

Carnival and Subversion: Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

(Theory: Bakhtinian Carnavalesque / Feminist Criticism)

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Abstract

A combination of carnival, subversion, and gendered discourse is a productive analytic tool applied to the study of literary works challenging existing social stratifications. Both Geoffrey Chaucer and Caryl Churchill create imaginative milieus in which the traditional authority is challenged and alternative social formations that are short-lived are prefigured. This paper investigates how these two works, which are separated by six centuries, apply Bakhtinian carnivalesque principles of polyphony, hierarchical inversion, grotesque realism, and the temporary suspension of official norms, in addition to feminist critical apparatuses to determine the opposition to patriarchal power. In the tale by Chaucer, the pilgrimage is a festivity space in which characters like the Wife of Bath are able to undermine clerical misogyny and gain interpretive power by means of embodied oration and performative narration. On the other hand, Churchill reinvents grotesque embedment as a feminist and politicised tool in an overt way: the subversion gathering of the historical women in Act 1 and the further domestic crises reveal the ideological limitations of neoliberal feminism and clarify material circumstances of the life of women. As a comparative textual analysis shows, the subversion of the festival by Chaucer is short lived and metaphorical, and the use of

festive inversion by Churchill is created to perpetuate an ideological critique. Finally, the dissertation argues that the carnivalesque survives as a changing literary practice, which allows writers to highlight paradoxes in mainstream cultural discourses, and to imagine new forms of social organization.

Keywords : (carnival , misogyny , subversion , patriarchal, polyphony).

الكرنفال والتقويض: حكايات كانتربري لجيفري تشوسر ومسرحية توب غيرلز لكاريل تشرشل

(النظرية: الكرنفالية عند باختين / النقد النسوي)

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الملخص

يمثل الجمع بين مفاهيم الكرنفال والتقويض والخطاب الجندي أداة تحليلية مثمرة لدراسة الأعمال الأدبية التي تتحدى البنى الاجتماعية القائمة. يخلق كلٌّ من جيفري تشوسر وكاريل تشرشل أوساطاً تخيلية تُواجه فيها السلطة التقليدية، وتُستشرف فيها تشكيلات اجتماعية بديلة تتسم بطابعها المؤقت. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية توظيف هذين العاملين، اللذين يفصل بينهما ستة قرون، لمبادئ الكرنفالية عند ميخائيل باختين، مثل تعدد الأصوات، وقلب الهرميات، والواقعية الغروتسكية، والتعليق المؤقت للأعراف الرسمية، إلى جانب أدوات النقد النسوي، للكشف عن معارضة السلطة الأبوية.

في عمل تشوسر، تمثل رحلة الحج فضاءً احتفاليًا يتمكن فيه شخصيات مثل زوجة باث من تقويض كراهية النساء الكهنوتية واكتساب سلطة تأويلية من خلال الخطاب الجسدي والسرد الأدائي. أمّا تشرشل، فتعيد توظيف الغروتسك بوصفه أداة نسوية ومسيّسة بشكل صريح؛ إذ يكشف اجتماع النساء التاريخيات في الفصل الأول، وما يليه من أزمات منزلية، عن الحدود الأيديولوجية للنسوية النيولبرالية، ويوضح الظروف المادية لحياة النساء.

وتُظهر القراءة المقارنة أن التقويض الاحتفالي عند تشوسر قصير الأمد وذو طابع مجازي، في حين أن قلب القيم الاحتفالي عند تشرشل مُصمَّم لينتج نقدًا أيديولوجيًا مستمرًا. وأخيرًا، تجادل الرسالة بأن الكرنفالية تستمر بوصفها ممارسة أدبية متحوّلة، تُمكن الكتاب من إبراز مفارقات الخطابات الثقافية السائدة، وتخيّل أشكال جديدة من التنظيم الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكرنفال، كراهية النساء، التقويض، الأبوية، تعدد الأصوات).

Chapter one

Theoretical Framework

1.The Bakhtinian Concept of the Carnavalesque

The Bakhtinian carnivalesque is a literary and cultural practice based on the medieval festivity celebration tradition, and it disrupts and breaks the established social stratification and standards of authority through the act of humor, disorder, and party. Mikhail Bakhtin recognized the celebration as a powerful, mass phenomenon in which strict hierarchies and social order are temporarily set aside or overturned, allowing individuals of different social classes to mix as equals. Such equalization of social layers can be manifested in various ways, such as the mock coronation and de-coronation of a festive inversion king, through costumes and masks, role reversal, and de-ranking (DeShields, 2015, p.10). More importantly, the grotesque embodiment is characterized by a blissful ambivalence between ancient authority and rigid truths, a conflation of the sacred and the profane, and the glorification of bodily and earthly existence over idealized or purely spiritual ones. It involves the glorification of the grotesque body, which focuses on change, extravagance, and renewal. The festive inversion breaks the rules and promotes free, familiar, and bizarre conduct by those involved (Taylor, 1995, p.59).

According to Bakhtin, the spirit of the carnival is a lived, participatory experience where there is no distinction between spectator and performer, and all people participate in it, sharing the festival spirit, which is subversive and liberating. Subversion is a second life for people, arranged according to laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a strange peculiarity of all the comic manifestations, constituting the festive spirit; they become the way to the second life, of second world and second order (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 8). This form of culture is perceived not only as a spectacle but also as a kind of opposition to the existing order and a new social force that can challenge and revise societal norms.

Celebration, in Bakhtin's concept, functions as a space of temporary liberation from the official order of Church and State. "All were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age." (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 1). by suspending and subverting established hierarchies and authority structures. During festive, the usual social norms, laws, and religious strictures are relaxed or inverted, creating a realm where people experience freedom from the rigid control imposed by institutional powers. This suspension enables an equalizing of social statuses; kings may be mocked, clergy parodied, and social roles reversed, which challenges the fixed authoritarian order. As opposed to the official feast, the grotesque embedment celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). This liberation is characterized by a collective experience of laughter, chaos, and transgression, allowing participants to mock and critique dominant institutions without fear of reprisal, since the carnival is a sanctioned, time-limited event. Dialogism is the broader principle underlying polyphony. It refers to the idea that meaning emerges through interaction between voices or discourses rather than from a single, authoritative source. "The word is born in a dialogue as we answer the word of another. The word is shaped in dialogic interaction." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 279). In literature, this means that characters and texts engage in active dialogue with each other, speaking, responding, resisting, and echoing, forming a dynamic field of multiple truths and perspectives. Dialogism extends beyond literature to encompass social life as inherently dialogic, with all language and meaning shaped by relation to others' discourse. Dialogism opposes monologism: "Monologism denies the plurality of independent and unmerged voices; it denies dialogic relations among them" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 292), where there is a single, controlling voice or interpretation.

In this way, the subversion reveals the artificiality of power and authority, and at least temporarily, breaks down official truths, creating a space where alternative views and social rebirth can occur. Therefore, carnival is an alternative, subversive counterculture that exposes the unnaturalness of official Church and State domination, providing a temporary yet essential escape from repression and rigid social roles, and fostering a sense of community and mutual humanity across established boundaries (Khan, 2025, p.1).

1.2 Polyphony and Dialogism

Polyphony and dialogism are two closely related concepts in literary theory, primarily formulated by Bakhtin. Polyphony is a style of narrative in which many independent and autonomous voices or perspectives of storytelling are present in any piece of literature. According to Dostoevsky, it is a polyphonic novel, characterized by the plurality of autonomous and disengaged voices and consciousnesses a true polyphony of entirely legitimate voices. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). There is an ideological position of each character or voice that is not subject to or solved by the singular voice of the author. The voice of the author does not enclose the unity of the event; it is just a voice among thousands of them (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 73). It establishes a rich interplay of positions, allowing for complex and open-ended conversations between these voices. Polyphony is well known in Dostoevsky's novels, which are often characterized by conflicting, though equally valid, ideological perspectives of characters that coexist without the author's interposition or resolution (Robinson, 2011, p.67).

1.3 Feminist Revisions of the Carnavalesque

Feminist revisions of the festivity engage with and critique Bakhtin's original concept by emphasizing gender and the politics of the body, power, and identity. Feminist critics have shown that the grotesque body is a site of both empowerment and anxiety, disrupting the rigid boundaries that patriarchal culture seeks to maintain (Russo, 1994, p. 61). They explore how the carnivalesque's subversive, grotesque, and

liberatory aspects open possibilities for challenging patriarchal norms and hierarchical binaries, especially regarding women's roles, subjectivities, and corporeality, “Bakhtin’s celebration of the grotesque body must be gendered, for the female body has been the privileged site of cultural regulation, surveillance, and fantasy.” (Russo, 1994, p. 62).

Feminist theorists read the subversion emphasis on grotesque corporeality and bodily excess as a site for contesting the mind/body split traditionally gendered in favor of masculine rationalism versus feminine lower bodily stratum. Feminist festivity critiques highlight ambivalence surrounding representations of women, noting that festive inversion occasions can both challenge and reinforce patriarchal power. Historically, the disorderly or unruly woman of carnival functioned as a potent symbol and site of social transgression and rebellion, yet also at times a target for sexual violence and subjugation,

Feminist interpretations emphasize the grotesque embodiment as a site of performative gender revision, where normative gender roles and power hierarchies are parodied, reversed, or suspended, thereby enabling feminist critique and resistance. It includes the critique of phallocentrism and the reassertion of feminine corporeal agency and desire as counter-hegemonic, since it “is aligned with virility, authority, activity and power... The positive term is privileged over the negative, feminine term, constructing an unequal hierarchy.” (Pryor, 2006, p. 238) Feminist theorists utilize Bakhtin’s dialogic and carnivalesque frameworks to expose contradictions in patriarchal ideologies and to produce a feminist dialogics that interrupts dominant power structures, thereby opening up space for alternative gendered subjectivities and social relations (O’Brien, 2006, p.90).

Judith Butler’s concept of *gender performativity* as social parody connects closely with the subversion through their shared emphasis on subversion, repetition, and the destabilization of normative orders. Both frameworks emphasize performance and theatricality. Butler’s gender performativity reveals that gender roles are repeated acts

that imitate cultural norms, often in a parodic way that exposes their constructedness rather than naturalness. “Gender is a stylized repetition of acts.” (Butler, 1990, p. 179). Similarly, the festivity (as theorized by Bakhtin and revisited by feminists) involves grotesque bodily excess, parody, and social inversion that temporarily subvert hierarchical power structures and norms, including gender norms. The link lies in how both gender performativity and the celebration use parody and performative excess to challenge dominant paradigms, Butler’s idea that gender is a repeated “Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.” (Butler, 1993, p. 313), This resonates with the carnivalesque practice of parody, “reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (Butler, 1990, p. 175).

Where official identities and social roles are mimicked and overturned. Feminist revisions of the subversion highlight the grotesque body and performative gender inversion as means of contesting patriarchal binaries, much like Butler’s notion of subversive gender acts dismantling fixed gender binaries. Both frameworks reveal social norms (of gender or hierarchy) as fragile constructs open to reimagining and transformation through embodied, dialogic performances. Festivity’s temporary subversion of power echoes the way Butler’s social parody in gender performativity creates openings to resist and destabilize hegemonic gender (Thompson, 2025, p.64).

Essentially, the social parody of gender exemplifies the spirit of carnivalesque, which is characterized by transgressive, embodied, and dialogic play, and it is this spirit that satirizes, uproots, and criticizes established socio-cultural orders, particularly those related to gender and identity. The identity expressed by both is unstable, characterized by a dynamic performance rather than a stable core, and the connection between them forms the basis of feminist and queer theoretical criticism of power and normativity. Therefore, the interaction of gender performativity and the grotesque embodiment adds depth to the idea of the theatricalization of gender, power, and identity, as well as the parody and possible subversion of culture and literature (Thompson, 2025, p.60).

1.3 Past Studies

Vanessa Rodrigues Barcelos conducted study on “The Canterbury Tales, by Geoffrey Chaucer, from the Perspective of Bakhtinian Carnival: The Wife of Bath and the Subversion of Female Gender through the Profanation of Biblical Discourse.” (2024) The purpose of this article is to examine the character of Alison, known as the Wife of Bath, in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. Utilizing Bakhtin's concepts of carnivalization (1984a, 1984b) and Butler's theory of gender performativity (1988, 1999), which to illustrate how this character subversively challenges specific biblical texts that dictate women's roles within marriage. For this analysis, the focus on the Wife of Bath’s prologue from Chaucer’s narrative, where she articulates her arguments more directly while simultaneously engaging humorously with biblical themes. The findings indicate that the Wife of Bath embodies a carnivalized performance of femininity during the medieval era, actively undermining contemporary stereotypes by irreverently interpreting various biblical directives from both the Old and New Testaments concerning womanhood and wifely duties.

Mahmoud Salami conducted study on “The Carnavalesque Elements of the Canterbury Tales.” (2023) This article investigates the intriguing ways in which Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* embodies the concept of the carnivalesque. The poet presents a medieval culture and popular life that may be unfamiliar to contemporary readers. This exploration aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the carnival world of medieval society, which persists in certain remnants of celebrations and imagery associated with carnivals, circuses, caricatures, and comedic spectacles. In *The Canterbury Tales*, carnival imagery is vividly depicted through the General Prologue and various tales where characters are portrayed in public spaces as exaggerated figures—wild men and women who are ridiculed, exaggerated, and subverted from sacred icons into clowns. Chaucer illustrates numerous instances of comedy and satire that reflect the behaviors of the pilgrims themselves, whose actions

during their journey epitomize the essence of the carnivalesque. Furthermore, *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates how Chaucer crafts his characters from elements associated with circuses, carnivals, fairs, and game shows settings often perceived as lowly, filthy, demonized, and outside societal norms. This article highlights how Chaucer inversely critiques many medieval cultural values in a manner that reveals his criticism and satirical perspective on prevailing ideological representations of culture.

This study is unique because it does not address any of the topics discussed before. Instead, it will fill a gap that has not been explored yet. It examined the connection and Rewriting Power Through Carnival: Feminist and Bakhtinian Readings of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Top Girls*. Through their works, we can have a comparative study.

Chapter Two

2.1 The Pilgrimage as Carnival Space

The Canterbury Tales by Chaucer portrays the pilgrimage as a festive inversion environment, which has a close connection to Bakhtin's theory of subversion. This carnival space is an intermediate, transitional field where social inequalities and regulations are put on hold, and the pilgrims interact freely, familiarly, and usually subversively. The pilgrimage is used to set a storytelling competition between the different characters from various classes, which possesses grotesque embodiment characteristics such as comedy, ridicule, social order inversion, and renewal. The pilgrimage is a journey between the familiar and the unfamiliar, being sacred and profane at the same time, full of danger and of potential. This aspect of liminality creates a space where pilgrims can relate in ways they might not otherwise, or express themselves, in fixed social hierarchies, recalling the festivity in that it allows for free and familiar contact with others in ways that are not normally available (Salami, 2023, p. 210).

The carnivalesque in the manner Chaucer presents the pilgrims and their acts is related to the subversion elements of the medieval popular festivity, which consisted of humor, jest, and inverting social norms. The pilgrims engage in a storytelling competition, presided over by the Host, whose stories capture the spirit of the grotesque embedment through their wide-ranging, frequently ribald content, and by the derision with which they ridicule the rest of society and the sanctities of religion. The festive spirit promotes social renewal, providing a critique and rejuvenation of social order, through laughter and parody (Pal, 2013, p. 2). The subversion serves as both entertainment and a tool of social protest, renewal, and identity negotiation. Chaucer, through the celebration, can give voice to a broad spectrum of social voices and expose tensions, contradictions, and potential changes in medieval society, all within the context of the sacred pilgrimage journey (Pal, 2013, p. 3). The pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* is not only a physical ride to Canterbury, but a metaphorical festive inversion spectacle in which social hierarchies are satirically dismantled and redefined in accordance with the theory of carnival developed by Bakhtin, whereby subversion, humor, and revitalization are playfully constructed. This makes the pilgrimage a rich, multifaceted space in Chaucer's work, akin to a festivity.

2.2 The Wife of Bath's Prologue: The Grotesque Female Body

the current analysis focuses on both works through the perspectives of feminist theory and Bakhtinian carnival, emphasizing their challenge to patriarchal standards. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* deals with a variety of female narratives, particularly in the prologue of the Wife of Bath, which faces conventional gender expectations and offers a depiction of women's autonomy. In parallel, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* examines the compromises women face within a male-dominated framework, presenting characters who maneuver through power dynamics in ways that resonate with Bakhtin's idea of carnival where existing hierarchies are disrupted. Both texts demonstrate how storytelling acts as a means of resistance, enabling women to reclaim their stories and

assert their identities in a society that frequently attempts to suppress them. This comparative analysis shows the transformative capacity of carnival as a platform for feminist dialogue and empowerment.

In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Chaucer constructs a figure whose body, sexuality, laughter, and contradictions place her squarely in the terrain of the grotesque female body. A body that becomes , a target of patriarchal ridicule and a surprising instrument of resistance. The uploaded article emphasizes that Alisoun is “absurd and grotesque, a figment of that anti-feminist gallimaufry” shaping medieval depictions of women, (Reid, 1969, p. 73). Through her speech, sexual candor, and comic force, she also disrupts the very norms that seek to constrain her.

Bakhtinian grotesque realism, the Wife's Prologue itself becomes a textual carnival, in which the unruly female body performs acts of degradation and renewal. Her materiality, sexual appetite, aging flesh, contradiction, and laughter embody Bakhtin's “lower bodily stratum,” (Bakhtin, 1984 ,p.20) a domain where official hierarchies are inverted, mocked, exposed as unstable.

In a society where clerical and male authority has historically dictated the interpretation of scripture, marriage, and sexuality, the Wife of Bath subverts this established discourse. She references biblical texts, Church Fathers, and antifeminist figures solely to invert, parody, and challenge their meanings, engaging in what Bakhtin describes as a “marketplace” voice that contrasts with the “official” stance of medieval doctrine. Her focus on experiential authority “experience, though no auctoritee” reflects a carnivalesque appreciation for lived experiences over abstract institutional truths (Barcelos, 2024, p.4)

In a society where male authority and religious teachings are factors in the conversation that surrounds marriage and sexuality, the Wife opens with a focus on personal experience over established texts: "Experience, though no authority / Were in this world, is quite enough for me" (Wilson, 1985, p. 198). In so doing, she sets against

the institutional perspectives of the scholars and clerics the actual voice of a laywoman drawing from her own life and physical existence. This way of doing things is a classic example of carnivalesque inversion, when the high (Latin, ecclesiastical, theoretical) is turned on the head by the very ordinary (vernacular, non-clerical, corporeal) and exposes the truth not in austere scholarly publications but in the vivacious talk of a pilgrim who refuses to be quiet or submissive (Barcelos, 2024, p.4).

The carnivalesque is at work in her irreverent interpretation of scripture and antifeminist doctrines as well, which she refers to only to scorn and weaken. She openly mocks the tradition of clerical misogyny when questioning the reason behind so many male church figures for focusing on women's faults: "Who painted the lion?" Tell me who?" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 700) a proverbial defy against narratives written by men. Furthermore, she mischievously recasts Saint Paul to support multiple marriages: "God commanded us to grow and multiply," (Ibid), she claims, taking a serious biblical imperative and twisting it to humorous support for her five husbands and her sexual agency. By playing with sacred texts in order to validate her own pleasure and authority, she implements Bakhtin's spectacle in which "official" discourse is dragged into the carnival square and subjected to ridicule, forced to answer to popular wisdom that has its roots in bodily experiences (Barcelos, 2024, p.4).

Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism is evident in the Wife's frank celebration of inferior aspects of the body sexuality, growing old, desire and physical deterioration. She speaks unapologetically of her sexual power relationships: "In marriage will I use my instrument / As freely as my Maker has sent it", (Chaucer, 1987, p. 750), emphasising the body as an instrument of negotiation rather than an occasion for shame. Her funny stories about old, jealous husbands "How pitifully at night I made them toil!" (Ibid), mix cruelty with laughter and erotic pleasure, turning marriage from its sanctified status to a world of sweaty human struggles. This demystifying of what is usually idealized in marriage points to carnival's dual movement: that of subversion of official

sanctity, and of suggested renewal and empowerment through the Wife's dynamic engagement with her body in redefining the power structures of marriage (Ibid).

The entire narrative framework of the Prologue carries a carnivalesque essence through its temporary redistribution of voice and authority within the social "fair" established during pilgrimage. The Wife, a cloth-maker from Bath, commands an extensive narrative presence that transforms what might have been merely a brief introduction into an expansive theatrical self-assertion. She revels in being seen as excessively loquacious "I am all Venus in my preferences" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 765), and dramatizes mock trials against both her husbands and misogynistic literature; for instance when she tears pages from Jankyn's "book of wicked wives" causing him to tumble into flames. This violent comedic rebellion against textual dominance exemplifies carnival at work: books are literally discarded while noisy, contradictory voices emerge from laywomen.

Bakhtinian perspective, grotesque excess also becomes a carnivalesque weapon: the Wife uses the very bodily traits condemned by patriarchal ideology, to overturn her husband's authority. Grotesque realism celebrates the "open," excessive, and unfinished body, and the Wife's sexuality gives her precisely this power of inversion, dragging clerical and marital hierarchies down into the material, comedic, bodily realm.

She boasts: "As help me God, I laughe whan I thynte / How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!... They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor... / But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 201–214). In these lines, her grotesque sexuality functions as power, not shame. Her surplus of the body, which male writers encoded to mean sin, is her asset of economic control. It is a literal performance of Bakhtin's festivity: the lower bodily level overthrows the high, revealing the weakness of patriarchal power by sexual parody and reversal. The Wife, therefore, represents the carnivalesque reversal of dominance: the body of the woman in it reverses the

dominance of the male gender even as it solidifies the stereotype of the woman being lustful and manipulative. The wife's thoughts further heighten this grotesque tension as she grows older. Even though she starts with the assertive statement that she is blessed with experience, it turns out to be costly as she later regrets the price of experience: "Age, alas! al wole envenione, / Hath me biraft my beautee et me pith... The flour is goon..." (Chaucer, 1987, p. 474-477). The grotesque realism of Bakhtin is based on the old, rotting, and regenerating body; the grope of the Wife reveals her as an incomplete character whose body cannot be idealized. This instance of physical outward introspection reveals to the reader her vulnerability in the sexual economies of patriarchy, in which age makes women redundant. These contradictions depict her irrationality, a characteristic medieval author often attributed to women (Wilson, 1985, p. 348-349).

Chaucer gives her the voice to articulate these contradictions, transforming her bodily decline into a form of truth-telling that destabilizes the idealized, symbolic Woman upheld by clerical discourse. Her attitudes toward desire, and domination further complicate her stance as a proto-feminist figure. She confesses that she loved Jankyn best precisely because he was the least loving: "I trowe I loved hym best, for that he / Was of his love daungerous to me" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 513-514). The irrational preference reinforces "perverse rationalization" and self-revealed contradictions (Slade, 1969, p. 245-246). She demands "sovereignty," she paradoxically relinquishes it in her final marriage, celebrating an egalitarian harmony after Jankyn submits his estate: "After that day we hadden never debaat... I was to hym as kynde / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 822-825), which indicates that "her professed beliefs in female sovereignty...are not finally followed by the heroine of her tale" (Parker, 1969, p. 94). While she verbalizes feminist principles, her lived choices reinforce patriarchal norms.

Amid contradictions, her laughter emerges as one of her potent and grotesque embodiment tools. Chaucer introduces her as one who can “laughe and carpe’ before an audience ‘in felaweshipe’” (Ibid). In Bakhtin’s understanding, subversion laughter is collective, liberating, and degrading; it destroys fear and exposes “official truth” as fragile. It is precisely such grotesque laughter that reveals the façade of patriarchal authority in *The Wife*, when she laughs,

“I laughe whan I may”(Chaucer, 1987, p.467). Laughter is her monstrous survival strategy: ridiculing the masculine power, revealing marital hypocrisy, and derailing the seriousness of the patriarchal speech. Her laugh is a form of resistance when her husband laughs at her memory of how she has worked them hard; she laughs at the thought of how she thinks, and in her festive inversion reversal of roles, the presumably submissive wife mocks her masters. However, this laughter reveals her internal fractures: her delusions are torn to pieces by her own unintentional self-disclosures (Parker, 1969, p. 97). Her laughter provides her with strength and shows people that she is trapped in the same stereotypes that she mocks.

Finally, the grotesque woman's body in the *Prologue of Wife of Bath* is neither feminist nor misogynistic. It is a carnival of a location in which the lower layers of the body, such as sex, appetite, aging flesh, and laughter, overturn social hierarchies and, at the same time, reveal the patriarchal texts that construct them. The Wife is “a character not in harmony but in conflict with itself” (Parker, 1969, p. 98). This conflict becomes the very engine of her subversion: an unruly, excessive, embodied form of speech that resists closure and destabilizes the official ideologies surrounding gender and authority. Chaucer stages not a singular statement about women, but a dialogic struggle over gender, authority, and embodiment , one that continues to unsettle readers and critics alike.

2.3 fabliaux, The Miller’s Tale, The Reeve’s Tale, The Summoner’s Tale, or Bakhtinian grotesque realism.

Fabliaux, as a medieval comic form, thrived on bawdy humor, trickery, and the vivid materiality of the human body. Popular in medieval France and Italy, they are marked by swift plots driven by sexual mischief, scatological obscenity, the cunning of ordinary people who triumph not through moral virtue but through shrewd wit. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, "The Miller's Tale," "The Reeve's Tale," and "The Summoner's Tale" represent some of the finest English adaptations of this tradition, combining the sharp wit of the fabliau genre with an incisive social critique. These stories, viewed through the prism of Bakhtin's ideas of grotesque realism and the festivity, can be seen as a means not just to entertain, but to rejuvenate culture, a conscious reversal of the traditional order of things.

Grotesque realism, as identified by Bakhtin, emphasizes the human body in its most corporeal and excessive manifestations, including eating, sex, flatulence, aging, and other bodily functions. Bakhtin presents the argument that grotesque realism degrades all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract by bringing it down to earth, down to the realm of the body, in *Rabelais and His World* (Bakhtin, 1984, p.19-20). This destruction is not the destructive type, rather a regenerative one, the exposure of the artificiality of official structures and renewal of the communal spirit by laughter. Such is precisely the process of fabliau as practiced by Chaucer: clerks, friars, millers, and household patriarchs, figures whose roles in society, intellect, or religion make them the targets of bodily humor, sexual confusion, and comic downfall.

In *The Miller's Tale*, Nicholas embodies the archetype of the trickster who uses his wits to seduce Alisoun, the wife of a carpenter. The story is full of humour and sexual innuendos and leads to a ludicrous situation against jealousy and foolishness. Chaucer comments that "He was as wanton as a kid," (Chaucer, 1987, p. 730-731), meaning that Nicholas was in a mischievous way rebelling against societal norms. This sort of playful defiance is in line with Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, where

established hierarchies are temporarily disrupted, where bodily desires may be celebrated and the grotesque allowed.

The Reeve's Tale continues to play on themes of revenge and the grotesque and the absurdity of human relationships. The clerks, John and Alan, decide to seek retribution from the miller who has deceived them and this leads to a series of comical and humiliating incidents. Their plan at the miller's expense brings about such comical events through his wife which is a prime example of poetic justice. Chaucer says, "For he was a knave and a thief," (Chaucer,1987, p.730-731) which highlights the moral ambiguity that exists in this tale. This notion is consistent with the Bakhtin concept of the grotesque body in which physicality is a key component of the demonstration of the absurdity and complexity of the human condition.

The Summoner's Tale also presents grotesque realism in its sharp critique on religious hypocrisy. The friar character embodies greed and deceitfulness, and he represents the social commentary of Chaucer's time in the form of a character. The climax painfully and humorously exposes the avarice of the friar when Thomas, a peasant, offers him a fart as an alleged gift. Chaucer states, "For he that hath a fartying in his hand," (Chaucer,1987, p.730-750) changing this simple operation of the body into a strong symbol of defiance towards corrupt authority. This act of defiance represents Bakhtin's view that the grotesque is conducive to subversion of traditional social orders by the transformation of the friar's greed into an object of mockery.

Through these narratives, Chaucer employs Bakhtinian grotesque realism to disrupt established social hierarchies and norms. The humor and absurdity present in these fabliaux can be seen as liberating mechanisms for the characters to release their desires and frustrations in light of the rigid structures of society. Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque underscores suspension of temporary authority so well depicted throughout these tales. By using humour and elements of grotesque, Chaucer is not only entertaining his audience but also making them think about the power dynamics,

morality and human behaviour. This complex interplay between the grotesque and social critique highlights Chaucer's enduring relevance in the exploration of desire, power dynamics and forms of resistance in medieval society.

Chaucer employs grotesque body humor in The Miller's Tale to mock clerical pomp and social rank. Absolon and his romantic self-image fail when the man is fooled into kissing the bare buttocks of Alisoun: "Dark was the night as pich, or as the cole, / And at the window she put out hir hole" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 3730-3731). The outrageous corporeality of the scene is characteristic of Bakhtinian carnival degradation, in which the spiritual pomp of a parish clerk is lowered down into the world of flesh. The humiliation of Absolon is then succeeded by the defeat of the carpenter John, who falls off the roof: "And down he fil from the roof sodeynly" (3814). This, according to Bakhtinian, is a standard carnival inversion, with the stupid old patriarch being the target of widespread mockery and the youthful lovers being the victors. The story satirizes individuals who hold onto power or intellectual arrogance, aligning with Bakhtin's concept of the world turned upside down, where the social order is put on hold.

The Reeve's Tale carries this subversion inversion even further by trickery and sexual mis-recognition. The miller, who prides himself on his skill in deceiving others, falls victim to deceit when the clerks get even with him by seducing his wife and daughter. The humor of this tale stems from aspects of bodily proximity, darkness, and mistaken identity, or what Bakhtin calls the open, unfinished body a body constantly "in process" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317). Through this physical and comic confusion, Chaucer reveals the hypocrisy of the miller and also questions the social hierarchy between clerks and commoners. The revenge of the clerks is not moral but carnivalesque, a temporary subversion of the power through "low," bodily means.

Grotesque realism comes to the extreme in the Summoner's Tale. The friar, who represents the authority of religion, is brought down with a literal fart joke. Thomas,

fed up with the friar's greed tricks him into receiving a fart as payment for his "spiritual counsel": "This friar . . . shall have my fart in his hand thus!" (Chaucer, 1987, p. 2145-2146). Bakhtin emphasises that festivity laughter "uncrowns" the powerful (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 124), and here Chaucer puts the friar's sanctimony in absurdity. The bodily function is made a tool of justice, a parody of sermons and spiritual gifts, and a reminder that even religious authority is subject to mockery. The gruesome degradation fits well with Bakhtin's idea that celebration imagery "celebrates the material bodily lower stratum" as a place of truth and renewal (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 21).

Chaucer uses fabliau conventions to stage a carnivalized literary space where authority figures are dethroned, the body is celebrated in its earthy vitality, and laughter becomes a force of social critique. Bakhtin argues that grotesque embodiment "builds its own world, its own laws" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 122), and Chaucer's fabliaux reflect this world, a one in which clerks, millers, friars, patriarchs lose their dignity through comic exposure, while marginalized figures gain temporary triumph. The grotesque realism of the fabliaux does not simply degrade; it reveals the contradictions of medieval social structures and reaffirms the vitality of the human community through laughter.

Chaucer's fabliaux are deeply Bakhtinian in spirit. They embody grotesque realism through their exaggerated physicality and bodily excess, while their satirical treatment of authority mirrors , the transformative power of carnival. Through comic misrule, sexual parody, and scatological inversion, Chaucer presents a vision of medieval society that is at once destabilizing and renewing , an affirmation of the comic, bodily, collective spirit celebrated by Bakhtin.

2.4 Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

Top Girls by Caryl Churchill represents a postmodernist feminist festivity in its use of fractured narratives, surreal elements, and a reversal of traditional ideals of feminism, success, and capitalism. The play disrupts single definitions of feminist success through its non-linear, chaotic narrative and intertextual discussions with a

multiplicity of women of different times and backgrounds. It criticizes the prices and the hypocrisies experienced by women who attain authority in a capitalistic patriarchal world (Sona, 2023, p.312).

The portrayal of women in *Top Girls* challenges the dualistic approach of traditional feminism, exhibiting complex characters that fail to represent the sisterhood or unity, but instead highlight the conflict between personal determination and social heteronomy. The subversion, in which female characters who were traditionally marginalized or previously suppressed are given their voices and agency, is dramatized in the play; however, their success usually comes with personal and social costs.

Churchill manages to blend historical and fictional characters into a surreal dinner party, that establishes a postmodern carnival space, where norms are subverted, revealing the contradictions and disputed landscape of feminist hopes in the capitalist reality of the Thatcher era. The play's critical posture aligns with postmodern feminism , "I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything of they've got what it takes ." (Churchill, 1982, p.34) its interrogation of essentialist and monolithic conceptions of womanhood, the limitations capitalism imposes on fewomanhood, s, demonstrating a fractured feminist landscape rather than a harmonious one.

The play begins with a group of women, historical and fictional, who are gathering for an imaginary dinner: each of them represents different challenges and triumphs in a male-dominated setting. This assembly serves as a tool of subversion, giving these women the voice to tell their stories and challenge societal norms. Marlene, the main character, says "I'm not a mother, I'm a career woman,"(Churchill, 1982, p.14) representing the struggle between traditional gender expectations and individual ambition. Her defiance echoes the spirit of the carnivalistic, where hierarchies that have been established are momentarily overturned, creating a festival of female agency and solidarity.

The character of Pope Joan, who dresses as a man to achieve power, is an example of the idea of the carnivalesque in *Top Girls*. Her narrative exposes the extremes to which women have to go to maneuver through and challenge patriarchal restrictions. When she states, "I had to be a man to do it," (Churchill, 1982, p.67) it suggests the systemic barriers faced by women in their pursuits of power and recognition. This instance encapsulates Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque, in which bodily identity is fluid permitting a rethinking of gender roles. The blending of historical and fictional elements in this dinner scene not only gives a voice to women, but also offers a critique of the expectations of society that constrain women, in order to create an atmosphere in which traditional norms can be questioned and redefined.

Churchill further portrays the theme of sacrifice in the face of success through Marlene's character who embodies the complexities within modern feminism. Her achievements come at a very high price; she has alienated herself from her family and traditional female activities. The tension is heightened when she considers that she needs strength: "I've got to be strong," (Churchill, 1982, p.89) showing the pressure put on women to live up to the standards of independence, at the cost of having to sacrifice personal relationships. This struggle resonates with Bakhtin's carnivalesque framework by revealing dual aspects of female experience in which triumph is woven together with emotional estrangement. Therefore, the play challenges the notion that in order to be successful one needs to make more personal sacrifices, making audiences rethink what women suffer in the process of becoming independent.

2.5 The Dinner Scene: A Feminist Feast

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* begins with one of the most radical scenes in contemporary drama: a surreal banquet in which historical, legendary, and fictional women from different centuries gather to celebrate Marlene's promotion. Reading *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill as a Postmodern text, Sona observes that the play is shaped by "postmodern elements such as intertextuality, simulation, [and a] tone of irreverence"

(Sona, 2023, p. 312). That destabilizes classical narrative expectations reveals how Churchill uses non-linear form to critique the patriarchal logic of both past and present. The dinner draws Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Pope Joan, Dull Gret, and Patient Griselda into a single shared space, creating a theatrical collage in which the voices of women, who suffered under patriarchal authority are resurrected and rearticulated across time.

Their gathering functions as a feminist rewriting of the banquet tradition, a parody of the patriarchal symposium seen in Plato's Symposium, where male philosophers debated universal ideas in an exclusive intellectual circle, "I thought I was a man. I spent my life pretending I wasn't a woman" (Churchill, 1982, p.19). Churchill reverses this logic by replacing abstract theories with embodied stories of suffering, endurance, violation, and survival, thus shifting the ground from philosophical idealism, to lived female experience.

This dreamlike assembly makes it possible to experience a temporary suspension of societal conventions, liberating the characters to express their aspirations, challenges and victories in an atmosphere of sharing. The protagonist, Marlene, says, "I'm not a mother, I'm a career woman." (Churchill, 1982, p.19) which introduces the tension between traditional female roles with the drive towards personal ambition, reflecting the complexities of modern feminism.

The diverse women in attendance at the table like Pope Joan, Lady Nijo and Gret reminds the reader of the disjointed nature of female autonomy. Each of the individual represents different historical situations and obstacles but together struggles with the limitations set by the male-centric society. Pope Joan's story of passing as a man to gain power can be understood in a great way when she states, "I had to be a man to do it." (Churchill, 1982, p.34) This quote reflects the institutionalized barriers that women faced and embodies the grotesque, a notion by Bakhtin in which identity and gender are fluid, allowing for a redefinition of traditional roles. The dinner gathering

becomes a place for these women to take back their stories and assert their identities in an environment that often tries to silence them.

Nevertheless, this dinner scene also reveals the limitations of individual accomplishment within a capitalist system, and how neoliberalism can hijack feminist principles. Although the characters enjoy their victories, a tension exists that these victories come with a price. Marlene's declaration, "I've got to be strong," (Churchill, 1982, p.91) reveals the pressures on women to be the picture of independence and success at the often at the expense of personal connections and solidarity among women. This tension is commensurate with Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque; although it allows for instances of liberation it simultaneously exposes complexities and contradictions that exist in women's struggles for empowerment.

The dinner scene in *Top Girls* serves to be both a celebration of feminist achievements and also an exploration of the fragmented nature of female identity in the postmodern era. What starts off as camaraderie and celebration begins to slowly drift to disillusionment as characters confront their choices with lasting societal limitations. Churchill's work encourages audiences to contemplate the difficulties involved in collective liberation while suggesting that while carnivalesque moments offer temporary relief from oppression, they cannot fully address deeper problems related to issues of inequalities and isolation experienced by women. As these characters move through their unique journeys, the play focuses on the cultivation of solidarity in bringing reimagining feminist discourse, not only through the realm of individual success, but true collective empowerment.

This banquet is also a powerful expression of what Bakhtin calls the festivity, the cultural mode in which social hierarchies are overturned, official discourse collapses, and truth emerges through collective, chaotic often bodily expression. In Bakhtin's terms, carnival "uncrowns", authority and celebrates the world "turned upside down." Churchill's opening scene embodies this principle: instead of elite men

speaking in orderly turns, Churchill presents a table full of women who were historically silenced , “They would never have let me speak. Never.”.(Churchill, 1982, p.20), they interrupting one another, overlapping, and contradicting each other as they narrate their lives, as in Lady Nijo “Everyone is talking at the same time- what a noise”(Churchill, 1982, p.34). The dialogue becomes a linguistic celebration , in which no single voice dominates, as Bakhtin describes it a “polyphonic” space where meaning is created through dialogue rather than monologue. Churchill’s overlapping dialogue “question[s] the rationality of the play” and intentionally resists conventional narrative coherence, using fragmentation to foreground a distinctly postmodern feminist critique.

The banquet is not grotesque in terms of food itself, it is hideous in the Bakhtinian sense of grotesque realism, centers on the body. Its humiliations, vulnerabilities, and excesses. Bakhtin writes that grotesque realism brings what is “high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” down to “the material bodily level,” (Bakhtin,1948,p. 20-22), especially the “lower bodily stratum” of sex, childbirth, bodily suffering, and degradation.

Churchill’s guests offer precisely such bodily narratives: Lady Nijo recounts sexual exploitation; Pope Joan describes her pregnancy and death during childbirth while disguised as a man; Griselda remembers her obedient suffering under her husband’s cruel tests, “He Took my children from me. He told me they were dead. I had to endure it. I had no choice” (Chrucill, 1982, p. 31). In speaking these experiences publicly at a celebratory meal, they enact the Bakhtinian principle that carnival liberates truth by bringing hidden bodily realities into communal view. Churchill transforms the banquet into a space where what patriarchy forced into silence becomes the very substance of conversation, creating a grotesque verbal feast of trauma, endurance, and resistance.

In *Feminism and future in Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls: a chance for hope*, Burguera Blay emphasizes that *Top Girls* explores “the abuses of power from a feminist

stance” (Blay,2021,p. 3) through theatrical experimentation, “skewed time frames,” (Blay, 2021, p. 9) and non-naturalistic strategies such as abrupt scene changes and temporal disjunctions, all of which resist stable ideology and expose contradictions within feminism itself. The banquet, therefore, becomes not only a resurrection of women’s histories but a dramatization of the impossibility of a unified feminist identity. Griselda’s blind obedience, Nijo’s internalized destiny, Isabella Bird’s colonial privilege, and Dull Gret’s violent rebellion stand in stark contrast, producing a friction that reflects, as Burguera Blay notes, “the contradictions inherent in feminism” (Blay, 2021, p. 11), rather than resolving them into a single narrative. Churchill uses subversion not to harmonize these voices but to stage their differences, turning the banquet into a theatrical forum where feminist ideology is tested against the lived realities of women across history.

The banquet is tied to its contemporary political context. Churchill’s play addresses, “the shift from a socialistic to a capitalistic society” (Sona, 2023, p. 312), under Thatcherism, reflecting anxieties about class mobility, individualism, and the erosion of collective responsibility. Marlene’s success within a Thatcherite system of meritocracy stands in stark contrast to the stories of women at the banquet, whose suffering stemmed from rigid patriarchal systems rewarded obedience and punished defiance.

The fact that Marlene takes pride in her promotion reflects the neoliberal feminist ideology, “I’ve been on the way up for long time”(Churchill, 1982, p.58) that personal success is a measure of movement forward. Churchill contrasts it with those of women who made many sacrifices, including not having their children at times, not having their identity, and even not having their bodies to make ends meet in a patriarchal society. The opposition reveals the shortcomings of feminism of the Thatcher era: Marlene is successful because she can accept the logic of the system that eviscerated other women. The carnivalesque feast is a critique of neoliberal feminism,

highlighting how individual success can conceal the struggles within the framework and the distribution of power.

As the women end up, speaking over each other, laughing, crying, arguing, and narrating their physical and emotional injuries, the banquet by Churchill transforms into a feminist festive inversion, destabilizing patriarchal beliefs, upending linear historiography, and exposing the complicated or contradictory character of the female experience. The commonplace conversation fulfills Bakhtin's opinion that truth is developed not by one person in power, but by a group of people jointly seeking it "we're all talking at once"(Churchill, 1982, p.49). Churchill creates an orchestral confrontation of narratives through his polyphony, overturning historical oppression, satirizing the intellectual traditions of patriarchy, and paying tribute to the complexity, pain, and resistance in the lives of women. By incorporating postmodern fragmentation, feminist pluralism, and the banquet as a venue of radical theatrical and political potential, Churchill demonstrates the value of women's stories throughout the ages to speak not just of subjugation but of disobedience, change, and the very strength of the commonly told story.

2.6 Subversion and the Capitalist Order

Due to *Top Girls*, Churchill enhances her criticism of Thatcherite ideology by attempting to portray Marlene's entry as a counterintuitive victory, which both sustains and dismantles the notion of feminist triumph. Marlene is a passionate individual who attests to the unbelief in class. Anything anyone can do, he has it in them, is a reflection of the Thatcherite gospel of meritocracy that rejects the existence of structural inequality.

The ideological shift is described as a transition from a socialist to a capitalist society, where the influence of competitive self-interest erodes communal responsibility. Marlene idolizes Margaret Thatcher, as evident in the line "She is a tough lady, Maggie," (Churchill, 1982, p.69) suggests that the former is internalizing a kind of

femininity that is not based on solidarity but is rooted in domination within existing hierarchies. *The Top Girls* employment agency is transformed into the smooth showroom of this ideology: avenue where empowerment is presented as superficial training on confidence. The counsel that Marlene gives to Jeanine “You have to figure out what you want... Go out and get it”(Churchill, 1982, p.66) makes feminism a sellable commodity, a product in the form of assertiveness. When she tells another client, “I think you’re overqualified,” (Churchill, 1982, p.70), her tone mirrors the bureaucratic aloofness of the system she now represents.

Churchill exposes the abuses of power from a feminist perspective, showing that the superficiality of corporate empowerment is built on a foundation of exploitation and exclusion. Nowhere is this clearer than in her interactions with Angie, whose wide-eyed aspiration “I want to be like you” .”(Churchill, 1982, p.45) is met with Marlene’s cold assessment to Joyce: “She’s not going to make it.”(Churchill, 1982, p.45) Marlene’s personal triumph depends on leaving behind the child she abandoned and the sister who raised her, echoing Joyce’s fierce accusation: “You never come and see your own child” Churchill, 1982, p.59).The agency’s atmosphere of performance, with its confident voices, sharp tailoring, and rehearsed smiles, transforms feminist subversion into what might be called a capitalist masquerade. What begins as a carnivalesque gathering of women across centuries, where their chaotic overlapping dialogue temporarily dissolves hierarchical norms, is by Act Two recoded into a space where individuality is polished and commodified rather than shared, where feminist festivity becomes capitalist spectacle, emptied of its communal force. According to Sona, Churchill presents a disturbing picture of a society that celebrates the success of women, but it contains profound contradictions within the very tradition of feminism itself.

This ideological contradiction leads to the problem that can be referred to as the failure of feminist solidarity the question Churchill dramatizes most brutally. *Top Girls* reveals that Marlene's success is conditional upon rejecting the general feminist value of

solidarity in favor of neoliberal self-promotion. During the clash between Marlene and Joyce, Churchill gathers the failure to unite at the core: Joyce spits, saying she does not know how you could be so cold, and Marlene replies, “I believe in the individual” (Churchill, 1982, p.80) The conflict over Angie's future becomes a microcosm of the clash between liberal feminism and the struggle of the working classes. Joyce accuses her sister of having joined the oppressors- You are one of them now, all right? - and the accusation is sound: Marlene has become a success, the success that has put her on the side of the capitalist patriarchy she feels like she has defeated.

This irony complies with the divided argument put forward by Judith Butler concerning the identity politics that feminism is disjointed when it operates based on a fixed category of woman without taking into account the converging force of class, race, and work. The emphasis of individual triumph as enforced by Marlene is what Butler cautions against: that woman is a collective subject and not a stratified, resistive position, “she’s not going to make it.” (Churchill, 1982, p.88). The fact that Angie is displaced, as her ambition to rise up the ranks is thwarted by structural forces, is similar to what Butler says: performance is not enough to reverse structural inequality.

The same criticism of the commodification of the female body in capitalism presented by Luce Irigaray is also pertinent. According to Irigaray, women in patriarchal economies turn into products that are going through the systems of value stipulated by men. This is precisely dramatized in the *Top Girls* agency: empowerment is not offered; it is sold, transforming the personality into a marketable commodity. Marlene is so refined in her confidence that, when intoxicated, she cries “I hate the working class” (Churchill, 1982, p.90) this display shows that she has internalized the capitalist logic, which Irigaray condemns to a great degree. In this regard, Angie's claim that she is her mother undermines the fantasy of female progress by revisiting the maternal attachments that Marlene had to repress to become successful. The psychological violence of being left by Marlene is an extreme expression of the point made by Irigaray

that the patriarchal structures require the destruction of the maternal and the relational to replicate themselves.

This is further criticized in a Marxist feminist reading. Churchill clarifies that the feminist struggle among women does not have a common denominator, joyce to Marlene “ you never come and see your own child”(Churchill, 1982, p.100). It is class that determines who ascends and who pays the price for the success of another. The statement that Marlene makes to explain her approach to individuals, which is: I believe in the individual is, in fact, a pure form of neoliberal ideology, and the play demonstrates that this belief does recreate the exploitations that Marxist feminism has come to identify i.e. the working-class woman (Joyce) must absorb the reproductive labor and emotional nurturing that the professional woman (Marlene) has thrown away. The rise of Marlene finances the stagnation of Joyce. The carnivalesque womenhood of the sisterhood in Act I, whose women of the centuries communicate collectively, disintegrates in Act Three into a household scarred by class, a place where solidarity is not merely impossible, but impossible due to the economic structure that Marlene promotes.

The success of Churchill lies in his demonstration of how feminist subversion can be transformed into something that is simulated as liberation, rather than liberation itself, once it has been internalized into the capitalist logic. The feast, which started as a subversion gathering of women undefeated pasts, turns, towards the end of the play, into a dark scene of neoliberal individualism, where achievement is bought at the expense of community, motherhood, and togetherness. In this sense, *Top Girls* is not just a criticism of Thatcherism, but a radical questioning of the inner contradictions of feminism: its vulnerability to co-option, its division into classes, and its failure to maintain the spirit of collective festivity that was previously a promise of change.

2.7 Medieval Carnival to Postmodern Disillusion.

Compared to the colorful world of the medieval carnival, the postmodern landscape of *Top Girls* by Churchill depicts a massive turnaround between the revitalizing laughter of the Middle Ages and the fatigued criticism of late modernity a turnaround between the regenerative laughter and the ironic disruptions and splintering of the Churchillian woman. *The Canterbury Tales*, by Chaucer, makes the pilgrimage a genuine festival site because it is not only a mocking of patriarchal authority, but because it rejuvenates social energy through the excess of laughter, which can temporarily suspend the existing truth and established order (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 8-10) Her physical frankness, sexual satire and unrestrained resistance are inspired by the ideas of Bakhtin that subversion laughter is the second life of the people, a life and life-affirming dramatization of rebirth in which hierarchies are upside down and reconstituted.

Top Girls, on the other hand, portrays a post-festive inversion world that is exhausted by the exuberance of collective resistance that carnival once embodied. Rather than a collective celebration, Churchill presents the rubble of what the festivity has become, changed according to the promises of transformation that have been swallowed, commodified, and rendered ineffective by Thatcherite capitalism. This banquet, by the opening of Act I, is a brief echo of the grotesque embodiment historical women laughing, interrupting, and telling grotesque bodily tales. However, unlike the pilgrims in Chaucer, this group does not end up creating communal rejuvenation. Their laughs are intertwined, collide, and disintegrate, and do not create the collective life of the festival as Bakhtin suggests. What emerges is a postmodern carnival of exhaustion, wherein the stories of the women reveal trauma instead of creating renewal. Churchill employs perverse probabilities and interrupted identities to show that feminism at the close of the century of capitalism is neither convergent to communal renewal nor one of its components (Blay, 2021, pp. 3-11).

Laughter is a prime example of the differences between the medieval world of Chaucer and the postmodern world of Churchill. Laughter in Chaucer is revitalizing, collective, a force that puts clergy and kings on the same level, a laughter that uncrowns the mighty and brings something new out of the hideous carcass. The laughter of *The Wife* makes fun of the husbands but also confirms her energy in a patriarchal society. This is in contrast to Churchill, who laughs in a thin, ironic, and pain-laden manner. Whenever Pope Joan or Lady Nijo laughs, it is a tone of exhaustion, not one of revelation. Likewise, Marlene is throwing on the flimsy laughter at the agency when she tells Angie, “you’re a big lump” (Churchill, 1982, p.66). It is hollow, and the fact that she is alienated rather than at home is revealed. This is not the mass laughter that Bakhtin praises, but what feminist critics refer to as the post-carnavalesque: laughter deprived of its communal force, deprived of the capacity to renew itself, and instead, it is the bitter irony of women living within structures that keep exploiting them.

So, at least, where Chaucer envisions a social world that has been reborn in the form of bodily humor, Churchill recreates a world in which subversion has already been enacted, and with disastrous results. The grotesque does not regenerate; it itself reveals. Laughter is not unifying, but disintegrating. Community will not arise: it is broken down under neoliberal individualism. Read side by side, Chaucer and Churchill trace the historical pattern between the medieval festival's revitalization and postmodern feminist disenchantment, between a world where laughter could at least momentarily cancel out and free up, and a world where laughter has become the only thing that a carnival has been forced to abandon.

Chapter Three

Conclusions

The narratives create an environment where the characters are able to shake off the expectations and hierarchies of society. This carnival-like setting lends itself to the reversal of authority, evidenced through characters like the Wife of Bath and the Miller who challenge traditional gender roles and social norms. The use of humour and wit throughout these stories fosters a feeling of community among the pilgrims. This shared laugh serves as a force that unites both characters and readers, allowing both to relate to the absurdities in human behavior and societal imperfections. The communal nature is reflected in the communal experience and narratives to highlight the mutual challenges. The carnival in The Canterbury Tales does suggest a potential for renewal and change. Characters often return from their adventures with new insights or perspectives, and carry the idea that breaking up social order can lead to personal growth and a re-evaluation of values. In Top Girls, the carnival atmosphere is dominated by fragmented autonomy, where individuals such as Marlene stand for the search for selfhood in a patriarchal structure. The dinner party scene is used to show the diversity and disagreement between the perspectives of women, which sheds light on the nuances of female identity and agency.

Whereas, Churchill criticises how neoliberalism appropriates the principles of feminism, suggesting that the celebration of individual achievements often disregards the empowerment of the collective. The successes of the characters are portrayed as individual successes while the system that promotes individualism over solidarity is shown to be deficient. The play has given a feel of disillusionment in collective liberation. The initial spirit of togetherness in the dinner party sharply contrasts with other moments of isolation and hardship among characters, illustrating how individual achievements do not contribute to a broader movement for women's rights and social

change. This progression from celebration to postmodern ideological disenchantment puts in evidence the difficulties women meet in present-day capitalist society.

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