rest of the women have endured seem appalling and even outdated, we will see in the next two acts how, even though times may have changed and there is some hint of progress in the attitudes and consideration towards women, in reality, as the play goes on, we realise nothing has drastically changed after all. Churchill employs this juxtaposition of past and present to portray and discuss on-going issues about women still present very much today. In this vein, this is a topic that is equally present in *The Mai*, although this time rather than relying on women from different historical periods, we encounter women that belong to various generations within the same family.

#### **4.1.2 Intergenerational perspectives in *The Mai***

In Marina Carr’s *The Mai*, set in the late 1970s, we follow four generations of Irish women from the same family, as they all come together to visit The Mai, the play’s

central character, in the new house she has built in Owl Lake with the intention of luring back Robert, the husband that abandoned her and her children five years ago. As Robert returns and the couple tries to rekindle their marriage, The Mai's sisters –Connie and Beck–, her grandmother –Grandma Fraochlán –, and her aunts –Julie and Agnes– step into the scene, determined to share their opinions on and meddle in The Mai's relationship. From her future perspective, the last link in the family chain, Millie –The Mai's daughter– looks back into her family's history to make sense of her own life and what has led to her current circumstances. Through the different conversations between these four generations of women, we witness their experiences in a deeply Catholic country for over a century, as they struggle and come to terms with issues such as marriage, motherhood, their relationship with each other, and the importance of the past in shaping the present and the future.

In spite of the play's title, in *The Mai*, as Sihra points out, the notion of a single protagonist is complicated, bearing in mind that the four generations of women take on a lead role at some point or another (2005: 139). Thus, in reality, we encounter a coral cast of female characters that collectively construct a scenario in which many issues that affected women throughout 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland are explored and discussed. The title character, The Mai, is a forty-year-old woman who has been struggling for the past five years to raise her children on her own and, at the same time, devoting all her efforts to build Owl Lake house, which represents her ultimate hopes of bringing her family back together again after her husband left them. One of three sisters –Connie and Beck–, they were all raised by their grandmother, Grandma Fraochlán, when their own mother, Ellen, died in childbirth and their father abandoned them as well. As their personalities develop on stage, we realise that the three sisters are indeed very different: Connie, married and with children, has followed a much more traditional path in life –with which she is

seemingly content–, whilst Beck, a free spirit, has just recently been divorced after getting married rather spontaneously. Standing out, we have Grandma Fraochlán, the hundred-year-old matriarch of the family, who throughout the play remains quite a mysterious woman. She is not afraid to speak her mind –more often than not, in excess–, and at times, proves to be the comic relief of the play through her witty, satirical and sarcastic interventions. Throughout her long life, she has carried the stigma of being an illegitimate child, of losing her dearly beloved husband, and trying to raise her children all on her own. Ellen’s death, her favourite child, and with whom she had behaved in a very strict manner, was a hard blow on her, and subsequently made her much more open-minded and flexible with her own grandchildren in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Now, in her old age, she constantly shifts between past and present, reality and fantasy, madness and lucidity. Grandma turns out to be an enigma on her own, full of contradictions, which we only get to know as we keep peeling her layers as the story unfolds.

Alternatively, Julie and Agnes –Grandma’s daughters and The Mai’s aunts– arrive later on in the play as the epitome of pious country gossips. Much more conservative in their views on topics such as divorce, abortion, and marriage, they are extremely judgemental and vocal about their opinions, reinforcing sexist behaviours and attitudes regarding women and their roles in society. Furthermore, they show a great determination in avoiding their nieces –in particular The Mai and Beck– from being sources of scandalous behaviours. Finally, we have Millie –The Mai’s sixteen-year-old daughter– as the heir to all of the previous women’s issues and problems, she has struggled to help her mother raise her siblings while simultaneously taking care of The Mai in Robert’s absence. Her role in the play is extremely interesting: she appears on stage as a character –her sixteen-year-old self–, and narrator –as an adult– guiding the audience throughout

the play as she looks back at a particular moment in her family's history: her mother's death. As *The Mai* goes on, she keeps trying to reconcile past and present and find a way to break the cycle that the women in the family have been repeating for generations.

According to Sihra, the role of storytelling within theatre mirrors the "processes of women's play-writing" (2018: 100), and within Carr's works, this turns into a key characteristic of female identity and experience, and a way in which women can reflect on their own family histories and past events that have had an influence on them. These characters-turned narrators become "present in the world that their discourse creates", while at the same time, they exist outside of it as well, as we very clearly see in Millie (Richardson 682). In this type of "memory play", as Richardson calls it (682), the narrator is also, as Mária Kurdi adds, "a participant of, but also a witness to, events with community or family members in the centre, which are both recounted and enacted in the given play" (2010: 230). In *The Mai*, Millie offers a very unique and interesting perspective on the play. In a similar way to Marlene in *Top Girls*, she becomes the audience and vice versa, and watches the play unfold from a spectator's standpoint. At the same time, she also interacts with the public, becoming the narrator of the demise of her parents' marriage, the climax of the family issues and insecurities, as well as her mother's death, which we experience through her eyes. She remains on stage throughout the play as a continuous presence, both as a character –whose interventions are brief and few– and as the narrator, who reveals certain events that present us with the truth, rather than the version of events The Mai and Robert decide to admit as the truth. As she "reveals the family's lack of self-awareness in re-enacting the narratives of their past", she consciously tries to overcome it herself (Sihra 2018: 82).

Millie also provides a less biased view of her family's situation. She has a far less sympathetic perspective on her father, unlike her mother, who has devoted the last few

years to do everything in her power to get Robert back. Millie blames Robert for leaving and for the repercussions it had on her, her siblings, and The Mai. She does not trust his good intentions, and is not ready to accept him back, as she still believes he acted selfishly for abandoning them in order to pursue his own freedom and independence away from his family. She is also depicted, as the older child –and woman–, as the adult and responsible for the family: “*Millie looks after them, moves around cleaning up*” (TM 110). As she evinces along the play, she seems to be bound to look after her siblings and her mother and dealing with the mess that her parents leave around, literally as well as symbolically.<sup>7</sup> In her, we see how the aftermath of family trauma and dysfunctionality of previous generations –as we will explore in more depth later in the analysis– have an effect on the younger ones, and how she, and presumably her siblings, is the one carrying the burden of the failings in her parents’ marriage. We can see that clearly reflected in her own relationship and the birth of her illegitimate son who, unfortunately, “will carry on the legacy of failure and pain in the parent/child relationship” (Leeney 2007: 709). Through Millie’s juxtaposing narratives, the transgenerational aspect is reinforced: she is herself “both child and parent” and “tells stories that expand the world of the play but, arguably, stall the drama.... Her role outside the family drama, her self-conscious dramaturgical role, forces the audience to take a perspective on the inner spaces of psychology and emotion” (Leeney 2007: 709). To this, Kurdi adds that, in the end, this technique makes it possible for the different range of perspectives in the play to acquire an extra layer of meaning and complexity, through Millie’s role as the narrator (2010: 231). Not only that, but as Sihra points out, through the recuperation of “lost memories

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<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Stephenson and Langridge, Marina Carr commented: “Why did I choose Millie? Because the stakes are high for her. She’s the first one of them that’s beginning to put the pieces together. Not in any kind of complete way, but she’s beginning to ask questions that the other women in the family accepted or took for granted” (149).

of missing mothers”, Millie’s role “echoes a vital need to recover the matriarchal lineage of Irish theatre” both within the play, and in the dramatic genre as a whole (2018: 195).

In this family, all the women have different beliefs and approaches to the role they should occupy in society and the freedom and independence they should enjoy. Through the continuous dialogue between them, topics such as divorce and abortion, which at the time of the play’s staging were still illegal in Ireland, are openly on the table and tackled from various female perspectives. Moreover, Carr constructs female characters that are in no way perfect, but flawed and complex, who constantly challenge the archetypal images of women, mothers and wives. In this vein, we see how Grandma Fraochlán, in spite of her age, utterly opposes the idea that Robert should be received back into the house: “You didn’t see her strugglin’ with them youngsters, all yours – in case you’ve forgotten – scrimpin’ and scrapin’ to get this house built and when everything’s laid on, you appear on the doorstep with a bunch of flowers” (*TM* 122). As a matter of fact, she clearly states that The Mai does not need him in order to be happy: she actually accuses Robert of selfishness and believes her granddaughter would be much better off without him holding her back, personally and professionally: “You’d be employed anywhere. Ya built this house for him, didn’t ya?... Ya survived this long without him, why are ya bringin’ on this on yourself again?” (*TM* 114). Despite the fact that both The Mai and Beck are considered to have failed in the eyes of society because of the crumbling of their marriages, Grandma proclaims how proud she is of the women they have become: “I’m proud of Beck, proud of Connie and proud of The Mai. Three great women!... Mighty women the lot of ye!” (*TM* 120). At the other end of the spectrum, we find Julie and Agnes, who are clearly opposed to Grandma’s views on these issues, and instead they play a role in reinforcing stereotypes when it comes to women’s rights and roles.

Unfortunately, the bleak perspective regarding the improvement of women's situation we find in *Top Girls* is equally conspicuous in *The Mai*, but this time from an intrafamilial approach rather than a historical one. In spite of the efforts of the women in this family to break the cycle of female oppression to which all of them have been victims of one way or another, there has not been any evident success. We see how –from Grandma to Millie– women are still subjected to the same social and gender roles, judged and criticised for how they behave and act. However, we cannot help but root for Millie and her son, so that perhaps, through looking back and questioning her and her family's past, she can finally break free of the destructive dynamics she has been trapped into. In a similar way to Churchill's restaurant scene, in *The Mai* Marina Carr manages to bring to light, discuss, and criticise many issues that directly affect women in a way that was rather innovative: this time, it is from women's own perspectives.

#### **4.2 Gendered spaces: breaking the glass ceiling**

Firstly, one of the concepts that feminist criticism has paid special attention to is the idea of space. More specifically, how both men and women have been socially assigned to different spaces in which they have been confined and limited, and also what that entails for the development of gender roles and stereotypes. In feminist theory, according to Kim Savelson, the term "space" reflects in itself a sense of social division, both on a literal and symbolical basis. She argues that spaces are thus "defined and identified by sociocultural forces that finally enforce limitations, laws, and practices pertaining to 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'" (537). When it comes to women, they have been both excluded from male spaces, and included in –in fact, even confined to– female realms leading to the idea of woman's "proper place" as a gender construction in itself (Savelson 537). Traditionally then, we can differentiate a clear-cut division between public and private contexts, as well as the very strict set of rules that dictate who is

allowed into each of them. As Pam Lieske states, the public sphere –politics, work– has always been considered inherently masculine, whereas the private area –home and family life– have pertained to the female territory (168). Unsurprisingly then, because women are the ones that inhabit the private sphere, there is a distinct and direct link between them and those activities that belong to that same environment: taking care of the house, cooking, raising children, and supporting husbands. Contrarily, because men’s *locus* is in the workplace, they are involved in “economic life and participate in political, social, and economic decision-making”, a space in which women have always been, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, completely excluded from (Lieske 169).

It comes as no surprise, then, that this clear separation between public and private spaces has been very thoroughly explored in contemporary feminist theatre. Female characters have generally been relegated to supporting roles to those of men on stage, and have conventionally populated settings such as the home, while their male counterparts have had a much more varied array of spaces in which to appear and develop. Feminist playwrights, including Churchill and Carr, have tried to challenge this strict compartmentalisation through mainly two techniques: either by including women in traditionally male-dominated areas –precisely in order to highlight their limited presence and representation in them–, or by redefining the concept of private space and home as a female focus entirely. Thus, in these two plays in particular, the idea of space in relation to women is approached in multiple ways. On the one hand, by locating *The Mai* solely in the house in Owl Lake, Carr delves into the concept of the “home” and its gendered connotations, while at the same time, provides the characters with a female-owned safe space. On the other hand, in *Top Girls*, Churchill focuses more on opening up the public spaces that have been inaccessible for women: professional and social realms that we,



more often than not, would directly associate with men, are instead reshaped to become completely female-starred spaces.

#### 4.2.1 *The Mai*: a house of own's own

“that house of proud mad women!” (*TM* 170)

Culturally, as we have been discussing so far, one of the concepts that have been intrinsically linked to the female experience is the image of the home and the implications it carries for women. Considered simultaneously both a prison and a haven, in the great majority of societies, women's role and place have been almost –if not completely– relegated to it, with no business outside of it (Pelletier 101). If we focus on Ireland, and particularly on Irish drama, the way the home has been portrayed in relation to women has been as “a precarious space, denoting a lack of security and prone to invasion and penetration”, rather than as a place of safety (Sihra 2007b: 3). To this, María del Mar González Chacón adds that the representation of the Irish household in literature has traditionally been, and continues to be, a place “of pain for women” (62-63). In *The Mai*, however, Carr takes “home” and its social connotations and reconfigures them: the house in which the play is set is, indeed, occupied almost exclusively by women, but rather than being depicted as a prison that cages and binds them to immutable gender roles they seem unable to escape from, Carr reclaims it *for* them instead. As an alternative to a place of pain and entrapment, we find that the house at Owl Lake is more of a refuge that becomes the perfect arena in which the women from the family can come together and discuss issues that have affected them for generations, and perhaps, come to terms with them.

From very early on in the play, we can see the symbolic value that *The Mai*'s house has. For her, the home she has built herself at Owl Lake serves as a channel through which to search for the sense of fulfilment and emotional belonging that she lost after her

husband Robert left her and her children. Not only has it provided her with a much-needed distraction and something in which to focus all of her efforts and energies, but more than anything, she hopes that the house will serve as the beacon that will draw Robert back and ultimately save her marriage. As their daughter Millie observes: “And so the new house was built ... The Mai sat in front of this big window ... as if she were pulsing messages to some remote star which would ricochet and lance Robert wherever he was ... Come home – come home” (*TM* 111). For the past five years, The Mai’s identity has been deeply rooted in the construction of the house and what it means for her: security, love, family, a new place where she can start afresh and forget the shortcomings and pains of her marriage, the new beginning she is so desperately searching for. For her, it is meant to be the uniting force that saves and brings her family back together again: “The Mai set about looking for that magic thread that would stitch us together again and she found it at Owl Lake” (*TM* 111). However, as The Mai soon starts to realise, rather than the idealised physical space in which she and Robert can be reunited, it turns out to be quite the opposite and the house becomes, instead, the material realisation that her wishes and desires turn out to be unattainable. A previous symbol of optimism and family, it transforms into an empty façade devoid of meaning, a pretence once she understands that a house is not going to make Robert want to stay, and that in fact: “It’s the kind of house you build to keep out neuroses, stave off nightmares. But they come in anyway.... It’s the kind of house you build when you’ve nowhere left to go” (*TM* 158).

Although we might say that it has failed in its primary purpose, we can see, on the other hand, that there is a reappropriation of the house itself by the female characters we encounter in the play. As Simone de Beauvoir stated, the home has been considered to be “the material realisation of that ideal of happiness ... it embodies permanence and separation. Inside the walls, the family constitutes an isolated cell and affirm its identity

beyond the passage of generations; the past, preserved” (482). Perhaps, it does not fulfil the role it was initially intended to have, but it does become a way for the female characters to “rehouse” themselves, as Sihra explains (2007c: 207), since it is still The Mai’s house: “Ya built this house for him, didn’t ya?” / “And for myself and for the children” (*TM* 114). Not only has she managed to keep her family afloat in spite of becoming a single mother all of a sudden, and succeed professionally all on her own. However, the time and effort devoted to its construction prove to be, most of all, a testament to The Mai’s relentless resilience and accomplishments. According to de Beauvoir, a house is also “the expression of its living standards, its wealth, its tastes: it must be exhibited for others to see” (585). We can see that for The Mai, the house is also a symbol of status, an evidence of her abilities, and most of all, something to be proud of. She enjoys being able to provide her family –not only her children, but her grandmother, and sisters as well– with a place in which all of them can coexist free of the outside world’s expectations and judgement, if only for once. As Grandma Fraochlán proudly highlights on more than one occasion, it is “The Mai’s new house” in every single way, and not Robert’s (*TM* 122).

Be it as it may, we cannot deny the fact that as the play goes on, the house turns itself into a “recess of female exile” for the women in the family (Sihra 2018: 76). Whether as a symbol of The Mai’s self-expression or ambition, or as a place where four generations of women finally find the safe context to discuss issues that have conditioned them as women, the relevance of this environment is undeniable when it comes to the character’s development. Its complexity lies in the fact that it functions as a gilded cage –in which The Mai has locked herself in in order to keep on pretending and avoid accepting the realities of her marriage–, but also as a place of freedom. It still remains a female, private space, but the women in the play –quite literally– take ownership over it,

a place where “enactments of alterity are possible and female expressiveness can begin to take place” (Sihra 2007c: 215). By exposing the bias that exists between women and the home, as well as by examining “how discourses on domesticity participate in other cultural codes and practices”, Lieske argues that gender roles regarding the home can finally be questioned, challenged, and subverted (170). What is more, women’s role in settings that are placed outside the home can be encouraged, something Caryl Churchill takes to the next level.

#### **4.2.2 *Top Girls*: appropriating male spaces and behaviours**

“There’s not many top ladies around” (*TG* 118)

In this vein, we can also find some instances of home-reclaiming in *Top Girls*. Although in a lesser extent than in Carr’s work, there is nonetheless a very clear moment where a traditionally female space, the kitchen, features heavily as the backdrop for the play’s arguably most climactic moment: the heated argument between Joyce and Marlene. If we focus on the third act, which takes place in Joyce’s house a year before the events of the first and second, it is interesting the way Churchill, as Aston highlights, selected the kitchen, of all places, to hold the political debate that develops between both sisters (2003: 22). On the one hand, we can argue that Joyce’s kitchen is still regarded as a symbol of female entrapment. Joyce, left alone to care for her teenage daughter, with whom she has a very tense and complicated relationship, still lives in the house of her childhood, trying to come to terms with the memory of a temperamental and abusive father, a submissive and unfulfilled mother, and the sister that went away and left her to deal with it all. Through their conversation, and the constant and evident dichotomy that clearly exists between Joyce and Marlene’s lives and personalities throughout the play,

we see that Joyce is trapped in an existence that perhaps she would not have chosen for herself, but has had no other option than to stick with. While we, as we will discuss, find Marlene in settings that are not traditionally associated with women, we only encounter Joyce exclusively confined, literally and symbolically, within the walls of her house.

At the same time, and as a result of Churchill's dramatic abilities, we cannot avoid discussing the fact that, on this occasion, the traditional connotations of the kitchen as a uniquely female space are being completely redefined. Conventionally a place to which women have been relegated, which embodies the oppression and duties that come associated with being a mother and a housewife, the kitchen is reframed instead as the location where both sisters, who have rather opposing political views, are able to discuss a topic that is rarely seen among women. In a similar way to what Carr manages to achieve in *The Mai*, this approach to the idea of home –still as a female space, but not necessarily of confinement and entrapment– challenges audiences' expectations: rather than avoiding the use of a conventionally gendered setting in female-led plays, both authors reuse it for their own purposes. Instead, they reclaim and re-own it *for* the women and for the exposure and discussion of topics that, much like the concept of home itself, need to be openly reassessed and brought to light.

However, and in spite of the previous example, Churchill's female characters are generally seen directly breaking into male spaces, and in *Top Girls*, it conforms the basis on which the play is constructed. She explores professional environments, in this case, by using a job agency that is directed to and run by women, rather than men. Not only that, but the women are often seen engaging in traditionally male behaviours: drinking, smoking, talking about their careers, and entering spaces that were previously dominated solely by men. As we have already discussed in the previous point, in act one, an interestingly odd group of women is reunited to celebrate Marlene's promotion in the

agency Top Girls. Thus, from the very beginning of the play the tone and intentions are set. This situation is, in itself, rather revolutionary: even some of the attendees to the dinner are surprised that Marlene, a woman, has been chosen above the men at the company for this job. Moreover, this scenario seems to be quite an unusual and unlikely one in which to develop a scene made up solely of women: for a group of them to be reunited to celebrate a professional success, boasting about their career cornerstones and where food and alcohol run free as the women get progressively inebriated is something not at all common. Churchill takes a traditionally male environment and replaces the male characters we might expect for such a scene, with women entirely.

For instance, we find Nijo, enjoying some of the liberties and pleasures that she was previously denied because of her sex, having a drink rather than having to serve it for once: “It was always the men who used to get so drunk. I’d be one of the maidens, passing the sake” (*TG* 56). In fact, we see that alcohol is a very prominent element throughout the whole scene, and even through the whole play. As the evening goes on and Marlene keeps ordering drinks for everybody, we see them drunk but finally free of the social constraints that bound them in their own times. Equally, in act three, alcohol also features predominantly as the argument between Joyce and Marlene develops. Furthermore, alcohol –and opium, for that matter– is certainly present in *The Mai* as well. The Mai, Beck and Connie get progressively drunk as they discuss their marriages –or lack thereof–, their past mistakes regarding men, and start wondering if the lives they have led so far have been out of their own free choice, or deeply conditioned by the romantic notions about love and marriage they were raised with.

Perhaps even more characteristic of Churchill’s work, we see women strolling into spaces often exclusive to men. In Joan’s case, for instance, we see a woman entering the very highest strait of the Catholic Church, a role that, if anything, cannot be more male-

oriented. Moreover, even though she adopted the persona of a boy, she was able to gain access to the world of knowledge and education she craved for so passionately and risked everything in order to do so. On her part, Gret is also depicted as a warrior, not conforming with traditionally female attitudes, but fighting back against the armies that are attacking her home and family. Nevertheless, it is through the introduction of Top Girls job agency, which seeks and helps women find a job, that Churchill is able to create the perfect setting in which to expose and challenge the inner workings of a professional space. We see Marlene working at Top Girls, her successes and difficulties, as well as how other women there manage –or at least try– to carve themselves a spot in the workplace, and to combine their professional and a personal life.

The fact that we find this environment almost solely populated by women is the ultimate example of Churchill's depiction of these characters as workers and employees. Marlene, Win, and Nell all hold high-paying and responsibility-heavy jobs, above many of their male colleagues. For instance, Marlene's has earned her new promotion ahead of Howard. Nell and Win talk about him, and how Marlene is much more deserving of the job because of his sense of superiority and entitlement over the women in the office: "Howard thinks that because he's a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard and that's that" (*TG* 100). However, although they are glad Marlene has climbed up the corporate ladder, there is some degree of resentment because the position has not been offered to them instead. Through them, Churchill puts forwards the idea of success for women as a very exclusive and individualistic endeavour, and that competition and selfishness between them are, thus, needed in order to achieve it. On paper, the agency –whose business consists in looking for work for other women–, as well as Marlene's promotion, would seem the perfect example of women breaking the glass ceiling in order to help other women.

And yet, as we see with Jeanine's interview, Marlene and the other workers are extremely hard on the rest of the female interviewees who are looking for a job: assigning them to female-considered industries –like cosmetics and fashion–, or asking them not to mention the fact they are or intend to be married. It is assumed, even by Marlene, that because Jeanine plans on getting married, she will stop working the second she does: "I'm saving to get married" / "Does that mean you don't want a long-term job?" (TG 85), which highlights the problematic for women that need to choose between family or a professional career. At the same time, Jeanine is, then, advised by Marlene not to tell her prospective employers about that detail, because it may make them change their minds about hiring her: "So you won't tell them you're getting married?... There's no need to mention it when you go for an interview" (TG 85), and recommends to never mention the fact that she might consider becoming a mother: "I've sent him a girl before and she was happy, left to have a baby, you won't want to mention marriage there" (TG 86). We might see this as an interest on Marlene's part in helping Jeanine prepare better for her future interviews, but we cannot ignore the fact that, to an extent, she is perpetuating those same assumptions, prejudices, and limitations on the women she is interviewing. In spite of complaining about her situation, Louise –another interviewee– contributes to alienate women from the workplace, sustaining the patriarchal structure present in her company while similarly placing value on acting like her male colleagues do as the only choice to advance professionally: "I always had my doubts. I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work" (TG 106).

Throughout *Top Girls*, in spite of having women who have defied the limitations of their gender, it, according to Marohl, "dramatizes the economic stasis of women in business and, more important, the impossibility of genuine social reform of any kind within a system maintaining vertical class distinctions" (312). The top girls we encounter



do question the structural issues, but rather than fight them, they perpetuate them for other women. As Reinelt said, this scene charts

the difficulty of women bonding with each other in a competitive economic climate ... where any advance of one takes something away from another, and where mistrust and lack of understanding create rifts among women who have made different life choices in a rapidly changing environment. (2009: 31)

In short, we could say that the complexity of the representation of female success and the relationships between the women we find in *Top Girls* can be approached from several angles. On the one hand, by altering this already pre-established recurring setting and using women instead at its centre, Churchill manages not only to expose the lack of visibility of women in these spaces –both in society and drama–, but also seeks to challenge gender stereotypes women carry in professional environments. On the other hand, these “top girls” are presented as engaging in conventionally male attitudes, and we may wonder whether the reason they have been successful at all is precisely *because* they are behaving as men do. Not only that, but if we take into account that their triumphs have been achieved by standing “not on women’s shoulders but on their backs” (Gobert 14), then the question is whether they have really broken the glass ceiling in the first place, or if perhaps these women are embodying sexist attitudes themselves rather than trying to eliminate them at all. We could argue that Churchill, on the one hand, wanted to criticise the role women have in institutionalizing sexism and their contribution as not only witnesses, but also as perpetrators of the patriarchal structure that denies women the chance to stand out professionally. As well, the fact that many of these women feel the need to display behaviours often attributed to men –strictness, competition, toughness– in order to be respected by their colleagues, evinces that, just because we can see women

have a degree of access to these professional spaces, it does not mean they are accepted as a natural part of them just yet.

### **4.3 The circularity of intergenerational familiar dysfunctionality**

“Isn’t it strange the fascination families have in the  
devastation of their nearest and dearest? ...  
Maybe they want to pick up a few tips for when their own number is up,  
or maybe it makes them feel good” (Carr 158)

As we have discussed in the previous section, across most cultures, both men and women have traditionally had very strictly defined roles not only in society, but also within the family unit. On the one hand, men, breadwinners and providers, have always acted as heads of the family, in charge of decision-making. Women, on the other hand, have been responsible for the caring of both the family and the house: dutifully devoted to the raising of children, household chores, and their husbands. Because of this dynamic, a strong relationship between “woman” and “family” has become inevitable and inescapable –similarly to that of women and the home–, and as a consequence, female identity has been intrinsically linked, even limited, to that of mother and wife. It comes as no surprise that, from a feminist perspective, there has been a deeper questioning and study of the innerworkings of the family unit, especially regarding women and their place in it in recent years. At the same time, contemporary authors have challenged the conception of “family” as a pre-established and determined symbol in order to uncover the issues and dysfunctionality that lie underneath, among them violence, alcoholism, toxic relationships, and other problems that further complicate interfamilial relationships. This exploration of family dysfunctionality –both on a particular and on a more general level– functions as a channel through which feminist literature can question the traditional

position of both men and women in both family and society. On the one hand, according to Emily Koch, it reassesses the concept of “woman” in relation to both home and family (206). On the other hand, the study of the issues that cause dysfunctionality also pays special attention to the role of the father as the figure that represents, on a smaller scale, the ultimate embodiment of patriarchy in the family.

In *Top Girls* and *The Mai*, we see that family issues and dysfunctionality are prominent topics in the play, which profoundly affect most of the characters we meet. The familial relationships both Churchill and Carr present are complex, problematic, and even toxic in some cases. Parents are depicted as imperfect flawed figures, who fail to behave as they are expected to, at least according to societal standards. Children –in this case, we find mostly daughters– carry the burden of their parents’ mistakes and expectations, and either try not to disappoint them, by following the role and rules imposed on them, or rebel against those same rules in order to break free, detaching themselves from the family. Family dysfunctionality is, thus, presented in both works as a cyclical problem that keeps emerging throughout the generations. From absent fathers to unnatural mothers, we witness how the way in which both these two playwrights manage to build up complex interfamilial relationships provides the perfect framework through which to expose and discuss other issues that not only affect family dynamics, but question gender roles as well.

The institution of family, whether because of religious influence or a deep sense of community, has been particularly ingrained in Irish culture, hence why the exploration of family dysfunctionality is a major concern in the works of a significant number of Irish authors, past and present<sup>8</sup>. As it happens with most matters regarding Ireland, some

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<sup>8</sup> Within this field, it is worth mentioning the considerable contribution of Marisol Morales’ *Family and Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Narrative and Film* (2016) to the study and exploration of dysfunctionality present in Irish literature.

scholars have highlighted the relationship that exists between the absence of paternal and maternal figures in texts to the country's colonial past. For instance, Kübra Kangüleç has commented on the fact that:

while dysfunctional Irish families composed of either emotionally or physically absent parents can allegorically be linked to the country's identity crisis as a postcolonial land, the persistence of the colonial stereotypes –especially of Mother Ireland– and Irish children's search for parentage to achieve their own identities as reflected in the works of contemporary Irish literature prove the harsh effects of colonialism on the Irish collective consciousness. (2)

Moreover, she argues that the portrayal of negative parental figures is a response to the “Irish ancestors' failure in their paternal roles” against the continuous oppression of Britain for centuries, a communal and collective feeling that is now being explored through the establishment of parallels with the family unit (155).

#### **4.3.1 Absent fathers**

Due to the patriarchal structures that pervade society, fathers have conventionally been responsible for the control of the children, especially daughters, until the time comes to pass them onto other men, namely their own husbands. Because both *Top Girls* and *The Mai* are works that are dominated by female characters, we quickly recognise that there is a recurrent theme in them when it comes to the depiction of fatherhood, and more importantly, the figure of absent fathers, both literally and symbolically. Not only do we find several instances where there is a complete lack of a father figure, but we can also witness the profound influence and power fathers exert over the different female characters, either treating them as a means in order to advance, gain favour, or money, or simply by limiting their choices. Even when they are present, fathers prove to be negative

and oppressive forces, who further upset the balance within the family and perpetuate societal and patriarchal rules on their daughters.

If we begin by analysing the father-daughter dynamics we encounter in *Top Girls*, we can quickly observe how they are all heavily determined by the expectations fathers placed on their daughters, a motif that is evident in most of the major characters, especially those in act one. For instance, through the dinner scene, as we get to know the attendees and their pasts in more depth, we find how they are all, to different extents, painfully influenced by the negative presence of their fathers, particularly Nijo and Isabella. Both women received an extremely strict education, and were raised to fulfil a very specific role, one both of them failed to meet in the end. Even though we can clearly see how there is a strong desire to make their fathers proud by conforming to what is expected of them, both managed to rebel against those same expectations. Although they achieve a sense of freedom, we can also perceive that the failure to accommodate this role alienates them from their fathers and their families, something that has a profound effect on their lives. On the one hand, Nijo recalls how she, at barely fourteen, was offered to the Emperor to become his concubine, after having been groomed since birth exactly for that sole purpose. Encouraged and pressured by her father to become the Emperor's favourite, a position that would have provided her family with a safe and influential status at court, she lived under this extremely heavy burden and responsibility, placed on her for having been born a woman. In the end, Nijo spent the rest of her days ridden with guilt after failing at sustaining that position indefinitely. Not only that, but we also see how she sadly remembers the fact that her illegitimate daughter, whom she was not allowed to keep, was bound to follow in her mother's footsteps: "She was being brought up carefully so she could be sent to the palace like I was" (*TG* 72). On the other hand, Isabella refused to follow the path that was already established and expected for a woman

of her situation. In spite of the empowerment that came with building and living her life according to her own rules, because of the deeply rooted and rigid rules she was raised under, a certain degree of guilt is certainly present in her interventions with the rest of the women. Not only do both women feel like they have failed to meet expectations placed upon them by the men whose word and opinion they considered to be almost sacred, but as they discuss their different circumstances, we see that a sense of bitterness and indignation aims towards their fathers for enforcing those same rules and expectations on them. Unconsciously, they have grown to blame and resent them not only for making them abide to those rules, but also for being cast aside for not adhering to them.

However, negative father figures can be seen not only regarding the women from past centuries, but are still very much present in the lives of the contemporary women we find in the play. In the third act, we have a much more detailed and in-depth insight into Marlene as a character, her past, and her childhood, including the relationship she has with her family and how that has shaped her life, for better or worse. Not only does she have a very distant and latently tense relationship with her sister Joyce and her niece Angie, but we also see through their conversation, full of reproaches and blame, that at the core of the broken relationship between them –and Marlene’s disconnection from her family in general– is her father. A working-class man, who struggled to provide for his family, had on-going issues with alcohol, and was seemingly abusive and violent towards their mother, he heavily impacted Marlene and Joyce’s childhood, and their subsequent relationship with other men.

On the one hand, Marlene completely despises him, and everything he represents: abuse, trauma, lack of freedom, entrapment, and we see he is the main reason she decided to drastically cut ties with her past. She wanted to escape from him, and the life he embodied, so as to not end up living like her submissive, unfulfilled and unhappy mother:

“Of course I couldn’t get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who’d come home pissed?” (*TG* 133). On the other hand, we see how Joyce is much more understanding towards him, perhaps because she –unlike Marlene– did not have the opportunity to leave and had no other choice but to make do with the situation. She acknowledges that the circumstances their father lives through are partly to blame for his issues: his frustration regarding his job, lack of money and options, and the difficulties to support a family (“They were treated like rubbish” *TG* 139), which he, as the breadwinner, was always expected to do. In a way, the author –through Joyce’s more sympathetic and layered view on the issue– blames not only institutionalised sexism, but also capitalism and the social structures for their dysfunctional childhood and the difficulties endured by the lower classes. Thus, we see how, at least in Joyce’s view, it is precisely the patriarchal rules the ones responsible for both her father’s behaviour and her mother’s unfulfillment, as well as the problematic dynamics present in the family in the first place.

Continuing with Churchill’s work, not only do we encounter constant examples of negligent father figures, but the literal absence of fathers is also explored, though to a lesser extent. The more evident example is found in Frank, Joyce’s husband. Even though he is barely mentioned throughout the play, his absence has a deep effect on both Joyce and Angie. Apparently discontent and tired with his life, he decided to leave, cutting all contact with his wife and the child he had raised as his daughter for years without looking back: “He was never that fond of her to be honest” (*TG* 136). This situation puts a strain on Joyce’s ability to support Angie both financially and emotionally, and turns her into a single mother, which in turn complicates her relationship with her daughter even further. We quickly perceive in Joyce’s attitudes towards Angie that she is someone she has mixed feelings about. On the one hand, she has raised her as her own daughter and, as such, she

cares about her well-being. On the other, she behaves quite dismissively towards Angie and blames her for her misfortunes: her inability to have more children, her husband leaving, which leads to a deep sense of frustration and resentment. Furthermore, we see just how deeply it affects Angie as well, who seems quite unaware of the adult world around her, and who –after the person she thought was her father left, and the relationship with Joyce becomes increasingly more tense– sees her sense of belonging to her family damaged, and in turn seeks refuge in Marlene, the aunt she adores and idealises. Through Marlene, Joyce and Angie, Churchill explores both the damaging presence and expectations of fathers, and the absence in the life of their daughters. In the process, she re-examines issues that they bring up: the social circumstances that surround and influence dysfunctional behaviours and dynamics, and the loss of identity and sense of belonging daughters go through for deviating from the patriarchal norms that are set on them by their fathers.

As it has been pointed out before, dysfunctional parent-child dynamics are very present in Irish literature in general. If we shift our focus to *The Mai*, we quickly observe that the topic of the absent father is an extremely recurrent one. Carr recurs on this idea to depict the effect it has on subsequent generations, and how dysfunctionality, in one form or another, shapes families for years. In this play, as in *Top Girls*, we have a series of women who have been somehow affected by the presence or the absence of men in their lives, as well as by a strong desire to impress them. According to Sihra, the absence of these paternal figures creates “further voids of emptiness” in the female character’s lives, which incidentally determines father-daughter dynamic, and make the women affected try to compensate for that void in different ways (2018: 213). Moreover, it causes a deep sense of alienation and loss of identity and belonging within the family, sometimes passing on that disconnection onto their own children.



To begin with, what triggers a lot of the family's issues that unfold later on, is the ignorance of Grandma Fraochlán's father, and the circumstances of her birth. Illegitimate children, as de Beauvoir pointed out, are nothing short of a handicap –both in social and economic terms– for an unmarried woman (409). This is certainly true when we are discussing a very Catholic and socially strict environment as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural Ireland. As we discover early on, Grandma's mother got pregnant by a traveller who disappeared shortly after: "She was the result of a brief tryst between an ageing island spinster and a Spanish or Moroccan sailor –no one is quite sure– who was never heard of or seen since the night of her conception" (*TM* 115). Not only does Grandma ignore the identity of her father, but also her heritage and where she comes from: "Whoever he was, he left Grandma Fraochlán his dark skin and a yearning for all that was exotic and unattainable" (*TM* 116). This leads her to grow up feeling a deep sense of disconnection from her surroundings, not only because of the lack of information about her own origins, but also due to her and her mother's ostracised position within their community. Encouraged by her mother, who told her that he was a Sultan and other fantasies, Grandma grew up with idealised notions of love, which would be reflected later on in her own marriage in terms of dependence, as well as in how she deals with her own daughter falling into the same fate.

Another quite dysfunctional relationship, perhaps the most obvious and important in the play, is that of Millie and Robert. The Mai, who lacked a paternal figure in her growth, is deluded in thinking Robert's return would be enough not only to save her marriage, but also her family. However, his relationship with his children is one of disinterest: "They're haunted! ... Your children are haunted! And you don't give a fuckin' damn!" (*TM* 156). As opposed to her mother, Millie, as the oldest child and witness to the aftermath of her father leaving, has a much more impartial and unbiased perspective

on him and his return, whom she blames for the issues that her family is struggling with. In fact, we see how, when he comes back, Robert does not even recognise his children anymore: he never cared, and continuously not to care, about them. They were never close, and even in adulthood, after The Mai dies, the relationship between him and Millie becomes more distant and tense: “It is beyond me now to imagine how we would’ve spent that day ... because when we meet now, which isn’t often and always by chance, we shout and roar till we’re exhausted or in tears or both, and then crawl away to lick our wounds already gathering venom for our next bout” (*TM* 128). Looking back on the days in Owl Lake, Millie realises that the presence of her father was never edifying for her, her mother, or her siblings, and that blood ties are not enough for a relationship to work: “A father has to be honourable if he can be honoured” (*TM* 128). In turn, and in spite of Grandma’s best efforts to avoid it, Millie has a child with a married man, left to care for him on her own, and ultimately carries the same stigma Grandma and her mother had to bear a hundred years before, going full circle.

Not only do we see women as the ones affected by absent fathers, but also men do as well. Grandma believes that because Robert’s father was not a constant presence in his life, he is bound to repeat the same behaviour with his own wife and children, something Grandma deeply resents him for and wants to avoid repeating at all cost. As she points out, “we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same”, which is one of the central key themes of the play: no matter what is done in order to prevent them, family patterns are bound to be repeated again and again (*TM* 123). This idea is also present in Churchill’s work: how the mistakes and expectations that are placed on different generations do not change at all in the end, no matter how much time has passed.

### 4.3.2 Unnatural mothers: the institutionalisation of motherhood

Nonetheless, one of the main themes that both plays share is their deep exploration of motherhood. Not only do we find examples of negative and dysfunctional paternal figures, but the relationships between mothers and children –especially daughters– are generally approached from a negative, though realistic, light. Equally dysfunctional and toxic, mothers in both Churchill and Carr’s works are far from the idealised image of self-sacrificing and devoted individuals. Simone de Beauvoir stated that, for the mother, “the daughter is both her double and another, the mother cherishes her and at the same time is hostile to her; she imposes her own destiny on her child: it is a way to proudly claim her own femininity and also to take revenge on it” (306). This is a dynamic that we can see again and again in most of mother-daughter relationships we find. Moreover, she argued that “the mother does not greet a daughter as a member of the chosen caste: she seeks a double in her. She projects on to her all the ambiguity of her relationship with her self; and when the alterity of this alter ego affirms itself, she feels betrayed” (575). The women in both plays project themselves, both their failures and successes, onto their daughters, and when they repeat the same mistakes, they are punished for it by their mothers.

In particular, one of the themes that are more prominent in both plays is the analysis of motherhood as a socially constructed institution, as well as the stereotypical and traditional symbol for “mother” that it has put forward. As de Beauvoir famously stated: “Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her” (21). Woman and motherhood have always been two completely intertwined concepts, and as many authors –including de Beauvoir– have stated throughout the history of feminist criticism, women have always been mostly defined in terms of their ability to procreate as their ultimate, and sometimes sole, purpose in life. Far from its more primal and biological function,

motherhood has been institutionalised in order to perpetuate society's –and patriarchy's– control and grip over women's lives, including their reproductive rights. According to Adrienne Rich, there is a long-standing established ideology behind motherhood that ensures that this social structure is maintained (33). In fact, the use of motherhood and women's reproduction has been employed, for instance, by totalitarian systems throughout history as a tool to control women, their bodies, their behaviours, as well as to disseminate an idea of what “family” should look like. As a result, Rich continues, motherhood has been domesticated and, by enslaving and appropriating women, their own source of power has been turned against them (68). Thus, family –like motherhood– becomes equally institutionalised and controlled by the patriarchal system. To this, González Chacón adds that, generally, the family as an institution, “does not constitute a refuge for women but a constraint that implies the obligation to become a mother even though this would involve the sacrifice of having to renounce to other expectations” (63). The idea that women's primary function in life is reproduction, and also that, once they become mothers, they must adhere to that role for life as the sole focus of their identity is one of the structural bases of patriarchy. Moreover, as Irigaray argued, it becomes the mother's responsibility –through the caring and education of the children– to maintain the social order, although without any effective power of intervention or ability to alter this order in any way (185).

In the last few decades, feminist critics and scholars who have explored the image of mother and studied motherhood from a social perspective have challenged the idea that because motherhood is intrinsically natural, “maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless” (Rich 22-23). Even before the birth of the child, the woman's identity is already completely reduced to that of mother, motherhood instantly considered to be a “natural vocation” (de Beauvoir 537). The image of mother – and motherhood itself–

becomes, thus, a symbol, and a very simplified and unidimensional one at that. Thus, contemporary literature, because of the increasing social and cultural changes in women's rights, seeks to examine and reshape this traditional idealised image of the mother, criticised "under the influence of the developing social, cultural and economic conditions of younger generations" (Kangüleç 137). Interestingly, in both plays sexuality is portrayed as a source of empowerment, rather than oppression. At the same time, we see how the image of the sexually uninhibited and liberated women heavily conflicts with that of the devoted and self-sacrificing mother.

Motherhood, in one way or another, is a topic very much present in *Top Girls*. From unwilling motherhood, to miscarriage or abortion, both the relationship between mothers and children, and between mothers and society are widely represented and discussed. Making use of the different temporal and cultural perspectives we find in the play, Churchill manages to add layer upon layer to study the figure of the mother, and the social expectations that bind together women and motherhood. If we focus on the female characters in act one, we see how all of them have a different experience and take on motherhood. Nijo, who has had several illegitimate children with her lover, is not allowed to keep them and is forced to give them up. Even though we do not find the figure of the "natural mother" in Nijo, in fact, she agrees that motherhood is not something she particularly pursued, she nevertheless remembers with sadness and regret how she has to let her first child go: "It was only a girl, but I was sorry to lose it", something she did again with the rest of her children, whom she never got to see again (*TG* 70). Unlike Griselda, who did get her children back after having thought them dead for years, Nijo was not as lucky: "Nobody gave me back my children" (*TG* 79). Although she never wished to become a mother, she has an inevitable bond with the children she lost and never had the chance to brought up herself. Continuing with the idea of the reluctant

mother, we might include Joan in it as well: accustomed to living life as a man, she never even knew she was pregnant until she publicly gave birth, which costed her and her child's life. On her part, Griselda, who was very much in love and subdued by her husband, gave her children up –to be killed, as she thought at the time– at his orders. Isabella, the only one who remained childless out of the dinner attendees, resents the very idea of marriage and motherhood because it conflicts with her desire of independence and travelling. All of these women, because of the time periods in which they existed, were expected to enter this institution, but because they challenged its very foundations – whether by having children outside marriage like Joan and Nijo, or refusing to become a mother altogether like Isabella– they are punished for it.

However, we can consider the relationship that exists between Joyce and Angie to be perhaps the most interesting one to approach from the perspective of unwilling motherhood. From the moment we meet Angie, as it has been previously discussed, we see that she has a complicated relationship with Joyce: although she is understandably a moody teenager, she also seems to be quite violent and resentful towards her mother (“Wish she was dead” *TG* 87), which stands out even more because it heavily contrasts with Kit's evident naivete and innocence. Angie resents Joyce for the situation they are both in: she considers her mother to have no ambition, and thus adores Marlene instead: she sees her aunt as a successful and glamorous woman and puts her on a pedestal, a position that inevitably leaves Joyce wanting in comparison. In many ways, we see that this resentment is mutual –as we have discussed– and that both Joyce and Angie blame each other for their lack of satisfaction with life. Joyce, as we discover towards the end, is not actually Angie's mother and feels like she has given up far too much so as to care for her sister's child. She has taken on the role of mother, a role that was not hers in the first place, and she refuses to take to an extent. She blames Angie for the sacrifices she

has made for her: her lack of more children, a job she hates, and the absence of her husband Frank. Moreover, Joyce's contrasting behaviour towards Angie is constant throughout their interactions, going from a nice and maternal attitude to being overtly nasty towards her daughter: "Want a choccy biccy, Angie? Fucking rotten little cunt" (*TG* 91). Later on, we know that Angie in fact suspects –perhaps even knows for sure– that Marlene is her biological mother, and wishes she had been raised by her rather than Joyce all along, failing to realise that the Marlene she knows and admires would not have probably been the same, had she decided to care for her instead of focusing on her career: "Turned out all right for you by the look of you. You'd be getting a few less thousand a year ... You'd be stuck here" (*TG* 133), and it is thanks to Joyce that she is able to do so. In Joyce, we find a woman that decides to adopt her sister's daughter, but that is somehow unsatisfied and frustrated with her role as Angie's mother. Whether her reasons for it were born out of kindness or a sense of responsibility and obligation, the expectation that Joyce's –a woman from a modest background and no professional aspirations– main aim is to become a mother almost unwillingly resonates with the circumstances of the women from the dinner scene. Trapped within the institution and its expectations, the resentment she feels towards Angie not only makes her bitter, but has clipped her wings about the possibility of being something more than a mother. Not only that, but this toxic relationship that develops between mother and daughter will inevitably influence and condition Angie for the rest of her life, perhaps, following in Joyce's footsteps.

This idea also features at the core of *The Mai*. If we focus on how motherhood is tackled in the play, we see that the author questions the idea of the natural mother in a similar way.<sup>9</sup> In this case, within the Irish context, she "challenges the primary

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<sup>9</sup> This is one of the topics that Carr is more interested in. As she discussed in an interview: "I don't think the world should assume that we are all-natural mothers. And it does. I don't think it's such a big thing anymore, but the idea that you sacrifice everything for your children - it's a load of rubbish. It leads to very

identification of women with the role of mother as defined by the Irish Constitution” (Sihra 2018: 96). Just as Churchill does, she presents women who have conflicting feelings when it comes to motherhood. We see how, rather than being presented as an instinct, motherhood as a whole is the source of the characters’ feelings of unfulfillment and entrapment. In their struggle to completely identify with the role of both wife and mother, as Sihra argues, “Carr exposes some of the unspoken realities of women’s lived experiences ... [and] points out the unattainable expectations of women in relation to children and motherhood, which go back to Catholic nationalist ideals of procreation that have been so ingrained in the country for centuries” (2018: 97). Rather than assuming their role as it is expected of them, “her female characters reject their role as mothers and see their homes as prisons, find familial bonds asphyxiating and die from longing” (González Chacón 64). For instance, both *Grandma* and *The Mai* are detached from their role as mothers, merely *assuming* it as something inevitable and part of the female experience, rather than because they had a deep desire to become mothers, something that, just as in Joyce and Angie’s case, strongly influences their daughters in turn. However, through Carr’s complex construction of mother-daughter relationships, we see how, rather than blaming the dysfunctionality that ensues an act of selfishness on the mother’s part, it is in fact the structural and social pressure of women to become mothers in the first place the responsible for it.

Through her female characters, Marina Carr deconstructs the symbol and myth of the “mother” as a nurturing, sacrificed, and devoted figure, who loses all identity, agency,

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destructive living and thinking, and it has a much worse effect on children than if you go out and live your own life. You're meant to adore your children at all times, and you're not meant to have a bad thought about them. That's fascism, you know, and it's elevating the child at the expense of the mother. It's like your life is not valid except in fulfilling this child's needs. What about all your needs, your desires, your wants, your problems? The relationship between parent and child is so difficult and so complex. There's every emotion there. We mostly only acknowledge the good ones. If we were allowed to talk about the other ones, maybe it would alleviate them in some way” (Stephenson and Langridge 150-51).



and sense of self the moment she becomes one, in particular as perceived in the Irish society: “A self-sacrificing and religious portrayal for the Irish mother who suppresses her feminine aspect symbolised by her womb and keeps her silence against patriarchy” (Kangüleç 99). If we focus on *The Mai*, we soon realise, according to González Chacón, that she “has forfeited her life for the sake of her children”, while in the meantime Robert has been able to enjoy the freedom she would have liked in order to explore herself (63). The Mai, having committed her life to her husband (leaving her studies and passions, being cheated, having children she did not want completely, and then building the house to get him back) feels unfulfilled when all her efforts have been for nothing. Because of her own disillusionment, hopelessness, and disappointment towards the end of her marriage, The Mai’s only option seems to be committing suicide in order to escape from it. As she recriminates Robert: “When you met me, I was cellist on the college orchestra. I had a B.A. under my belt, and I was halfway through my Masters! You lower me, all the time you lower me” (*TM* 155). Rather than being natural mothers, they struggle with that and are inevitably influenced and limited by their own family history. Unwilling motherhood is depicted as a sort of prison that cages women and prevents them to fully reach their potential. In spite of motherhood being a predominant topic in the play, the way it is explored is interesting: rather than being the sole focus in the women’s lives, it is accessory, rather than pivotal. We meet Millie, but we do not know the names, the gender, anything about the rest of The Mai’s children, we do not see her interact with them. As Kangüleç adds, this “discontinuity between the generations in Ireland” is reflected in the “silences and gaps that dominate the mother-child communication” (142).

De Beauvoir further argues that motherhood is seen as something worthy of respect exclusively when the mother is married and the child is legitimate, otherwise, “the unwed mother remains an object of scandal, and a child is a severe handicap for her”

(456). As a bastard, she and her mother were judged and excluded from society, constantly carrying the stigma of her illegitimacy. The trauma from the alienation is so deeply rooted in her sense of self-identity that when her own daughter, Ellen, got pregnant in similar circumstances, Grandma forced her to marry the father of her child in order to stop both mother and daughter from carrying the same burden once again: “I was the only bastard on Fraochlán in living memory and the stigma must’ve been terrible for her.... And that’s why when Ellen got pregnant, I would not have the scandal” (*TM* 169). The shame she felt for being considered a bastard was so traumatic that she would rather ruin any possibility for her daughter to choose than to carry it onto another generation, even when it is constantly repeated how much potential Ellen has. She left her medicine studies and her dreams of being a doctor in order to become a mother and a wife: “And it only filled Ellen with more longing and made her feel that what she had lost was all the greater” (*TM* 146). Although The Mai and her sisters remember Ellen fondly and as a loving mother, her relationship with her husband is depicted as erratic at best, with him going away only to come back every so often to get her pregnant, dying in childbirth in the end: “She was worn out from all them miscarriages and pregnancies” (*TM* 139). We see that Millie, The Mai’s daughter, carries on the insecurities she has inherited from her family, and just as Grandma’s mother did, she has a son from a married man. We witness how she is a victim of her family’s issues and mistakes, and thus continues the cycle.

As we have discussed before, the negative influence of paternal figures is highly influential, especially affecting the way the women in the family foster romantic attachments. Because of her lack of a father as a child, and the subsequent trauma of growing up as a bastard, Grandma attached herself to her husband –the nine-fingered fisherman– in an utterly unhealthy way. Choosing him and their relationship over that of her own children, when he disappeared at sea, Grandma was left without the person she

loved most in the world: “I know he was a useless father, Julie, I know, and I was a useless mother.... I would gladly have hurled all seven of ye down the slopes of hell for one night more with the nine-fingered fisherman and may I rot eternally for such unmotherly feelin” (*TM* 182). This, in turn, had a profound effect on her children –as we see in Julie and Agnes– and the resentment they felt towards their mother for never considering them her priority: “She had little or no time for her children except to tear strips off us when we got in her way. All her energy went into my father and he thought she was an angel.... She was so unhappy Mai, and she made our lives hell” (*TM* 145). Julie and Agnes resent their mother for having loved her husband more than them. The play explores the generational gap and differences between these four generations of women, and the expectations regarding marriage and motherhood. Equally, as a result of growing up without the constant presence of a father figure and the loss of her mother, The Mai develops an unhealthy attachment to Robert, considering their relationship the foundation of the whole family dynamics. That is why she is so desperate to hold on to him no matter what. Moreover, we see that Julie blames her mother for caring more about their father than about themselves. We see as well how the absence of paternal figures is repeated, and how the possibility of male abandonment affects the subsequent generations (Julie putting up with marriage at all cost, Ellen marrying not to be alone, Mai forgiving Robert...): “Well maybe you should talk about him less, seeing as he left ya penniless with seven offspring” (*TM* 143). The dichotomy between being a mother and being a wife is thoroughly explored in the play, and it seems as though these women struggle to be both, unsuccessfully: “Maybe parents as is lovers is not parents at all, not enough love left” (*TM* 144). As some scholars have argued, this common “blind pursuit for an idealised mother echoes the impossible pursuit of the Irish nationalists and results with psychosis due to his lack of a proper father figure” (Kangüleç 158).

Similarly to the depiction of motherhood presented in *The Mai* –as not something that is no longer just biological and natural for women, but a social convention–, in *Top Girls* we see how Marlene, just as the women in Carr’s play, is not, in the least, prone to become, behave, and act as a mother. Even Joyce, who takes responsibilities for her sister’s daughter, resents and blames Angie for her lack of opportunities in life, presenting a view of motherhood very different from what is usually expected. Although on a smaller scale, in *Top Girls* we also see the intergenerational problematic of daughters becoming heirs of those feelings of resentment and bitterness. Angie, in the end, is the one who will have to deal with both Joyce and Marlene’s decisions and behaviours towards her, similarly to Millie, who will carry her family’s issues, mistakes, and insecurities. Through them, we see the cyclic nature of family dysfunctionality, how it does not only upset the balance within the family, but deeply affects those involved through generations. Even though we see how both Angie and Millie are caught up in this circle, we cannot help but root for them to be the ones who are able to finally escape from it.

#### **4.4 The influence of religious institutions**

Finally, it is worth exploring the conspicuous criticism towards religious institutions and their role in perpetuating female oppression, which both authors deal with in these two plays. The relationship between religion and patriarchy has usually been a mutually beneficial one. Throughout history, most religions have relied on exclusively male-dominated structures of power, at least when it comes to their higher straits. Moreover, religious institutions have been in charge of establishing, enforcing, and policing social and moral behaviours. As Jasper proposes, most religions have been, and to this day, still continue to be, organised and rooted in sexist structures. Not only are they built on the basis of faith directed towards a singular male entity –as in the three

main contemporary western religions– or on a predominantly male pantheon. As she points out, these faith systems are still based on a “single transcendent and masculine divine being as creator and sustainer of human life”, also reinforced on a more human level through the “terrestrial existence and on the corresponding institutional structure” (125). Jasper also argues that the symbolic framework we find, especially in the West, proposes the idea of masculinity as “the ideal measure of all human aspirations”, which promotes and legitimizes male privilege as well as the hierarchy that places women as inferior beings subjected to expectations, rules and standards that men do not need to adhere to (130). Naturally then, the criticism towards these practices –in this case, in relation to women– is one of the topics that concerns many feminist scholars and authors.

In particular, as both Carr and Churchill explore, Catholicism has conventionally restricted women’s roles within society, imposing strict gender norms and rules that have bound women, policing their roles as wives and mothers, their reproductive rights, and shaming them if they deviate from it. Historically, women have been participant in the development of the religious experience, but as Jasper points out, “male-identified structures and the male point of view has marginalised or excluded women from power”, so that their involvement has always been limited by those in charge, relegated to a rather symbolical and minimal role (131). In fact, according to Jeanna DelRosso, this situation has been of especial interest for feminist criticism because of its active role in perpetuating “gender repressions” and also indoctrinating “young girls into their limiting roles as Catholic women, marginalizing them from participation in the church hierarchy of administration and clergy” (191). Their institutional representation and the symbolic image the Church has created and promoted of them, Jasper continues, generally poses a danger to women, both socially, psychologically, but also, physically (125).

When it comes to literature, from banning works considered to be immoral or potentially dangerous, to completely silencing certain sectors and individuals, religious institutions have had a significant role in censoring authors, works, and themes deemed to be unsuitable or even sinful for going against their dogmas, so that the values they defend continue to be upheld. It goes without saying that one of the goals of feminist literature has been, as Thomsen points out, to denounce the “male-oriented religious and secular system” that has treated women as second-class humans, in fact as “scapegoats for social shortcomings and defects caused by men” (166). Similarly, it seeks to challenge the previously unquestioned patriarchal authority organised religion has enforced on women, and at the same time reclaim the visibility that has been denied for them. Portrayed as either evil temptresses or saintly virgins, the representation of women instilled by the Church has been rather symbolical and extremist, a simplification that has been adopted in fiction, and because of the original connection between theatre and religious celebrations, in drama particularly. To challenge this portrayal has been the aim of many feminist playwrights, just as we can observe in the authors examined in this dissertation.

It is no wonder, then, that religion –and especially, the criticism towards the Catholic Church as an institution– is one of the topics that are most heavily present in a lot of feminist contemporary drama. Both Churchill and Carr have used religion to expose and question the role women have occupied and their relation to religious power. In both *Top Girls* and *The Mai*, in one way or another, this criticism is interwoven with other issues: how organised religion (in this case we see Catholicism and Buddhism in particular) is conspicuous with the patriarchal system in which women have been left out of and oppressed by, employing morality to keep women “in line” as well as to punish them for any deviation. From dictating fixed images of woman, to supervising

motherhood and family relationships, its influence on women's lives is undeniable. Playwrights concern themselves with constructing, as Sally Ebest points out:

female protagonists coming of age despite, and often in defiance of, traditional expectations regarding a woman's "role." They decry sexism, alcoholism, violence, and abuse. They promote independence yet reiterate the importance of motherhood. They emphasize the strength that comes from family, friends, and community. They show the rise and warn us of the fall of feminism. (170)

#### **4.4.1 *Top Girls*: nuns and Popes**

In *Top Girls*, we find that, in particular, Isabella, Nijo, and Joan have all grown up in quite religious backgrounds, and have been deeply, though differently affected, by it. Firstly, Isabella, daughter of a clergyman, spent most of her childhood under the yoke of a very strict set of rules she, as a woman enclosed in a religious household, was bound to follow. Despite choosing her own path and straying away from the life she should have had for a woman of her position, we see that she felt terrified of disappointing her father. The shame and guilt of not fulfilling that role, shows just how ingrained religious beliefs can be in a woman's education. However, through her, the author introduces questions about the division between religion and spirituality, presenting these two concepts as altogether separate: Isabella criticises and, through her comments, highlights religious hypocrisy: "Good works matter more than church attendance" (*TG* 59).

Similarly, inflexible religious behaviours feature in Nijo's story as well. In her case, we see how she did embrace it, and in fact, devoted the rest of her life to it, however unwillingly. After being cast aside by the Emperor, and following her father's orders, Nijo has no other choice but to turn to religion as a means of survival: "If you lose his favours, enter holy orders" (*TG* 57). Alone, without any way to support herself, she became a nomad Buddhist nun, and spent the rest of her life wandering around Japan as

atonement for having failed in fulfilling her primary role as an imperial concubine. However –and although we can infer from her story that she actually enjoyed some freedom once she left behind the oppressing influence of her circle– she was still not content with her new role, and was far from genuinely devote to it: “So when I fell out of favour, I had nothing. Religion is a kind of nothing / and I dedicated what was left of me to nothing” (*TG* 61). Through Nijo, Churchill tries to demystify the symbiosis that have always seemed to exist between religious vocation and women, and present it as it was in most cases: their only way to survive apart from marriage or under the protection of a man; and on the other hand, if they were fallen women, like Nijo, it was a way for them to be punished for their sins and failures.

Finally, in Joan we find a very clear criticism towards the Catholic Church as an institution and its inflexibility and consideration of women, as well as the cruel practises it carried out. In fact, both Joan’s life and death were heavily marked by it. Pretending to be a man so that she could have access to an education that was not available to her, she managed to rise within the institution until she was elected Pope, something utterly unthinkable –in fact, forbidden– for a woman. In her recollection of her life as Pope, we see how she describes the role as an authoritarian figure, the absolute powerful head of the institution, obeyed and venerated in a completely idealised way: “Yes, I enjoyed being Pope. I consecrated bishops and let people kiss my feet, I received the King of England when he came to submit to the church”, a role that Joan actually grows to enjoy because of the power it allowed her (*TG* 68). Not only that, but the fact that Joan did not realise she was pregnant, but rather than she was getting fat as a result of the extravagant and luxurious life a Pope leads. We see how Churchill criticises the double standards when it came to male and female behaviour and morality in a religious setting: “Other Popes had children. Surely” / “But they didn’t give birth to them” (*TG* 69). Besides, she also



denounces its intransigence when being mocked: when she was discovered, she was punished with death by daring to infiltrate a forbidden space for women.

#### **4.4.2 *The Mai*: women and the Catholic Church in Ireland**

Likewise, in *The Mai*, we can also find a heavy criticism towards the oppressive role and influence of Catholicism, this time focused on Ireland, but perhaps in a more subtle manner than in Churchill's play. Through the different female characters in the family and their respective experiences, we see how Irish women, because of the suffocating religious influence, have been very limited. Issues that directly affect women, such as family, motherhood, reproductive rights, sexuality, abortion, divorce and female autonomy have been traditionally monitored by the Church. Moreover, the country's colonial past is also partly responsible for the image of woman that has prevailed. In fact, according to Kangüleç:

the Church's attempt to seize the maternal body by the help of the symbolic law can be read in parallel to the Irish Catholic Church's influence on the Mother Ireland image which was isochronously reconstructed with the Irish identity during the fervent days of Irish nationalism. Since the English colonisers accused the Irish of femininity in an attempt to associate the colonised Irish with backwardness, wildness and emotions. (57)

In the play, we see that all these conservative and religious values are perfectly embodied in *The Mai*'s two aunts: Julie and Agnes. Both women show up unexpectedly at the Owl Lake house, in order to figure out what is happening to the women of the family. Suspecting that their niece Beck has been married, and equally concerned with *The Mai*'s marital situation, they are determined to find out the truth and put things to bed:

Two of The Mai's aunts ... decided not to take the prospect of a divorcee in the family lying down. So they arrived ... armed with novenas, scapulars, and leaflets on the horrors of premarital sex which they distributed amongst us children ... Births, marriages and deaths were their forte, and by Christ, if they had anything to do with it, Beck would stay married even if it was to a tree. (*TM* 135)

They are the epitome of traditional and conservative Catholic Irish women that Carr wants to mock: judgemental, gossipy, meddling in family affairs, and firmly set against divorce, abortion, and sex outside marriage. When they hear the rumours about Beck's potential divorce, they decide to jump into action to convince her otherwise, and, thus, spare the family the shame that would bring: "You're not really getting a (*whisper*) divorce, are you sweetheart?" (*TM* 140). Moreover, when they gossip about the possibility that Beck could be pregnant, they have very clear views on the matter: "God forbid! A divorcee with a child, born after the divorce.... We'll find out if she's pregnant first and, if she is, with the luck of God she'll miscarry" (*TM* 136). As we can see, for them, the idea of a miscarriage is far preferable and less shameful than an abortion, illegitimate children, or a divorced single mother as an only parent. Nevertheless, despite their close-minded opinions, the fact that abortion is discussed at all in the play is in itself quite subversive: despite the rising in women's sexual freedom and the evermore extensive use of contraceptive methods at the time the play is set, 1979, it was still a taboo topic. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that neither divorce nor abortion were legal in Ireland at the time the play was written and staged.

On the issue of marriage, Julie clearly believes that in spite of Beck's behaviour and attitude, which she considers to be quite loose, she has been lucky enough to have a man interested in her, and blames her for wasting the opportunity: "All this hoorin' around for years and finally someone marries you and you walk out on him. And I

suppose you'll be back hoorin' round before we can bat an eyelid" (*TM* 141). Not only that, but because of the conception of marriage by the Church as an irrevocable commitment, we see how other women are equally reluctant to divorce. In spite of the pain Robert has caused The Mai and her children, we see that she is still desperate to keep him at all costs. On the one hand, because she truly loves him –a love that borders on obsession–, but more importantly, because it is what she is *supposed* to do. As a married woman in late 1970s Ireland, she feels shame at the thought of having failed in not being able to retain her husband by her side, unsettled by what neighbours and family might think of her –including her Grandmother, aunts and sisters–, and determined not to accept defeat, namely in the form of a divorce. Desperately, she would rather try to hold on to him than becoming “one of those women” who have failed at their main task in life: being a wife. Equally, Beck, despite being ashamed about what people would think if they found out she is having a divorce, is even more worried about the possibility that no one would think she had the “ability” to be married in the first place: “Beck herself felt the need to tell everyone that she had been married, however briefly. I think maybe to raise herself a little in everyone’s estimation” (*TM* 134). Even her, whom we see as the more open and forward-thinking among the three sisters, cannot escape from the expectations she has been brought up in. Julie, shocked at so much talk about divorces, does not understand how a younger generation can think of it as an option: “What’s this about working out. In my day you got married and whether it worked out or it didn’t was by the way” (*TG* 141). This clearly opposes to the commitment women should stick to whatever the consequences or the situation within marriage, thus placing the responsibility completely on them.

It goes without saying, then, that illegitimate children, as we have discussed in previous sections, is another issue women have been punished for by a very religious

society. We see, particularly in *Grandma Fraochlán*, just how tightly tied in with religion and morality it is the rural Ireland at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Carrying the burden of the ignorance about her past and the lack of a paternal figure, when Grandma finds out that her daughter Ellen is pregnant before marriage, she forces her to marry the father so that she could avoid those feelings of shame again from being repeated in the family, guilty that her mother's mistakes will keep determining the life of her daughter as well: "I was afraid they'd blame me and say it was The Duchess' blood that made her wild and immoral" (*TM* 170). However, we see that the social norms and rules placed on women, and the subsequent falling from grace if they are not followed are not a thing of the past, since the same happens to Millie and her son Joseph.

In short, in both plays we can just see how much the influence of institutionalised religion –and its role in restricting, controlling, and policing women's freedom– cannot be denied. It has been the aim of authors like Carr and Churchill to expose how, even today, those beliefs and limitations are still being imposed on women by the religious institution itself, but also by the society that follows its doctrines and takes on the role of enforcing them. From their independence and autonomy as women, their reproductive rights, and the way they decide to live their lives, we see how many female characters in both *Top Girls* and *The Mai* are utterly determined by their surrounding expectations on how they should act, and the price women like Joan, The Mai or Grandma Fraochlán have to pay if they do not follow the rules.

## 5. Conclusions

In the two plays analysed in this dissertation, we have come across a different array of female characters that are, in one way or another, striving to pave their own way in a world that is set against them from the beginning simply for being women, fighting the limited role society pushes them to adopt. This society that, deeply rooted in set and rigid patriarchal structures –in which women have traditionally been considered little more than male property and walking uteruses–, mostly succeeds in disallowing women from having their own agency and independence, be it social, financial, or familiar. From historical women who, looking back on their lives, finally come to terms with their own experiences and the ingrained oppression that have guided them throughout, to contemporary women who question the role they are expected to play and the path they are pressured to follow, Churchill and Carr manage to build characters who, in some way, challenge the idea of the imposed female identity. Both playwrights reclaim through those same flawed, imperfect, yet real, characters, a much less biased and partial perspective of the female experience on the stage, as they, quite literally, break into and take centre stage in the voicing of their own narratives for the first time.

The theoretical framework of this study has tried to illustrate, firstly, the position that women have traditionally had within the history of theatre, both in terms of authorship, but also when it comes to physically being allowed to perform on stage. Offering a brief chronology of the position of women in drama, this section has explored how –from ancient Greece through Elizabethan drama, and all the way to the 19<sup>th</sup> century– women’s contribution to the stage was extremely limited by the ruling structures that dominated society and the arts, and were frequently banned from it entirely. As we have seen, it was not until the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that, thanks to the consolidation of a far more politically and socially inclined drama, both female

playwrights and characters were allowed to occupy a more substantial space within it. Secondly, it has tried to provide an overview of the theoretical basis for the analysis – including concepts regarding motherhood, religion, female identity, and family related theories–, which have been applied later on to the plays. Finally, I have provided a more in-depth exploration of contemporary theatre as the heir of the aforementioned traditions, especially as seen in the works of both Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr.

As far as the critical analysis goes, this dissertation has approached the gender issues both authors address in the selected works. I have analysed, firstly, the more structural and formal elements that both Churchill and Carr share, such as their taste for temporal experimentation regarding structure, and the use of satire and humour by the constant juxtaposition of both comedy and tragedy. Moreover, I have offered a deeper analysis of the main characters we encounter in these two plays, presenting them as women who do not quite adhere to the traditional archetypes employed when creating and developing female characters. Through them, we can see the use both authors make of generational gaps when approaching women and the evolution –or lack thereof– of their situation throughout time: in *Top Girls*, we observe how this is achieved through the inclusion of women from different backgrounds and time periods; and in *The Mai*, through the exploration of the different generations of women belonging to the same family.

Additionally, the analysis has focused on the existent relationship between women and spaces, both private and public ones, that we can perceive in the plays, and how they play a rather significant part in the development of gender roles. In particular, I have analysed how the home, a traditionally female space, can be seen as a source of female empowerment as well, as presented by Marina Carr, who reclaims said space *for* the women in the family. On her part, Caryl Churchill delves more into public spaces, which

have been generally under male control, and places an all-female cast in positions of power. As the play shows, the real obstacles that exist for women are the structural problems that disallow women in the first place and gives them a false sense of equality, forcing them to choose between one aspect of life and another, unable to combine both.

Afterwards, I have tried to explore some aspects regarding family dysfunctionality and how the aforementioned gender roles present in our society play an important role in its development. We have seen how most of the female characters in both plays are negatively influenced by either the negative presence or the absence of paternal figures, as well as the causes for this situation to occur. Moreover, this section has gravitated around the institutionalisation of motherhood as a tool that has been employed to further the patriarchal authority. Lastly, I have tried to illustrate how family dysfunctionality, as seen in these two plays, is presented as a cyclical spiral without ending that entraps women generation after generation, whether within the same family –as we can see in *The Mai*–, or approached from a more historical perspective, as in *Top Girls*.

Finally, the last section of the analysis has considered the long-standing relationship between patriarchy and religious institutions. In particular, how both structures have acted hand in hand throughout centuries and across most cultures to serve as yet another way in which to oppress, control, and police women's bodies, options, freedom, and lives overall. As we can see in both Churchill and Carr's works, there is a heavy criticism towards, particularly, the Catholic Church.

As we have seen throughout this study, the aforementioned dramatists develop new techniques and offer a new perspective that portray women as complex individuals, giving them back their voice, and reclaiming their place in society, history, and literature. Both have contributed to the feminisation of theatre in terms of authorship and female presence, and have made –and continue to make– the genre much more aware about

issues regarding gender, motherhood, complex intergenerational relationships, like social the roles and stereotypes women had had thrust upon them. Furthermore, their influence on the genre in both the English and Irish theatrical context is undeniable, defying those conventions so often present in drama, and providing a fresh and uninhibited approach to the discussion of the abovementioned issues.

In fact, this dissertation has also attempted to reveal that drama can be a valid way through which playwrights, in this case women dramatists, can not only expose the gender bias that dominates society, but also criticise the dominant power structures that ensue the reinforcement of this bias. Moreover, they both create a space in which these issues can be brought to light, questioned, and hopefully, eventually overcome. As Marohl proposes, it is only “by the reformation of entire social systems, then, can gender roles be changed (or dispensed with) and authentic liberation of the sexes occur” (314). In this vein, perhaps we can root for theatre to play a significant role in addressing, hopefully even changing significantly, those same systems.

In short, through their female characters, both Churchill and Carr manage to voice the female experience *from* the female perspective, transgressing imposed gender roles and social and patriarchal expectations. Both *Top Girls* and *The Mai* can be considered to be a response to the collective demand for a more complex representation of women in drama, constructed without the ever-dominant male bias present in our society, in which female characters can finally take on the position under the spotlight that has evaded them before. To conclude, as this study has hopefully shown, both Churchill and Carr have masterfully crafted two plays in which the rich amalgamation of issues and topics that they present and openly discuss is done seamlessly, all of them connected and interwoven in a tapestry –or two– that are, as I believe they should, considered key examples of feminist contemporary theatre written by women. Both plays, above all,



invite a dialogue about women: their roles in society throughout the years, the improvements –or lack thereof– in said roles, and how through drama, their situation, frustrations and revindications can, if not overcome, at least be brought under examination.

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