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“Is everything history?": Churchill, Barker, and the Modern History Play

BREAN S. HAMMOND

When the English theatergoer thinks of the category “history play,” it is likely to be Shakespeare that first comes to mind. Shakespeare wrote his two great tetralogies of history plays in the 1590s against a background of unprecedented political instability. The prolonged European war and the tax burden of fighting it, repeated disastrous harvests and plague outbreaks from 1585 onwards, religious strife exacerbated by the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, high levels of unemployment in key industries such as cloth leading to frequent riots, and political factionalism all served to ensure that Queen Elizabeth’s popularity sank disastrously as the century drew to a close. In that context, the nostalgic strain of patriotism in Shakespeare’s histories, bookended as they are by the successful reigns of Henry V and Henry VII, the latter the founder of the Tudor dynasty, can be perceived as an attempt to rebuild the nation by representing its past civil and foreign broils as capable of glorious transcendence, however embarrassing and complex the questions are that must be asked

along the way. If the past is, as they say, another country, it is a country that Shakespeare fought hard to conquer for the present.

Although recent appetite for history seems voracious, as is evident from the proliferation of televised series and the plethora of on-screen pundits, the nature of that interest is all too often in history commodified, packaged, and sanitized for a viewership that wants personalities and good stories. History appears depoliticized in this process, rendered unproblematic and stripped of any living tendrils to the present. Television at least *does* history, however. In British theater, history is virtually unrepresented. It is not very difficult, perhaps, to suggest reasons why in the British theater of the last thirty years there has been very little that resembles a modern “history play.” At the most general level, one can point to those theories of the postmodern that have called for or predicted the end of narrative history. Stopping short of the textualizing, ironizing, or undermining of history itself—and more directly relevant to the theater—are those accounts of the recent institutional history of theater that have argued the impossibility of any form of political radicalism to be found in scripted drama performed within a theater building. Baz Kershaw, in *The Radical in Performance* and in a series of articles, has argued eloquently the case that the ending of theatrical subsidy in the Thatcherite 1980s led to the emergence of powerful national theatrical institutions with an inbuilt antiradical bias. Commodification of theatrical entertainment and the marketing of culture to theatergoers defined as customers from the late 1970s onwards, has led Kershaw to believe that it is only outside custom-designed buildings, and through the move from “drama” to “performance,” that politically interrogatory and challenging live events can be found.¹ One by one, the contributors to the recent influential *Cambridge History of British Theatre* point to the clear division, in terms of political commitment, between the “older generation of post–World War Two British dramatists—Arden, Bond, Pinter, Griffiths, Edgar, Wesker, Churchill, Hare, Brenton, Barker, Wertenbaker—who variously attempted to use or explain history, and to locate the individual within a social, political, and thus often historical context” and later issue-based writers, operating outside the theater mainstream, who have no significant interest in the shaping of the present by past events.² Even

within the list of historically inflected writers compiled by Gottlieb, although some have written influential “state of the nation” plays, and others have produced work that looks at history through the refracting glass of myth or fiction, relatively few have confronted directly the events taking place in tracts of historical time.

My purpose in the present article is to consider two writers, Caryl Churchill and Howard Barker, who have been among the last to retain the ambition to dramatize involvement in the process of English history, and to make relevant connections between the nation’s present and its past. Churchill’s early work with the Joint Stock Company considered the nature of socialism and the degree of its compatibility with feminism, deploying a dramaturgy that, as commentators have noted, is a radicalization of Brechtian epic theater but not, finally, a repudiation of it.³ From very early on in his career, however, Howard Barker has adopted what David Barnett terms “anti-psychological, non-linear, and morally unstable dramaturgies” (later termed a “Theatre of Catastrophe”) that, in their pugnacious confrontation with liberal humanist credos and radical disregard for conventional morality, have been associated with Nietzschean conceptions of the *Übermensch*, with authorial cults, with Thatcherite sympathies, and with aspects of the postmodern.⁴

I will compare two plays that formed part of the early repertoire of the Joint Stock Company—itself one of the most overtly political and left-leaning of the alternative theater companies formed in the 1970s—Caryl Churchill’s *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) and Howard Barker’s *Victory* (1983).⁵ The plays are set in contiguous historical periods—*Light Shining* covering the era of the Second Civil War and Commonwealth, and *Victory* the time immediately following the Restoration of Charles II—but they are startlingly opposed in their representations of this important epoch in English history and in the dramatic theory that lies behind these representations. The plays can be read as in significant dialogue with one another; and the comparison sheds light on the nature of “committed” theater, on the complexities of historical representation in theater, and on the transition between theater subsidized by the state and theater privatized which is also, to a degree, the transition between modernity and postmodernity.

I

To understand why dramatists in the 1970s and 1980s might have wished to situate their own politics by means of plays about the English Civil War, it is necessary to say something about the representation of that conflict in the historiography accessible to Churchill and Barker. The point should emerge that writers of history plays do not inherit an account of the past that is a value-free domain of objectively recorded historical events. The English Civil War is a vital intellectual crux because it has been a battleground on which left- and right-wing historians play out their conflicting ideas of British nationhood. For those on the right of the political spectrum, the so-called "revisionist" tendency, Conrad Russell has been the most prominent spokesman. In his influential introduction to a collection of essays published in 1973 entitled *The Origins of the English Civil War*, Russell set himself against those Marxist and "Whig" historians who argued that the war was the inevitable result of deep social forces. Whereas the political left reads the Civil War as the most visible symptom of the momentous transition from feudalism to capitalism, as a weakened class of aristocratic and gentle landowners lock horns with a rising alliance of commercial and industrial profiteers, Russell argues that there was no inevitability about the outbreak of hostilities, which were the result of short-term political mistakes made by a bankrupt monarch with an inadequate bureaucracy, who had to raise money by unacceptable means in order to fight his wars. To Russell and the revisionists, there were no structural tensions in English society, which was deeply committed to hierarchy and inherited authority. There were differences of opinion inside the political nation, which was a small ruling elite mostly concerned with the conflict between Puritan and Arminian forms of Protestantism. Most people were not part of the political nation, had no real concept of opposition, and were concerned with local issues rather than national ones. Like many other European leaders, King Charles was engaged in a complex balancing act, trying to play off English against Scottish and Irish interests which, given the Catholic predominance in Ireland and the extreme Protestant complexion of Scotland, was in itself an incendiary situation. Large-scale social and economic changes typical of Marxist thought are unnecessary as paradigms

of explanation. Revisionism has behind it a relatively conservative, royalist bias clearly articulated in books like Jonathan Clark's *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, where he denies that there was any revolution and argues that "reaction against innovation" and "resistance to undesired change" are better explanations of the events of 1640.

For the purposes of this discussion, the left-wing perspective can be epitomized by the powerful writing of the political historian Christopher Hill, by whom the Civil War period is perceived as one in which a very different path for our historical development was possible; and one in which, although that path was not actually taken, trails were blazed that remained unexplored until the development of socialism two centuries later. Hill had been arguing since the 1940s that the English Revolution was a "bourgeois" revolution. In an essay published in 1980, Hill explains, against a background of repeated and wilful misunderstanding, that this does not mean "a revolution made by or consciously willed by the bourgeoisie":

The English Revolution, like all revolutions, was caused by the breakdown of the old society; it was brought about neither by the wishes of the bourgeoisie, nor by the leaders of the Long Parliament. But its outcome was the establishment of conditions far more favourable to the development of capitalism than those which prevailed before 1640. The hypothesis is that this outcome, and the Revolution itself, were made possible by the fact that there had already been a considerable development of capitalist relations in England, but that it was the structures, fractures, and pressures of the society, rather than the wishes of leaders, which dictated the outbreak of revolution and shaped the state which emerged from it.⁶

Such a formulation is radical because (1) it uses and accepts the term *revolution* rather than the term in use at the time, *rebellion*, (2) it affirms a belief in the kind of epochal change—from feudalism to capitalism—that was argued for by Marx, (3) it emphasizes societal pressures rather than individual personalities as the main agents of historical change, and (4) by implication, it suggests that the revolution developed the potential inherent in society at the time, and that therefore another such change, to socialism, could do so again. Two of Hill's books are particularly significant for our purposes, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) and *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977). The earlier book tells the story

of the formation, on democratic lines, of Cromwell's New Model Army, which served as a breeding ground for the radicals and sectaries. In 1647, the army elected representatives called Agitators, who functioned as a conduit for the Leveller movement. The Levellers were a "watchdog" group whose political objectives were to ensure that the democratic gains promised by the Civil War, in terms of widening of the franchise, proper representation, and power to the people, were actually made. They became convinced that what the war actually was achieving was the concentration of power in the hands of a different elite, and it was to avoid this that, through the Agitators, they put an Agreement of the People to the Army Council in October, 1647. Three months of debate followed, the so-called Putney Debates. But the true hero of Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* is Gerrard Winstanley, instigator of the True Leveller, or Digger, movement. Winstanley and his followers went straight for the jugular of the Civil War leaders. Their objective was not to argue over constitutional forms and theories. They understood that possession of land and of the wherewithal to make a living was the mechanism that made society work. So they began to occupy areas of waste and common land and put them under cultivation. Their theories were communist: when God first made the world, they argued, there were no distinctions of rank and no tenures of private property.

The pamphlet after which the play of Caryl Churchill's that I will be going on to discuss, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, was published in December 1648 and gave early expression to this egalitarian, communistic politics. There are an exhilarating couple of pages on Winstanley in Hill's book, which give us some idea of why it might have acted as such an inspiration to a radical theater troupe, the Joint Stock Company, and a left-wing dramatist, Caryl Churchill, in the mid-1970s:

Winstanley's conclusion, that communal cultivation of the commons was the crucial question, the starting-point from which common people all over England could build up an equal community, was absolutely right. Winstanley had arrived at the one possible democratic solution which was not merely backward-looking, as all other radical proposals during the revolutionary decades ... tended to be.... Collective cultivation of the waste by the poor could have had the advantages of large-scale cultivation, planned development, use of fertilizers, etc. It could have fed the expanding English population without disrupting the traditional way of life to anything like the extent that in fact happened.⁷

It was the failure of political programs, of all the concrete ways of making a difference that led some sectaries, in particular so-called Ranters like Abiezer Coppe and Lawrence Clarkson, to look for intensely individual solutions to their problems. Denying the existence of sin and hell, propagating the view that all things come from nature rather than God, earnestly anticipating the end of the world, the Ranters took themselves to alehouses where they drank, smoked, copulated, swore orgiastically—broke all the taboos that orthodox Puritanism under Cromwell was determined to enforce more rigidly than ever.

In the later book, *Milton and the English Revolution*, Christopher Hill teaches us to think of Milton not in the way we perhaps like to think of our great poets, as a judicious moderate, but actually as closely related to the radical sectaries who burgeoned in the Civil War: the Baptists, Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Seekers, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, and Muggletonians, who all had their version of how salvation was to be won and how God's kingdom was to be achieved on earth. Hill taught his readers to consider Milton not as the author of *Paradise Lost*, an English epic of universal significance, treating a theme as awe-inspiringly wide as the Fall and Redemption of Mankind, but as a writer whose corpus was shaped by the local circumstances and close political encounters of the time. By rights, Milton should not have lived to publish *Paradise Lost*. He ought to have been hanged, drawn, and quartered after the Restoration. Since 1642, when strict censorship was temporarily lifted as a result of abolition of the King's Court of Star Chamber, Milton had been publishing radical pamphlets. Like all extreme Protestants, he believed utterly in individual freedom of conscience. Religion was a transaction between the individual and Scripture, so that virtually anything a man believed as a result of sincere study of the Bible guided by the inner light of grace, could not be heretical. Free assembly, free discussion, uncensored publication, could not be wrong. Clearly, such opinions had political consequences. Milton was against traditional social hierarchies of rank, against the aristocrats and the monarch who held the social system in place. Paid clergymen, maintained by tithes, serving a state-sponsored church, operating in specially consecrated buildings as often as not festooned with idolatrous religious images, were impediments to genuine faith. Milton therefore opposed the Presbyterian tendency within Puritanism as

ferociously as he did the Catholics. His own contemporaries never quite knew how radical Milton's views were because the work of theology in which he really spilled the beans, the *De Doctrina Christiana*, remained unpublished until 1825. He was pro-divorce and in favor of polygamy, that much was known, and gained for himself an odd reputation as a libertine and defender of sexual excess. Many of the sectaries gained this reputation as a consequence of their "antinomian" beliefs: that is, the absolute emphasis on conscience and inner sincerity that meant no external legal sanctions were required to keep Christians in line. Milton disputed the doctrine of the Trinity, believing instead in the Arian heresy, and did not accept strict Calvinist theories of predestination since they were incompatible with free will. He shared in the popular, lower-class fervor at the coming of the millenium. The end of the world was at hand. After the overthrow of the Pope-Antichrist, God's Englishmen, the Chosen in the fight, would see the coming of Christ and his saints to reign on earth for a thousand years.

Hill's way of reading *Paradise Lost* and the later poems of Milton is as a coming to terms with the monumental defeat of 1660 and the Restoration: His own blindness becoming total in 1652; Cromwell's gradual swing to the right, establishing himself as Lord Protector, and almost accepting the Crown in 1657; the re-establishment of a state church; defeat of radicals like the Diggers; persecution of others like Quakers; the re-militarization of England, and finally, in 1660, the return of the king, and with the return of the king, political executions, censorship, profane amusements like the theater, and the licentiousness of courtiers. It was like Israel's return to bondage in Egypt: monarchy was slavery, a return to rebellion. By 1659, Milton's prose, like *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, was a hysterical attempt to prevent the inevitability of return to kingship. All of this gives Milton's stated purpose in *Paradise Lost*, to "assert eternal providence, / And justify the ways of God to men," a particular inflection. God certainly needed a defense for inflicting such a powerful defeat on his saints. While traditional readings of the poem seek to emphasize its moral and theological dimensions, implying that reading it against the background of contemporary politics would be to limit and to reduce its "universal" significance, Hill shows how the prelapsarian discussions and postlapsarian

disputes between Adam and Eve might be illuminated by knowledge of the debates between different sections of opinion amongst Parliamentarians as the Protectorate went on.

Was the Civil War, then, a victory or a defeat? Clearly, it depends on your politics. The tendency of Hill's later work is to argue that the "official" Revolution was a triumph for the sacred rights of property which brought about some redistribution in the nature of those who were property owners, clearing the decks for the rise of capitalism. But, if we attend to "history from below," we can see that there was another "unofficial" revolution that permitted ideas to be aired that would have established communal property, vastly widened democratic and legal institutions, liberated sexual mores, given greater freedom to women and disestablished the state church. Those voices could not be listened to at the time, but perhaps there will be a time when they can be.⁸

II

It should be clear, then, that in deciding to dramatize the period of the English Civil War in the 1970s and 1980s, and in representing the figure of John Milton onstage, writers were engaged in acts of writing that were already heavily ideologically charged. Howard Barker's play *Victory* (1983)—its title reeking of its post-Falklands/Malvinas War moment in April to June 1982—offers its audience that peculiar, inversely Pirandellian quality of pleasure afforded by the appearance as a dramatic character of a historical figure. As a matter of historical fact, the poet John Milton had to lie very low in the period immediately after the restoration of King Charles II in 1660. Act 2, scene 2, of Barker's play introduces John Milton, blind and silent, under the protection of the Royalist poet laureate Clegg. Clegg takes advantage of Milton's uncommunicative condition to brand him as a turncoat who kept a foot in both the Royalist and Parliamentary camps. The play's protagonist, Susan Bradshaw, is the wife of the executed Regicide John Bradshaw, president of the Council of State under Cromwell, who is undertaking what seems like a pious pilgrimage to collect together the pieces of her husband's severed body. She comes to visit Milton, of whom she was wholly in awe while her husband was alive. Now, however, she finds herself able to slap Milton's

face. A victory? The scene ends with Milton who, until then, has said virtually nothing, making this speech:

She slapped my face because her heart is broken. I find that comprehensible. When the war is won, wage war on the victors. Every civil war must be the parent of another. Those given laurels praise then execute. And their executioners, when the time comes, execute them too. Any amount of war a man will take, will acquiesce in his own destruction, even, provided that he knows the change takes place. That is the God in him. But if after the first war, you only heap praise on the victors, they will make themselves your masters, even ape the first oppressor and invite him back. Any amount of power a man will take, provided we permit it. That is the shit in him. Next time, should we start there must be no finish, or we shall slap one another's faces in the gardens of our enemies. (182)

The scene provides a characteristically “Barkerian” effect—a wholesale uncertainty on the audience’s part about how to interpret what they have just seen and heard. Is what Clegg says about Milton’s divided loyalty historically accurate? And why “Clegg”? If the dramatist can bring Milton onstage, why not his actual historical counterpart, Sir William Davenant? More immediately, the audience asks whether Milton’s inference is correct that Bradshaw is angry about the revolution’s failure to prevent the old corruptions from perpetuating themselves. In dramatic context, it is apparent that Milton has entirely misconstrued Bradshaw’s motives. Her iconoclastic assault is not a political victory, not an assertion of her more enduring commitment to radical politics. It is a personal victory for Bradshaw over her former self, a self that was entirely submissive and awestricken, a self that wrongly sought fulfilment in her husband’s political objectives. Barker himself has commented eloquently on this scene:

The poet has been an intimate collaborator of Bradshaw’s dead husband, and there is every reason to expect the two victims of the reactionary vendetta to throw themselves together and console themselves for disaster. But Bradshaw has banned this kind of reconciliation from her life. The spectacle of the blind Milton fills her with contempt, and in a surge of cruelty and mischief she strikes him across the face, deriding him. In this scene, which exemplifies the collapse of solidarity and the suspension of morality, the beauty of Bradshaw’s exhilaration, her poetic recollection of lost and unrecoverable life, combined with her terroristic attack on a helpless man, serve to create a dramatic climate where political values are loosed into the air, and the audience, deprived of the predictable, is obliged to construct meaning for itself at least until the stricken Milton,

nursing his smacked face, settles the chaos in a moving, but essentially trite revolutionary catechism.⁹

“Political values are loosed into the air”; “trite revolutionary catechism”: the extent of Barker’s investment here—his very phrasing an allusion to one of Karl Marx’s most famous passages (“all that is solid melts into air”)—suggests that Bradshaw’s victory over herself and over Milton emblemizes a victory of the dramatist’s own. Barker is on record as saying that he uses history “not for nostalgia, but to hack away at comforting images of the past in order to evoke, or unlock, feelings about the present.”¹⁰

III

Just as the English Civil War is for modern historians a site of cultural contestation, an anvil on which they hammer out their opposing models of political nationhood—its documents peculiarly plastic and malleable, fueling various methodologies that rest upon sharply distinguished ideological convictions—in recent theater, dramaturgy that is capable of modeling the past dynamically rather than statically, has been something of a holy grail. Barker’s reference to “cruelty and mischief” above offers a clue to one provenance of the theater theory that supports the dramaturgy of his scene. For the dramatists under our consideration here, a major challenge was to assimilate and develop key aspects of Brechtian stagecraft while modifying, or even wholly rejecting, the ideological premises upon which the stagecraft depended. For Bertolt Brecht, theatrical techniques had to do justice to Marx’s dictum in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that the purpose of philosophy was not to interpret the world, but to change it. An art that produces activists rather than intellectuals, a committed art able to transfuse its commitment to spectators: this is the goal implied in the following statement from *A Short Organum for the Theatre*:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.¹¹

To Brecht, the detailed reconstructions of photo-realism were likely to result in an inert, spent superficiality. In the theoretical treatise called *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, Brecht makes his philosopher say:

The crux of the matter is that true realism has to do more than just make reality recognizable in the theatre. One has to be able to see through it too. One has to be able to see the laws that decide how the processes of life develop. These laws can't be spotted by the camera. Nor can they be spotted if the audience only borrows its heart from one of the characters involved.¹²

Even in circles where fundamental political values are shared, however, there has been vigorous debate about the toolkit best able to create theater that makes the fundamental laws of the life-process visible to an audience. Within socialist intellectual circles there has been endless debate about the appropriate way to represent the past. For Theodor Adorno, writing in the mid-1960s, it was Brecht himself who produced superficial art. His essay "Commitment" argues that art certainly should be politically committed, but that it was the seemingly noncommitted Beckett, and not the overtly committed Brecht, whose drama was best equipped to achieve real political objectives. Brecht's drama, to Adorno, very often achieves only a trivialization of the real: one example he gives is of Brecht's play about the rise of Fascism, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, in which the Fascists are allegorized as a greengrocery cartel called the Cauliflower Trust. Adorno says:

Instead of a conspiracy of the wealthy and the powerful, we are given a trivial gangster organisation, the cabbage trust. The true horror of fascism is conjured away...the ridicule to which Ui is consigned renders it innocuous ... the artistic principle of simplification not only purged politics of the illusory distinctions projected by subjective reflections into social objectivity, as Brecht intended, but it also falsified the very objectivity which didactic drama laboured to distil.¹³

And he mentions in the same breath the Charlie Chaplin film *The Great Dictator*, which "loses all satirical force and becomes obscene when a Jewish girl can hit a line of storm-troopers on the head with a pan without being torn to pieces" (184). In an extended commentary on his trilogy *The War Plays*, Edward Bond has rejected both Brecht and Beckett as dramatists capable of making theater into an engaged social phenomenon, Beckett because his art is determinist and Brecht because his "alienation" effects depended on the false conception that the mind can escape from itself into a mythical objectivity. Bond's contribution is the "Theatre Event," stage action that communicates a particular philosophy, not a psychology, through the social space of theater:

We need to fill the gap [the stage space] by showing how the existing ownership of machines (and therefore of society and the psyche—of our reality) limits our humanness and freedom, and how nevertheless we may make ourselves and society freer and more human.¹⁴

Apparently, then, the primary objective of the valuable historical play is not to produce mere costume-drama, to re-create the past in a series of tableaux, but to choose an era or chain of events that has some resonance for the present time. Only then is the resultant artwork likely to support the broad claim of “history men” everywhere: that we can’t understand where we are unless we know where we’ve been. Learning the lessons of Brecht’s debates with other left-wing theorists like Adorno and the Hungarian critic Georg Lukács might entail preserving enough detail and substance to give the audience a genuine sense of the past and the feeling that it matters, which they might not get from an action that presents as a mere parable.

Barker, meanwhile, as his reference to “mischief and cruelty” in the quotation above might suggest, derives his theoretical underpinnings from a different provenance. Peter Brook’s 1964 “Theatre of Cruelty” season, picking up on a European theatrical tradition deriving from Antonin Artaud, cross-fertilized by psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic models articulated by such as Marcuse and Reich, has more relevance to his theater experiments, designed to blur the divisions between the private and the public persona. As Simon Shepherd writes, in reference to Laingian psychology:

The message that is carried by madness’s truth says that everyday norms are imposed on human beings, and the imposition does violence to them. In terms of this message, the development of mass consumerist culture doesn’t merely corrupt people’s tastes and modes of living so much as actively suppress the human being’s full self. This is the point at which two major modern theories meet: a Marxist analysis of how capitalism turns human beings into objects finds shared ground with a psychoanalytic stress on how individuals learn the repression of desire.¹⁵

The meeting-point of Marx and Freud is the point at which the personal becomes political, the point at which “identity politics” begins to be the playwright’s focus. We can trace in the move from politically “relevant” plays to those that trace the social expression of intense desire a move from the 70s to the 80s and from socialist to Thatcherite Britain: from

the modern to the postmodern in that the multiple social, sexual, racial, and other identities assumed and doffed like hats by the new-style individual self, becomes the object of investigation. It is the move from *Light Shining* to *Victory*.

IV

Against this theoretical background, it may be clear that the subject matter and the dramatic techniques employed by Caryl Churchill in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* were intended to secure a happy fusion of resonant historical period and kinetic theatrecraft. Working as she was in the mid-70s with both the Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment companies—the latter concerned to put women's experience at the center of the stage—Caryl Churchill found in Hill's conception of the mid-seventeenth century a dynamic conception of history and of the part played by women within it. Although recent historians of women's experience do not agree that sexual liberation was as significant an aspect of that experience during the Civil War as Hill himself believed it to be, there is agreement that unprecedented degrees of self-expression were granted to women. Patricia Crawford summarizes the position thus:

The main effect of the English Revolution on women was in providing greater opportunities for them to express their ideas individually and collectively. Their public statements of their views enhanced female self-confidence; women were more prepared to publish challenges to patriarchal power at the end of the seventeenth century than they were a century earlier.¹⁶

Females challenging patriarchal power is an important aspect of the "history from below" that is dramatized in *Light Shining*. Churchill's play tries to capture the enormous energy liberated by the individual self-confidence and the communal power of the sectaries in the Civil War period, despite the fact that the trajectory of the radicals was a trajectory of defeat. The play was one of the earliest productions of the Joint Stock Company, a company founded in circumstances that suggest analogies to those of the Civil War. Britain in 1974 was again a country in crisis. More value was wiped off the Stock Exchange in that year than in the slump of the 1930s, the balance of trade deficit had trebled as a result of the huge hike in oil prices imposed by the Middle Eastern Oil Producing

countries, and industrial giants like British Leyland, Rolls Royce, and Court Line required huge injections of government capital to stave off bankruptcy. Politically, the nation was again a battleground between left and right: a state of emergency had been declared in November 1973 when the miners' strike interrupted energy supplies. By February 1974, Prime Minister Edward Heath went to the country on the issue of "who governs?" presenting the question as a direct standoff between extremism and moderation, between the dangerously revolutionary forces of organized labor and the business and professional interests being held to ransom by them. Two general elections followed, bringing in a Labour government offering to make a "social contract" with the trade unions and to protect jobs by bailing out the several industries forced into crisis by inflation and the three-day week. Just as important, in terms of context, as this macropolitical climate were the various campaigns to secure squatters' rights and fair rent legislation, and to protest against scandals like the vast city-center office block Centre Point being allowed to remain empty while elsewhere in London the numbers of the homeless increased. It was in this climate that Max Stafford-Clark and Bill Gaskill got together to form an innovative theater company called Joint Stock, whose entry in the *British Alternative Theatre Directory* for 1982 reads as follows:

Joint Stock's work centres on its unique relationship with writers. Each show is the outcome of an intensive research period in which the themes and ideas of the project are researched and explored by the actors and the director in collaboration with the writer, who then writes the play. The text goes through further revision during the unusually long rehearsal period before it is finally shown.... Joint Stock operates as a collective. Everybody working for the company at any one time has a voice in the policy and conduct of the company. Also involved in this structure are representatives of the actors, directors, designers and stage managers who have worked for Joint Stock over a period of time. Each show usually contains 7 actors, 3 stage managers, a touring electrician, director, writer, designer, lighting designer. The general manager is the only full-time employee.¹⁷

Joint Stock were unusual in that their early working practices were materially affected by their experience of rehearsing a particular play, David Hare's *Fanshen*, which is about the coming of revolution to a small Chinese town. Reading Rob Ritchie's enjoyable history of the company, *The*

Joint Stock Book, one is struck by the extent to which the debates that go on within the company actually relate to those of the Civil War period: the conflict between a group organized democratically from the bottom up, and directors who at times want to impose their own single vision on the collective—pretty much the conflict inherent in the Putney Debates.¹⁸ Caryl Churchill's own account of the rehearsal methods for *Light Shining* captures the excitement of an improvisatory approach to playmaking, scripting coming at a fairly late stage in the proceedings:

I'd never seen an exercise or improvisation before and was as thrilled as a child at a pantomime. Each actor had to draw from a lucky dip of bible texts and get up at once and preach, urging some extraordinary course of action justified from the Bible: 'Suffer little children to come unto me' became an impassioned plea to lay children in the street and run them over with a steamroller. They drew cards, one of which meant you were eccentric to the power of that number, and then improvised a public place—a department store, a doctor's waiting room—till it gradually became clear who it was, how they were breaking conventions, how the others reacted.... One day we had a prayer meeting where everyone had to speak; someone wanted to eat an apple but Max [Stafford-Clark, the director] made him pass it round and everyone had to say something about it; the last person didn't say anything but bit into it; and that ended up in the play. (19)

Light Shining articulates into a series of short scenes, each one having its own separate point to make, or illuminating a different facet of the collective experience of the war. But the separate scenes are governed by a before-during-after rhythm which is extremely effective in giving a synoptic view of the move from revolutionary fervor through the counter-revolutionary effect of Putney, to the defeated individualism and quietism of the end. The greatest innovation in the staging is the demand that a single actor play several roles, and furthermore, a role can be played by more than one actor. This is even more radical than anything Brecht attempted. The idea that two different actors can play the same part in different scenes effectively prevents the audience from identifying too closely and throws the emphasis on a collective rather than an individual experience. Scenes are shaped by what Brecht would have called "a *gestus*." The scene "Hoskins Interrupts the Preacher," for example, effectively plays out in miniature the conflict at the heart: the Civil War has loosened the bonds of authority so that individuals are now permitted to interrupt

sermons with their own observations. But as Jone Hoskins finds, there are strict limits to this licensed freedom: it does not extend to women, or to questioning the doctrine that only some souls are of the Elect. Hoskins's view that women should also be allowed to express themselves and that everyone may be saved is given short shrift. Documentary material is presented alongside the fictional material. Particularly striking is the staging of an edited section of the Putney Debate. This poses an enormous challenge to actors who have to capture and retain audience interest for a complex and nuanced debate about how far voting rights will be extended in the new state. Political rhetoric has to be made compelling, and for that, the text has to be wonderfully well spoken. Perhaps the most purely "alienating" scene in the Brechtian sense is "A Butcher Talks to His Customers," a scene that has no narrative function, but in which a tradesman does the unspeakably anti-capitalistic thing of telling paying customers that they don't deserve and can't have the meat for which they are willing to pay good money, and working up to a superbly Swiftian climax.

Howard Barker's play *Victory* has a title scarcely less enigmatic than Churchill's. Does the play celebrate the Royalist victory over the Parliamentarians? Susan Bradshaw's quest is to collect the scattered limbs of her executed husband John Bradshaw, who had been president of the court that had condemned Charles I and later president of the Council of State under Cromwell. This appears to be an act of deep piety on Susan's part, an homage to the sacred memory of a great Revolutionary leader, but as the play goes on, it becomes apparent that Susan is in the process of remaking the self. In scene 2 for example, Susan seems to be far less disgusted by the hideous sexual thuggery of the Cavalier Ball than we might expect her to be: she responds to his nakedly expressed passion: "There is a sort of cleanliness in you. A sort of honour in your vileness I can understand" (139). She is wilfully unkind and nonmaternal to her children, McConochie and Cropper, disgusting the latter with her open discussion of her husband's genitals. Thereafter, Susan Bradshaw takes to the road and the depth of her resentment against her puritan ideologue husband becomes clear. For her, John Bradshaw's constant intellectualizing has been a kind of indecent exposure:

I shame him? What about him shaming me? Getting his ugly reason out, his great moral purpose, showing it in public, and his wisdom! Could not

walk with him five minutes but he had his wisdom out, forever exhibiting his mind, was ever a mind hung out so much in public, dirty thing it was, great monster of a mind so flashed and brazenly dangled? (152)

Scene 5 is a useful one to compare with Caryl Churchill's *Light Shining*, in that the latter play treats its personnel of impoverished agricultural workers and mendicants and self-taught revolutionaries with consistent sympathy. Here, however, Bradshaw and Scrope come upon a band of impoverished former republicans, who are symbolically burying a fire-arm in the hope that it will be needed for a future rising. Bradshaw seizes the opportunity not only to extort precious food from them by flaunting her identity as Bradshaw's wife, but also to steal their money. These actions are part, again, of a conscious effort to remold herself. The distance she has traveled from Puritanism and revolutionary fervor is obvious in the speech she makes to Devonshire in act 2, scene 1:

Yes means no resistance. Yes means going with the current. Yes means lying down when it rains and standing up when it's sunny. Yes urge. Yes womb. Yes power. I lived with a man whose no was in the middle of his heart, whose no kept him thin as a bone and stole the juices from him. No is pain and yes is pleasure, no is man and yes is nature. (174)

To gauge the extent of the difference between Churchill's collectivism and the extreme individualism of Barker's *Victory*, it is necessary only to compare the climactic scenes at the end of both plays. Churchill's last scene before the postscript recreates the atmosphere of a Ranter or early Quaker prayer meeting, set in an alehouse, flavored with drink and tobacco smoke and creating a jerky stop-start sensation of spontaneous events. Rather than narrative, this seems to be more musical in movement, touching on several different tonalities, from the dangerously zealous Cobbe, to the earnest Claxton, the alienated Briggs and the troubled Brotherton. It has the flowing open-endedness of Chekhov. Churchill's scene celebrates the attempt on the part of poor people to come to a personal understanding of God and salvation, to conduct a prayer meeting in the absence of the intellectuals upon whom they have usually relied. Failure though it is, this is a scene of warmth, of charity, of rhapsody. It would be difficult to imagine anything colder and crueller than Barker's scene. King Charles has forced the pregnant Devonshire into an unwanted marriage to the appalling banker Hambro, as a way of keeping his paymaster sweet. The language is gross and reductive throughout:

Devonshire: Charlie, call it off.

Charles: Who says I ain't a mighty mover of destinies, flinging coldbummed bankers down with Lady Roaring Hips? These old republicans will fuck shears for an earldom.

Devonshire: Call it off.

Charles: I could lie beneath the mattress just to hear old Hambro grieve. Will he shove sovereigns up your slit? Tell all, won't you, and call the infant Ajax, you must admire its tenacity, no prod or quinine's shaken it, nor baths in boiling cowshit, I believe. (186–87)

There is a horrific coup de théâtre when Hambro unwraps a “present” from Charles to find it is the mutilated figure of Scrope, Bradshaw’s faithful secretary, who has had his lips removed and a copy of his beloved master’s utopian political treatise hung round his neck. Pathetically, Scrope is still trying to mouth Republican slogans, but is stunned by the sight of Bradshaw consorting with the Monarchists and is subjected to brutal insults from her. Next, the Cavalier Ball enters and stabs Hambro, thinking that in so doing he will be winning a victory for his king over the representative of the Parliamentarians. But this is just another pathetic gesture of defeat. From then on, the audience is confronted with a slideshow of contradictory stage images. Charles enters with the final piece of the jigsaw of her husband’s body that Susan has spent the entire play trying to collect, his head, which he forces down into the puddle of Hambro’s blood. Emotionally overwrought as he now is, Charles confesses to his shallowness, his sense of himself as a sham and of royalty’s defeat by capitalist interests. Strangely, it is Susan who takes the mutilator of her faithful Scrope and the murderer of her husband into her lap, nursing him tenderly. Before the scene ends, Bradshaw is savagely beaten up by a footman who blames her for his demotion in the household. If the audience is unsure what to make of this, uncertain of the view of the period that finally emerges, the play will have succeeded in achieving what Barker refers to as “the suspension of moral predictability.” This is apparent in his characterisation of Charles II, history’s “merrie monarch.” Charles appears first in scene 3 as a sex-crazed, exhibitionistic, infantile, regressive cynic, who amuses himself by shying skittles at the headless trunk of Bradshaw while being masturbated by his mistress Devonshire and while his court poet, Clegg, spouts verses of exaggerated praise for his Royal Highness. He is a capricious clown and yet there is manifest a glittering intelligence, an entirely self-aware ability to control subversive elements.

In the context of the entire play, and in the context of Barker's writings about the theater, we can read Bradshaw's repudiation of Milton as the rejection of an emblem of the political left, a rejection as powerful in its way as Falstaff's by Prince Hal. It is a "goodbye to all that," the "all that" of committed political theater, of the belief that theater can be the cultural arm of a communal endeavor to effect revolutionary change. It is tempting to read the difference between Churchill and Barker as that between a dramatist whose theme is socialism's internal struggle to reconcile its revolutionary and evolutionary tendencies, and one who, writing in the Thatcherite 1980s, has accepted the newly prevailing political emphasis on individualism. This would, however, be a simplification that does not do justice to Barker's work. To some extent Barker endorses Hill's account of the Civil War as a clearing of the decks for capitalism, as is suggested in the deliberately anachronistic "Interlude" scene in *Victory* (set in the vaults of the Bank of England), which depicts the restored Charles II being dictated to by powerful financial interests. And Barker's theater is more closely related to the austerities of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty than to the corporate-hospitality entertainment that Thatcherism required its company-sponsored bread and circuses to deliver. Nevertheless, Barker's theory of theater has been evolved in significant opposition to the emphasis on collectivism, documentary drama, and Brechtian alienation that characterizes the early work of Churchill and Hare. His mature work is "post-socialist." It takes the collapse of socialism for granted and considers the question of what will replace it. For Barker, the answer lies in "radical individualism," a credo to the effect that individuals can have multiple selves and that to liberate the authentic self is more important than to act according to moral or political imperatives. Here is a characteristic statement, in respect of the so-called Theatre of Catastrophe that Barker wishes to inaugurate:

A braver theatre asks the audience to test the validity of the categories it believes it lives by. In other words, it is not about life as it is lived at all, but about life as it might be lived, about the thought which is not licensed, and about the abolished unconscious. Sympathy, and the sudden liquidation of sympathy, the permanent disruption of character, the instability of motive, are some of the means available to this project. The abolition of routine distinctions between good and bad actions, the sense that good and evil co-exist within the same psyche, that freedom and kindness may

not be compatible, that pity is both a poison and an erotic stimulant, that laughter might be as often oppressive as it is rarely liberating, all these constitute the territory of a new theatrical practice, which lends its audience the potential of a personal re-assessment in the light of dramatic action. The consequence of this is a modern form of tragedy which I would call Catastrophism. (52–53)

Barker distrusts the cheap effects of comedy and satire, the canned laughter of audiences who are not stretched or forced to confront their own contradictions. He is not afraid to have his Catastrophic Theatre labeled “elitist.” In a very bold essay entitled “Radical Elitism in the Theatre,” Barker argues that “there is only one sin left, and it is identified as Elitism, a sin for which left and right share an obsessive contempt, and consequently it is a sin with compelling attractions” (29). His theater is elitist in the sense that it does not presume the audience to be a “semi-educated mass in need of protection, and protection in particular from complexity, ambiguity, and the potential disorder which lurks behind the imagination” (1). He presents himself as a radical individualist, who has paid the price for writing uncommercial plays that eschew realism, journalism, simplicity, and comedy. He comes across as a charismatic despot, and his protagonists are frequently also charismatic despots, capable of seeing what is right for others and having the necessary iron in the soul to force others to make the difficult choices and live up to their potential. Barker’s plays and writings on theater are troubling experiences because there is a very delicate balance to be struck if his fierce hunger for vision amid imaginative liberation of the self is not to shade over into romanticized absolutism.

In the final speech of David Hare’s play *The Absence of War* (1993), a defeated George Jones, Leader of the Labour Party, directs at the audience the following questions: “Is this history? Is everything history? Could we have done more? Was it possible? And how shall we know?”¹⁹ Hare’s play is a distinguished contribution to the by-now rich dramatic corpus on the “defeat of the left,” dealing as it does with the failure of the Labour Party to win the election in 1992. As Jones’s anguished questions might indicate, however, the play is concerned not only with a political debate, but with the issue of cultural representation. How do we write about the events of the recent or remote past? Does calling events “history” imply that they are irrevocably past, unchangeable, not in any way living on

into the shaping of the present? Or is there a way of representing them such that they strike the audience as at various points alterable? What are cultural artifacts doing when they turn to history for subject matter? How do such artifacts avoid being mere period pieces, telling us what we already know and cannot influence? These, as I hope to have shown, have been some of the central issues addressed by serious theater in recent times.

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NOTES

¹ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999).

² Vera Gottlieb, *Cambridge History of British Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 412–13.

³ See, for instance, Frances Gray, "Mirrors of Utopia: Caryl Churchill and Joint Stock," in *British and Irish Drama since 1960*, ed. James Acheson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 47–59: "A Joint Stock play ... focused upon ordinary members of specific communities, often in a state of flux and change; it sought to demonstrate clearly, through speech, movement and image, the political meaning of each scene—what Brecht called the *gestus*" (49); and Janelle Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style," in *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 174–93: "Using an epic dramaturgy many have linked to Brecht, Churchill placed her characters as social subjects at the intersections of economic, religious, and political forces which disciplined their sexuality and prescribed their gender" (175).

⁴ David Barnett, "Howard Barker: Polemic Theory and Dramatic Practice, Nietzsche, Metatheatre, and the Play *The Europeans*," *Modern Drama* 44, no. 4 (2001): 458–75 (458). See, on those various positions, Robert Shaughnessy, "Howard Barker, the Wrestling School, and the Cult of the Author," *New Theatre Quarterly* 5, no. 19 (1989): 264–71; Gunther Klotz, "Howard Barker: Paradigm of Postmodernism," *New Theatre Quarterly* 7, no. 25 (1991): 20–26; Liz Tomlin, "The Politics of Catastrophe: Confrontation or Confirmation in Howard Barker's Theatre," *Modern Drama* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 66–77.

⁵ References to *Light Shining* are to Caryl Churchill, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1985). References to *Victory* are to Howard Barker, *Collected Plays Volume 1* (London: John Calder and New York: Riverrun Press, 1990).

⁶ Christopher Hill, "A Bourgeois Revolution?" in *People and Ideas in 17th Century England* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 95–96.

⁷ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972; reprint, 1976), 130.

⁸ It should be stressed that the account given above of Civil War historiography does not begin to do justice to the diversity and complexity of the debate. To render that complexity

adequately is not my major concern, but to those who would like to get to grips with it, I would recommend the following sources in addition to those mentioned in the text: R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution Revisited* (London, 1977), esp. chaps.7–10; *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics 1603–1642*, ed. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (London: Longman, 1989), esp. chap. 1; Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (London: Macmillan, 1991); J. S. Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (London: Longman, 1993).

⁹Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey (London: John Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1989), 59 (hereafter cited as “Rabey”).

¹⁰ Howard Barker, *Gambit* 41 (London: John Calder, 1984), 35.

¹¹ Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1949), quoted from *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang; London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 190.

¹² Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965; reprinted 1977), 27.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, “Commitment” (1962), trans. Francis McDonagh, in *Aesthetics and Politics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso 1977; reprinted 1986), 184–85.

¹⁴ Edward Bond, *The War Plays*, rev. ed. (London: Methuen, 1991), 303.

¹⁵ Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack, *English Drama: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 346.

¹⁶ Patricia Crawford, “The Challenges to Patriarchalism: How Did the Revolution Affect Women?” in *Revolution and Restoration: England in the 1650s*, ed. John Morrill (London: Collins and Brown, 1992), 119.

¹⁷ Catherine Itzin, “Joint Stock Company,” in *British Alternative Theatre Directory 1972–94* (Eastbourne: John Offord, 1982), 77–78.

¹⁸ *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective*, ed. and intro. Rob Ritchie (London: Methuen, 1987), 1–22.

¹⁹ David Hare, *The Absence of War* (London: Faber, 1993), 110.