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Bridging the Dualist Pairs: An Ecofeminist Reading of Caryl Churchill's Fairy Tale Inter-text in *The Skriker*



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Abstract

Drawing mainly upon the critique of the dualisms of the ecofeminist literary theory, this article establishes connections between the dramatic structure of Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994), populated with anti-rational forces like fairies, spirits, goblins, and monsters, and the theory of ecofeminism. Thus, this article aims to reveal complementary ways of thinking about questions of dualism that are applicable to theatre studies. Accordingly, this article brings an anti-dualist feminist perspective to *The Skriker*, arguing that the play employs its fairy elements to avoid boundaries between dualist pairs so that all categories can be reconceptualized in ways that challenge polarisation. In this sense, the article indicates that the fairy character Skriker's swift crosses between the dualist pairs of male/female, human/nonhuman, and conscious/unconscious realms, and the idiosyncratic language relate to the interconnectedness between those dualist pairs, highlighting the possibilities through which they may be reconsidered in an interactive and complementary way.

Keywords

Ecofeminist Drama • Dualism • Fairy Tale • Caryl Churchill • *The Skriker*.



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Introduction

From the last decade of the twentieth century right up to the present day, a greening fire has been lit across disciplines to generate possibilities for the reciprocal relationships between humans and the non-human world. In an attempt to challenge the “anthropocentric arrogance and dominating attitude towards nonhuman nature,”¹ literary critics have paid much-needed attention to the prospect of reconsidering the agency and autonomy of nature. The common critique, proceeding on the analogous dominations of ‘nature’ and ‘women,’² has also found its way into literary studies, gradually becoming an approved and growing branch of ecocritical research,³ to which Françoise d’Eaubonne refers as “ecofeminism.” Paying exclusive attention to the concomitant oppression of women and nature, ecofeminist literary criticism interrogates the interwoven nature of all forms of domination, such as racism, classicism, speciesism, (neo)colonialism, and imperialism, which form “an oppressive and patriarchal conceptual framework” that Karen Warren calls “a logic of domination.”⁴ Hence, ecofeminism basically opposes the way this logic of domination has functioned historically within different cultural contexts and ultimately requests “an appreciation of the intrinsic value of everything in nature [and] an end to dualisms.”⁵ According to ecofeminists, there exists a complex conceptual interconnection between anthropocentrism and androcentrism in which dualism plays a central role.⁶ The dualistic structure operates within a hierarchical conceptual system that constructs categories into contrasting pairs perceived as fixed and ahistorical, connecting and reinforcing one another. Dualistic structures “make equality and mutuality unthinkable,”⁷ as they attach value to the side of a binary pair resonating with culture/reason/male/self and devalue the ‘underside’ in connection to nature/emotion/female/other.

The deconstruction of binaries initially requires the reconceptualization of nature with the intentional and mind-like qualities previously erased by Cartesian mind/body dualism.⁸ The reconfiguration of nature as an agentic space beyond human control enables a transfer between various structures of gender-related domination, which Plumwood refers to as “an anti-dualist ecological feminism.”⁹ Drawing mainly upon the critique of the dualism of ecofeminist literary theory, this article establishes connections between the dramatic structure of Caryl Churchill’s play *The Skriker* (1994), populated with anti-rational forces like fairies, spirits, goblins, and monsters, and the theory of ecofeminism, revealing complementary ways of thinking about questions of dualism that are applicable to theatre studies. Accordingly, this article brings an anti-dualist feminist perspective to *The Skriker*, arguing that the play employs its fairy elements to avoid boundaries between dualist pairs so that all categories can be conceptualised in ways that challenge polarisation.

¹Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xxvii.

²Mary Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1.

³Simone Birgitt Hartmann, “Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives on Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context: Toward a ‘Situated’ Literary Theory and Practice of Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice,” in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 93-94.

⁴Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 24.

⁵Barbara T. Gates, “A Root of Ecofeminism: Ecoféminisme,” in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 21.

⁶Val Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Reason,” *Hypatia* 6, (1991): 22.

⁷Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

⁸Plumwood, *Feminism*, 5.

⁹Plumwood, *Feminism*, 40.



Fairy Tale Inter-text in Ecofeminist Drama

Ecofeminist literary criticism provides a framework through which human relations, literary culture, and nonhuman nature may be re-evaluated in terms of ecofeminist drama. The framework explores literary considerations of nature and how those considerations are metaphorically and conceptually linked with representations of gender. By examining language, narrative construction, and character development, ecofeminist literary critics are able to highlight representations of women and nature in a wide range of literary texts, demonstrating how these representations maintain and perpetuate a “harmful environmental ethic” and are used to justify the “oppression of various others in patriarchal culture.”¹⁰

In essence, ecofeminism seeks to reject the assumption that the theory promotes the principle of an ontological connection between women and nature, highlighting the constructedness of gender and nature with an emphasis on the continuity between these entities, previously constructed as polar opposites. As Gates insists, “inherent in ecofeminism is a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things,” not only between women and nature.¹¹ In this way, ecofeminists challenge feminisations of nature or naturalizations of femininity to deconstruct political, historical, conceptual, empirical, socio-economic, linguistic, symbolic, and literary dominions over women and nature in favour of a more complicated and diverse relationship between these entities. Hence, ecofeminism extends its scope beyond the reductionist critique of the human versus nature conflict, integrating social, economic, and cultural dimensions into the environmentalist consciousness. Ecofeminists contend that the conceptualisation of the category of human requires more complex negotiations, particularly in terms of the dimensions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. To say the same differently, by exposing the mechanisms that perpetuate and maintain centric structures of domination along the axes of race, class, gender, and species, ecofeminism explores alternatives to relational assumptions defined by phallogocentric, psychological, and philosophical theories and problematizes Cartesian and Enlightenment definitions. In this regard, literary texts may allow for alternative discursive terrains in which dichotomous categorizations can be reconceptualized through nuanced negotiations. In the deconstruction of oppressive conceptual frameworks, as Una Chaudhuri highlights, “the arts and humanities—including theatre—must play a role.”¹²

The popular conceptual binary that divides humans from nature has been one of the most challenging issues that arts and humanities have investigated. The arts, with an emphasis on human conflicts within a cultural spectrum, have long been thought of as a form of expression that often separates humanity from nature. As for theatre, its particular focus on the Anthropos situates it at the far end of that continuum.¹³ In comparison to other disciplines such as literature, philosophy, visual arts, and history that may turn their attention from the human world to the world of objects, theatre has long been obsessed with humans, communicating the human mind in a dialogic form. As Chaudhuri argues, since antiquity, the Western dramatic tradition has been considered “a wholly social account of life”¹⁴ and it has strictly “concerned itself with what Sophocles, in *Antigone*, termed ‘the miracle of man.’”¹⁵ However, contemporary theatre scholars place great hope in the role of theatre in reconfiguring humanity's attitude towards the nonhuman environment as its textual and visual possibilities render it a crucial venue for the reconsideration of all oppressive structures. The cooperation of textual and visual dramatic elements, including dance, music, and text,

¹⁰Gretchen T. Legler, “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 228.

¹¹Gates, “A Root of Ecofeminism,” 20.

¹²Una Chaudhuri, “‘There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake’: Toward an Ecological Theater,” *Theater* 25, no.1 (1994): 24.

¹³Wendy Arons and Theresa May, *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

¹⁴Chaudhuri, “There Must Be,” 24.

¹⁵Carl Lavery, “Introduction: Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?” *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 20, no. 3 (2016): 231.



inevitably demonstrates a relational performativity that ultimately denies human supremacy and challenges the long-standing obsession of theatre with the Anthropos. In this way, there arises a possibility to consider theatre a particular site of counter-discourse, resistance, and reimagining.¹⁶ Although approaching theatre in performative terms can be challenging, this perspective contributes to trouble narrowly anthropocentric and androcentric discourse in theatre, revealing theatre's critical potential for staging resistance to all forms of domination, with a focus on the subjugation of women and the environment.

Contemporary playwrights employ many strategies to reconceptualize various categories in order to create new spaces for alternative interpretations. In this vein, Churchill's fairy tale elements inter-text in *The Skriker* arguably creates a space through which the dualist pairs that permeate the play can be undermined, and possibilities for change can be attained. Possibilities for change, as well as demands for social justice for both human and nonhuman entities, commonly find expression in folk tales and fairy tales, making these genres popular in all social classes.¹⁷ Folk tales and fairy tales appeal to the tastes of contemporary storytellers because they contain wounded characters who struggle for the social justice that we also demand in our contemporary societies. In other words, folk and fairy tales address "moral conflicts that have deep roots in our species,"¹⁸ offering alternative ways of thinking to deal with different forms of domination that have arisen in many places in today's world. Widely assumed as formative tales of childhood and represented in mass media for both children and adults, folk and fairy tales deal with the "issues that have a significant social function—whether critical, conservative, compensatory, or therapeutic."¹⁹ To say the same in slightly different terms, the fairy tale will serve a meaningful social and aesthetic function that genuinely liberates the readers, inspiring wonder in them and allowing them to imagine a wealth of possibilities for overcoming oppressive systems of discourse and representation.

Thus, rather than being "an infantile and non-serious literature"²⁰ as is often assumed in public opinion, the genre is "actively beneficial,"²¹ and has inspired unconventional revisions in the literary canon since the twentieth century. In the literary imagination, folk and fairy tales have been employed as points of departure, having major cultural significance and deserving deeper critical consideration. Expanding as a genre, the fairy tale has been consciously incorporated into twentieth century dramatic productions to articulate recovery and agency for the silent other. This conscious decision aims "to make meaning out of inarticulate matter, to make silent material speak."²² Fairy tales accordingly reconceptualize familiar motifs, plots, and characters to provoke contemporary readers/audience into rethinking the conventional norms of gender, sexuality, and power. The fairy tale reconfigured in an individualised way not only enables the "socialisation and acculturation of [its] readers"²³ but also stimulates a unique artistic capacity to challenge established literary conventions. Such a reconfiguration "allows for free expression and subversion of norms that are hypocritically upheld and serve to oppress people,"²⁴ providing hope for a possible change. In other words, the essence of the conventional Western fairy tale embodies "heroic optimism," wherein characters

¹⁶Theresa J. May, "Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage" *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 7, no. 1 (2005): 86.

¹⁷Jack Zipes, "Speaking the Truth with Folk and Fairy Tales: The Power of the Powerless," *The Journal of American Folklore* 132, no. 525 (2019): 248.

¹⁸Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 152.

¹⁹Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), xi.

²⁰Cristina Bacchilega, "North American and Canadian Fairy Tales," in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales: The Western Fairy Tale Tradition from Medieval to Modern*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 343.

²¹Jack Zipes, "Introduction: Fairy Tales," in *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature*, ed. Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul, Lynne Vallone, Peter Hunt, and Gillian Avery (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 181.

²²Karen E. Rowe, "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 56.

²³Jack Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), xxvi.

²⁴Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment*, xxix.



endure misfortune, yet through supernatural intervention or their own ingenuity, transform the adversities to their benefit, ultimately resulting in a favourable conclusion.²⁵ Thus, the classic framework is discernible and universally characterised by hope, transcending cultural boundaries and languages, exhibiting social competence and triumph over evil in fantastical realms, which consequently influences our reality and promotes change. The conventional impulse of hope for change in fairy tales strongly suggests an intentional strategy in *The Skriker*, foregrounding dichotomies in order to highlight the destructive consequences of oppressive conceptual frameworks grounded in dualism.

Fairy Tale Inter-text in *The Skriker*

Churchill's inter-text of fairy elements enables her to expose inherent contradictions in patriarchal ideologies and confront oppressive conceptual frameworks, as many ecofeminists attempt to do. In her early career during the 1970s, Churchill showed a commitment to "both feminist and socialist ideals," using the theatre's function of generating possibilities of justice.²⁶ Especially Churchill's early works, *Vinegar Tom* and *Floorshow*, brought her "a recognition that she belongs to a [women's] movement."²⁷ Churchill's plays take on innovative techniques, including musical interludes, episodic mode, and nonlinear discourse, which signal a break with the patriarchal forms of theatre.²⁸ Amelia Kritzer comments on Churchill's evolving dramaturgy, noting her "continual imaginative challenges to the conventions of theatre."²⁹ Churchill's techniques, thus, challenge the rigid linearity of the traditional binary oppositions of the western anthropocentric and androcentric worldviews, exposing the mechanisms that perpetuate and maintain centric structures of domination along the axes of woman and nature.

In their exploration of the alternatives to traditionally defined phallogocentric discursive terrains, Churchill's plays move towards "re-viewings of the 'frightening', terrifying, and damaging consequences of our contemporary world, hurtling towards economic and ecological warfare and a constant state of global terror."³⁰ Plays such as *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971), *Fen* (1983), *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1991), *The Skriker* (1994), *Far Away* (2000) and *We Turned on the Light* (2006) explore the moral and ecological implications of human action. Sheila Rabillard points out, "[*The Skriker*] has more recently been discussed as one of Churchill's most important ecological statements" and "its eco-logic centres upon the role of the fairy characters."³¹ Building on and contributing to this statement, the following discussion of *The Skriker* takes Rabillard's statement a step further to investigate the ecofeminist focus of the play upon the role of Churchill's dramatic structure, populated with anti-rational forces. It seems rather odd that *The Skriker*, a play with such a complex engagement with ecofeminist assumptions, has elicited very little critical attention in this area. Relying mainly on the anti-dualist ecofeminist methodology outlined earlier and incorporating, where necessary, other theoretical paradigms, this article focuses on the particular approach to dualisms taken by *The Skriker*, as well as the question of whether the play succeeds in offering entry points to open new spaces for alternative social visions, making use of theatre's unique possibilities.

The play is based on three central figures: Lily, a young pregnant woman; Josie, a young woman who has been accused of murdering her baby; and the Skriker, "a *shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and*

²⁵Marina Warner, *Fairy Tale: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xxix.

²⁶Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), 69.

²⁷Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond, "Introduction: On Caryl Churchill," in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, ed. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

²⁸Lisa, Merrill, "Monsters and Heroines: Caryl Churchill's Women," in *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, ed. Phyllis R. Randall (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 81.

²⁹Amelia Kritzer, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 1.

³⁰Aston and Diamond, "Introduction," 6.

³¹Sheila Rabillard, "On Caryl Churchill's Ecological Drama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, ed. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 97.



damaged.”³² The Skriker is introduced as “an ancient fairy, [...] hundreds of years old [...] one of many, not a major spirit but a spirit.”³³ In his inquiry into the folkloristic background of the Skriker, R. Darren Gobert notes that in the compendia of fairies and folklore, he comes across a creature wandering invisibly through Northern England: Shriker or Skriker, whose graphemic variation shows a resemblance to Churchill's Skriker's equally variable speech. The word skriker is associated with a word from the Lancashire dialect meaning “complain,” itself no doubt related to the Middle English word for “shriek.”³⁴ Used in both the history of theatre and fairies, the Skriker can be related to the “horrible shriek” that, as Gobert outlines, punctuates the sound design and signifies Josie and Lily's movement from one world to another, even as they do not really move.³⁵

Spirits from English folklore such as Black Annis, Jennie Greenteeth, Johnny Squarefoot, Rawheadand-bloodybones, and Nellie Longarms, each legendary for harming the young, accompany the Skriker in the dramatic and scenic landscape of the play.³⁶ By using these folkloristic spirits, Churchill enriches the dramatic construction with conventional fairy themes such as the threat of children's death, enchanted food, and changeling substitutions. Moreover, *The Skriker* adapts another trope of fairy tales, present in “Frau Holle” by the Brothers Grimm or “Les Fées” by Charles Perrault: the unkind action of one girl brings punishment; the kind action of another brings rewards. For instance, in the play, Josie spits toads after denying the Skriker's request for a kiss; Lily grants it, and “pound coins come out of her mouth when she speaks.”³⁷ It is pertinent to note that Churchill's fairy elements inter-text in *The Skriker* allows her to “talk about power, violence, alienation, [environmental] conditions, [and gender] roles.”³⁸ Paying particular attention to the intersectionality between environmental degradation and the deterioration of Lily and Josie's living conditions, Churchill reveals continuities and the interpenetration of the dualist pairs that persist throughout the play. The play opens with a long monologue by the Skriker:

*[D]own comes cradle and baby [...] Revengeance is gold mine, sweet. Fe fi fo fumbledown cottage pie crust my heart and hope to die. My mother she killed me and put me in pies for sale away and home and awayday. Peck out her eyes and have it [...] An open grave must be fed up you go like dust in the sunlight of heart.*³⁹

As the quotation lays bare, from the very beginning of the play, the ‘buried child’ theme underlies this speech and acts as a catalyst for the understanding of environmental destruction. This common theme permeates the ecofeminist dramaturgy, establishing strong connections between the poisoned land and the children who have died from toxic pesticides. For instance, Cherrie Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* (1994) also deals with the shocking intensity of the buried child motif, serving to recruit the audience/reader as allies against such destructive practices, and hence the image can catalyse changes in perception and behaviour.⁴⁰ *The Skriker* manifests similar connections by dramatising the Skriker as a reflection of abused nature. The Skriker's initial speech ties together the Skriker's cosmically polluted spirit world (jumbling together fragments of well-known nursery rhymes), the exploitation of the planet (e.g. in form of the “gold

³²Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker* (London: Nickhern Books, 1994), 1.

³³Churchill, *The Skriker*, 16.

³⁴R. Darren, Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 28.

³⁵Gobert, *The Theatre*, 29.

³⁶Gobert, *The Theatre*, 24.

³⁷Churchill, *The Skriker*, 11.

³⁸Jack Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

³⁹Churchill, *The Skriker*, 3-5.

⁴⁰Cherrie Moraga, *Heroes and Saints & Other Plays* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: West End Press, 1994)

mine”), and the theme of the revenge of nature that are so common to environmental writings. The readers/ audience are informed that the Skriker seeks blood to repair the abused planet by uttering,⁴¹ “Reveangance is gold mine.”⁴² The Skriker threatens—using the very same word, “mine”, to relate to both the abuse the planet suffers and to her role as nature’s avenger. As Janelle Reinelt highlights, “the Skriker is damaged because the world has damaged her. Her image is of ruined nature.”⁴³ In harnessing the common fairy tale theme of the ‘buried child’ to the environmental agenda, the play draws attention to global environmental changes, which provoke fresh modes of dramatic inquiry and representational strategies.

The Skriker’s cosmically polluted underworld parallels Josie and Lily’s abused psychic conditions. Elaine Aston foregrounds this parallelism and argues that the play reflects a “concern for future generations—particularly future generations of women,” with particular emphasis on the analogous damage that occurs to both women and nature.⁴⁴ During Skriker’s ten-minute monologue, which hints that “the mother a murder in rags tags,”⁴⁵ the readers/audience learn that Josie is confined in a mental hospital, having been accused of killing her child. Considering this confinement, it is possible to argue that one of the principal female characters in the play is depicted as alternately abused and victimised. The Skriker visits Josie in her psychiatric ward in the shape of an old “dowdy” woman, trying to seduce her into the spirit world.⁴⁶ Josie, who has already been damaged irreversibly and convicted of killing her 10-day-old baby just before the play starts, proves quite resistant to the Skriker’s lure into the spirit world. She blames the Skriker for all her suffering and wants to remove the spirit, who has been preoccupied with seducing, subverting, and eventually controlling Lily. Lily, pregnant at the beginning of the play, is more vulnerable to the Skriker’s lure and tries to get along with the abusive spirit, yet finally she is forced to surrender. Struggling with their roles as biological mothers, both Josie and Lily are vulnerable: the Skriker knows “[they] [are] desperate,”⁴⁷ and succeeds in subverting their ability to perform their motherhood roles, reducing Josie to containment and Lily to surrender.⁴⁸

The Skriker cautiously avoids questioning Josie and Lily’s historically constructed social roles as more vulnerable to anti-rational forces or ‘hysteria’; rather, the play criticises the oppressive conceptual frameworks that create those roles. Circulating on the border of indistinction, the Skriker as “a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged”⁴⁹ embodies, as Perrault has argued, both the abused “essence of that which is woman” and the patriarchal structures of subversion and oppression that seduce and corrupt her.⁵⁰ The evident absence of the fathers of Josie’s and Lily’s babies—who, however, are symbolically present in the mental hospital confinement—and the Skriker’s sporadic interruptions to the two women’s lives permeates not only Lily’s and Josie’s present lives but also their futures.⁵¹ As Perrault further writes, “[the women] are shaped by historical patterns perpetuated by the patriarchy, [...] and placed in a continuous present in Churchill’s mythic world, unable to escape the strangling death portent of the past.”⁵² In this

⁴¹Kelli Shermeyer, “The Future is Fey: Toward a Posthuman Dramaturgy with Caryl Churchill’s *The Skriker*,” *Journal of Fantastic in the Arts* 30, no.1 (2019): 54.

⁴²Churchill, *The Skriker*, 5.

⁴³Janelle Reinelt, “Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style,” in *Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 188.

⁴⁴Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights 1990-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32.

⁴⁵Churchill, *The Skriker*, 3.

⁴⁶Churchill, *The Skriker*, 9.

⁴⁷Churchill, *The Skriker*, 27.

⁴⁸Katherine Perrault, “Beyond the Patriarchy: Feminism and the Chaos of Creativity,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* Fall, (2002): 52.

⁴⁹Churchill, *The Skriker*, 1.

⁵⁰Perrault, “Beyond the Patriarchy,” 50.

⁵¹Perrault, “Beyond the Patriarchy,” 49.

⁵²Perrault, “Beyond the Patriarchy,” 53.

context, the shape-shifting ability of the Skriker, unconstrained by spatio-temporal registers, allows for the deconstruction of the (masculine) Aristotelian tenets of narrative order, which informed a linear theory of dramatic unity.⁵³ The Skriker introduces herself to Lily as follows:

*I'll level with you, okay? You ready for this? I'm an ancient fairy, I am hundreds of years old as you people would work it out, I have been around through all of the stuff you would call history, that's cavaliers and roundheads, Henry the eighth, 1066 and before that, back when the Saxons feasted, the Danes invaded, the Celts hunted, you know about any of this stuff? Alfred and the cakes, Arthur and the table.*⁵⁴

The Skriker's "time-space' compression" to an instant enables her to move across spatial and temporal confinements, which also empowers the play to deconstruct patriarchal linearity for the sake of causality through a reconceptualization of time and space frames.⁵⁵ The nonlinear time construction of the play imaginatively exposes some of the faulty frameworks and erroneous assumptions of the Enlightenment project that continue to govern Western ontological and epistemological beliefs. Thus, the aperiodic behaviour of the play offers multiple entry points through which new spaces may be foregrounded beyond dualism.

The Skriker and other irrational forces comfortably cross the line between the human and nonhuman worlds as they appear in various personae. The Skriker's appearance in the deceptive luring forms of men, women, and children, as well as inanimate objects, problematises the logic of dualism. Its surreal shapeshifting ability opens up to the Skriker a space of autonomy and freedom that would be unattainable to her in the real patriarchal world. The ability to disguise allows for reversing gender roles and overcoming patriarchal conventions. At various points in the play, the Skriker appears as an old crone, a disturbed child, a loud American, or a sofa, exposing the dichotomies as blurred. It is, therefore, significant to note that Churchill's use of a shape-shifting fairy character, unconstrained by linear time and space, can be regarded as an ecofeminist strategy to highlight the continuity between dualist pairs previously constructed as polar opposites and hence to indicate inherent contradictions in the oppressive ideologies governing Lily and Josie's conscious and unconscious worlds. To say the same in slightly different terms, the Skriker's interactions with Josie and Lily retain an autonomy that would not be possible without the disguise, which allows the Skriker to manipulate them astutely to obtain what she desires. The Skriker makes repetitive visits to Josie in her psychiatric ward and comes across Lily in different places in a variety of guises, including a derelict asylum patient, a homeless woman, a drunk American tourist, and a male suitor, all of which destabilise her physical and conscious presence. The sporadic interruptions restrain the women's lives as the Skriker weaves in and out of their conscious world while attempting to lure them into the unconscious underworld. The shape-shifting and the resulting ambiguity around bodily, spatial, and temporal boundaries vitally contribute to an anti-dualist interpretation of the play, relating it to the interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman worlds. In this way, *The Skriker* deconstructs the linearity of time and space in a creative and explorative way, which ultimately challenges the rigid linearity of the traditional binary oppositions of dualistic thinking.

Churchill's invitation onstage to not only the shape-shifting Skriker but also other anti-rational forces addresses "real anxieties about [human] vulnerability in an age of rapid globalisation."⁵⁶ Globalisation,

⁵³Perrault, "Beyond the Patriarchy," 46.

⁵⁴Churchill, *The Skriker*, 16.

⁵⁵Aston and Diamond, "Introduction," 8.

⁵⁶Laura Davis and Christina Santos, *The Monster Imagined: Humanity's Recreation of Monsters and the Monstrous* (Witney, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), xi.

indeed, is a key element in the play's use of folkloristic motifs. Diamond affirms that Churchill's use of the fairy elements from British folklore, "take[s] on new shapes and traverse[s] national boundaries."⁵⁷ Even more central to an ecofeminist reading of *The Skriker*, however, is the way the play situates humans and anti-rational nonhuman forces in a mutually reliant framework, dismantling the hierarchy between humans and nonhumans. In a series of theatrical images, the anti-rational forces from the nonhuman world share the stage with humans. As the stage direction informs us in one scene:

A BUSINESSMAN with a THRUMPIN riding on his back. He doesn't know it's there. The GIRL leaves. He is joined by colleagues, all with THRUMPINS, for a meeting. They are talking but we can't hear what they say. All we can hear is a shrill twittering wordless conversation among the THRUMPINS.⁵⁸

The wordless scene of intermingling humans and nonhuman challenges the conventions of anthropocentric theatre, "which has been coterminous with the history of human subjectivity"⁵⁹ and has concerned itself with communicating the human mind in a dialogic form. Dismantling traditional dramatic conventions generally dependent on language, *The Skriker* adopts a new dramatic strategy that might "break the fifth wall of anthropocentrism."⁶⁰ This new strategy promotes a breakdown of the dualistic human/nonhuman division through the distortion of spatial and temporal scales and the entanglement of nonhuman with humans on stage within a nonhierarchical dramatic structure, promoting reciprocal possibilities and co-existence. Moreover, the strategy discloses the Aristotelian theory of poetic arts, which is based on hu(man) experience and principles of regularity with an emphasis on the narration of the world by man.⁶¹ It is therefore no coincidence that Churchill's strategy leads to a deeper exploration not only beyond human/nonhuman dualism but also across male/female boundaries, e.g. by undermining the basic assumptions of patriarchal linearity, as discussed above. This strategy highlights that these dualist pairs do not remain a given, and their attendant assumptions and expectations can be transcended.

Another central strategy the play employs is exploring the role of language in shaping dualist assumptions. As Wilson argued, this role relies "on a structure of replacement (the sign stands for the signified) and displacement (the deferral of desire through subsequent repressions from sign to sign."⁶² Churchill's emphasis on the fluidity of language "at once seductive, strange, terrible and haunting" shatters the limits of representation.⁶³ In the play, "recalling James Joyce's puns and neologisms," the Skriker's speech "becomes mutant" and does not provide a satisfactory meaning of the action continually shifting and sliding.⁶⁴ The Skriker's five-page monologue opening the play is filled with linguistic associations based on sound and makes it difficult for the audience to reach a satisfactory understanding of the action from the very beginning: "Shriek! shrink! shuck off to a shack, sick, soak, seek a sleep slope slap of the dark to shelter skelter away, a wail a whirl a world away. Slit slat slut. That bitch a botch an itch in my shoulder blood."⁶⁵ The Skriker's

⁵⁷Elin Diamond, "Feeling Global," in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*, ed. Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 481.

⁵⁸Churchill, *The Skriker*, 35-36.

⁵⁹Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh, "Introduction: Greening the Absurd," in *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*, ed. Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), 6.

⁶⁰Una Chaudhuri, "The Fifth Wall: Climate Change Dramaturgy," *HowlRound*, April 2016, n.p.

⁶¹Laurie Schneider-Adams, *A History of Western Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 97.

⁶²Ann Wilson, "Failure and the Limits of Representation in *The Skriker*," in *Essays on Caryl Churchill: Contemporary Representations*, ed. Sheila Rabillard (Winnipeg, Canada: Blizzard), 180.

⁶³Jean E. Howard, "On Owning and Owning: Caryl Churchill and the Nightmare of Capital," in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, ed. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48.

⁶⁴Howard, "On Owning and Owning," 48.

⁶⁵Churchill, *The Skriker*, 1-2.



idiosyncratic language aims to disable meaning rather than generate it, problematising the assumption that “grammatical categories reflect the underlying structure of the world”⁶⁶ and instead constructs grammatical structures as a central part of the not only anthropocentric but, more narrowly, phallogocentric system that entraps the (human) female characters. The Skriker’s warping of grammatical structure exposes oppressive and limiting features, while her alternative discursive strategy remains beyond her expressive and cognitive capacities. This results in restricting the discursive supremacy of the Anthropos and destabilising our conventional understanding of the subject and object in the meaning-making process. The Skriker’s distorted speech and her appearance in various personae allow for a multifaceted, complex envisioning that considers questions related to dualism and, more significantly, the limits of language to represent reality. According to ecofeminist critic Catriona Sandilands, “the Real, like the repressed, has been with us all along” and it “lurks as a limit to language [...] in the gap between reality and representation.”⁶⁷ Echoing Sandilands’ claim, Howard also suggests that the conversations in *The Skriker* perpetually veer between nonsense and new sense, forming meaning and dissolving it while problematising the role of language in shaping reality and generating meaning.⁶⁸

The grammatically disjointed speech in *The Skriker* is accompanied by dance, “an expressive medium that slips the noose of rational discourse” and thus serves particularly well to further emphasise the inadequacy of language to generate authentic meaning.⁶⁹ The series of dances and pantomimes in *The Skriker* parallels the actions of the main characters and foregrounds the failure of linguistic procedures in the play. In this way, the use of disjointed speech and the musical interludes “shatter the phallogocentric model ... [and] disturb the traditional (male) linear play structure [...] criticising the social and political plight of women.”⁷⁰ This can be read as another deliberate attempt to challenge dualism as an ecofeminist dramatic strategy. Wilson has adequately described the way the *Skriker* questions and overturns the language as “an act of political resistance.”⁷¹ The play’s chaotic use of language within its nonlinear dramatic structure replaces the traditional sign system to raise awareness of women’s social and political predicament and potential environmental destruction. As the probably most central expression of the traditional sign system, language, as Warren states, “plays a crucial role in concept formation [...] it also plays a crucial role in keeping intact mutually reinforcing sexist, racist, and naturist views of women, people of colour, and nonhuman nature.”⁷² Language, in short, is one of the arrangements of the logic of domination, dictating subjectivities and constructing systematic categories of identities based on culture/nature, human/nonhuman, and male/female dualisms. However, the strategies of the play, as discussed above, unquestionably undermine this problematic capability of language to form and reinforce oppressive dualistic conceptual structures and instead invite the readers/audience to think about the probabilities beyond dualisms.

The Skriker’s resistance to linguistic conventions aligns with yet another anti-dualist ecofeminist dramatic strategy, namely the strategy of rendering the underside of a dualism in ways that speak to its agency and its existence apart from and beyond the control of its respective opposite in the dualist pairing. This becomes particularly conspicuous in the way the Skriker aligns herself with the natural world and continually reminds us of its destruction:

⁶⁶Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 133.

⁶⁷Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 180.

⁶⁸Howard, “On Owning and Owning,” 48.

⁶⁹Diamond, “Feeling Global,” 482.

⁷⁰John A. Price, “The Language of Caryl Churchill: the Rhythms of Feminist Theory, Acting Theory, and Gender Politics,” *Women Writers* (July 1999), n.p.

⁷¹Wilson, “Failure,” 187.

⁷²Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 27.

*They used to leave cream in a sorcerer's apprentice. Gave the brownie a pair of trousers to wear have you gone? Now they hate us and hurt hurtle faster and master. They poison me in my rivers of blood poisoning makes my arm swelter. Can't get them out of our head strong.*⁷³

In the Skriker's account, hatred, abuse and mastery dominate the stark division between the human and nonhuman worlds and propel her desire for revenge: "Revengeance is gold mine, sweet,"⁷⁴ she threatens at the very beginning of the play. Determined to seek revenge on those who have destroyed its natural habitat, she quite tellingly does not choose a powerful male one might expect to stand as a representative of this human "master[y]", but Josie and Lily, "poor, single mum[s] [who are] more likely to be exposed to contaminated food and polluting toxins."⁷⁵ The Skriker lures them into the underworld, an imperial palace hosting a sumptuous feast where "some of the food is twigs, leaves, beetles, some of the clothes are rags, some of the beautiful people have a claw hand or hideous face."⁷⁶ These images deceptively suggest "poison in the food chain"⁷⁷ and finally give way to a distorted reflection of this world, which can be regarded as a projection of the apocalyptic ending that awaits the human world. Thus, the Skriker, who claims to be a hundred years old, appears as the embodiment of nature in a long-held culture/nature opposition who wreaks vengeance on human beings to reclaim its vitality and agency. Here, the Skriker functions "as an actor [...] radically challeng[ing] the idea that nature is passive matter, there for cultural consumption."⁷⁸ The fairy character, who has been consciously incorporated into the play, articulates recovery and stimulates agency for the silent nature. Churchill's preference to construct nonhuman nature as an entity that speaks, as an agent with its own vitality, and as an interrelated force beyond human control deserves particular attention.⁷⁹

However, the point that needs to be underlined is that bringing nature into the category of the subject does not aim to erase the difference between human and nonhuman nature but rather requires respect for its otherness.⁸⁰ The reconfiguration of otherness from the ecofeminist perspective offers "a theory of *volitional interdependence* among humans and nonhuman alike."⁸¹ Indeed, ecofeminism demands human recognition of the other as not only different but also of equal ontological status "on the basis of heterarchy rather than hierarchy," providing "a healthy diversity" for the ecofeminist perspective, which aims to destabilise dualist structures.⁸² In the play, the Skriker assumes agency and intentionality, through which Churchill allows the underside of a dualist pair to reclaim its significance and value, attempting to reorganise it in nonhierarchical ways and destabilising dualist structures.

The Skriker's articulations on recent environmental phenomena—she refers to "the large number of meteorological phenomena [...] Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Drought. Apocalyptic meteorological phenomena. The increase of sickness"⁸³—not only reinforce nature's value but also aim to raise awareness of potential environmental deterioration. As previously stated, the opening remarks of the play inform us of the damage

⁷³Churchill, *The Skriker*, 4.

⁷⁴Churchill, *The Skriker*, 5.

⁷⁵Rabillard, "On Caryl Churchill's Ecological Drama," 98.

⁷⁶Churchill, *The Skriker*, 29.

⁷⁷Churchill, *The Skriker*, 32.

⁷⁸Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 12.

⁷⁹Serpil Oppermann, "Feminist Ecocriticism: A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory," in *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, ed. G. Gaard, S. C. Estok, and S. Oppermann (New York: Routledge, 2013), 27.

⁸⁰Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 158.

⁸¹Patrick Murphy, "Two Women are Speaking: Contemporary Literature as Theoretical Critique," in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 23.

⁸²Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy, "Introduction," in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 6.

⁸³Churchill, *The Skriker*, 43.



done to the Skriker's world, which is reinvented through the conventional fairy themes. However, the end of the play turns attention to the earth, which has been transformed into a "toxic waste paper basket case [...] up in the smokey hokey pokey? up in the world wind? up in the war zone ozone zany grey?"⁸⁴ The Skriker, as the embodiment of inappropriately used nature, warns about ecological deterioration in such a severe way that it even destabilises seasonal changes.

The final scene displays the Skriker's ability to traverse time, transporting Lily back from her spirit world to the real world. Lily first thinks she has only been away for a second, but then realises that a hundred years have passed and that the old woman and the little girl she encounters are assumedly her granddaughter and great-great-granddaughter. The Skriker articulates their encounter as follows:

*'Am I in fairylanded?' she wandered. 'No,' said the old crony, 'this is the real world' [...] Lily was solid flash. If she was back on earth where on earth where was the rockabye baby gone the treetop? Lost and gone for everybody was dead years and tears ago, it was another cemetery, a black whole hundred years [...] And this old dear me was Lily's granddaughter what a horror storybook ending. 'Oh I was tricked tracked wracked,' cried our heroine distress, 'I hoped to save the worldly, I hoped I'd make the fury better than she should be.' [...] But when the daughters grand and great greater greatest knew she was from the distant past master class, then rage raging bullfight bullroar. The GIRL bellows wordless rage at LILY.*⁸⁵

Along with the persisting disruption of the spatio-temporal continuum, the play ends with a final manipulation of language, displayed through Lily's great-great-granddaughter's "wordless rage"⁸⁶ as she directs her anger at Lily, the representative of the past 'master' generation responsible for the apocalyptic conditions of her own century, turned "cemetery".

In this context, the play foregrounds an apocalyptic ecological vision granted by the Skriker and invites us to abandon destructive human practices, which rely on the exploitation of nonhuman nature. The final scene provides a bleak vision of the future, dramatising the confrontation across generations and drawing attention to the emphasis on the generational responsibility for the future. Notably, despite the older woman's attempts to convince the little girl that the earlier generations had sought to preserve the planet for future generations, the great-great-granddaughter is not persuaded and disregards the old woman's justifications for the past. As the Skriker states in a forceful, direct tone, "But the child hated the monstrous,"⁸⁷ the child associates the destructive structures of exploitation with her present desolation. In this way, *The Skriker* envisions the present as a time of loss and fragmentation permeated by the past and the future as a wasteland. *The Skriker's* vision that conjoins the dualist pairs of culture/nature, male/female, and human/nonhuman provides, in the words of Shermeyer "the speculative—and the world-inventing space of the theatre—to think, build, and imagine better modes of co-existence and interdependency."⁸⁸

Conclusion

The fairy tale inter-text in *The Skriker* functions on both social and aesthetic levels, exposing discourse and representation as oppressive systems. By using this literary strategy in British drama, Churchill aims to inspire change in the contemporary world. *The Skriker* individualises fairy elements from British folklore

⁸⁴Churchill, *The Skriker*, 32.

⁸⁵Churchill, *The Skriker*, 51-52.

⁸⁶Churchill, *The Skriker*, 52.

⁸⁷Churchill, *The Skriker*, 52.

⁸⁸Shermeyer, "The Future is Fey," 63.

theatrically, inviting thought-provoking speculation about the real-world debates on ecological and feminist agendas. Notably, the play's dramatic strategy endeavours to elevate the oppressed underside within dualist pairs, including nature, woman, and the nonhuman, undermining the idea of an unbridgeable opposition between the dualist pairs in a manner that reflects a number of ecofeminist strategies. In this vein, *The Skriker* reimagines nature as a subject capable of resistance, provoking the contemporary readers/audience to reconfigure the culture/nature dualism, which Plumwood lists as the foremost of the problematic dichotomous categorizations she outlines.⁸⁹ To uncover the deep structures of oppression in culture can be extended beyond this central culture/nature dualism and across subsequent dualisms, including primarily male/female and human/nonhuman divisions. *The Skriker* allows for alternative spaces in which such dichotomous categorizations can be reconceptualized by problematising the anthropocentric assumptions of traditional theatrical conventions. In this way, *The Skriker* reveals the theatre's critical potential for staging resistance to all dichotomous categorizations, paying particular attention to the subjugation of women and nature. The play imaginatively positions the readers/audience as witnesses to the devastating effects of environmental destruction and women's vulnerability to the consequences, then invites them to act on behalf of environmental injustices. By dramatising the ancient fairy Skriker as the embodiment of devastated nature, *The Skriker* challenges the reiterations of patriarchal culture through what Gaard and Murphy call "a conception of human and nature intersubjectivity, a relation involving a human identity shaped by an acknowledgement of both connection and difference."⁹⁰

The Skriker's ability to shape-shift and the play's ambiguity around bodily, spatial, and temporal boundaries attempt to bridge the dualist pairs of culture/nature, male/female, and human/nonhuman, and thus create a symbolic space in which alternative possibilities of anti-dualist ecofeminism are explored. The Skriker's swift crosses between the dualist pairs of male/female, human/nonhuman, and conscious/unconscious realms, and her idiosyncratic language relate to the interconnectedness between those dualist pairs, highlighting the possibilities through which those dualist pairs should be reconsidered in an interactive and complementary way. Churchill's dramatic strategy, in this sense, concurs with the inherent potential of an ecofeminist perspective, through which ecofeminists affirm multiple articulations and reconstructions of the oppressive ideological structures that validate the domination of women and nature and manifest an urgent need for change. This need for change is most strongly expressed in the play's apocalyptic ecological vision and the female characters' desperate conditions, which emphasise generational responsibility for the future and resonate with the concerns pervading the ecofeminist agenda.



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⁸⁹Plumwood, *Feminism*, 4.

⁹⁰Gaard and Murphy, "Introduction," 9.



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