

A chorus of issues



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Although the characters' distinctive individual stories are told in Act I of Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*, the overall effect is a cumulative chorus of women's issues. The dinner scene in Act I establishes thematic foundations upon which numerous women's issues can be raised. Despite each character's clamor of self-absorbed monologue and consequential disinterest or lack of sympathy for the others' narratives, the women of Act I are fundamentally united through common feminist concepts. Effective use of several literary techniques, stage directions, and contextual parameters essentially serves to emphasize the ultimate chorus of women's issues. The predominant issue raised in Act I is that of social confines and identity as expressed through the common premise of clothing. Several characters debate the implications of dress and its suggestions with regard to conventional societal conceptions. A disagreement between Isabella and Joan surfaces over the idea of dressing, whereby Joan's assumed masculinity as conveyed through her clothing does not concur with Isabella's notions of femininity; tension and undertones of disapproval are implied in Isabella's direction to Joan on the topic of dress: "I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine." Furthermore, Nijo introduces concepts of clothing with respect to social confines as paralleled by her contextual significance. The cultural principles of thirteenth-century Japan are illustrated through Nijo's glorified elaboration of clothing as an indication of social status: "When I was chosen to give sake to His Majesty's brother (...) I wore raw silk pleated trousers and a seven layered gown in shades of red." Dress is a significant theme upon which issues of female identity are expressed, as achieved through contradictory views. Female position in relation to men is also explored as portrayed through conflicting beliefs.

Marlene's belief in the universal unacceptability of rape contrasts with Nijo's recognition and acceptance of her own objectification before the Emperor. Nijo's understanding is a result of her own cultural upbringing: she states after Marlene expresses concerns about rape: "No, of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him." Such views of diminutive relations to men can be compared to the story of Griselda, who sacrificed her own children to comfort the misguided, troubled mind of her husband, Walter, who in turn believed that Griselda did not have the capacity to "always obey him" and thus forced her to "prove" her love and loyalty to him. The surrendering of her children based on Walter's disturbed suspicions is an undeniable indication of Griselda's understood submissiveness to men. The themes of objectification and powerlessness are thoroughly considered throughout Act I, and that theme inextricably links all of the women even though they disagree; Marlene, for example, must physically remove herself from the dining table upon hearing Griselda's story: "I can't stand this. I'm going for a pee." Maternal protection is a central feminist theme considered in Act I. Gret's hideously nightmarish monologue of horrifying rage is a consequence of the suffering through loss of her child: "My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword (...) I was mad, I hate the bastards." The maternal grief that Gret experiences can be equated with that portrayed in the other stories of women who had also lost their children. Nijo and Griselda suffered similar tragedies in losing their children. Nijo surrendered her children as did Griselda, who was asked to prove her loyalty to her husband by agreeing to their murder. Griselda is the only maternal character to have had her children returned to her; her presence is potentially Marlene's subconscious manifestation of yearning to regain her children. Joan also experienced the

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barbaric loss of her child after a public childbirth: “ They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.” The women who bear the loss of children are quintessentially united through maternal suffering. Motifs of travel in Act I signify the essential women’s issue of change, endeavor, and the search of new horizons. Isabella’s escape to Morocco is a consequence of her detest for domesticity, whereby issues of gender roles are raised. The idea of wanting to “ get away” is illustrated through Nijo’s twenty years of traveling and Isabella’s longing to escape when at home in Scotland: “ I couldn’t stay in Scotland, I loathed the constant murk.” Even Marlene introduces a need to escape: “ I’d like to go somewhere exotic like you but I can’t get away.” The notion of change is a perpetuating theme in Top Girls and conveys a common matter amongst the women of Act I. Another important fundamental theme throughout the entire play is that of the equality and unity of women. The common support for that idea among the women is questioned through the continual and somewhat hectic interruption and overlapping of speech. Stage direction is cleverly utilized to convey a sense of equivocation concerning the supposed female unity. As the waitress “ starts to bring the main course,” for example, Marlene ironically queries, “ And nobody noticed anything?” The juxtaposition of stage direction and contextually ambiguous dialogue effectively deflates the supposed grandiose female alliance that is seemingly suggested throughout Act I. The waitress completes the anachronistic spectrum of women: her silence dismantles the notions of universal female comradeship. This incongruity is further expressed as Gret recounts the terrifying details of her story; the drunken women continue to voice their own sufferings despite Gret’s recollections of female alliance. Joan is lost in her isolating soliloquy of

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Latin gibberish whilst Isabella persists on telling her tale. It seems that all women struggle to be heard, yet do very little to listen. Stage directions dictate the chaotic digression of the ending of Act I: NIJO is laughing and crying. / JOAN gets up and is sick in a corner. MARLENE is drinking ISABELLA'S brandy. The disordered nature of the ending moments of Act I primarily reflect the conflicting, chaotic nature of the women and their individual stories and beliefs. The individual stories of Act I, however conflicting, nonetheless point to a universal female experience of oppression. Gender roles, maternalism, equality, social confines, and identity are all themes directed toward expectation. The repetition of the statement, "There was nothing in my life," by several women epitomizes the suffering for their endeavors and the psychological entrapment within their own eternal conflicts; although varying and contradictory in nature, the themes raised therein ultimately unify the women of Act I.