

Subverting original  
gender: gender  
performance in caryl  
churchill's cloud 9



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Cloud 9 by Caryl Churchill serves as a critique of British social standards—racism, colonialism, and especially sexism, gender roles, and sexual politics. The play takes place in two acts, with Act One set in Victorian Africa and Act Two in London in 1979, creating a parallel between a time of extreme sexual oppression and one of growing sexual liberation. In Caryl Churchill's introduction to the play, she states: "The first act, like the society it shows, is male dominated and firmly structured. In the second act, more energy comes from the women and the gays" (Churchill). Not only does Churchill examine gender politics through the text of the play itself, she shows it through the performance itself. Therefore, gender itself becomes a performance. Judith Butler argues in "Gender Trouble" that gender does not exist beyond the cultural performances and actions that express it. This goes beyond the usual distinction of sex and gender, as many believe that sex is physical while gender is social and cultural. Butler challenges this to argue that sex, too, is a result of social and cultural practices. This theory of gender performance, specifically in regards to femininity, is expressed through Cloud 9 in the characters of Betty and Edward.

Betty represents the ideal Victorian woman and wife. She upholds extreme standards of femininity and is completely available to the whims of her husband. In the first act, she is played by a man. At first, this is a stark deviation from audience and reader expectations. A Victorian woman is the pinnacle of femininity, so seeing a man perform the role is jarring. This is actually quite effective on two different levels. First of all, it illustrates the performative nature of gender as explained by Butler. The actor does not necessarily appear as a woman physically, but must perform the correct

actions for the audience to believe that Betty is, in fact, a woman—and these actions are precisely what make her a woman, as it is not her physical body. On the other hand, it serves as a commentary of the ideal Victorian woman, or what would count as the ideal Victorian woman in the eyes of her husband. Due to rampant and systemic sexism, husbands harbored resentment for their wives, and the traits they idealized, of course, were those of other men. Therefore, a man playing the wife of a traditional Victorian man is incredibly fitting. Not only this, but the Victorian woman was expected to center not only her life, but her entire identity of womanhood around men. Betty's first quote in the entire play is:

BETTY. I live for Cilve. The whole aim of my lifels to be what he looks for in a wife. I am man's creation as you see, And what men want is what I want to be. (Churchill 1)

This quote shows what being a woman means in the first act of the play. In the second act, in 1979, the world of the play becomes one of blossoming female liberation. The idea was becoming popular that women no longer had to center their womanhood around men—and thus, now Betty is played by a woman. She also now acts on her own desires, such as trying to pick up men. She even says: "I've never tried to pick up a man before" (Churchill 87). She has become her own person, a woman with actions that do not center the needs of men, but of herself.

Betty's character is also largely reminiscent of Butler's ideas about drag. This exaggerated performance of femininity by men goes to show that there is no original gender—it is always a performance. In "Gender Trouble," Butler

says, “ In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Butler 2385). These elements of gender being performed are understood by society to be natural, but through the dramatic performances of drag, we can see that they are not at all. With a man playing Betty in Act One, these ideas about drag apply to her too—nothing about her femininity is natural. It is all performed.

Edward fulfills a very similar role. In Act One, he is portrayed by a woman, and in Act Two, he is portrayed by a man. In fact, the two actors playing Edward and Betty from Act One swap roles with each other. But, Edward does not perform masculinity in the same way that Betty performs femininity—his casting serves a different purpose. Edward fails to perform masculinity and finds it more natural to perform femininity instead. Edward’s first line in the play is:

EDWARD. What father wants I’d dearly like to be. I find it rather hard as you can see. (Churchill 2) This quote shows that from the very beginning, he is having trouble living up to the standards his father wants him to uphold. These are, of course, the standards of Victorian masculinity. Edward does not fit into the standard of ideal Victorian boyhood, and this is evident from the very beginning, as he is portrayed by a woman. There are also many textual examples. For instance, he wants to play with his sister’s baby doll. His parents and governess protest this, as dolls are not for little boys to play with. To this, Edward says: “ She’s mine and she loves me and she won’t be happy if you take her away, she’ll cry, she’ll cry, she’ll cry” (Churchill 31). He also is not very good at playing catch, which, since he is a boy, his father expects him to be able to do well. Their exchange goes as such: HARRY.  
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Throw straight now. EDWARD. I did, I did. CLIVE. Keep your eye on the ball. EDWARD. You can't throw. CLIVE. Don't be a baby. EDWARD. I'm not, throw a hard one, throw a hard one-CLIVE. Butterfingers. What will Uncle Harry think of you? EDWARD. It's your fault. You can't throw. I hate you. (Churchill 19)

Clive and Harry taunt him because he is bad at throwing the ball, therefore showing that masculinity is an action—in this case, throwing a ball. Therefore, casting him as a woman works to show his femininity and how he fails to meet the standards of Victorian boyhood and masculinity, and also shows his failure to perform the necessary actions for masculinity. In the second act, which takes place 25 years later for the characters even though it is technically much farther in the future, Edward is an adult and openly gay. Of course, homosexuality was prohibited in the Victorian era, and could be viewed as men performing femininity. 1979 ushered in an era of gay liberation, and while there was still extreme persecution, the idea of being a gay man was much more normalized. Edward still does not perform masculinity, though, and even among gay men there was a standard of masculinity to be adhered to that Edward does not quite fit. He still performs feminine tasks, like cooking dinner every night. His boyfriend Gerry comments on this:

GERRY. You're getting like a wife. EDWARD. I don't mind that. (Churchill 70)

To Edward, this is natural, but Gerry is uncomfortable as he interprets Edward's actions as feminine. Gerry does not believe that Edward is naturally like this, since he is a man. Their exchange continues as follows:

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GERRY. Stop it. EDWARD. Stop what? GERRY. Just be yourself. EDWARD. I don't know what you mean. Everyone's always tried to stop me being feminine and now you are too. (Churchill 70) Edward believes that his feminine actions are natural, and he does not like it when people express disapproval and try to get him to change. This has been happening his entire life with his parents and now the same thing is happening with his boyfriend in a different context. None of Edward's various performances of gender serve to benefit him. Butler says: "Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (Butler 2387). Edward's performances and actions allow him to survive in his own way, but he is punished by essentially everyone for it. After Gerry leaves, he has the following conversation with Victoria, his sister:

EDWARD. I like women. VICTORIA. That should please mother. EDWARD. No listen Vicky. I'd rather be a woman. I wish I had breasts like that, I think they're so beautiful. Can I touch them? VICTORIA. What, pretending they're yours? EDWARD. No, I know it's you. VICTORIA. I think I should warn you I'm enjoying this. EDWARD. I'm sick of men. VICTORIA. I'm sick of men. EDWARD. I think I'm a lesbian. (Churchill 72)

Through this passage, we understand that Edward is comfortable enough with his feminine actions to the point where he might want to be a woman. Therefore, if he were to be a woman, he would love women through the lens of femininity as well, which is why he says "I think I'm a lesbian." It is not clear whether Edward decides that he is in fact a woman by the end of the play. He sleeps with both Lin and Victoria, but also gives Gerry a second chance. Lin, Victoria, and Gerry all view Edward as a man still. Before their <https://assignbuster.com/subverting-original-gender-gender-performance-in-caryl-churchills-cloud-9/>

first orgy, while they are attempting to drunkenly summon spirits, Lin says, “She won’t appear with a man here” (Churchill 74). She is referring to the presence of Edward. At the end of the play, while Gerry is talking to Betty, he refers to Edward as gay and with masculine pronouns, so it can be assumed that Gerry still thinks of him as a man as well (Churchill 87). This leaves the audience with a very ambiguous sense of Edward’s gender, which further subverts the notion of original gender. Edward is obviously uncomfortable with performing masculinity, but at the same time does not fully perform femininity, or at least not within the time this play takes place. It is impossible to define Edward through one specific gender—he is just Edward. His actions and performances do not give us a clear conclusion.

Betty and Edward fall on both sides of the spectrum of oppressive gender roles, and they both navigate this oppression through their individual performances of gender. Betty performs the duty of the Victorian housewife until she enters a time of women’s liberation, and Edward fails to perform masculinity and would instead rather perform femininity, even though this choice is never really supported. Both instances prove Butler’s theory that there is no true original gender, and instead gender is a performance enforced by social and cultural elements.

Works Cited  
Butler, Judith. “Gender Trouble.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, third edition. Vincent B. Leitch. Norton & Company, 2018.  
Churchill, Caryl. *Cloud 9*. Theatre Communications Group, 2010.