Dimple Godiwala. ***Breaking the Bounds. Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980.***

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1 Dimple Godiwala's aim is to give a detailed analysis of contemporary plays by feminist dramatists and to show how they have entered, and thus effectively changed, the British dramatic mainstream, or rather the "malestream" of English, male, white, heterosexual, middle-class, leftwing dramatic writing. Following Foucault's claim that one can never write outside the dominating discourse, Godiwala demonstrates how the five chosen feminist playwrights have managed to transform the patriarchal dramatic discourse from within, thus intervening in the mainstream theatre as "the last site of negotiation" (xiii) that feminism had to enter in the second half of the twentieth century.[1] At one level she hence offers an analysis of the changes within dramatic discourse, on another level she undertakes a theoretical critique of Western patriarchy. Assuming an unbroken episteme of patriarchy, which as only in the twentieth century been ruptured by feminism, Godiwala contests Michel Foucault's analysis of epistemological breaks within Western discourse as developed in *The Order of Things*.

2 In Chapter One Godiwala defines her concept of patriarchy as "a complex, interactive web of intermingling or disparate and discrete discursive and post-discursive cultural practices, techniques, and methods" (3). The "rules" that shape discourse and exist on a pre-discursive level according to Godiwala can be called the "western patriarchal impulse," a level that can be modified but nonetheless remains self-reproducing. She chooses *Top Girls* as a play that documents the unbroken historical and global (consider Lady Nijo) episteme characterised by the patriarchal impulse, as the piece gathers female figures from the ninth (Pope Joan) to the twentieth century (Marlene) who have all been exploited and restricted by patriarchy. Godiwala argues that the patriarchal discourse has been ruptured, and thus partly transformed, by feminism (which for example enabled Margaret Thatcher to become Prime Minister in 1979). The changes in the dramatic discourse, which is presented as a subcategory of patriarchal discourse, do not only embrace the playwrights' gender and the subject matters of the plays, but also their form. With reference to Churchill's *Blue Heart* (*Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle*) Godiwala demonstrates how far a postmodern feminist play can differ from naturalist patriarchal form.

[1] Godiwala claims that the *fin de siécle* suffragette dramatists have not in fact entered the dramatic discourse as their plays were understood as political pamphlets rather than dramatic achievements (cf. xiii).

3 According to her notion of "the performativity of the dramatic text," Godiwala decides not to refer to particular productions of the chosen plays but rather to read the play texts as eliciting the performance texts, as "acts of performativity on the page" (xviii). Imagining possible performances instead of narrowing her investigation down to one particular/the original production, Godiwala also hopes that her "deep readings" of the plays might inspire future productions. However, with a few considerable exceptions (see below), Godiwala seldom considers performance possibilities in the course of her enlightening textual analysis; especially in the reading of the gender-bending Queen Christina an elaboration on the presentation of gender ambivalence on stage would have been interesting.

4 In Chapter Two Godiwala shows in detailed analysis how Caryl Churchill, the most prominent of the five chosen writers, breaks the bounds of both dramatic form and traditional content by creating innovative, non-patriarchal dramatic modes (for example in *The Skriker, Traps, Cloud Nine* and *Blue Heart*) and entering previously male territory when examining politics, history, financial issues, and war (such as in *Mad Forest, Serious Money, Owners, Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and *Top Girls*). In the case of *Vinegar Tom* her feminist concern resulted in a collaboration with *Monstrous Regiment,* a work that according to Godiwala sharpened both her dramatic and her political sensitivity. Godiwala shows that the common attribute "Thatcherite" to those recurrent female figures in Churchill's work who adapt to male ideals is a misnomer. She sees the patriarchal impulse behind this attempt to assimilate ambitious women into the patriarchal system and eventually use them as weapons against feminism (as in the case of Thatcher). There is another common error in the criticism of Churchill's oeuvre that Godiwala reveals: She argues that *Cloud Nine* is a play dealing with gender and sexuality rather than a postcolonial play as commonly assumed. It precariously has the only black character played by a white actor in the first part and completely loses interest in issues of race in the second part:

> Churchill does break the bounds of gender but at the cost of other issues with which the English stage has a great difficulty in dealing: the issues of race and colonial relations […] *Cloud Nine* for all its revolutionary fervour in the domain of feminist subversion and western sexual liberation remains an imperial narrative as it en-acts a progress achieved by a 'civilization' which is not merely White but also English (43-51).

5 It is in her reading of *Top Girls* that Godiwala raises an idea that might indeed be picked up by future productions: She highlights that the seventh woman, the waitress, remains silent and suggests that her subaltern presence should be embodied by a black actress, thus revealing the comparatively privileged status of the other women within the play. Churchill's

neglect of issues of race within her feminist play points towards the importance of locating difference within the current feminist epistemological project. Godiwala's short examination of Jackie Kay's semi-Brechtian *Chiaroscuro* shows that plays produced in the British fringe theatre have raised the issue of race (and black lesbianism) since the 1980s.

6 The third chapter "White Women's Mythologies" shows how Pam Gems puts female characters centre stage, re-working and re-considering famous female (and more recently, also male) icons who have achieved a mythical status, such as Queen Christina of Sweden, Marlene Dietrich, and Edith Piaf. Her non-linear narratives in a Barthesian way de-construct the legends and explore their relations to contemporary women concerning social and sexual freedom and gender restrictions. Similar to Churchill, Gems' project partly is *her*storicising male-dominated myths. Godiwala argues that the plays reflect Gems' non-separationist integrated approach to gender and her belief in a bi-sexuality in which both genders can merge and contribute and that it might be due to her avoidance of polemic writing that Gems is the only woman dramatist to have been produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company five times. In *Queen Christina* Godiwala detects a consideration of the current "gender trouble", as the play portrays the "flux, uncertainty and instability which surrounds gender identity" (91) today and thus can be linked to Judith Butler's notion of gender as citational performativity. Deconstructing the myth of a glamorous, intellectual Queen Christina as established by the film version starring Greta Garbo, Gems depicts a conflictual, deformed, gender-transgressive, "matrophobic" bisexual. Not only female rulers, but also mythic courtesans (Camille), heteiras (Piaf), and whores (Stas) are re-considered by Gems, de-mythicising romance as a construct that masks the exploitative nature of traditional heterosexuality in *Camille* and showing backstage crudity, class rage, and drug addiction in *Piaf*.

7 Entitled "From Heteronormativity to the View From Lesbos", the fourth chapter of *Breaking the Bounds* points out that Sarah Daniels is an ambivalent figure - seen from the radical lesbian margins of dramatic discourse (such as *The Gay Sweatshop* and *Split Britches*) she is an assimilationist, having entered the "malestream" and using traditional dramatic forms such as melodrama to entertain middle-class audiences. Seen from within the mainstream, however, she clearly is the most controversial and radical of the discussed playwrights, as she constantly (and didacticly) picks up taboo topics such as pornography (*Masterpieces*), sexual child abuse, incest and mental disease (*Beside Herself, The Madness of Esme and Shaz*), and gay lives (*Neaptide, Ripen Our Darkness*). Daniels continuously attacks patriarchal society without suggesting that lesbianism is "the solution" to the manifold problems of women. Godiwala convincingly argues that in Daniels' work "lesbian" becomes a

trope for bonding likened to motherhood and sisterhood, a trope for woman's awareness of the oppressiveness of patriarchy, and "a trope of reassurance which says there *are* alternative ways to live" (121). The study shows that melodrama is a dramatic form singularly suited to lesbian dramaturgy, making use of its basic emotions despair, protest, and triumph (for the marginalised) and that Daniels adds her genius of humour to this triad.

8 The final chapter "Soliloquizing Woman" analyses the work of Clare McIntyre and Anne Devlin who both use soliloquies to explore the psyche of the female subject. McIntyre fragments the female subject's social self in *My Heart's A Suitcase* and her sexual self in *Low Level Panic*, dividing woman's responses to her objectification in patriarchal culture among three characters who embody acceptance, assimilation, and rejection. Anne Devlin's psychological portraits of women are set against the backdrop of the Northern Irish conflicts, investigating the patriarchal power in Ireland and its interrelation to the Catholic Church. Devlin shows the women's need for freedom from the social/religious framework of domination, deconstructs the mythology of male heroism in Northern Ireland, and shows the damaging effects of exile.

9 Godiwala's study not only provides an illuminating analysis of the work of five contemporary feminist dramatists but also convincingly traces their influences on the dramatic mainstream discourse. Although some of the writers such as Sarah Daniels ultimately appeared to be a too radical force to continue being produced in the mainstream (Daniels now writes for television), there have been decisive changes to both the topics and the style of mainstream theatre within the past twenty years. It is one of the merits of *Breaking the Bounds* that Godiwala also reveals the shortcomings of feminist dramatic writing. Her constant examination of the depiction, or rather the ignorance, of the issues of race and colonialism points to the importance of including these issues within the mainstream - an inclusion that seems to take place at the turn to the twenty-first century, as recent productions for example at the Royal Court (cf. my review of *Fallout*) and the National Theatre show.