

Research Report**Fantastical Elements in the Earliest Plays of Caryl Churchill****Rinko Yamagishi**

Throughout her career, Caryl Churchill has shown interest in fantastical elements. Despite the abundant evidence of her interest in her works, however, they have never received as much critical attention as they seem to deserve. This paper examines how these fantastical elements are presented in Churchill's early plays up through *Owners* (1972). While the fantasticality found in the earliest plays functions to reiterate rather obvious or feasible interpretations, the function of the fantasticality seen in *Owners* is, instead, a subversion of the play's generally accepted interpretation. Through a focus on the play's fantastical moments, the character of Worsely is foregrounded as a more convincing and organic character with intense wishes for life and connectedness rather than the clownish figure with everlasting suicidal wishes, which he has generally been interpreted to be. Additionally, the fact that he succeeds in owning his body and controlling his life through the repeated failed suicide attempts opens up a new, positive approach to the concept of "ownership", the aggressive and exploitative nature of which has been a focus.

1. The importance of fantastical elements in the plays of Caryl Churchill

In the 1970s, the British theatre saw the rise of female playwrights in the feminist movement, including Pam Gems, Louise Page, Micheline Wandor and many others. Caryl Churchill was one of those playwrights. However, today, Churchill is often considered exceptional amongst all, one of the most important and influential playwrights of contemporary theatre. One critic, Christopher Innes, explains the differences between Churchill and other female playwrights as follows:

[...] where Gems (with the exception of *Blue Angel*), Micheline Wandor or Shelagh Stephenson are essentially naturalistic in approach, even if using unconventional structures, Churchill's drama is increasingly imagistic and surreal. She presents politics from a subjective perspective, and the characterization in her most typical plays (from *Cloud Nine* in 1979) culminating in the mythic nightmare of the *Skryker* [sic] (1994) is symbolic. [...] Churchill's approach is poetic [...]. (512)

Innes introduces Churchill in the chapter titled “Poetic Drama: verse, fantasy and symbolic images,” explaining that “the poetic vision can be expressed through mythic images and dream states, subjective explorations or existential universalization, symbolism and ritual” (438), of all of which can be easily enumerated with examples from her work. He also understands poetic drama as a “type of anti-naturalistic theatre” (438), toward which Churchill herself admitted her inclination in an interview conducted in 1989: “I enjoy plays that are non-naturalistic and don’t move a real time” (Roberts 3).

While “poetic” seems an effective term to illuminate the uniqueness that Churchill’s theatrical world holds, the term could also be argued as overly comprehensive. Moreover, if, as Innes explains, “poetic drama” deals with “the area of experience” which is “generic and transcendental, as opposed to particular and social,” and “evokes subliminal states instead of making political statements” (438), how do we explain the consistent claim that Churchill’s works are “poetic” when many are considered significantly political? In fact, when asked about political theatre, Churchill herself once stated that it was impossible for playwrights not to take a moral and political stance (Churchill, *Interviews* 79). She also made her stance clear as of at least 1988: “I’ve constantly said that I am both a socialist and a feminist. Constantly said it” (Churchill, *File on Churchill* 89). Here, the question of whether “poetic” is the most appropriate concept through which to grasp the nature of Churchill’s theatre arises.

In order to explore the focus on the anti-naturalistic aspect of Churchill’s plays suggested by Innes and find a better and more focused concept through which to deepen our grasp of this facet of Churchill’s theatrical world, it might be helpful to turn to other critics. For example, at the beginning of his article about *The Skriker*, Graham Wolfe writes:

If she [Churchill] is, as Tony Kushner has claimed, the “greatest living English-language playwright” (qtd. in Savran 24), this honor should be linked to her groundbreaking experiments with the fantastic. From *Mad Forest*’s ravenous vampire, to *Fen*’s furious revenants, to the temporal paradoxes of *Traps*, to the cloned doubles of *A Number*, Churchill’s work repeatedly challenges expectations in an industry whose mainstream is still dominated by naturalistic writing. Of all these forays, her 1994 play *The Skriker*, which debuted at London’s Royal National Theatre (directed by Les Waters), stands as one of the boldest attempts in recent decades to explore theatre’s affinity for fantastic worlds and creatures. (234)

Another critic, Irene Eynat-Confino, looks at Churchill’s works from the same point of view as Wolfe and—in her list of modern western dramas that employ fantastical elements—Churchill appears as the playwright of the second-largest number of fantastical plays in the post-war period, after Beckett (191-194). Raising the “monster” as an example of the residents of the world of the fantastic, Eynat-Confino explains that “the fantastic is not only an exploration of the limits of knowledge by means of mythical characters and magical acts but also a critique of consensus reality” (3). She additionally states that “the introduction of the fantastic into a realistic narrative – built on the assumption that it reproduces the everyday experiential world of the audience – disrupts

and negates what is conventionally regarded as ‘the real.’ Such a mode distorts the spectator’s sense of perspective, perverts his perception of space, time, and sound, and inflects his emotions and thinking long after the performance has ended” (4), while “fantasy” refers to a self-contained world with its own rules that no one, including spectators, hesitates to accept them (4). While the concept of “poetic” proposed by Innes lies outside of the political, leaving it questionable as to if it is a genuinely appropriate concept to comprehend Churchill’s theatre, the concept of the fantastic suggested by Wolfe and Eynat-Confino¹ seems to better connect the anti-naturalistic tropes Innes finds worthy of focus and the politicalness of Churchill’s theatrical world. In fact, the fantastic’s function of encouraging audiences to re-examine what they accept as certain seems to resonate with Churchill’s interest in the difficulties and the importance of perspective-shifting once revealed in an interview:

I suppose because I’m often very conscious of the absurd things people take for granted, and the whole different systems people have for judging whether things are important or not. If I cut my finger now, for example, it would be an awful thing, but obviously much worse things are happening far away and one can’t relate to them. That kind of discrepancy, in lots of different ways, is something I’ve thought about for a long time. (Churchill, *Plays and Players* 1)

Examining Churchill’s works in light of the above indications reveals various examples of the fantastical devices woven into her representative plays, which often seem to play important roles. As Innes and Wolfe note, the most conspicuous example is inarguably *The Skriker*, whose protagonist is “a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (*SK*² 243). In this play, along with the eloquent Skriker, various silent folklore figures wander the stage, indicating the possible existence of other worlds. Other examples are found in *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982), *Fen* (1983), *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), and *Mad Forest* (1990), as the critics mentioned above suggest: in *Cloud Nine*, the characters who never age, in accordance with the timeline, hold a ritual trying to summon Goddess and instead summon an apparition of a soldier who died in Northern Ireland; in *Top Girls*, a flamboyant dinner party of historical or imaginary female figures unfolds; in *Fen*, apparitions from the past are impressively deployed; *A Mouthful of Birds* shows the theatrical world haunted by the story of *The Bacchae*; and in *Mad Forest*, a vampire and a dog talk to each other.

It is surprising that these fantastical elements have rarely received full critical attention despite not only their abundance in the representative plays but also the close affinity between Churchill’s interest in and the potent effect those tropes hold on disturbing the consensus of reality and shifting the spectators’ grasp of the world(s) around them. Moreover, Churchill’s fascination with depicting something different from what is considered natural, normal or real can be traced back to even her earliest works, which the aforementioned critics seem not to notice. Thus, in this paper, I will examine several of the works from those Churchill produced before she began to establish her position as a professional playwright in an attempt to articulate how the fantastical elements are employed and function in those plays.

2. Fantastical elements in the earliest plays

As cited above, in an interview conducted in 1989, Churchill admitted that she “enjoy[s] plays that are non-naturalistic and don’t move a real time.” Given that Churchill created various experimental plays during the decade prior, such as *Top Girls*, *Fen* and *A Mouthful of Birds*, the statement could have primarily been meant to summarise her interests through the 1980s. However, her fascination with weaving something other than what is considered natural, normal or real into realistic contexts can be traced back even to her early works produced before she started working as a professional playwright. The earliest plays, written before *The Ants* (1962), are unpublished as yet. Still, even from the glimpse we have through the writings of a few critics who were honoured with the loan of the original scripts from Churchill herself,³ we can sense her above-mentioned interest in otherness and hints of fantasticality incorporated in those early plays.

Her very first work, *Downstairs*, already shows her interest in “other” worlds. Performed in 1958 by an Oxford University drama society while Churchill was a student there, the play involves two families living in the same small flat: the upper floor is for the Johnsons, the owners of the flat, while the downstairs is for an indigent and mysterious family including a father, a bedridden grandmother, a daughter called Catherine and an eighteen-year-old son called Joe. Although Alfred Johnson, the husband, and Ted Johnson, the son, are attracted to the mysteriousness of the people living downstairs, Susan, the wife, despises them. Longing for a life in the countryside, where everything is “clean and fresh” (*DS*⁴, qtd. in Cousin: 122), Susan is especially suspicious towards Joe, who has a sense of “the unusual, the remoteness, the non-conformity” (Roberts 4) and who she suspects may be “mentally retarded” (Cousin 122). Towards the end of the play, Ted hits and kills Catherine, who he has started to have feelings for. Susan realises that even if Catherine disappears, “This is never going to end. There’s always going to be that girl downstairs now” (*DS*, qtd. in Roberts: 4). Geraldine Cousin argues that one of this play’s themes is “the need to keep one’s personal world safe from external, intrusive forces” (122-3). In other words, the existence of the family living downstairs suggests the otherness that disrupts the “normality” of daily life.

However, when a hinted-at sense of fantasticality in the play is considered, its interpretation need not fall into the mere binary between the upstairs and downstairs. The setting of the play is naturalistic, and nothing unreal happens throughout it. However, as Roberts writes, “In a naturalistic piece, though, there is evidence of other worlds and ways of proceeding” (4). Through these other worlds with fantastical elements, Catherine and Joe, who are supposed to be mysterious others, show their different aspects. Catherine tells Susan about her life with Joe:

Joe, will you leave them alone. He likes to touch things, he likes to feel things in his palm. He won’t break them, don’t worry. When he breaks things I make up stories to frighten him about dragons and bombs and he cries all day and makes Gran cry and me too. We always make up stories and put people we like in them, and people we don’t like, and people we used to know. No, you know what I used to like to do? There were always a lot of empty bottles around from

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Dad drinking, and I used to fill them with water, and then put dye in to make them coloured, and stand them in the window so the light shone through. (*DS*, qtd. in Roberts: 5)

The nature of Catherine as presented here is helpless rather than “external” or “intrusive.” Instead of depicting her simply as a mysterious other that invades the “normal” world of the Johnsons, Churchill lets Catherine show her and her family’s bleak inner world through her fascination with imaginative moments, such as story-making and gazing at the bottles of coloured waters. On the other hand, Joe might appear as more of an outsider than Catherine since he lives in a world where fantasticality and reality co-exist, but his fascination with touching things may be indicative of longing for connections to the real that he doesn’t want to “break.” In other words, focusing on the hints of fantasticality foregrounds the vacillation between (and longings towards) the real and the other worlds and reveals the delicate nuances bestowed on the characters.

Churchill’s second play, titled *Having a Wonderful Time*, was written and performed by another Oxford University drama society in 1961. The play revolves around Paul, a businessman in Paris who makes it a custom to work hard during the year for his annual two-week vacation in the southern part of France. He is a “world-weary observer of the scene he sees every year” (Roberts 6), trying to fix the lives of people living there. However, nobody ends up acting as he wishes, and the colourlessness of Paul’s life is revealed instead. Among the characters that Paul encounters, Cousin Charles can be considered a strong dramatic foil to him. Contrary to Paul, who seems to be against anything silly, Charles is a character whose “reality consists of dreaming” (7). He is a “storyteller and lives in his own world” (7), a world that is full of fantastical imaginations. In his world, a Cadillac is a “dragon in disguise,” and the dragon is looking for the “boy with seaweed hair” (*HWT*⁵, qtd. in Roberts: 7). As it was not possible to access the whole script, it is premature to reach any conclusion on the meaning of Charles’s existence in this play. However, at the very least, it can be argued that the existence of Charles shows Churchill’s early interest in something outside of reality.

The hints of fantasticality seem to be more developed and focused in her first professional radio play, *The Ants*, broadcast in 1961. The play foregrounds the horror of trampling down others emotionally, physically or both through devices such as divorce and war. The horror culminates in the last scene, where fire is set to ants walking in a line while the hysterical laughter of a child echoes.⁶ The play revolves around the conversations between a character named Tim and his grandfather, and all through the conversations, Tim keeps his eyes on the small colony of ants, making them keep his company. In spite of the fact that the play’s setting is highly naturalistic, a hint of fantasticality is found in the relationships between Tim and the ants. While the adult characters cannot see differences between the ants or even dream of them having any individuality, Tim can tell them apart and always spots his favourite, which he names Bill. This fantastical ability bestowed to Tim is the key to interpreting the play. While his ability, at first, emphasises his innocence that could confront the violent world which the adult characters and the trope of war represent, he loses the ability in the course of the play and ends up finding joy in killing the ants in the fire. Here, the loss of fantasticality signifies the corruption of the mind.

Looking at the early examples of fantasticality, it is interesting to note an affinity between powerlessness and fantasticality and that it touches on important subjects of each play. In *Downstairs*, the fantastical element is attributed to Catherine and Joe and not only highlights the otherness of their existence but also foregrounds the intricacy of their emotional struggles with the bleakness their lives hold. In *Having a Wonderful Time*, the element is found in a “storyteller” who is “regarded by most as quite useless” (Roberts 7), and his attitude of going his own way accentuates the vanity of the character of Paul. Finally, in *The Ants*, the corruption of the mind is represented through the figure of Tim losing his fantastical power.

3. Fantastical moments and lifewish in *Owners*

While the fantasticality found in the earliest plays functions to reiterate obvious or feasible interpretations of the plays, the function of that seen in a play written almost a decade later, *Owners* (1972), could be slightly different or, rather, more subversive. *Owners*, Churchill’s first professional stage play, was performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. As Churchill answered in an interview, this play has two thematic concerns: “There were two ideas really. This happens quite a lot. I’ve got several ideas and then I suddenly see a way, while I’m working on one, that the others can be put into the same play. There was one idea going about landlords and tenants, and then another about western aggressiveness and eastern passivity, and I realized that obviously the two could go together” (Churchill, *Plays and Players* 40). More precisely, as Churchill writes in the preface of the play, the contrast between two opposite attitudes is summarised in “the active, achieving attitude” (Preface 4) of a Christian hymn-like “Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to war” (3) and the passive attitude of a Zen poem, “Sitting quietly, doing nothing. Spring comes and the grass grows by itself” (3).

The play is one of the most discussed among Churchill’s early works. Many critics consider it to be a highly political play, whether it is a critique of a capitalistic way of thinking, the prevailing everlasting patriarchal attitude of society or both. In any case, it seems the play is sometimes perceived as slightly over-political, driven by a strong thematic concern by Churchill. For example, Michael Billington’s evaluation of the play posits that the characters are unconvincing because they heavily mirror Churchill’s strong concerns:

Miss Churchill’s weakness is that she throws everything in bar the kitchen sink: euthanasia, body-snatching, the Protestant work ethic, the use of sex for social revenge. She also manipulates character to prove her social points: you don’t really believe in the property tycoon’s physical lust for her tenant, in her bookish butcher-husband who is a caricature of male chauvinist piggery or in the suicidal tendencies of her industrious legman. (“*Owners* at the Theatre Upstairs”)

Alisa Solomon also admits that “*Owners* is not totally free of the tendency for characters to exemplify philosophical stances” (51). The unbalanced quality of the play is additionally noted by other critics who describe the play by using words like “distorting” (Kritzer 63) or “grotesque” (Cousin 91).

Some of the characterisations in the play, to be sure, can feel distorted or magnified, making it seem

easy to pin down who represents what. Marion clearly represents the idea of western aggressiveness and consumption, marked by her eating each time she makes an appearance in the play; Alec, who never shows interest in anything, represents the attitude of eastern passivity; Clegg, Marion's butcher husband, is a grotesque caricature of patriarchal social value; and Lisa, exploited financially by Marion and sexually by Clegg, is representative of the victims of capitalist and patriarchal social systems.

However, if we examine the characters more closely, we find a character that seems to avoid exemplifying any clear-cut philosophical stance: Worsely. As suggested in Billington's review of the play, Worsely is Marion's "industrious legman" with an everlasting suicidal desire. Every time he comes on-stage, he has accumulated more bandages on his wrists, neck, arm and leg from his suicide attempts, culminating in being bandaged almost all over his body in the last scene of the play: "His face is partly bandaged from a burn. Other bandages and plaster as before" (*OW*⁷ 65). At a glance, he seems to be a mere supporting character and so hasn't had as much critical attention as others. Still, it is interesting to note that Churchill names Worsely first at the preface of the play: "I was in an old woman's flat when a young man offering her money to move came round – he was my first image of Worsely and one of the starting points of the play" (Preface 4). Moreover, the Royal Court Theatre summarises the play into the following tagline: "Marion wants everything, Alec wants nothing, Worsely would rather be dead. A comedy about property owning" ("*Owners* [1972]"). Here again, it is noteworthy that the character of Worsely is considered to be at par with Marion and Alec. In fact, Elaine Aston considers Worsely as "a central figure in Churchill's critique of ownership." She explains that Worsely never "succeeds in 'owning', that is, deciding the destiny of his own body" (21), although he believes his body is his own property. In other words, through the figure of Worsely, a question that could touch the quintessence of the play is presented: Everyone, no matter how wealthy or poor, has their "own" body, but do we really "own" it? In a sense, Worsely could be considered as the most symbolic and comprehensible character that illuminates the very heart of the issue of ownership.

Furthermore, as discussed elsewhere,⁸ Worsely can be understood as a more delicately nuanced character than generally received. For example, Worsely's attitude toward Lisa's baby boy enables us to glimpse his wish for an organic relationship. While the new parents, Marion and Clegg, show no real interest in him, Worsely can tell the baby apart from other babies, which reminds us of the innocent boy Tim in *The Ants* with the ability to distinguish his favourite from other ants. Just as Tim's special ability suggests an alternative to the violent adult world represented through divorce and war, Worsely, possessing a similar ability, counters the world constituted of "owners" represented by other characters. He is also depicted as the only character concerned with what is best for the baby and is willing to take the risk of damaging his relationship with Marion (for whom he holds respect and unrequited love) by secretly bringing the baby back to Lisa, which possibly shows his "impulse toward community" (Kritzer 67). His impulse towards emotional connection with others is also seen through his character's affectionate side; he not only cares for the baby but also gets "fond of too many people" (*OW* 59). Being aware of the importance of Worsely in this play as a counter against the binary

values represented by other characters makes us realise how well the above-mentioned tagline by the Royal Court gets at the heart of the play.

As to the possibility that Worsely is more than a mere supporting character, one critic adds an interesting interpretation: while noting that the farcical elements in the figure of Worsely contribute to the play's comic aspect, Mary Beatrice Joseph points out a seriousness in the character that reminds us of *Waiting for Godot*: "[...] Worsely is not all clown. He is reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Despite the comic dimension that he possess [*sic*], he embodies the angst of twentieth century man. [...] he is faced with the dilemma of coming to grips with the idea that life has no meaning, is a vacuum, and hence can be extinguished with no regrets" (114-5). Here it is interesting to remember that Beckett is the only playwright who produced more fantastical plays than Churchill during the post-war period. As Eynat-Confino writes, *Waiting for Godot* is no exception and strongly entails the fantastical quality through utilising a "mound" motif which is, in Celtic mythology, "the dwelling place of the fairies and a gate to the Other World" (148). In the play, Eynat-Confino argues, the motif functions as "a defining agent that enhances Beckett's stance that man's life is a station in a sort of hell, ruled by repetitiveness, unrewarded hope, and loss of direction in time and scope" (148). While the world around Worsely seems to be a realistic one without any magical instruments, it is noteworthy that the character is discussed in relation to the characters of *Godot*, who suggest the sense of fantasticality swirling around the motif of death.

As for Worsely and death, Worsely himself casually comments on it at the beginning of the play: "I try to [be dead]. My doctor says I'm so safety prone I must have a lifewish. I have a sense of humour about psychiatrists" (*OW* 10). As Worsely doesn't seem to take the doctor's opinion seriously and finds it rather funny, critics don't find it convincing either. Billington assumes that Worsely has "a built-in deathwish" ("Forgotten Plays"), and Cousin points out that "Worsely does genuinely try to end his life," explaining the reason for him not being able to as "it's just that circumstances are against him" (92). However, looking at Worsely and death in light of the above new angle concerning the play's hint of fantasticality, a different perspective on his suicide attempts might arise. Just as the world of *Waiting for Godot* is dominated by repetition, the world of Worsely is also ruled by an unusual repetitiveness. Even before the play starts, Worsely has survived six suicide attempts ("I've tried to kill myself six times. And I'm a willing victim." [*OW* 11]), and he evades death again and again (at least five times) over the course of the play. This repetitiveness not only adds a comic or absurd flavour to the play but also evokes a surreal impression, especially taking into account that everything else in the play proceeds in a naturalistic manner. In fact, upon reading the script of the play to decide whether the Royal Court should put on the play or not, Anthony Page, who once worked as the theatre's director, left an internal memo: "I did think the idea of the man repeatedly trying to commit suicide was overworked and wondered if she would rewrite and cut down on this" (Robert 44).⁹ There are no means for knowing whether Churchill followed his advice and rewrote this, but if she did, it could be argued that Worsely's suicide attempts were originally planned to be presented as an even more unusual phenomenon.

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If we examine Worsely's suicide attempts again more closely with this in mind, we come to notice someone is often involved in the events: a young man who Worsely calls "Samaritan friend". At the beginning of the play, Worsely looks back at the moment that started his relationship with the "friend": "I saw a poster saying Suicide – ring the Samaritans. So this very pleasant young fellow came round and I told him I want to kill myself and could he help. He said in a very feeling voice he would certainly try. But does he hell. The bastard's always trying to stop me" (*OW* 11-12). "The Samaritans" here likely refers to the British charitable organisation founded in 1953 that offers emotional help for people suffering from distress, generally through their telephone helpline. By the time this play was written, it had grown into a large and widely-recognised organisation with branches all over England and Wales and a new but growing network in Ireland.¹⁰ Although Cousin interprets this Samaritan friend as a group of people, saying, "He enlists the aid of the Samaritans, but, to his disgust, instead of helping, *they* try to prevent him from killing himself" (92, emphasis added), it is highly likely (and important to the later discussion) the Samaritan friend is an individual, given the references using singular forms like "he" or "bastard". It is also interesting to note that the friend is male, which should be less common given that the majority of the Samaritans were and are women.¹¹ It is apparent that the Samaritan friend was eager to perform his duties to prevent Worsely from killing himself, even before the first scene of the play (presumably at least several out of six attempts: "The bastard's *always* trying to stop me" [emphasis added]), and during the play, Worsely admits that he and the Samaritan friend gradually deepen their friendship, possibly being moved by his enthusiasm, to the extent that Worsely makes a new will in the Samaritan friend's favour.

At first glance, the Samaritan friend looks like he simply tries to fulfill his duty as a Samaritan. However, if we look at his character more intently, we might notice a rather unusual aspect of his existence. When Worsely says the Samaritan friend always tries to stop him from killing himself, we might expect this to be conducted as a form of telephone consultation considering that the Samaritans offer help primarily through telephone. However, over the course of the play, we gradually learn that the friend physically stops his suicide attempts. When Worsely tries to kill himself the seventh time with gas, the Samaritan friend appears and saves him:

MARION. You're very white.

WORSELY. It's the gas.

MARION. What, last night?

WORSELY. That Samaritan friend of mine dropped in just as I was going off nicely.

MARION. Had you invited him?

WORSELY. You know me better than that Marion. (*OW* 26)

Although Worsely never asks him, the Samaritan friend shows himself to prevent Worsely from choking himself with gas. He again appears near the end of the play, trying to rescue Worsely from plunging to his death. Worsely also recalls that the Samaritan friend suddenly appeared when he was sitting on the ledge of a high building in a suicide attempt, leading to the friend's death:

And then there turned up beside me of all people that Samaritan friend. I think I've mentioned him. Very on-going. [...] He'd come up on the ledge to squat beside me and talk me down. We had a chat. Just this and that. I was just about to drop off, suddenly, in the middle of what I was saying, to take him by surprise, when I saw he had turned quite pale. He can't have had much of a head for heights. And the next thing, he'd gone. I was quite right to think the distance would be fatal. (*OW* 63)

Considering Worsely's tone, it is apparent that it was as surprising for him to find the Samaritan friend coming up to save his life as it was when he tried to kill himself with gas. Here, a question arises; in the period without mobiles or the internet,¹² would it ever be possible for someone always to happen to "drop in" or "turn up" when suicide is about to be committed? In the first place, the Samaritans' service has been provided primarily through telephone with the help of face-to-face counsel opportunities, which have been comparatively limited as they have been offered at their branches for safety reasons. In the play, however, the Samaritan friend always pays visits to Worsely and meets him outside of the branch, leading to a deepening friendship that saves his life at least two times, and most likely more if the attempts before the story are included. To be sure, the Samaritans once provided support beyond their usual telephone support called "assigned befriending", where a volunteer was assigned to a caller to support them "through home visits and other activities outside the branch" (Pollock et al. 265). Even so, it is rather unusual that a "young pleasant fellow" keeps an eye on Worsely day and night and never fails to rescue him at a close call. Additionally, rescue operations the Samaritans used to provide were conducted by people called the "Flying Squad". Dispatched 24/7 to those in a state of emergency, the Flying Squad were a team of volunteers, for example, "about 12 people with motor cars" (Odlum et al. 134) at the Bournemouth Samaritans or the "two volunteers on call, available at any time of the day or night to go out to callers" (Lugg) in the weekly Flying Squad rota of the Stratford-upon-Avon Samaritans. In light of the fact that the Flying Squad service seems to have operated through teams, solo rescue operations like Worsely's Samaritan friend seem unlikely to have happened.

Considering this, another question arises: Does Worsely's Samaritan friend actually exist, or is he an imaginary or fantastical figure that only Worsely can see? To be sure, it might not be possible to claim that the Samaritan is an entirely illusionary figure, as some of his aspects described by Worsely do not necessarily contradict the principles of the Samaritans. For example, Worsely says that the Samaritan friend at first hesitated to reveal his religious views towards the physical body ("My befriender the Samaritan believes life is God-given. At first he was too sensitive to say so" [*OW* 35]), which fits with the Samaritans' principle that "Samaritan volunteers are forbidden to impose their own convictions or to influence callers in regard to politics, philosophy or religion" (Varah 64).¹³ Even so, it remains possible that Worsely's Samaritan friend is fantastical, or at least a production of his imagination to some extent. The fact that he has been admitted to a mental institution (and is still "demented" [63], as Kritzer writes) might also make this more likely. The experience of mental breakdown leads Marion (who was admitted to the same mental institution as Worsely) to adopt an aggressive,

exploitative attitude and Alec to display complete apathy towards everything. However, Worsely, still haunted but driven by the “impulse toward community,” vacillates between cravings for connection and disconnection, giving complex and delicate nuances to his character. The vacillation possibly creates the fantastical figure of the Samaritan friend as someone who acts on behalf of Worsely to keep him holding onto this world. To be sure, there remains a possibility that the stories around the Samaritan friend are pure fabrications by Worsely to disguise his inner conflict from others. Still, not only does this not reverse the above interpretation of his wish for life and connectedness, it proves its intensity even more clearly.

Looking at Worsely’s suicide attempts with the above in mind, we come to notice that he actually shows hesitations around leaving the world, at least in some attempts. In the ninth attempt, the body part he blasts off with Clegg’s gun is not a crucial one, but his hand, and in the tenth, where the Samaritan friend unexpectedly falls off from a building, he decides to postpone his attempt and comes down to the ground by himself. Additionally, when Marion orders him to set fire to the flat where Alec’s family resides, he replies, “I may meet my own death in the blaze” and “*waits a moment*” (emphasis added) for a reaction from Marion, who “doesn’t react at all” (*OW* 64). Imagining this scene in performance, the beat created here would effectively convey his longings for life and connectedness. (He never kills himself in this fire either, because “it is far too hot” [66].)

Through focusing on the hints of fantasticality around the character of Worsely, the intensity of his wishes for life, of which both he and critics are unaware, comes to be disclosed, foregrounding Worsely as a more convincing and organic character than the one of which he has been received. In other words, the fantasticality swirling around Worsely disrupts the generally accepted interpretations of the character and leads us to re-examine them. First of all, contrary to the interpretation of him as a genuinely suicidal character, there is a possibility that Worsely actually wishes for the opposite. Moreover, while he does share anguish over the meaninglessness of life with Vladimir and Estragon, it can be argued that he cannot give up an expectation towards life that could respond to the “impulse toward community” he holds. Finally, if Worsely’s true wish is not to terminate his life, it cannot be said that his attempt to “own” his body is a failure. Rather, he succeeds in “deciding the destiny of his own body” and controlling his own life through a succession of failures in his suicide attempts. The fact that Churchill never allows Worsely to take his life, even at the very end of the play, reiterates the hopefulness towards life and opens a new and positive approach to the theme of ownership, the aggressive and self-centred nature of which is mainly focused through the figures of Marion, Clegg, Alec, and Lisa.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

The characters with fantastical elements in Churchill’s earliest plays are powerless and isolated, ending up sinking into their own solitary worlds. Worsely, however, is markedly different. Although he shares some qualities with the earlier characters, he tries to reach out for connection. This change, seen in the character of Worsely, might resonate with the change Churchill herself underwent in the 1970s: from a solitarily working

playwright to a playwright whose theatrical talent was blooming through collaborations with young and energetic theatre companies such as Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment. As mentioned, Churchill seems to have kept an interest in fantasticality throughout her career in the 70s and 80s that launched her stardom, an interest that even seems to have grown in her later career, as seen, for example, in *The Skriker*. However, how its representation developed in Churchill's theatrical world after *Owners* has yet to be explored. Given the abundant evidence of fantasticality as one of the tropes Churchill turned to repeatedly and its nonetheless rarely receiving the critical attention it deserves, re-reading her plays focusing on fantastical moments could reveal as-yet-unknown aspects of her theatrical world.

Remark

¹ Among the numerous attempts to define terms around fantasticality in literary works, Eynat-Confino's proposed interpretation here follows that of Kathryn Hume: "According to Hume's wide-ranging definition, anything that constitutes a departure from consensus reality pertains to the fantastic. ... Since technology, beliefs, and cultural trends and contexts are in constant flux, Hume's approach is most pertinent to the study of the fantastic in general and of the fantastic in modern theatre in particular" (112-113).

² Abbreviation of *The Skriker*.

³ We know parts of the unpublished early plays from the following works, from which all information on these plays dealt with in this article is derived: Geraldine Cousin, *Churchill: The Playwright* (London: Methuen Drama, 1989); Philip Roberts, *About Churchill: The Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

⁴ Abbreviation of *Downstairs*.

⁵ Abbreviation of *Having a Wonderful Time*.

⁶ The more detailed analysis by the author on *The Ants* can be found in the following article: "The Representation of Children in the Earliest Works of Caryl Churchill," *Studies in English: The Regional Branches Combined Issue 1* (2009): 139-153.

⁷ Abbreviation of *Owners*.

⁸ Rinko Yamagishi, "Owners は誰か—Caryl Churchill の *Owners* 再読 [Who Are the Owners? : Rereading Caryl Churchill's *Owners*]," *Bulletin of the Graduate Division of Letters, Arts and Sciences of Waseda University* 55 (2010): 19-31.

⁹ In fact, Churchill herself was also concerned about the difficulty of realising the character of Worsely on the stage: "The part that worried me in particular in between writing it and realising it was going on was that the whole tone of Worsely that I'd had in mind wasn't there and wouldn't come out" (*Plays and Players*). Churchill's concern shows how different the character of Worsely is from other characters.

¹⁰ There were nearly 130 branches in England and Wales in 1972 (Varah 61).

¹¹ According to the *Information Resource Pack 2011* and *2012* published by the Samaritans, 75.5% of listening volunteers were women in 2010 (*Pack 2011* 8), and 68.7% were women in 2011 (*Pack 2012* 9). Although this is only an estimate from the limited data available, it is highly likely that fewer males were working as volunteers back in the 1970s. Thus, if the Samaritans offer Worsely a group of volunteers to support him, as Cousin suggests, he should inevitably have encountered female volunteers as well.

¹² Even the percentage of households with landline telephones in the United Kingdom in 1970 was as small as 35%. Refer to: Thomas Alsop, "Percentage of Households with Landline Telephones in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1970 to 2018," *Statista*, 7 Dec. 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/289158/telephone-presence-in-households-in-the-uk/>, accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

¹³ Although the name of the organisation might remind us of the Gospel of Luke, it accidentally got its name in 1953 from an article in the *Daily Mirror* that described it as "Good Samaritans". The organisation is religion-free.

¹⁴ While Alec and Lisa have often been deemed opponents and victims of "owners" as represented by Marion and Clegg, the possibility that they are also owners is discussed in the above-mentioned article, "Who Are the Owners?"

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