

# *Not Not Not Not Not Enough:* Caryl Churchill's ecological drama and commitment

*Carmen Gallo*

## *Abstract*

The focus of this paper is Caryl Churchill's political engagement, especially her first experiments with the ecological implications of capitalism. It examines Churchill's ecological dramaturgy and imagination before the 'anthropocentric turn' of the new millennium. My aim is to explore how she represents environmental issues in three plays written between the 1970s and the 1990s, works that belong to three different genres: *Not Not Not Not Not Enough* (1971), a dystopia set in an apocalyptic 2010; *Lives of Great Poisoners* (1991), which is modelled on Greek tragedy and bourgeois drama, but, significantly, uses 'poison' as an allegory of pollution; and, finally, *The Skriker* (1994), which relies on some features of the fairy tale to investigate the catastrophic long-term effects of natural disruption. Churchill's plays do not discuss scientific notions or map disasters taking place around the world; more importantly, they seek to offer powerful and disturbing dramatic experiences that subvert our established thoughts and encourage us to imagine a world based on entirely different values. Moreover, they advocate for dialogue between generations and call on everyone to take responsibility to ensure a decent future for the earth and its inhabitants.

*Key-words:* Caryl Churchill, ecocriticism, British contemporary drama, experimental theatre, pharmakon, dystopia, environmental disasters, crisis of imagination.

## **1. Churchill's ecological imagination before the turn of the millennium**

During her decades-long career, Caryl Churchill has repeatedly intermingled urgent contemporary issues such as feminism, consumerism, climate change, and environmental crises in order to offer a bigger and complex political picture of the effects of

globalization in a gain-driven world. The powerful resources of her theatrical imagination are exploited to promote collective engagement and draw the audience beyond a passive, individual awareness of the contradictions or conflicts of our present time. This call to publicly commit to general concerns is mostly evident in what Sheila Rabillard calls Churchill's "ecological drama," a genre to which her 1971 radio drama *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* can be ascribed, as well as the plays *Fen* (1983); *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1991); *The Skriker* (1994); *Far Away* (2000); *We Turned on the Light* (2006), a choral work; and the recent *Escaped Alone* (2016). According to Rabillard, these works testify to a shift from the "localized environmental concerns (as in *Fen*) to the ecological effects of globalization and the alienated consumerism of late capitalism (*The Skriker*, *Far Away*)." They show the tension between what Rabillard calls "environmental justice" and "deep ecology," in which the former claims an ethical position against economic exploitation of natural resources and the inequalities coming from it, while the latter promotes a radical rethinking of the human and the necessity to overcome an anthropocentric view of our relationship with animals and nature (Rabillard 2009: 88-89).

Both these views are connected to the controversial definition of our time as the Anthropocene, a term made popular by P. J. Crutzen, who seeks to underline the incomparable impact of human development on ecosystems (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, Crutzen 2010). Vicky Angelaki has synthetically retraced the complex eco-lexicon emerging since the 1930s as well as the impossibility of identifying the precise historical origins of the phenomenon (2019, pp. 5-8; see also Lewis, Maslin 2015). Generally, the term Anthropocene reveals that the exploitation of nature has accelerated due to population growth and the race for new technologies. While these facts appear to be indisputable, it has also been suggested that this fashionable and apparently militant label could end up obliterating economic responsibilities and the interests of global capitalism that stand behind them. As Christopher Nealon puts it, "It's not so much Homo Sapiens as the rich who are destroying the earth – rich people, rich nations" (2015).

The concept of our time as mainly anthropocentric is also blamed for reinforcing the idea of nature as totally dependent on human agency, a position recently questioned by some who propose to

move beyond this polarization (humankind vs. nature), by blurring the boundaries between human, animal, and natural kingdoms (Braidotti 2013). These post-human ideologies are accused in their turn of undermining calls to act against immediate or impending disasters, by fostering elitist utopias that envision nature taking back control of the earth, even to the detriment of the human species (Guha 1998).

Although these conflicting views had not clearly emerged during the period of Churchill's first ecological plays, symptoms of the implications of selfishness and capitalism can already be found in some of her plays written between the 1970s and 1990s, a time when environmentalism became a mass movement in Britain, with its own political party (The Green Party) and think-tanks such as the New Economics Foundation (Prendiville 2014).

"For Churchill, dramatizing the political is not just a question of content but also of form" (Aston-Diamond 2009: 2). I want to take this as a point of departure to focus on some forms of Churchill's ecological dramaturgy and imagination before the 'anthropocentric turn' of the new millennium. My aim is to explore how she uses her distinctive experimental forms – temporal organization, disruptive speech-patterns and variations on genre – to offer reflections on two of the most important crises of our time. The first is the environmental crisis, which involves science, technology, capitalism and human selfishness. The second is what we might call a crisis of the imagination: the difficulty of *imagining* a different world, of thinking the unthinkable, that is threatening the world more than climate change, as recently suggested by Amitav Gosh (2016).

I will focus especially on three works that belong to three different genres: *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971), a dystopia set in an apocalyptic 2010; *Lives of Great Poisoners* (1991), which is modelled on Greek tragedy and bourgeois drama, but, significantly, uses 'poison' as an allegory of pollution; and finally *The Skriker* (1994), which relies on some features of the fairy tale to investigate the catastrophic long-term effects of natural disruption.

These plays share two aspects that make them worthy of a comparative analysis: they all deal with pollution, and they all rely on and destroy the claustrophobic conventions and assumptions of dramatic or literary tradition. In *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* the dystopian world is described by means of the naturalistic

setting of a room. In *Lives of Great Poisoners* we find a mix of genres, including detective story, *feuilleton*, and comedy of manners, all complicated by dance and music being much more than ancillary elements. Any mimetic illusion in this play is undermined constantly by the use of historical anachronism and by the same actors playing different roles during the performance. Finally, in *The Skriker* the fairy tale genre is used to suggest a sort of *unheimlich* feeling and the impossibility of a happy ending: familiar forms of English folklore return from an archaic past in distorted forms, which unsettle the present state of things and pose a threat to the future of humankind.

Another common aspect of these ecological works is their confusing temporalities. Although 'eco-' and 'geo-'critical studies insist on the relevance of spaces, places, and territories in contemporary thought (see Tally and Battista 2016), time plays a crucial role in Churchill's dramatic representations of environmental crises. Her plays do not discuss scientific notions or map disasters taking place around the world; more importantly, they show the difficulty of grasping a climate crisis which has built over a long time span and call on the confrontation among generations to guarantee a decent future to the earth and its inhabitants.

A key word in Churchill's ethical horizon, which connects the environmental content (pollution) and the emphasis on temporality, is responsibility, a notion that always calls for public, collective, and political engagement. According to Churchill's socialist views, individual acts are simply not enough in the face of global capitalism. For this reason, a collective awareness is necessary to promote social change on a wider scale. Theatre is not enough *per se*, but deconstruction of genres and disturbing representations can defy our poor (aesthetic and political) imagination, that is to say, both our fossilized ideas about dramatic experiences and our conformist thoughts about uncontrolled scientific progress or capitalism as the only possible ways forward.

## **2. *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*: a dystopia of contemporary consumerism**

*Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*, directed by John Tydeman, was broadcast together with Churchill's play *Abortive* on BBC Radio3 in 1971. Churchill chose a date in the future millennium,

2010, which seemed very distant at the time, as the setting for a dystopian world in which people live in one-room cellblocks in “the Londons,” a toponym that suggests unrestrained urban speculation and widespread pollution everywhere in Britain. This is inferred by the fact that Mick, a pragmatic sixty-year-old man, asks Vivian, a younger married woman who wants to move in with him, to spray oxygen all over the room. They are waiting for Mike’s son, Claude, a wealthy famous musician who may be able to help them move to a cottage in the country (in a less polluted area). Pollution is so extreme that oxygen is hard to find, and it is sold in bottles by those who can afford them. The same goes for plants, which, since nothing of the ‘common good’ remains, can only be purchased. The audience is forced to confront the worst consequences of the capitalistic exploitation of environmental resources, by watching characters live in a world in which oxygen is part of the economic dynamics of scarce supply and high demand.

In the very first lines of the play, Vivian gives a dramatic account of the situation and her health:

VIVIAN: Shall I tell you what what I bought today? Not enough enough oxygen in this block, why always headache. Spoke caretaker, caretaker says speak manager, manager says local authority won’t give us won’t give us the money. Said I said what’s no point giving us faster – all be dead corpses in the faster lifts if there’s not not not not not enough oxygen. Caretaker caretaker said his part his personal if it was up to if it was down to him would punt big plants big plants plants plants in every room. [...] (Churchill 1990: 39)

Vivian immediately presents the paradox of the technological progress of her time: faster lifts are available and are much easier to obtain than oxygen and plants. More than that, her impossibility to speak except in short breaths – as is evident from her syncopated syntax – testifies to physical damage that affects her language and probably her thoughts as well. As Yeliz Biber Vangölü observes, “The linguistic disruption occurs as a result of the displacement of the human being from nature, a condition highlighted by the clash between the human organism and the oxygen spray that, absurdly, substitutes for natural air. [...] there is ‘not enough oxygen’ to transform the concepts into vocalised words” (2017: 199).

Significantly, Vivian is the only person to embody the natural disruption of this apocalyptic world. Mick is older and was somehow able to preserve his skills. Claude, his son, is much younger and, being born into this world, has found a way to adapt to it. For Vivian, instead, the disruption and the effects of pollution are registered in her compromised body and language, which testify to the degradation of the ecosystem in which she lives. As Greg Garrand notes, the “trope of pollution is historically implicated in both environmental destruction and salvation since Bacon ‘discovered’ pollution in the modern sense [...]. From an eco-critical perspective, [it] reflects the ambivalent role of science as both a producer of environmental hazards and a critical analyst of them” (Garrand 2004: 8).

“Scientia potentia est”: science/knowledge is power, as Bacon wrote in his *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597); this power can be used to invent new technologies and to describe and analyse both their sustainability and their devastating impact. As mentioned earlier, in the play Mike is old enough to remember the world as it was before 2010. His memories give the audience glimpses into the past: when he was young (in the 1970s) he could still walk outside without fear of intoxication; now grass is a sightseeing attraction that poor people can only look at from afar. At the beginning of the play, while waiting for Claude, Vivian sees a sparrow and opens the window. “The distant roar of traffic” is heard and Mick says “Shut it at once. The haze. The stink. You’ll kill me” (44). She can remember birds but Mick makes it clear that, “When I was a young man there were flocks of birds. What you remember is pigeons. Now they were a plague before elimination. They fouled the towers” (44).

We also learn that Claude is among the last born in the Londons. In this apocalyptic setting, ruled by a totalitarian government, natural disruption also affects biological reproduction: children are not allowed to be conceived without first buying a licence or winning a lottery. Claude tells the story of his half-brother Alexander, who had a child illegally. Initially, he and his wife refused to have “another abortion though hadn’t got exemption. They kept moving country to country to avoid the regulations” (48). Then they changed their mind and killed the child to avoid the consequences of their illicit act. Vivian comments on the tale, alluding to her desire for a baby but also to the impossibility of her *imagining* something different from total submission to the rules: “I’ve never dared never dared

evade the regulations” and “But if I did if I did have if I did have one have a baby I couldn’t I couldn’t kill it more than kill my self I couldn’t kill” (49). The lack of oxygen coincides with a lack of imagination; but, more importantly, it coincides with a lack of children who represent future generations. Vivian is still shocked by the act of killing a baby, but the episode testifies to a characteristic common to all Churchill’s dystopian worlds: “the portrayal of ordinary people turned killers among a deranged populace when the veneer of civilized behaviour is destroyed by extreme social conditions” (Marranca 2017: 2)

Claude’s tale and Vivian’s comment show the connection between natural disruption and the female condition. Another recurring figure in the play is Claude’s mother and Mick’s ex-wife, who is repeatedly mentioned in the play, although she never appears on stage. Mike and Vivian view her as a fanatic, but Claude admires her, because she “gave up all her things. Not that she had much, she was never – tried to give her – when I first earned – but she wouldn’t. February she wrote me she’d formally relinquished her room, burnt her cards, just gone. So many do” (47). Soon Mick discovers that Claude is going to follow her example and that he gave up five million pounds to join the ‘fanatics’, running the risk of being starved or killed. Mick recalls the “sixties, seventies, eighties” when there were similar horrors but “We learn to watch them without feeling a thing. We could see pictures of starving children and still eat our dinner while we watched” (51). His example of cynicism is intended to convince Claude to stay, but he leaves, nonetheless. From an ethical and political point of view, Claude represents the only positive character in the play because he tries to fight against the present state of things and dares to imagine a different world at the cost of life just like his mother. His example is meant to suggest a similar action to the audience which should be afraid of Mick and Vivian’s claustrophobic lives. When Claude leaves, Mick and Vivian watch him in the street from the open window while the smoke stings their eyes. Then they spray oxygen, drink water, and think about completing their jigsaw. Significantly, Vivian “can’t see the sky” in the puzzle (because she has forgotten that it’s blue) while Mick is “so good at it” (55).

Mick’s final decision to invite Vivian to live with him could appear a romantic happy end, but this is actually an expedient to

defend their little privileges and protected lives from the fanatics (“There’s still meat in the Londons if you can pay. There’s ration of food and water for each room. We can stay alive if we stay in the blocks,” p. 51). Their living together strengthens the couple’s individualism and ends up underlining Claude’s praiseworthy choice to join a collective action of resistance for a better world. Mick and Vivian’s “persistent hopefulness about their future in a world where oxygen sprays and suicide-bombers have become daily facts” can also be read, according to Vangölü, as the maximum of degradation and absurdity of the play’s dystopian space (4).

When *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* was published in 1990, in the introduction Churchill states: “It’s slightly unnerving to read *Not...Oxygen* twenty years later. It’s more obviously relevant now than it was then” (...). And it is even more urgent now, after the 2017 US retreat from the Paris Agreement has stoked a new awareness among the youngest members of society (like Churchill’s character, Claude) that action is vital now to avoid catastrophic consequences (for example, Greta Thunberg and her Fridays for Future).

It would seem that Churchill’s works did anticipate a rapidly emerging conflict between generations in our time: older people mostly defending their privileges, lifestyle, and interests, while younger people expose to the public the major threats that the capitalistic economy poses for the world’s future. In a real sense, the play’s dystopia is becoming true in some parts of world, where people face unprecedented (and uncontrolled) levels of pollution in exchange for industrial productivity and the promise of increasing general wealth.

After *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*, Churchill would continue to interweave environmental issues with neoliberalism, gender issues, and formal experimentation. These overlapping issues would reach their climax in the new millennium (Aston 2013). As Angelaki observes, her play *Escaped Alone* (2016), like *Far Away* (2000), “preceded yet senses the tectonic shifts that the watershed year 2016 would produce for humanity (the vote for Brexit; the vote for Trump; the growing concern over toxic masculinities)” (2019: 21). In *Escaped Alone* especially, Churchill offers a complex picture of our contemporary world, making even more explicit the parallel between “society’s systematic mistreatment of women” and “its systematic exploitation of resources” (Angelaki 2019: 22).



### 3. *Lives of Great Poisoners*: allegory of technological poison

Among Churchill's plays that tackle environmental issues, *Lives of Great Poisoners* is probably among the most experimental since it combines music, dance, and drama. It plays with the formal conventions of Osborne's naturalistic theatre and Greek tragedy, framed as both a detective story and a comedy of manners with triangular love affairs. There are three main narrative sequences, which have different chronotopes and never overlap: Edwardian London, Ancient Greece, and seventeenth-century Paris. Nonetheless, common thematic lines and multiple role-playing contribute to the creation of strong connections and cross-references. It cannot be considered merely an ecological drama, although the leitmotif of the play is the production, uses, and effects of poisons, a story that can be easily interpreted as an allegory of the contemporary relationship between technological progress, scientific research in chemistry, and pollution.

As we learn from the production dossier of the play published by Methuen Drama in 1993, including introductions by Churchill, the composer Orlando Gough, the choreographer Ian Spink, and the designer Antony McDonald, the original idea of the play was poison and that "of a toxic waste ship of fools unable to put in to any port. That faded but poison stories stayed" (Churchill, Gough, Spink 1993: ix). Thus, behind the poisons in the play lies the image of a toxic waste ship, an image that would have immediately called to mind environmental disasters. These are indeed later alluded to through the figure of the American inventor and industrial chemist Thomas Midgley, a famous scientist living in the 1940s, who anachronistically interacts with the three great poisoners in the title.

The first is Hawley Harvey Crippen, a well-known homeopath living in Edwardian England, who gained some popularity due to his use of "hyoscine hydrobromide" (Churchill 1998: 206) to kill his wife, Cora. The second is Medea, who is accompanied by a chorus of Poisons (also present in the other sections of the play). According to the myth, she killed her children, but also Jason's new young wife, Creusa, with a poisoned dress disguised as a marriage gift. The last poisoner on stage is Madame de Brinvilliers (played by the same actress who plays Medea and Cora), a seventeenth-century French woman who famously poisoned her father, brothers, and sister. In

the play, Churchill focuses on Madame de Brinvilliers' adulterous relationship with Sainte-Croix, who taught her the art of poisoning. Sainte-Croix perfectly represents the connection between scientific research and the logic of profit at any cost: he is shown while working with the alchemist Exili on a poison impossible to detect, compared to "an emanation in the air," which will be sold illegally to "corner the market" (219).

There are other poisons in the play too: in a crucial scene we see Madame de Brinvilliers and other women playing with the poisonous ingredients used in the cosmetics of the period: "What rubbish do we rub on our faces?" (221). Interestingly, the designer, MacDonald, decided that "as clothing was removed [during the different parts of the play] so make-up was added, as part of the self-poisoning process." He also avoided historical costumes, except for corsets, which "served as the most obvious visual symbol of how we poison ourselves for personal vanity" (Churchill, Gough, Spink 1993: xviii).

In the end, the link between poison and pollution is made explicit after Madame de Brinvilliers' execution. The stage direction describes Sainte-Croix, who "*comes in carrying a tray of coffee and amaretti, which he serves to everybody. People unwrap their amaretti and roll up the papers and Sainte-Croix sets fire to them so that the burning paper floats up into the air and the ash floats down*" (236). The ritual fills the air with smoke and burnt paper, which contaminate the air. While ashes float down, Madame de Sévigné describes Madame de Brinvilliers' body as it is thrown into the fire and her ashes scatter to the winds: "She is in the air. Her body burnt, her ashes scattered to the winds. Now we all breathe her in so we'll all catch a mania for poisoning which will astonish us" (236). Madame de Sévigné's words suggest that breathing the polluted air will make the urge for poisoning, seen throughout the play, contagious. Rabillard describes this closing scene as a "performative contagion" (p. 95) and highlights how both audience and characters are "potentially exposed to ashes – and they are thus invited to consider whether they are catching or have already caught the mania" (Rabillard 2009: 95). This mania for poisoning and self-poisoning is closely connected to environmental pollution but also to a sort of ideological pollution: the logic of capitalism that justifies the use of lethal chemicals, and the logic of a patriarchal world that forces women to wear harmful substances on their faces.

Among these ‘professional poisoners’ we find a sort of ‘accidental poisoner,’ Thomas Midgley, the American inventor who is “dressed always in his forties suit” (xviii), and who comes in and out of the play with no regard for historical accuracy. In the first two episodes he is shown explaining his invention of putting lead in petrol, thus improving “combustion characteristics” (192), and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in fridges to “keep things cool [...] so they won’t putrefy in hot weather and make people sick” (217). CFC began to be used in the 1930s and was considered safe until the 1960s, when it was discovered to have catastrophic effects on the ozone layer. As Churchill underlines in her introduction to the dossier, both lead in petrol and CFCs in fridges were inventions “that seemed a good idea at the time but were inadvertently poisonous” (Churchill, Gough, Spink 1993, p. x).” His last dangerous idea is “to control the growth of crops by increasing the ozone in the earth’s atmosphere” (237). It would obviously be a suicidal act, leading to a world very similar to Mick and Vivian’s in *Not... Enough Oxygen*, but, fortunately, this one at least was never put into practice.

Poisoning, as well as willing or unwilling self-poisoning, are the main subjects of this play, which allegorically suggests a comparison with contemporary society. More than a mere denunciation of science’s mistakes or the economic interests behind technological inventions, the play offers a wider reflection upon poison as *pharmakon*, something both curative and lethal. In *Republic* (III, 386a-392c), Plato compared the use of lies to a *pharmakon*, specifying that it should only be used by experts. In *Plato’s Pharmacy* (1968), Jacques Derrida thoroughly explored the ambivalence of the *pharmakon*, which is based on the association between *pharmakon* and writing developed by Plato himself, in *Phaedrus*. Churchill exploits this ambivalence throughout the play. In the very first scene, similar to a prologue, Medea uses her poisoning arts to give life back to Aeson, Jason’s father, and describes her power with a song:

Hurting you I heal you  
 Killing you I cure you  
 Secret of death and new life  
 Poison that heals  
 Fill your blood fill your breath  
 By my skill  
 I kill you and give you new life. (191)

The same art is later used to kill her rival Creusa. Crippen has always used poisons/drugs as a treatment to calm down his wife Cora, but here he uses them as a way to kill her softly. Care plays a crucial role in their last exchange:

Cora: I'm going to die.

Crippen: What's the matter, my love? Are you ill?

*Cora is trying to grab hold of Crippen.*

Cora: Help me. Take care of me. Make me better. Stop the pain.

[...]

Crippen. You're meant to go to sleep. It's not supposed to hurt. It's painless. Be quiet, someone will hear you. What are you doing? Hyoscine's meant to make you go to sleep. You're meant to die quietly, Cora, in your sleep. (pp. 201-202)

Crippen's poison is supposed to be painless, but it does not work well, and he will have to cut off his wife's head – to get rid of her or to stop her suffering? In the scene called "Hospital," Madame de Brinvilliers uses poisons to kill patients. In the stage directions, Churchill reproduces an excerpt from a biography of Madame de Brinvilliers by Hugh Stokes, describing her visitations to the sick: "*Brinvilliers was allowed to wander at will. She brought and administered sweets, wine, and biscuits [...] patients who received gifts from her hand invariably died in greatest agony*" (218). The aims of her actions are quite unclear, but what is relevant for our reading of poison as *pharmakon* is that she brings death to people who think they are safe, in a place where they should be cared for and healed.

I suggest that this attention to the pros and cons of poisons in the play is connected to the double status of science: it is supposed to improve the general health and wealth, but economic interests often conceal the risks and costs of its progress. Even if the intentions of science are good, its results sometimes end up harming people. This is the same warning issued by Bertolt Brecht, the German dramatist who greatly influenced British alternative theatre in the mid-1970s, with his attempts to create a distance between the drama and the audience, thereby allowing them to reflect on the actions unfolding on stage (Reinelt 1994: 81-107). In 1947, in Los Angeles, Brecht staged a revised version of his *Life of Galileo* (first written in 1938 in German, later renamed *Galileo*), directed by Joseph Losey. The play testifies to his shift from a previous optimism towards the

goals of science to the denunciation of its harmful potential after the 1945 dropping of the nuclear bomb.

In this light, the leitmotif of poison can be seen as an allegory of modern science, especially its constant search for chemicals to be used in industry and war, often without strict government control of their environmental impact or ethical uses. Churchill employs famous deaths by poison and Midgley's twentieth-century inventions to create a Brechtian estrangement from the love plots, and as a way to reflect upon contemporary threats posed by the alliance of science and capitalism, especially on 'global commons' like the atmosphere and the ocean (Rabillard 2009: 94). Even more significantly, she exploits the complexities of the allegorical representation to offer a wider condemnation of general selfishness (killing people to fulfil one's purposes) and hypocrisy (killing people with substances disguised as curative or that are impossible to detect, so that no one can be assigned responsibility for the crime). This leads the audience to reflect upon the connivance of science, industry and economic exploitation, which can only be destroyed by a radical change in political thought and economic practices.

#### **4. *The Skriker*: a fable of disaster and revenge**

In 1994, Churchill worked again with choreographer Ian Spink for the play *The Skriker*. Pushing her experimentation further, she combines an almost naturalistic setting, with two young women living in London, with a nightmarish underworld of fairies and goblins taken from English folklore. The play is recognised as being modelled on the traditional fairy tale and revenge tragedy (Rayner 1998), to which I would add a parallel with a Victorian fable, *The Goblin Market* (1862), by Christina Rossetti. This is a narrative poem in which two sisters are tempted with fruits by goblins who attempt (in vain) to take their lives. Here, instead, we have two close friends: Josie, who is in a mental ward for killing her child, and Lily who is pregnant and gives birth during the play. As we have seen so far, motherhood is a frequently recurring theme in Churchill's ecological drama: the killed child and the 'fanatic' mother in *Not... Oxygen*, Medea in *Lives of Great Poisoners* as well as Josie's murder suggest the perverse relationship between humans and Mother Nature. Natural disruption is mirrored in women's oppression,

physical weakness, and mental instability. Other maternal features are to be found in the protagonist of the play, the Skriker, a spirit who is described in the list of characters as a “*shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged*” (Churchill 1998: 243). At the beginning of the play, the character immediately presents herself in a sort of Shakespearean soliloquy, which displays her protean rhetoric, compressing time and space and encapsulating multiple voices and shapes. Rules of language are transgressed and what survives is a fractured monologue filled with disturbing imagery, whose meanings are indecipherable but still powerful and violent. As Gobert reports, Churchill described it in her note for translators as “a bit like someone with schizophrenia or a stroke, where the sense is constantly interrupted by other associations of words” (2016: 20).

This verbal inventiveness has been compared to Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (Attridge 2001-2002), and many references to literary and popular sources such as *Moby Dick*, the book of Genesis, *Gone with the Wind*, the book of Revelation, the *Songs of Innocence* by William Blake, Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, among others, have been suggested (Bono 2016: 127; Gobert 2014: 23).

These literary fragments and pieces of conversations overlap, “creating a feverish claustrophobic effect” (Amich 2007: 397) that takes us back to the atmosphere of *Not... Oxygen*. The Skriker is a sort of vengeful figure who recalls and contrasts with Vivian’s “damaged language” (Gobert 2016: 20): Vivian could hardly speak due to the lack of oxygen, whereas the Skriker gives ample expression to her grief, through stream of consciousness and by transforming into multiple characters. We meet her as a neglected woman, a forty-year-old American woman, a pink fairy, a businessman, a bossy child, a teenager, and a sick old woman. As for the connection between environmental crisis and the systematic exploitation of women, feminist theorist Elaine Aston adds that the play premiered at the Royal National Theatre in 1994 “in a moment when the British government was accelerating its dismantling of the welfare state,” limiting assistance to single mothers in particular (Aston 2003: 32).

The protagonists Josie and Lily belong to this category. The Skriker explicitly says that she had perceived their desperation and chosen them for that reason: “I knew you were desperate, that’s how

I found you” (268). At the beginning of the play, we learn that Josie had met the Skriker at the mental hospital and thought she was a patient like her. Then she describes the Skriker to Lily as “hundreds of years old. And then I was impressed by the magic but now I think there’s something wrong with her” [...]; “she looks about fifty but she’s I don’t know maybe five hundred a million, I don’t know how old these things are” (252).

This description suggests an opposition between the girls’ youth and the ancient, if not archaic nature of this magic creature. She has multiple identities and shapes, but her general attitude is that of a furious and violent revenger who wants to destroy her charges (Aston 2003; Rayner 1998). Revenge for what? Several hints in the play allow her character to be read as the survivor of an ongoing environmental devastation (Gobert 2014: 23; Kritzer 1998). This is most evident in a key scene that intertwines technologies, pollution, and ecological disasters, and that involves poison too.

Lily is at a bar talking to a forty-year-old American woman whom she cannot imagine to be the Skriker. The woman asks Lily insistently to clarify how television works. Lily answers by referring to electricity and satellites, but she cannot really explain the scientific process (pp. 254-255). The woman gets angry about how vague her explanations are. She asks questions about the ability of Lily’s people to fly by plane and the “massive explosions” (probably a reference to the atomic bomb), and then suddenly asks: “Or how you make poisons?” Lily cannot understand; the Skriker finally pours out her pain:

You people are killing me, do you know that? I am sick, I am a sick woman. Keep your secrets, I’ll find out some other way, I don’t need to know these things, there are plenty of other things to know. Just so long as you know I’m dying, I hope that satisfies you to know I’m in pain. (256)

“Keep your secrets” refers to the secrets of science that the Skriker believes Lily is purposely hiding. She also tries to entice Lily by promising to find her a lover if she confesses how television works (p. 259). The Skriker’s questions about television, planes, and poisons are a way for her to understand how to stop her own death process. A few lines later, she finally confesses her identity to Lily:

I am an ancient fairy, I am hundreds of years old as you people would work it out, I have been around through all the stuff you call history, that's cavaliers and roundheads, Henry the eighth [...] long before that, long before England was an idea, a country of snow and wolves where trees sang and birds talked and people knew we mattered, I don't to be honest remember such a time but I like to think it was so, it should have been [...]. (257).

She confirms that she is a 'spirit' of nature, represented here through the idealized images of singing trees and talking birds. This pastoral setting evokes a sort of idealized magical past and at the same time an uncontaminated ecosystem that has been lost. The Skriker herself doubts whether it ever existed, but the image functions nevertheless to denounce the present state of pollution. Later, she refers to the "apocalyptic meteorological phenomena" that have been occurring recently, such as "earthquakes, volcanos, drought," and emphasizes that nature is "not available anymore" (282). We then learn that her aim is to "witness unprecedented catastrophe. I like a pile-up on the motorway. I like the kind of war we're having lately" (283). As Candice Amich underlines: "The Skriker is a vehicle for exploring and vocalizing a geo-political apocalypse only she will survive" (2007: 400).

While waiting for the catastrophe, the Skriker spends her time trying to tease the two young girls and lure them into the underworld. The first is Josie, who spends some time in the underworld with different creatures of English folklore, who offer her food and drink, as happens in most fables and in Rossetti's *Goblin Market* as well. Significantly, when she comes back from the underworld, it seems as if time stopped the moment she left, so she can go back to her life. Later in the play, Lily offers to follow the Skriker into the underworld to save the world from her fury, but she soon realizes that the rules have changed. Instead of being in fairyland, she finds herself in the future, where an old woman and a deformed girl appear. Lily discovers that several centuries have passed and that her individual sacrifice was useless. The girl she meets is apparently her great-great-granddaughter, who expresses her wordless rage when she realizes that Lily comes from the same past that is responsible for the general pollution and her own deformity: "they were stupid stupefied stewpotbollied not evil weevil devil take the hindmost of them anyway," says the Skriker (290).



As in *Not... Enough Oxygen*, there is a conflict between generations, and an allusion to a dystopian future in which the uncontrolled use of science and the pollution it generates are affecting children's births. The Skriker's revenge strikes female bodies once again: the deformed girl who is unable to speak represents, in a more radical way than Vivian, the effects of environmental disasters. The fairy-tale setting turns emphatically nightmarish, and even the ambiguous happy ending of the Victorian model, *The Goblin Market* – in which Lizzie is able to save her sister with the remains of fruits smashed on her face by the goblins – is no longer possible.

### 5. Conclusion: Churchill's theatre as *pharmakon*

The claustrophobic feeling of being entrapped and forced to live in a poisoned world runs through all these plays. Even before the new millennium brought urgency to climate issues, Churchill exploited the conventions of various genres and “contaminated” them with pressing questions, thus prophesizing the future importance of a greater environmental commitment. More than that, Churchill suggests that theatre, too, can be a *pharmakon*. It can offer powerful aesthetic experiences that can heal our cynical attitudes (like Mick's) and keep alive our imagination. It can present disturbing and provocative representations, images, and stories that can tear down or even destroy conventional and similarly claustrophobic thought schemas. It can also pave the way to new hypothesis and hopes. If individual virtuous acts (such as Claude and Lily's) are not enough, theatre can at least suggest a collective engagement to support transparent management of the impact of new technologies and chemicals produced by scientific progress, and to fight against a world ruled by selfishness, profit, and consumerism. The commitment of theatre should therefore be to promote new visions and attitudes, since these are the very prerequisites for *imagining* a different future: one that is not constantly haunted by the spectres of fear, catastrophe, and extinction.

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