

EMBODYING AGONISM IN LUCY KIRKWOOD'S *MOSQUITOES* AND *THE WELKIN*¹

Clare Wallace

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Abstract: Rooted in Chantal Mouffe's conceptualisation of agonistic pluralism and Jacques Rancière's work on dissensus, this article analyses the debate scenes of British playwright Lucy Kirkwood's plays: *Mosquitoes* (2017) and *The Welkin* (2020). In *Performing Antagonism* Tony Fisher suggests that the politics of theatre and performance has formally pivoted towards "a critical politics of the visible." The article asks what this implies in Kirkwood's drama. In a contradictory present conjuncture where multiple forms of crisis overlap and interact, Kirkwood's recent work hones polarised, gendered, antagonistic scenes of encounter where the challenges of dialogue, of understanding and of ethical relations are repeatedly articulated. Through close attention to the ways agonism and antagonism are embodied in the plays, the article argues that for Kirkwood dissensus operates to enact a feminist "critical politics of the visible" in which mutual recognition and resilience are keynotes.

Keywords: agonism, dissensus, dialogue, Lucy Kirkwood, *Mosquitoes*, *The Welkin*, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière.

In the opening chapter of *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy* Tony Fisher revisits various perspectives on political theatre ranging from, at one extreme, a distanced-based didacticism associated with Brecht and at the other, a transcendence-based understanding of performer and audience associated with Artaud.² Jacques Rancière's critical challenge to this model in his

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² Tony Fisher, "Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*," *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 15.

2007 essay *The Emancipated Spectator* initiated many fresh debates about the (il)legitimacy of political theatre that were elaborated in an Anglophone context most immediately in the work of Alan Read and Joe Kelleher and soon followed by many others.³ Nevertheless, Fisher argues that “we should not assume that the efficacy argument entails the rejection of a politics of the theatre, or a refusal of the idea that theatre can intervene politically.”⁴ Instead, he turns to post-Brechtian theatrical forms and the fundamentally “*agōnic* nature of the political.”⁵ Following Hans-Thies Lehmann’s oft-cited assertion in *Postdramatic Theatre* that the “politics of theatre is a *politics of perception*,”⁶ Fisher suggests that there has been a “historical shift or displacement of practices *away* from a politics [...] based on a naïve belief that theatre’s pedagogical power rested on its rhetorical effects, and toward forms of theatre and performance that engaged in what might be designated *a critical politics of the visible*.”⁷ Such a critical politics is not literally confined to seeing *per se*, but pertains rather to the representational field as a whole, recalling what Rancière terms art’s role in the “the distribution of the sensible.”⁸

Since her debut in 2008, British playwright Lucy Kirkwood’s work has repeatedly revolved around dilemmas and impasses both political and ethical. From her dystopian farce *Tinderbox* (2008) to the devastatingly surreal portrait of sex trafficking *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now* (2009) to *Chimerica* (2013), a state-of-the-nation play for a globalized era, Kirkwood is recognisably an engaged playwright seeking theatrical modes of reflecting on the struggles and antagonisms of the present. More recently, her play *The Children* (2016) has prompted diverse critical discussion of its dramatisation of climate crisis, its depiction of aging, and the dramatic operations of aspiration and affect.⁹

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011); Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Joe Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴ Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*” 16.

⁵ Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*” 16.

⁶ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) 185.

⁷ Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*” 17. Original italics.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004) 7.

⁹ See Siân Adiseshiah, “Ageing as Crisis on the Twenty-first-century British Stage,” *Crisis, Representation and Resilience: Perspectives on Contemporary British Theatre*, ed. Clare Wallace, Clara Escoda, Enric Monforte, and José Ramón Prado-Pérez (London: Bloomsbury, 2022) 21-38, Julia Hoydis, “A Slow Unfolding “Fault Sequence”: Risk and Responsibility in Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children*,” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in*

This article concentrates on her two major plays produced since *The Children – Mosquitoes* (2017) and *The Welkin* (2020). While contrasting in their thematic foci and dramaturgical qualities, in both these plays female bodies feature as the sites of agonistic dialogue about beliefs, rights, and duties. I will argue that the dissensual underpinning of Kirkwood’s recent theatre renders palpable a complex of keenly pertinent social and political antagonisms, enacting a feminist “critical politics of the visible”¹⁰ that rewards our closer attention.

Before turning to the plays, I want to further unpack some of the critical vocabulary upon which Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki’s *Performing Antagonism* is founded, and which inflects my approach. The term *agon*, from the Greek ἀγών – meaning conflict, struggle or contest – pertains to the conventions of Classical theatre in which opposing principles are articulated by actors or by actors and chorus. As Fisher notes, “[i]n both tragedy and comedy [...] the *agōn* took the form of the ‘debate scene’, frequently employing well-defined tropes and formal rhetorical figures derived from legal processes,” signalling the pervasive sense of the agonistic in the political imaginary and “producing a consciousness of the necessity of sublimating antagonism – socially, culturally and politically.”¹¹ In a contemporary context, agonism is most obviously central to political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of politics as a space conditioned by the “ever-present possibility of antagonism.”¹² Notably for Jacques Rancière too, disagreement and dissensus are pivotal, though his concerns are philosophical and aesthetic. Both Mouffe and Rancière point to the paradox of democratic consensus which may only take place provisionally and on the basis of exclusion.¹³ In place of agreement and a convergence of rationally established views, both theorists substitute ineluctable struggle and continual negotiation as the basis of politics. Denial of such antagonisms produces an imaginary that is ultimately depoliticised. Mouffe responds to what she sees as the failures of a deliberative model of democracy with “agonistic pluralism,” an alternative model which she believes “asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate

English 8, no. 1 (2020): 83-99, and Clare Wallace, “Moving Parts: Emotion, Intention and Ambivalent Attachments,” *Affects in 21st-Century British Theatre: Exploring Feeling on Page and Stage*, ed. Mireia Aragay, Martin Middeke, and Cristina Delgado Garcia (London: Palgrave, 2021) 43-61.

¹⁰ Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*” 17.

¹¹ Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*” 11, 12.

¹² Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013) ebook, Chapter 1.

¹³ See Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2020) and Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promoting of democratic designs.”¹⁴ By contrast, Rancière reflects on politics and aesthetics in terms of the “distribution” and redistribution “of the sensible.”¹⁵ He maintains that

[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time [...] Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.¹⁶

Such models of antagonism derive not from specific or literal conflicts or struggles but are defined by “the impossibility of a final suture,”¹⁷ in other words, the absence of definitive closure and the inevitability of ongoing debate. Useful here is the recognition of the discursive and performative character of dissensus and difference that might be embodied and articulated in theatre. Without making disproportionate claims for Kirkwood’s plays, it is clear that these works communicate something of the contradictions of a present conjuncture where multiple forms of crisis overlap and interact. In Kirkwood’s recent work, polarised, antagonistic scenes of encounter are central. Amidst complex conflicts around environmental catastrophe, aging, reproduction, science, and equality, Kirkwood’s theatre refuses closure or consensus, and probes the demands of agonistic pluralism, dialogue and mutual recognition, even in disagreement.

“The force of two mosquitoes, flying into each other”¹⁸

Mosquitoes is a drama of collisions – of particles, of worldviews and of emotions – ostensibly hinged to the ground-breaking discovery of the Higgs particle. Though commissioned years earlier by the Manhattan Theatre Club with grant support for

¹⁴ Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 755-56.

¹⁵ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 7ff.

¹⁶ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 13.

¹⁷ Rachel Cockburn, “Antagonising the Limits of Critique,” *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 242. Cockburn is citing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2001) 125.

¹⁸ Lucy Kirkwood, *Mosquitoes* (London: Nick Hern, 2017) 44. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

science-themed artistic projects, it was first produced by the National Theatre London in 2017. As Matt Trueman neatly observed in his review of the show, Kirkwood “structures the play around science, studding it with collisions and disappearances, creation and destruction – all those qualities we associate with the Higgs boson – she fills it with questions of communication: language barriers, intellectual gaps and niche cultural references.”¹⁹ Although there are echoes here of Michael Frayn’s 1998 physics/ethics play *Copenhagen*, the fact that *Mosquitoes* was finally reworked in the immediate wake of the Brexit referendum adds an implicit and contemporary political dimension to Kirkwood’s efforts to find theatrical metaphors to express something of the significance of recent discoveries in quantum physics.²⁰ The outcome is a family drama of incommensurate energies and ongoing polarisation set against research into the fundamental forces in the universe. At its centre are two middle-aged siblings, Alice and Jenny, who seem to have little in common beyond some shared genetic material and a tendency to buy Toblerone chocolate in the airport duty free. Everything about them tugs in opposite directions. Alice is health-conscious, rational, and controlled. Jenny is impulsive, self-destructive, and emotionally labile. Alice has a prestigious career as an experimental physicist; Jenny is a telemarketer, and by the end of the play is working in a pub. Alice lives in Geneva, Jenny in Luton. Orbiting and intersecting with Alice and Jenny are Karen – their mother, Luke – Alice’s son, Henri – Alice’s partner, and Natalie – one of Luke’s school friends. Alice’s son is a teenager, cerebral but socially maladjusted, while Jenny’s baby daughter Amy dies of a preventable illness because she had not been immunised. Alice’s husband has disappeared and likely has committed suicide, but she now has a new too-good-to-be-true partner, a cultivated Swiss entomologist with the World Health Organisation. Jenny’s husband Mike has left her following the death of their child and now wants to sue her. Standing outside the dialogues among these characters but invisible to them is the figure of the boson, a personification of the particle, who observes their actions and dwarfs all their concerns with explanations of the five ways our world might end.

Across four acts and numerous short scenes, knowledge, intelligence, and interpersonal relationships form three interlocking zones of antagonism. The first

¹⁹ Matt Trueman, “London Theater Review: ‘Mosquitoes’ by Lucy Kirkwood,” *Variety*, 28 July 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/legit/reviews/mosquitoes-review-play-lucy-kirkwood-1202509398/>.

²⁰ Laura Collins-Hughes, “Don’t Despair, Protest: Playwright Lucy Kirkwood Sees No Other Choice,” *New York Times*, 22 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/theater/lucy-kirkwood-the-children-manhattan-theater-club.html>.

of these centres on science and speculation. The play opens with an emblematic conversation set two years earlier between Jenny who is pregnant following IVF and is panicking about giving birth, and Alice who is trying to reassure her on the basis of her own experience. While sharing her worries about the baby's health, Jenny admits to having avoided ultrasound check-ups because she'd read on the internet that they are unsafe. In response to Alice's rather patronising insistence that "just because you can access the information doesn't mean you're equipped to understand it," Jenny counters:

well I think actually what I feel, *as a mother*, might be stronger than a a a a
just a... *fact* don't you?

Alice: No

Jenny: Okay well there's not like a single version of

Alice: Yes there is. There is, absolutely / there is

Jenny: Well that's a very Western way / of

Alice: A what?

Jenny: I'm just / saying.

(13-14)

The tension between an unequivocal commitment to scientific expertise voiced by Alice, and Jenny's anxious scepticism spawned by articles she's found on Google, is stark. Jenny's feelings-over-facts attitude provides the basis of her behaviour throughout the play. However, as is revealed later, Alice's belief in scientific data improbably co-exists with religious belief – something that Jenny as an atheist finds bizarre. Notably too, despite Alice's defence of medical knowledge, as she tries to soothe Jenny's fears by relating the story of Luke's birth, her memories are all hinged to feelings and faith, reminding us subtly of the subjective nature of bodily experiences that certainly do not conform to a single template, and of beliefs that lie beyond empirical measures.

In contrast to Jenny, Alice's character is configured in relation to a highly specific and abstract intellectual sphere. Alice lives for her work at CERN in Geneva, where she is a member of the team collecting data on the Standard Model Higgs boson, a quantum particle associated with the Brout-Englert-Higgs field. Physicists attempting to understand the Big Bang in the 1960s theorised that interaction with this field caused particles to gain mass, thus permitting the evolution of the universe as we know it. Alice's research team is trying to verify or disprove the existence of the field using the Large Hadron Collider. Although the project excites and obsesses her, the theoretical complexities of this scientific world are largely incomprehensible to those beyond the discipline. Translating

these discoveries into other forms as a way of grasping them is an ongoing motif in the play. Alice encourages Luke to create a soundtrack using the data from the project, making music of the collisions of particles. Less positively, the team's findings become grossly distorted as they pass into the popular media where journalists attempt to stir public interest and anxiety about scientists potentially creating a "black hole factory" or triggering Armageddon (42). Similarly Jenny, as a non-scientist, is nonplussed by such rarefied enquiry; she cannot see the point of spending six billion euros "[f]or something that you can't see and might not be there in the first place?" (53) And, of course, Kirkwood's personification of the boson also renders the impenetrability of particle physics as an accessible theatrical device for audiences, giving mass and human qualities to something that cannot be seen or felt.

Repeatedly, characters spar over questions of understanding and intellectual acuity. Karen is bitter at the fact that her former husband was awarded a Nobel Prize in the 1970s for her research discoveries, is frustrated by her own aging body, and terrified by the early signs of dementia. Luke cannot disguise his contempt for his classmates and reacts to one of them with violence, provoking a vicious backlash as a result. However, the pivotal character here is Jenny. Jenny is funny, affectionate, a bit racist, a bit crude, an embarrassingly ordinary anomaly in their family. She is persistently dismissed by them, at times to her face, as being inferior, a "retard," "epically thick," a "silly woman" (25, 67, 109). Alice and Karen rudely exclude her from their jokes and conversation because they've already decided that she would not understand, yet clearly Jenny is still part of their lives and they often depend upon her for emotional and practical support. Echoes of the polarised enmities of Brexit reverberate in the antagonistic relations among the characters. The smug attitudes of her educated and cosmopolitan sister, mother, and even nephew, draw fire from Jenny who on numerous occasions insists that she is "[n]ot an imbecile, not a fucking halfwit" (38). Lightly referencing the language of particle physics, Kirkwood has Jenny describe herself as a "weak force" (56) and in considering the agonistic debate the play unfolds, it is worth remembering the force embedded in Jenny's overdetermined weakness and its political import. As Avital Ronell provocatively suggests, stupidity cannot be treated as "a vanquishable object [... It] exceeds and undercuts materiality, runs loose, wins a few rounds, recedes, gets carried home in the clutch of denial and returns."²¹ It is a description that neatly fits Jenny's development through the play. Stupidity is assertive, evasive, contradictory, inexhaustible, and just as much a force within the sphere of human endeavour as its more 'noble' counter forces. As

²¹ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 3.

such we cannot afford, as Kirkwood insinuates, to simply dismiss its power. Jenny, fleeing from the scene of her own grief and guilt, plonks herself in her sister's world. When the undivided attention she craves is not offered, she lashes out, wanting Alice likewise "to feel stupid"; she "want[s] something to happen to her that she'll never be able to understand" (55). Jenny resents how Alice "finds everything easy and I find everything hard. I hate her." (56) And yet it is clear that in some sense, the sisters love each other. The asymmetry of intellectual capacities or professional achievements does not map simply in terms of influence. There's more than a grain of truth in Jenny's blithe remark in the play's final dialogue – "well, you can't know everything, can you?" (117) Like the outsize influence of the tiny mosquito, Jenny's force unpredictably changes all their trajectories, regardless of how intellectually superior they believe themselves to be. Disregarding her experiences, excluding and insulting her, does nothing to change her impact on and position within their world, it merely exacerbates the impasse.

Throughout the play, Jenny is typecast as the voice of anti-science, enjoying horoscopes, ignoring the hazards of heavy drinking and smoking, susceptible to the popular currents of anxiety pulsing on the web, and minimally conscious of the contradictions in her own views. For instance, when Henri tries to explain his work developing insecticides with reference to mosquito-borne malaria, Jenny is indifferent to the benefits of saving lives in an overpopulated world. Yet her vaccination hesitancy has cost her dearly, with the loss of her much longed-for daughter. Viewed in relation to the politics of the present, post-Brexit and post-pandemic, Jenny embodies a cluster of negative qualities – contrarian, self-absorbed, opinionated, superstitious, and impulsive. Which begs the question whether Kirkwood sets her up as a soft target, or whether something more nuanced is disclosed in the agonistic dramatic field. I want to suggest that through the character of Jenny, Kirkwood prompts consideration of the challenges of agonistic pluralism. For all her abundant faults, her presence illuminates their co-dependence and the limits of Alice's intellectual approach to human relationships. Jenny catalyses the play's discussion of the complex ethics of care and reproduction. Entangled with the motifs of modes of knowledge and ignorance is an ongoing conversation about who has the right to have children and who is equal to the responsibilities to future generations. Luke is determined never to have children and thinks some people should not be allowed to. Karen's attitude to her daughters is callous, while Jenny's desire to become a mother is unabated in spite of her situation and experience.

Notably the burden of care falls mainly to Jenny: it is she who looks after their mother, dealing with her growing neediness and incontinence even in the face of sarcasm and brutal insult; it is she who offers highly-strung Luke some down-to-

earth advice as he complains of his school situation or catastrophises over a sexual picture his friend has circulated without his permission; it is Jenny who covers up Luke's destruction of his mother's work. She may be beaten and scolded by her mother, acerbically denounced by her sister, but she is the chaos with whom they share DNA. As Karen notes, "*everyone* always thinks they're living at a time of great chaos and there was peace once upon a time if only they could get back to it but chaos came before us, we came from chaos and that's what we go back to." (95) From chaos possibilities emerge: at the end of the play Alice visits Jenny, who reveals that she is pregnant again. It is an ambivalent moment communicated in Alice's reaction:

Alice: I just have to say

Jenny: Can we not

Alice: I really think / this is

Jenny: Just I feel like we've covered this, and I don't want you to say something you can't take back so.

Alice: I think it's unhinged.

Jenny: There it is.

(120)

Yet despite the dubious possibilities, it also testifies to a resilient hopefulness. With an eye to the political polarisations of a post-Brexit Britain, Kirkwood does not pretend the sisters' differences can simply be resolved, but rather closes the play with an ongoing disagreement *and* a gesture of connectedness: "*Jenny puts Alice's hands on her stomach. Holds them there.*" (120)

"There is a great loyalty between you and your sister then?"²²

Pregnancy, agency, and loyalty continue to be the focus of agonism in Kirkwood's next play, *The Welkin*, which opened in early 2020 at the National Theatre London. In contrast to *Mosquitoes*, *The Welkin* is a history play. Action is set in 1759 and follows the deliberations of a jury of matrons, tasked with ascertaining whether a convicted murderer is pregnant or not. While researching the eighteenth century, Kirkwood became interested in this residual female role that dates back to the medieval period. Under early modern English common law, if a condemned felon 'pled the belly' and the alleged pregnancy was in the early stages, a jury of women

²² Kirkwood, *The Welkin* (London: Nick Hern, 2020) ebook. Further references in the text are to this unpaginated edition.

would be empanelled to verify the claim. Were the convicted to be found pregnant, she would be granted a stay of execution and likely a commuted sentence.²³ Within a resolutely patriarchal judicial system, this practice opened a small, if ambivalent pocket of female agency. Conventionally women empanelled on such juries had to be “beyond moral, legal and spiritual reproach [... with] no prior legal convictions, be a respected member of the community” and as a widow or married woman, have direct experience of pregnancy.²⁴ *The Welkin* places a cast of thirteen women centre stage, in just such a homosocial arrangement, unfolding a drama of ethical struggle, dissensus, and violence. As was frequently remarked in reviews, the scenario seems to reprise that of the 1957 American courtroom drama *12 Angry Men*, but it also recalls Susan Glaspell’s one act play *Trifles* from 1916. However, in contrast to these precursors, in Kirkwood’s play the guilt of the accused is never in question and, still more significantly, she is present on stage. Similar to the presence of the boson in *Mosquitoes*, *The Welkin* is tuned by references to phenomena beyond the material realities of the everyday. Halley’s Comet due to appear in late 1758 is remarked upon by the play’s characters, particularly by Sally. This comet, the only one visible to the human eye from Earth, was first identified by Edmund Halley in the eighteenth century as periodic, more specifically, as a short-period comet that orbits the sun approximately every 75 to 76 years. The comet’s cyclical yet remarkable appearance draws the attention upward both within the play’s dramatic scheme and beyond it, disrupting its historical frame and local concerns. In this way, a “critical politics of the visible”²⁵ is suggested via *The Welkin*’s representational synthesis of the social body and the material body canopied beneath the welkin, a Middle English word for the heavens.

The play is asymmetrically structured. It is framed by two tableaux in which the matrons are seen at work; the first tableau is followed by a short scene in which Sally Poppy returns home after a four-month absence. It is dark, she is looking for money, her husband is angry and offers to beat her but as she lights a candle, she is revealed to be soaked with blood. She proceeds to burn a plait of blonde hair with the flame of the candle – the last remains of her victim, Alice Wax, the child of a local aristocrat. This scene is followed by another short exchange between local midwife Elizabeth Luke and Mr Coombes the bailiff, who has come to persuade her to join the jury of matrons. The remainder of the play’s action takes place in a closed room in the courthouse where the assembled women, guarded

²³ See Jane Bitomsky, “The Jury of Matrons: Their Role in the Early Modern English Courtroom,” *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* 25 (2019): 4-22.

²⁴ Bitomsky, “The Jury of Matrons” 10.

²⁵ Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*” 17.

by Mr Coombes, must decide Sally's fate. After various efforts to examine her, the matrons fail to reach any agreement and a doctor is summoned who confirms the pregnancy. Having given their verdict, the jury is permitted to leave but Sally's respite is short-lived as Mr Coombes – paid by Lady Wax – kicks her repeatedly in the stomach to bring on a miscarriage. The play draws to a close with Elizabeth preparing to strangle Sally in order to spare her a violent execution before the vengeful mob outside, followed by a last image of the women working.

In *Dissensus*, Rancière distinguishes politics from police as “two distributions of the sensible, [...] two ways of framing a sensory space, of seeing or not seeing common objects in it, of hearing or not hearing in it subjects that designate them or reason in their relation.”²⁶ He goes on to explain that “[t]he essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places.”²⁷ In mobilising common sense, ‘the police’ assigns subjects to their ‘proper’ place. By contrast, politics “consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of the community,” opening space for a “dissensual ‘commonsense.’”²⁸ Kirkwood's stage scenes index such relations of power and are infused with a dissensus that is not confined to the dominant courthouse scenario. The striking opening tableau, titled “Housework,” presents each of the matrons engaged in a separate domestic task – washing, mending, cooking, caring for children, polishing, and so on – each in her own domestic space. This voiceless picture of social reproduction is one replayed in the final tableau, set in 2061 when Halley's comet is due to appear again. Though their tools and appliances are now modern, their domestic work remains essentially unchanged. Their silent labour frames the play's overt agonistic scene, suggesting a systemic subjectification that overflows the immediate setting and points to the policing of women's place more generally. In various publications since *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici has explored the ways women's bodies and women's labour have been requisitioned by patriarchal regimes of accumulation, and her insistence on the body as a political, not a private, sphere is of keen relevance to *The Welkin*. Federici's analysis pairs the nascence of capitalism with forms of enclosure of public spaces and violent repression of women, viscerally manifested

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010) 92.

²⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus* 36.

²⁸ Rancière, *Dissensus* 36, 139.

in the persecution of witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁹ It is a history that cannot but impinge on the female collective in the play. The hostilities of the legal system are felt by all, whether in the press-ganging of women as a jury, the fact that the Justice offers them a mere hour to decide upon the case in a room with neither heat nor refreshments, or in the memory shared by Elizabeth of the harsh fate of a local woman accused of witchcraft.

The female collective on stage thus is metonymic of a social body that is only partially bound to the historical context. Kirkwood's stage directions make this explicit – while the play is set in March 1759 in the south of England, she advises: “[t]he matrons can be of any ethnic background, indeed it is crucial the group reflects the present-day population of the place the play is being performed in, not East Anglia in the 1750s.” Enclosed in the shabby, inhospitable confines of the courthouse, these women are introduced as representative of a span of classes, ages, education, and professions, a diverse collective sharing a gendered position within a patriarchal world. Swearing to do their duty before the Justice, each introduces herself, sharing details of her marital situation, her experience with childbearing, and some private desire or predilection in a mode that drifts surreally between public oath and private confession. It is a scene that configures the twelve matrons subordinated to the figure of the Justice, yet simultaneously the inclusion of private details creates a fissure in the regime of common sense that confines them.

Kirkwood's dramatic scene rests on the recognition that though, as women, her characters' place within this regime is similarly predetermined, there is little equality, agreement or even solidarity among them. Unsurprisingly, a number of the matrons vie for dominance in the collective. Charlotte Cary, a lady from Colchester, seems to be the most socially elevated and on this basis is selected as fore matron; Sarah Smith, veteran of three marriages and mother of twenty, is clearly the most senior; and as midwife, Elizabeth Luke is an acknowledged expert on women's reproductive health, respected, resented and, at times, feared. Their attitudes to the task of evaluating Sally's state are similarly diverse: upon hearing the identity of the offender, Elizabeth tells her daughter “There is a woman there in need of help. She is a nasty, stupid, wicked wretch, and I mean to save her life.” Simple-minded Mary Middleton is more concerned with getting back to her leek harvest as soon as possible. The other younger women seem to find the situation an amusing distraction from their usual duties, and several have grudges against

²⁹ See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), also *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY/Oakland, CA: Common Notions/PM Press, 2012).

Sally for gradually disclosed reasons. The plurality of their attitudes feeds an increasingly antagonistic debate over proof and justice that Elizabeth desperately attempts to synthesise:

Please. This whole affair is a farce. We are cold, hungry, tired, thirsty women and all of us've had our housework interrupted. Peg does not trust the girl because she is poor while her poverty endears her to Helen, Kitty and Hannah believe she has been framed by a comet and yet will show her no mercy, Charlotte is a stranger who arrived with her mind already decided, Sarah Hollis will not speak, Ann has not slept a full night for three years, Mary, forgive me love, does not know which glove belongs on which hand, Emma cares for nutmegs above life itself, poor Judith is dying of heat while the rest of us freeze to death and all of us are half-occupied with who is feeding the children and whether the dog has got at the cream. It is a poor apparatus for justice. But it is what we have. This room. The sky outside that window and our own dignity beneath it. Mary's view is as important as Charlotte's, and together we must speak in one voice. It is almost impossible that we should make the right decision. But shall we not try?

Elizabeth's bid for consensus at the end of Act 1 fails miserably and the scene ends in cacophony.

Though not explored to the same extent as in *Mosquitoes*, a thematics of expertise versus ignorance, the known and the unknown, inflects the central questions of judgement and responsibility in the play. Despite the wealth of collective experience embodied in the characters on stage, women's bodies remain inscrutable, the site of secrets difficult, sometimes impossible, to resolve. This is accentuated by the ongoing conversation around sex, pregnancy and childbirth as shrouded with mystery, radically diverse experiences, and potential misfortune. As one of the younger characters remarks: "I do think it very queer that we know more about the movement of a comet that is thousands of miles away than the workings of a woman's body." Against this plurality and indeterminacy, patriarchal medical authority, represented by Doctor Willis, speaks with a singular voice, quantifying female experience as divergent and inferior: "The whole animal economy of a woman makes reason and intellect a struggle [...] Alas. The life of a woman is a history of disease."

Sally's case renders visible the violence inherent in such patriarchal common sense and requires the other women to take some position in relation to it. Sally is guilty – she freely acknowledges her role in the murder of the child – but she is also a victim. As is revealed in the second part of the play, she is the outcome of a

casual rape when Elizabeth was a thirteen-year-old maid at the Wax house. Given away, reared in brutality and poverty, unhappily married, repeatedly pregnant, greedy for sexual pleasure, she is a rough, ignorant, and unsympathetic sister. She embodies a contemptuous rejection of the rules of decency and conformity and has no time for female pity or concern. Even when miscarrying she rebuffs Elizabeth's care: "You deaf or suffen? Don't want you. Enduring woman. Constant woman. Fuck your fortitude." Sally's path to destruction coincides with the expected appearance of Halley's Comet. Though the women attempt to blame her behaviour on the man with whom she absconded, Sally refuses to relinquish her responsibility. She recounts how she "wish[ed] out of that sky would fall a man, a fine-looking man, on a black horse" and shortly after he appeared. The matrons are dumbfounded by her insistence that it was the force of her sexual fantasy that has caused this man to materialise. Sally is deaf to outrage over her participation in the dismemberment of Alice Wax, just as she is cynically pragmatic about the pregnancy. While the reasoning behind the murder is ill explained and is perhaps the result of class resentment, what is clear is that now, Sally's body becomes the subject of a dissecting gaze and rough physical investigation that eventually confirms that she is indeed "quick with child."

Sally's unruly body and unrepentant agency, therefore, constitute the debate scene of the play. She fractures the consensual common sense that positions the women in this environment, opening instead a discursive agonistic space. Recognisable within this space is an economy of exploitative and gendered social reproduction that Kirkwood underscores with strategic anachronisms. In addition to the already mentioned casting directions and the framing tableaux, two other moments stand out. Sally describes playing "aeroplanes" with Alice shortly before the murder; when Elizabeth asks what she means, there is a pause before Sally answers that she doesn't know. Sally, at this moment, seems to be a conduit for something beyond herself and repeatedly is identified with looking up to the sky, even when this has fatal consequences. A similar anachronistic interruption occurs shortly after when Helen erupts in hysterical rage at the injustice of Sally's pregnancy and her own childlessness. She is calmed by Mary who sings a "song [...] arranged like an old folk song but is 'Running Up That Hill' by Kate Bush"; all the women bar Elizabeth gradually join in the singing. Following a pause, Sally rates the song "a good one" before Helen rediscovers her equilibrium and the matrons as one finally give their verdict. Via the song, with its emphasis on exchanging places and overcoming obstacles, Kirkwood momentarily destabilises the play's temporality and gestures towards the debatable scripts that delineate women's experience.

While *Mosquitoes* concludes with an image of ambivalent pregnancy and the sisters united in looking up to a bird and a plane flying overhead, *The Welkin* similarly guides the gaze upward though hope for Sally's future has been lost. Elizabeth's intention of saving Sally's wretched life is ironically upended. With the complicity of Emma, one of the least sympathetic members of the jury, Elizabeth provides Sally with a death less horrific than the one awaiting outside. The final tableau joins the women in their observation of the comet but also, significantly, in their ongoing absorption in domestic labour:

They all watch it for a moment.
Then they look down again.
The WOMEN go on with their housework.
End.

Critical Agonistic Spaces and Dramatic Dialogue

What emerges in Kirkwood's recent plays are structural and aesthetic dissensual acts that generate improbable moments of connectedness. These plays probe the question of gendered relationality in their thematic treatments of struggle and debate. I have underscored some of the ways the debate scenes of *Mosquitoes* and *The Welkin*, in which incommensurable differences collide, invite reflection on the workings of "agonistic pluralism" in the field of theatre and performance, and the significance of dialogue, mutual recognition and, by implication, political resilience. As Chantal Mouffe emphasises in *The Democratic Paradox*, if politics is not a matter of reaching agreement but the continuous balancing of antagonisms, it requires

an ethics which strives to create among us a new form of bond, a bond that recognizes us as divided subjects [...]. It does not dream of an impossible reconciliation because it acknowledges not only that the multiplicity of ideas of the good is irreducible but also that antagonism and violence are ineradicable. What to do with this violence, how to deal with this antagonism, those are the ethical questions with which a pluralistic-democratic politics will for ever be confronted and for which there can never be a final solution."³⁰

Kirkwood's theatre opens a space where these questions and their contradictions are embodied, articulated, and confronted; a vital space of agonism and dialogue.

³⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000) 139.

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