

More Than a Number: Reproductive Technologies, Cloning and the Problematic of Fatherhood in Caryl Churchill's *A Number*

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The rise of new family formations as lived experience, not least as a function of developments in reproductive technologies, has been accompanied by a range of cultural productions —auto/biography, poetry, films, plays, novels— centring on the question of the impact of these technologies on the individuals concerned. Focussing on one such production, the hitherto little explored text of the play *A Number* by one of Britain's most preeminent feminist playwrights, Caryl Churchill, whose work is also much performed in the US, this article examines how the play intervenes in debates about new reproductive technologies. I draw on theoretical writings on reproductive technologies, as well as first-person accounts of donor insemination, to argue that in her exploration of father-son relationships in an all-male setting, Churchill produces a highly innovative and complex engagement with issues of reproduction and paternity, refusing conventional notions of the heteronormative nuclear family, of the effects of non-normative reproduction, and of the predictability of the effects of divergent (pro)creation.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill; *A Number*; cloning; reproductive technologies; fatherhood

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Más que un número: tecnologías reproductivas, clonación y la problemática de la paternidad en *A Number*, de Caryl Churchill

El aumento de nuevas formaciones familiares como experiencia vivida, entre otras cosas, como función de los avances en las tecnologías reproductivas, ha venido acompañado de una variedad de producciones culturales —auto/biografía, poesía, películas, obras de teatro, novelas— que abordan la cuestión del impacto de estas tecnologías en los individuos afectados. Mediante el análisis de *A Number*, pieza teatral hasta ahora poco estudiada de Caryl Churchill, la dramaturga feminista más importante del Reino Unido, cuyo trabajo se representa también con frecuencia en los EE.UU, este artículo examina el modo en que dicha obra interviene en los debates sobre las nuevas tecnologías reproductivas. Utilizo textos teóricos sobre las tecnologías reproductivas, así como relatos en primera persona de inseminación con donante, para sostener que en su exploración de las relaciones padre-hijo en un ambiente exclusivamente masculino, Churchill establece un diálogo innovador y complejo con los temas de la reproducción y la paternidad, rechazando las nociones convencionales sobre la familia nuclear heteronormativa, los efectos de la reproducción no normativa y el carácter predecible de los efectos de la (pro) creación divergente.

Palabras clave: Caryl Churchill, *A number*, clonación, tecnologías reproductivas, paternidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of new family formations as lived experience,¹ not least as a function of developments in reproductive technologies,² has been accompanied by a range of cultural productions —auto/biography, poetry, films, plays, novels— centring on the question of the impact of these technologies on the individuals concerned. These productions include films such as the tellingly titled *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) and the 2010 film adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. They are indicative of our continuing cultural preoccupation with the meanings and implications of divergent procreative processes. The exploration of these processes has a long provenance in the Western cultural imaginary: one might argue that the story of the creation of Jesus Christ is one such narrative,³ as are the many Greek myths that detail how various gods and demi-gods were created. In recent cultural texts exploring this phenomenon, the focus has been not so much on the underlying biotechnological processes themselves —these remain largely the domain of science— but on the socio-emotional and ethical implications of creating human beings through divergent processes.⁴ In this article I shall focus on one such text, Caryl Churchill's (2002) play *A Number*, in order to analyse the imaginative transformation of current debates about reproductive technologies in that work, and to examine what kind of intervention it makes in those debates. As I shall demonstrate, many of the issues raised within *A Number* with regard to cloning are concerns that are also significantly debated in relation to other types of divergent procreative processes such as donor insemination and IVF. In analysing Churchill's engagement with these issues, I shall be less concerned with the play *as a play*, i.e. its performative dimensions,⁵ and more with the substantive issues around fatherhood which it raises.

According to James Brandon, *A Number* “was one of the most frequently produced plays in American professional theatres during the 2005-2006 season” (2006: 502), following its original run at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2002 and at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2004. Brandon attributes this success to the play's “minimal technical requirements, a cast of two” and its focus on “the important contemporary issue of cloning” (502). I would argue that as subsequent films such as *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) and *The Switch* (2010) for example show, it is not simply its highlighting of cloning as a divergent and, at present, still utopian procreative process that contributed to the success of *A Number*, but the fact that its issues speak to concerns that can equally be raised in relation to other forms of biotechnologically assisted reproduction.

¹ See for example the Autumn 2002 issue of *Tulsa Studies of Women's Writing* (21.2) which centred on ‘The Adoption Issue’; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Bainham 1997.

² New family formations have also occurred as a function of rising divorce and cohabitation rates, for example.

³ See Ricoeur (1974) for an suggestive reading of this.

⁴ Interestingly, the review of the first production of *A Number* in London in the *British Medical Journal* (Klotzko 2002) did not engage at all with the questions of the science underlying the play but focussed wholly on the ethical and psychosocial arguments it made.

⁵ For that discussion see Gobert 2009.

In its preoccupation with family formations and the problematics of family and relational dynamics *A Number* emblemizes one of the key long-term concerns of Churchill's work, the "[smashing] of the bourgeois family structure" (Gobert 2009: 121). This is as evident in the radio plays *Abortive* (1971), *The Judge's Wife* (1972) and *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (1990), as it is in her theatre plays, from *Cloud Nine* (1979) through *Top Girls* (1982) to *Blue Heart* (1998). In many of her plays it is an outsider, often genetically unrelated, who serves to highlight the precarity of familial relations. But *A Number* is the only play that centres exclusively on the father-son relationship, and it is this on which I focus here.

2. PRIVILEGING THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP

At the centre of *A Number*, and in this respect productively unlike many contemporary cultural texts dealing with donor insemination, cloning and divergent forms of reproduction, is the relationship between a father and his sons. Churchill's play thus makes an important intervention in the arena that has been termed "new fatherhood" studies (see e.g. Pickard 1998; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Wall and Arnold 2007). This is particularly significant because 'traditionally', if one might term it as such, feminists—and Caryl Churchill remains the UK's pre-eminent feminist playwright (see Aston 1997; Aston and Diamond 2009; Adishesiah 2009; Reinelt 2009)—have tended to focus on the mother and maternity rather than on the father, and thus the creation of an all-male space by a feminist writer, as it occurs in *A Number*, and her focus on fatherhood, are uncommon. Indeed, many writers on new reproductive technologies and parenting continue to highlight that "mothers are the benchmark for norms in fathering" (e.g. Aitken 2000). Elfenbein and Watkins (2002), for instance, discuss extensively how gay male adoptive families are constructed "in terms of what they lack: a female mother" (306).

One might, of course, as Brandon does at one point, argue that the writing out of the mother from this context is in itself an issue. Indeed, Brandon states: "I found the lack of a voiced female perspective in a play about reproductive issues to be a severe shortcoming" (2006: 503). The lack of a voiced female perspective in the context of reproductive technologies was certainly an issue already and previously raised by many feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, when what was then called 'artificial reproduction' started to become established and discussed in the public domain as a result of the birth of the so-called first test-tube baby, Louise Brown.⁶ However, not only does *A Number* as a text constitute an articulated female perspective since it was written by a woman, and a feminist to boot, but its focus on fatherhood also provides an important contribution to what is after all not merely a concern for women. Significantly, for example, the most widely used method of assisted reproduction in the UK and elsewhere until the 1980s was donor

⁶ For a discussion of the history of such terms as 'artificial reproduction' see McNeil (2007). See Arditti et al. (1984) for a useful set of texts on the 'test-tube' issue.

insemination;⁷ hence many donor offspring who search for a genetic parent post-2000 are actually searching for their father. In this, the social pattern follows the developments of biotechnological processes. The possibility of egg donation, embryo transfer and surrogate motherhood, for example, all of which involve multiple mothers (genetic and social), is a phenomenon that developed much more rapidly in the 1990s than before.⁸ It is also the case that fatherhood as such is increasingly under public scrutiny as questions of fathers' contributions to the socialization of their children, a key concern in *A Number*, are the object of public debate.⁹ But, as Sally Sheldon argued, "there is little work on reproductive technologies which takes fatherhood as its central focus" (2005:526).

Whilst fatherhood is one central issue in *A Number*, which I shall explore in detail below, the other is what it means to be a son, including a son conceived through divergent means. In the course of this five-act play, the father, Salter, encounters three of his sons. These are differentially positioned in relation to him, which in part accounts for their specific interactions with and reactions to their father. This also articulates a range of concerns which surface in the broader literature on people conceived through assisted reproduction, in particular donor insemination. The issues addressed in the play —whilst based on a procreative process, cloning, that is at present not possible— thus nonetheless speak to the wider debates around the impacts of assisted reproduction, on those who use it and those who are produced by it, that preoccupy public discussions around divergent procreative processes and new forms of family formation. The play, then, makes an important intervention not only in the so-called new fatherhood debates but also in debates around assisted reproduction.

The central underlying narrative of *A Number* is quickly told even though, within the play, it unfolds gradually over the play's five acts. As a young man, the father, Salter, is an alcoholic, abusive towards his wife and small son. His wife commits suicide when their son, Bernard (or B1 in the play), an only child, is two years old. In the wake of this death Salter disintegrates into a two-year period of depression and neglect of the child. At the end of this period, Salter hands over his son, by now manifesting the effects of sustained neglect such as having become virtually silent, to social services. At the same time he is gripped by remorse for his parenting failure and wants to recover Bernard as the child he was when he was born —perfect, and unspoilt by the parenting failures of his mother and father. Salter allows himself a second chance at parenting —though not through fathering in the conventional sense. He pays a scientist to clone Bernard, and eventually is presented with a 'new' son (B2 in the play), a cloned version of his first child. The scientist also produces further clones of

⁷ For detailed figures of the various assisted reproductive processes and their outcomes in Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority licensed clinics see, for example, for the UK <<http://www.hfea.gov.uk>> (Accessed 4 September, 2011).

⁸ The first reported transfer of a fertilized egg that resulted in pregnancy was, however, conducted at the Harbor UCLA Medical Center in 1983 (see Blakeslee 1984).

⁹ It is worth noting here that interrogations of men as reproductive beings remain relatively scarce, and the question of why men might want to engage in assisted reproductive processes is under-researched (see Sheldon 1999).

Bernard —the play suggests around twenty in all— and it is not clear whether or not Salter is aware of this. His focus is on the one perfect cloned child that he receives and through whose upbringing he assumes that he in a sense atones for his failure with his ‘original’ son. The hospital where the cloning, seemingly secretly, took place, eventually comes across the records of this process and contacts the clones in order, it would appear, to conduct research on them. Through the hospital’s contacting of the clones, Salter’s sons —his ‘original’ one, the clone he then brought up, and another clone called Michael Black— are made aware of their histories, and Salter himself learns of the multiple clones that were produced. The play then centres on the reactions both Salter’s sons and Salter himself have to these discoveries and, importantly, the play suggests that the sons all react quite differently to the revelations, to their status, to their ‘father’ and to each other. I shall now turn to examining these reactions in order to analyse what commentary Churchill’s play offers on fatherhood and reproductive technologies. These, as the play suggests, are prominently implicated in how and under what circumstances, the sons were ‘made’.

3. ‘DOING’ FATHERHOOD

Bernard or B1 was conceived ‘naturally’ through heterosexual intercourse between Salter and his wife. The reasons for B1’s conceptions (whether he was a desired child or an ‘accident’, for example) are never discussed; he is a fact in Salter’s life and acts as the catalyst for Salter’s decision to have him cloned once Salter recognizes that he failed him as a parent. There is thus, in Salter’s behaviour, no articulated specific desire to ensure his lineage or to continue his genetic line. His decision to clone focuses on the recovery of a child that was seemingly perfect at one point and his relationship to that child. It is at this stage that women are written out of the text and out of Salter’s life; following his disastrous relationship with the wife with whom he had Bernard (B1), Salter appears to make no further attempt to establish a relationship with a woman or to conceive children with a woman. His relation to his son/s is thus neither grounded in a quest for familial lineage, nor in the desire to consolidate a relationship with another fe/male adult through a joint child. One might therefore argue that he is concerned with ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ a father, with his practice as a father rather than with his status as father.¹⁰ Importantly, Salter’s concern with his practice as a father centres on how he treats his sons —one at a time— and is thus focussed on the intergenerational dimensions of that relation. There is no consideration of the lateral relations his sons might have with each other. Yet, as I shall discuss further below, those relations are critical to some of his offspring as they also define their relationship to Salter.

Once they know of their histories, two of the sons, B1 and B2, confront Salter. The third ‘son’, Michael Black, is contacted by Salter after B1 kills B2 and then commits suicide. The play thus remains focussed throughout on the father-son dynamic. *A Number’s* dramatic

¹⁰ See Sheldon (2005: 552) for a discussion of the difference between being and doing fatherhood.

impact is in consequence derived from that dynamic and its implications. Importantly, the play is structured around a series of one-on-one encounters Salter has with each of his sons; the meetings between B1 and B2 are reported by them to Salter rather than being acted out on stage. This both reinforces the on-stage intergenerational focus of the play and the structure of Salter's relations with his sons, which is sequential and singular — one son at a time. Salter is not interested in a multitude of sons, in 'a number', even though he has a number of offspring, but in *the one* (son) with whom he is engaged at any one point in time. *A Number* as title gestures towards the paradox of Salter's position as it unfolds in the play, of both wanting a single, particular son and being prepared to draw on 'any number' of them to achieve this. However, as the play suggests, even in this single focus, Salter struggles to make adequate connection with each particular son. B1 is severely neglected, B2 is kept in ignorance of his origin and Michael Black seems to be simply 'the number three' Salter approaches so he can continue his fathering practice.

Churchill thus offers a profoundly pessimistic reading of Salter's fathering capabilities, and one which in various ways challenges both ideas of the family romance and assisted reproductive practices that do not delimit the number of offspring created from the sperm of any one donor.¹¹ Salter is unwilling to, and possibly incapable of, engaging with all his offspring on equal terms simultaneously — he does not want to know them all and only makes attempts to get to know them one at a time when a vacancy arises on his fathering horizon. He has no emotional attachment to all the clones that were made from his son B1. This constitutes the play's challenge to the family romance, or genetic fiction in Donna Haraway's (1991: 1997) terms, which suggests that genetic bonds will automatically lead to emotional ties. On another level it also challenges the appropriateness, no longer a practice in some countries, of utilizing the sperm of one donor for the insemination of large numbers of women since, as Salter demonstrates, it is not at all clear that a single person is capable of relating in a parental role (emotional, social, fiscal, etc) to a multitude of offspring.¹²

Simultaneously, the play challenges the notion of the often asserted pre-eminence of the mother in parenting, through the ways in which both Salter and his sons relate to the absent mother. Salter's wife, the play makes clear through B1's bitter observations, was not a good mother. B1 simply remembers her inadequacy at protecting him from his

¹¹ See Freud (1977). The fantasy of being 'recognized' and the genetic bond being the basis for emotional bonding is a very common one among those conceived through donor insemination. As one such person, for example, put it: "I was aware of the dissimilarities between my [social] dad and me. . . . With my friends I could see . . . a definite bond between them and their fathers. You could see physical similarities easily. My [social] dad seemed impossibly distant to me, emotionally and physically" (Donor Conception Support Group of Australia Inc. 2004: 36).

¹² In *Children of Eden* (Beeney 1999: 348-50), the central character works out that in the late 1960s, when he was donating sperm and the extent of the use of that sperm was unregulated, his sperm was used to produce hundreds of offspring. See also James (n.d.). The question of the capacity of any one individual to relate (equally) to all these offspring if they claim him as 'father' in the emotional as well as the biological sense is effectively side-stepped in favour of maintaining the family romance whereby the central character is constructed as feeling immediate affinities with the two offspring whom he does encounter and who end up marrying each other.

father. Neither Salter nor the sons hanker after the mother. B1 and B2 want to know what happened to her but appear not to mourn her loss. The mother, Churchill's play argues, is thus not as key to parent-child relations as much literature on the topic would suggest. This line of argument constitutes one of the challenges the play offers to conventional notions of family structure, and possibly, to strands of feminism and feminist psychoanalysis, both conservative and radical, that privilege the mother as central to the child's development.

The sons have both the first and the last word in *A Number* —they drive its dynamic, with Salter seeking to respond to what he finds himself confronted with. Salter's own initiative throughout focuses on the (re)construction of the perfect child he spoils through his neglect, and once this has been achieved (which is only temporary since B2 gets killed), he looks no further. It is only when he has lost both B1 and B2 that he starts to look for the 'next' clone. He wants a son, any son it might seem, as long as he is a version of his first child. And although he protests to Michael Black that the nineteen other clones that exist are 'not the same' (50), whilst having previously reassured B2 that he was 'the only one' that mattered to him (14), Salter searches for the next son once he has lost the other two (B1 and B2), explicitly framing it in those terms. As he tells Michael Black: "I didn't feel I'd lost him [B1] when I sent him away because I had a second chance. And when the second one my son the second son was murdered it wasn't so bad as you'd think because it seemed fair. I was back with the first one" (49). Salter's logic here is the logic of the paternal relation, not at all informed by the child's reaction. His logic is sequential and separatist. He focuses on one child at a time —but not from the perspective of the effects his actions might have on his offspring. This is what has prompted various reviewers of the play to describe him as a 'monstrous human' (e.g. Kritzer 2003: 354). There is no doubt that his main, or only, concern is his own relation to the child, although it is not at all clear what he hopes to derive from it.

One possible explanation is that he is looking for intimacy. In his encounter with Michael, in contrast to those with B1 and B2, he is the seeker, he is the petitioner who tries to get close to this offspring. Michael, unlike B1 and B2, is constructed as a well balanced individual who has no particular interest in Salter; Klotzko describes him as "the banal clone" (2002: 1043). He is affable and positive, not assuming that Salter has singled him out for any particular reason. He shows neither particular interest in knowing about Salter, nor aversion to it. One never learns of his life as a child growing up and is thus not provided with a (childhood-centred) rationale to account for his development; as an adult he simply appears to be very well adjusted.

4. DEFAMILIALIZING GENETIC CONNECTION AND 'UNDOING' FATHERHOOD

At the point of meeting Salter, Michael is an adult, a teacher, and married with three children. His familial circumstances are thus those of a conventional nuclear family. He is completely unfazed by discovering that he is one of several clones; instead, he thinks it "delightful" (48) and assumes that all the clones will be happy to meet Salter. Sibling

rivalry, as it clearly existed between B1 and B2, does not seem to enter his consciousness. In this he resembles people conceived through donor insemination who are curious about other possible offspring from their donor, and strive to make connection (e.g. Scheib et al. 2004). He loves the idea of the possibilities of similarities and differences inherent in the multiplicity of selves of which he is one —“I do see the joy of it” — he says, whilst recognizing that Salter is “not at all happy” (49). Salter is partly ‘not at all happy’ because in this he in a sense loses his ability to ‘mean’ as a father, his power as a father figure. Whereas both B1 and B2, who had relations early in their lives with Salter, are focussed on their relation with him as a/the father figure, Michael, who has had no such connection during his youth to Salter, is not fixated on him. As a consequence, it would seem, he is also much less perturbed by the idea of being ‘a number’ —one of a whole bunch of clones. Michael professes to be happy with his life, and has no need of Salter. As such he flummoxes Salter, who tries to get ‘to the heart of him’ by asking him about himself. But, whatever Michael chooses to tell Salter, such as a story about people living in holes in the ground, his sleeping position etc., none of it satisfies Salter’s need to make connection. This is partly constructed as a function of Michael’s being happy. The final exchange between Salter and Michael which also ends the play has Salter ask Michael: “And you’re happy you say are you? You like your life?” to which Michael replies: “I do yes, sorry” (50).

Michael’s happiness appears to liberate him from the need for paternal connection,¹³ and indeed, from the need to agonize about his status as clone. This is highly significant as it constitutes one important aspect of Churchill’s intervention in the fatherhood and divergent creative processes debate: in the figure of Michael, Churchill undoes the assumed need for a father, the need to be unique so beloved by neoliberal notions of subjectivity, the need to be special. Michael has achieved an adulthood that is not reliant on his biological father. It is not clear how —but it is clear that this has nothing to do with Salter, or indeed with the scientist who cloned Michael. Churchill offers no historicized familial indication as to why Michael’s disposition is as it is —there is no suggestion of a ‘loving family background’ or, alternatively, of no such background. Michael also, as already indicated, does not in any sense suffer from sibling rivalry —free from a need to be ‘fathered’ by Salter, he is also free from feeling any loss or, alternatively, completion of self through the discovery of the existence of others who are like him. He does not mind being ‘a number’. His sense of identity is not threatened by this for, as he, embracing the

¹³ One important issue here is that in 2010 the UK conservative prime minister David Cameron for a short time manifested a preoccupation with happiness, seemingly derived from the notion that in fiscally constrained times the public needed to be kept on side by reassuring them about their basically happy disposition, which implied that feeling good was supposedly not dependent on one’s material conditions. On 15 November, 2010 the BBC reported that “Mr Cameron, who first floated the idea of a ‘happiness index’ in 2005, when he was running for the leadership of the Conservative Party, argues that gross domestic product (GDP) —the standard measure of economic activity used around the world— is no longer up to the job”. Despite arguing that “You cannot capture happiness on a spreadsheet”, he intended to measure well-being in terms of happiness. See <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11833241>> (Accessed 20 September, 2011).

scientization of culture, rationalizes: “We’ve got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person. We’ve got ninety per cent the same genes as a chimpanzee. We’ve got thirty per cent the same genes as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong” (62). Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998) points out the paradox of contemporary culture, namely “a longing for community, for a sufficient sense of sameness with others” (88) such as Michael manifests, and at the same time, the desire for individualism and to be special, in particular to be special *to* someone (Phillips 1998: 90), as B1 and B2 want. Churchill distributes this paradox among Salter’s offspring, thus indicating the plurality of reactions that are possible.

In his sense of being part of the wider world and thus ‘belonging’, that is, in his defamilializing of genetic connection, Michael’s disposition is clearly completely different from that of B1 and B2. He also does not have the anxiously searching quality that informs the lives of the clones in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, for example, who are haunted by the desire to know about their origin (see Griffin 2009). This is what in Klotzko’s eyes makes him banal, but within the logic of the play he occupies a central, and indeed the final, position in that he refuses the significance of origin, of individuality, and of singularity and, most importantly, that he is happy in this disposition. This is relevant because it indicates the possibility of parenting (biological, social) *not* being key to, or the be-all and end-all of all development, as B1’s behaviour certainly suggests. Parents, father, may matter, but not necessarily as psychoanalysis and other theories of parent-child relations would have us believe. This is one of the significant ways in which *A Number* diverges from the common depiction of parent-child relations.

The other, related, way in which this play diverges from such depictions is in its refusal of fatherhood as a homogenized disposition, practice, or experience. Salter is a different father to his three different sons, in part as a function of the circumstances of their production and in consequence of this, through the dynamic between them. To B1, the child produced ‘naturally’, i.e. through heterosexual intercourse within marriage, Salter was the neglecting, abandoning father, damaging his child through the lack of any affirmation of that child’s needs. B1’s traumatic early childhood and his being handed over to social services, so the play suggests, imbued him with a sustained sense of his own lack of worth. This is exacerbated, from his point of view, by being cloned because this, he argues, means that “they take this painless scrape this specky little cells [*sic*] of me and kept that and you threw the rest of me away” (25).¹⁴

In taking this line about B1, the play offers a forceful critique of the notion of the conventional heterosexual, mother-father-child family formation as the most appropriate for bringing up children. This critique centres squarely, in line with much feminist writing on the subject of the family (e.g. O’Toole et al. 2007; Warner 2009), on the possibility of

¹⁴ B1’s line here echoes that of some donor offspring, such as Louise, for example, who said: “it’s deeply inhumane to put kids together from genetic DIY kits . . . it’s how it feels. Like bits of you have been grabbed from somewhere, and you have no idea where” (Lorbach 2003: 165).

abuse and neglect within that family and the notion that, more important than the family formation per se, is the particularity of those involved. Both Salter and his wife during B1's first years are constructed as unhappy alcoholics who cannot manage their lives or support each other; Salter —tellingly vaguely— remembers that at the time his wife killed herself, he was “still *with* her more or less but not with her then no I was having a drink I think” (41).

Following his wife's suicide Salter clearly spirals into a period of alcoholism and depression. His parenting of B1, his first son, becomes wholly inadequate, resulting in extreme neglect, deprivation and cruelty, for instance locking him into a cupboard to shut him up. Of the two-year period until he hands B1 over to social services, Salter maintains: “I don't remember it. . . . The whole thing is very vague to me” (41). This is fully in line with research on the impact of spousal death on those bereaved. Umberson et al. (1992: 10), for example, state that “[d]epression is a particularly common response to widowhood, at least in the first year or two following the death” (see also Carr 2004) and it affects men more than women. In the play, this acts as a convenient explanation for Salter's appalling treatment of B1, to some extent absolving Salter from considering his own behaviour too closely. Indeed he is only forced to confront it when his sons discover their histories. I use the word ‘convenient’ because Salter's resistance to being frank, his continued evasions of his sons' questions about his actions throughout the play, construct him in such a way as to make it difficult to decide the extent of his culpability in what happened —and this, of course, is one of the points the play makes, namely that judgments cannot readily or easily be made, and/or blame attributed. Salter and his wife's complete inability to nurture their child —B1 remembers, for example, that “[his mother'd] be there but she wouldn't help stop anything” (32)— leaves him with the view that the world is full of “a lot of wicked people . . . you see them all around you. You go down the street . . . and you think you don't fool me I know what you're capable of” (30).

B1's utter lack of trust in others, a classic result of child neglect and abandonment (see Gold 2000), coupled with jealousy of the clone B2 who enjoyed a seemingly ‘normal’ son-father relationship with Salter, results in his murdering B2, thereby in a sense confirming the cycle of violence which some researchers have identified as one outcome of parental neglect and abuse (e.g. Dodge et al. 1990; Kashani et al. 1992). Attracted and repulsed by his father in equal measure, B1 reacts to the revelation of his abandonment and re-making by venting his anger on his cloned self/other rather than on the father who commissioned the cloning. The father remains inviolate, the desired object that he cannot do without, and hence cannot destroy. There is no banding together of the brothers to overthrow the father as psychoanalysis would suggest.¹⁵ Rather, for B1 the father remains the venerated object whose questionable behaviour he can only deal with through attacking something

¹⁵ See Freud's (1913) ‘Totem and Taboo’ and his (1939) ‘Moses and Monotheism’ for these accounts of brothers banding together to overthrow the father.

or someone the father holds dear ('If I can't have you, nobody can...') as B1 does, or through withdrawal, as B2 does.

Salter's inability to parent B1 within a conventional family formation does not — the play suggests — imply that he cannot parent other children better. Although B2 is brought up within a single-parent household led by a male, an unconventional household formation in terms of family ideals within white Western culture, his relationship to Salter appears to conform to the supposedly 'normal' version of a loving father-child dynamic. Salter parents B2 quite differently from B1. This suggests both that individuals can change (Salter has stopped drinking, for example) and that they can practise the same type of relationship — here, the father-son one — in radically different ways. This complicates the line the play appears to take on B1, who is constructed as not change-able but as someone whose traumatic childhood seals his fate as a permanently damaged person. It complicates that line because Salter, another person who also leads quite an abjected life at a certain point, is shown to be capable of change, thus indicating that one does not necessarily have to 'be' a particular kind of individual but can exhibit different sorts of behaviours with different people. It may thus be that it is a matter of the degree of the damage, or possibly the kinds of damage inflicted that determines an individual's ability to change with his or her circumstances.

5. 'NATURE' VERSUS NURTURE

In Salter's conversation about his own behaviour with B2 in Act 3, the discussion partly centres on the relationship between nature and nurture and the extent to which Salter's behaviour was a matter of willed choice, and hence moral responsibility, as opposed to genetic (and therefore 'unwilled') determination. In this B2 grapples with the question of how "who you are itself forces or you'd be someone else wouldn't you?" (35) as the play would have it. The play asks after the dichotomy between self-determination or 'free will', and determination resulting from multiple influences, such as the environment and genetics, which one is the object of and hence can do nothing about. This question arises because of Salter's different parenting of B1 and B2; both sons desperately seek answers from him regarding his behaviour. B2 tries to understand Salter's behaviour in terms of a determination which excludes Salter's own volition and in doing so denies both Salter's agency and hence his responsibility. He suggests, for instance, that Salter's alcoholism might have been the result of a certain genetic susceptibility to drugs, or a genetic disposition towards addictive behaviour (33). In these suggestions he follows current trends of geneticizing dispositions (e.g. Numberger et al. 2005; Jacobson et al. 2008; Gratacos et al. 2009; Edenberg et al. 2010) which have resulted in a re-visioning of the interplay between genetics and environment. That re-visioning is articulated in *A Number* as a complex interplay which renders it difficult to make judgments about, and attribute responsibility for, people's behaviour precisely because it is hard to disentangle 'nature' and 'nurture'. Churchill mobilizes the issue of identical twins separated at birth to ask about

the relative importance of nature versus nurture.¹⁶ But, as B2 puts it: “it’s a combination of very complicated and that’s who you were so probably I shouldn’t blame you” (33). Later in the same conversation he re-iterates, “I can’t give you credit for [being good] if I don’t blame you for the other [being bad] . . . it’s too complicated to disentangle” (34, 35).

The belief in the pre-eminence of genetic dispositions is common among those who seek their biological parents. Described by Donna Haraway as the genetic fiction, it structures the imaginary of familial relations, including those in divergent family formations, such that people using various forms of reproductive technology have traditionally been advised by clinics to choose donors with physiological characteristics that resemble their own. In the same way, donor-conceived people searching for their genetic parent/s have as their first concern for wanting to find out about that parent whether or not the parent looks like them, and they frequently assume that all manner of traits, interests, hobbies and characteristics may be a function of the genetic disposition of their genetic parent/s. In *Let the Offspring Speak* (Donor Conception Support Group of Australia 2004: 45-6), for example, Peter says: “The more I learn about genetics . . . the more I recognize that hereditary [*sic*] determines some important part of character . . . I would like to know what that missing fifty per cent of my gene pool is like . . . And on some level, most of all, I would like to meet an older man who looks like me”. Nicky, a female donor offspring, said: “I am always searching for similar personality traits and interests in an attempt to affirm who I am” (30), and a woman named Caroline states: “Being a sperm donor child makes you question everything about your humanity” (Hardy and Appleyard 2010). Caroline’s view, indicating the depth of her sense of identity crisis provoked by finding out that she is a donor offspring, is common, particularly among those conceived in countries where donor insemination remains anonymous or where donor disclosure is a very recent phenomenon —making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to gain information about the donor.¹⁷ Tellingly, one donor offspring cited by Alexina McWhinnie, who could not locate her donor, said: “Eight years on, I no longer feel I live in the black hole. My sense of identity and well-being no longer depend on discovering the identity of my natural father. But reaching this point has been a huge and difficult journey. Without faith in a God who is Father, I think I would still be floundering” (2006: 35). This woman’s statement suggests a shift in investment from the ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ father to a ‘spiritual’ one, exemplifying her strong sense of a

¹⁶ Churchill has explored the issue of identical twins in an unpublished radio play first broadcast on BBC on 21 November, 1968 titled *Identical Twins*. For a discussion of that play see Gobert (2009). Studies of identical twins separated at birth have been one mechanism used to try to understand the relative influence of nature and nurture. Such studies which were highly influential around issues of intelligence and heredity in the first part of the 20th century became somewhat discredited in the early 1970s when one of the chief psychologists working on such twins, Cyril Burt, was found to have faked his data (see Dorfman 1978; Gillie 1977). Twin studies nonetheless persisted into the 1990s, and beyond, as one means of testing the nature-nurture relationship (e.g. Lichtenstein et al. 1992; Davis and Phelps 1995; Joseph 2001).

¹⁷ It may also apply in contexts where those who have used donors to conceive have decided to keep this secret, and where offspring find out ‘by accident’ later.

need for a father, whatever form that father takes, with whom she has a clear connection. Churchill's play, in some senses refuses that position in the figure of Michael; a father himself, he feels no need for the 'father' that Salter is to him.

6. KNOWING THE FATHER

In his murderous jealousy of B2, B1 manifests a more profound form of sibling rivalry than commonly haunts the literature on families, not least because much literature on clones does not engage with the question of how 'the original' relates to the 'copy'. In other words, that literature, and one might take Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a certain prototype, is concerned with inter-generational relations, rather than with intra-generational ones or, as is to a significant extent the case with Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, with the relations between the clones who are all, ultimately, in the same situation and, in that novel, are not related to each other, or cloned from one another. But in *A Number* the three sons we encounter are not in the same situation in relation to each other or to their 'father'. In all of this, Caryl Churchill is highly innovative in her work since she explores multiple relations between diverse sons and their father. As B2 puts it, talking about the difference between himself and B1: "what he feels as hate and what I feel as hate are completely different because what you did to him and what you did to me are different things" (45). Where B1's trauma is the trauma of neglect, B2's is the trauma of the loss of his i-identity or uniqueness. As he puts it to Salter: "Don't they say that you die if you meet yourself?" (16). B2's fear is about the loss of self, of being just 'a number', compounded by his sense that none of the clones in the "batch" as he describes it, "was the original" (17). This is made worse when he gradually realises that Salter did not want *him* per se but rather the original son he was cloned from, who Salter paid homage to by giving B2 the same name. When Salter tells B2 that he "loves him" B2 retorts, "That's something else you can't help" (46), thus ultimately refusing Salter's emotional agency and with it also the possibility that Salter's actions and professions might mean something, i.e. that he, B2, is actually loved, because they are willed rather than being the inevitable unwilled consequence of his genetic make-up.

B2's view is in some respects vindicated by the play since Salter immediately seeks out a next son when he loses B2, showing little regret over B2's murder or B1's suicide. His proclamation, "I miss him so much. I miss them both" (62), rings hollow. The audience is thus left to ponder the question whether or not Salter is the 'victim' of genetic or environmental factors (such as trauma in his own upbringing, which B2 considers at one point); in other words, whether he cannot help himself, or if he is the human monster that some reviewers have suggested. Both positions are about establishing causality—arriving at understanding through elucidating a cause-and-effect sequence. However, the complexity of the issues involved also defies a simple or unitary explanation; the play does not offer such a singular position. Instead it offers a number.

Unlike in many other clone narratives, or indeed the experience of those conceived by anonymous sperm donation, all the sons who appear in *A Number* know who their father is,

so B1 and B2's quest is not about establishing their genetic heritage but about understanding the kind of relationship their father has to them or what their meaning is for him. This is also a prominent concern both for donor offspring and for those who have been abandoned (or given up for adoption) by their parents. The question of why donors or those who gave up a child acted as they did looms large in donor offspring's and adopted children's narratives.¹⁸ As one American male donor offspring put it: "Sperm donors are the mysterious participants in this method of family building. Are they more like birth parents who relinquish their children or are they more akin to the deadbeat dads who only care about their immediate pleasure?" (Lorbach 2003: 167). The problem in seeking to answer this question is, of course, that donors are motivated to donate for various reasons. In his fictionalized account, former sperm donor Michael Beeney describes the motive of his central character, a medical student at the time of his donations, thus: "Altruistic motives he had none. Before getting on 'the bank' he had struggled on a meagre grant" (1999: 91). For Beeney's character, it is a financial transaction. However, other, often older men with established families who decide to donate can have more altruistic motives, rarely —one has to say— centred on the potential offspring, but commonly wanting to help those unable to have children by other means (see Donor Conception Support Group of Australia 2004). Neither of these reasons, fiscal or altruistic towards infertile adults, has anything to do with the potential resulting offspring, of course. This in itself may be a disappointment to such offspring, who are looking for the significance *they*, rather than those who brought them up, have for the donor.

7. NARCISSISM AND THE REPRODUCTIVE TRIANGLE

This leads to what is one of the core issues in this situation and indeed in *A Number*, namely the narcissistic dimension —the "simulation of sameness" or the making of someone in/for our image as psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1998: 91-92) describes it— which governs the decision-making processes of those that constitute the triangle of assisted reproduction of any kind: the potential parents, the actual offspring and those who provide the means by which that reproduction occurs (doctors, donors). The potential parents, and this is certainly the case with Salter, are concerned with having the opportunity to parent. Phillips suggests that cloning "is used to get around history, as though in the total fantasy of cloning, history as difference is abolished" (94). In Salter's case, this means history as the story of failed parenting is obliterated by a new story of successful parenting: his commissioning of a replica of his original son thus serves to fulfil Salter's need to create an image of himself (and for himself) as a good father.

In the case of infertile men and their female partners, who commonly experience infertility as devastating (see Daniels 2004, especially chapter 2), the narcissistic dimension

¹⁸ In *The Adoption Papers* (1991), for example, mixed-race writer Jackie Kay (re)constructs her biological parents' possible motives for and feelings about giving up their daughter at birth, and some of her later writings (e.g. 2010) continue to deal with this issue, particularly the quest for finding her Nigerian father.

of assisted reproduction, the desire to be the thing or person they cannot be, a parent/family, is expressed as an overweening desire for precisely this: to parent and to have a family. “I was so hungry for a baby”, said one woman (2004: 55); “We were really excited that we were going to have a chance to be a family”, said another (2004: 52). The child’s view is not always taken into account. Salter, for instance, does not consider how either B1 or B2 might feel about his decision to have B1 cloned. In this Salter is in fact like Walter, an actual social father of donor offspring who said: “I didn’t really look at the issues to be quite honest. I didn’t look at the implications further down the track when we first started talking about it. It was just a solution to the problems” (53). Quite so. B2 is also in a sense ‘the solution to the problems’ Salter had in parenting B1, and like Walter, Salter does not consider what kind of impact his decision might have on his offspring.

The offspring’s concern, too, both in Churchill’s play and in autobiographical accounts of actual donor offspring, tends to be on their own sense of their identity, and how they might be perceived by their donor. Preoccupation with self, and self’s relation to others — in that order— is thus at the heart of what I would term ‘the assisted reproductive triangle’ and this, as Churchill’s play suggests, makes for conflicted and conflicting relations since individuals’ needs remain somewhat unfulfilled as the focus of those involved is less on the other than on the self.

The good news, in a sense, is that Churchill presents the impact of the narcissistic dispositions that promote procreative activity, as different for the three sons Salter meets. His paternity or ability to procreate ‘naturally’ —a matter which is very frequently seen as an issue both for infertile men themselves and for the donor offspring they rear who are not their genetic children— is not in question here.¹⁹ At issue is his socio-emotional competence to parent, and this is firmly placed into the contextual domain rather than presented as a ‘given’ or ‘learnt’ competence. He is able to parent effectively when his circumstances, which he can influence through his behaviour, are conducive to this. This does not mean that he has automatic or instinctual empathy with his children; his reactions to both B1 and B2’s questions to him about his motivation for his behaviour towards them do not derive from any desire to tell the truth, but instead appear to centre on his wish to preserve his ‘good standing’ with his sons, denying any guilt on his part, whilst attempting to make them feel OK about themselves. Only under duress does Salter reveal anything like the truth about what happened. Thus, only when B2 suggests that he does not mind if he was the result of assisted reproduction, does Salter concur that this is what happened.

B2 So please if you’re not my father that’s fine. If you couldn’t have children or my mother, and you did in vitro or I don’t know what you did I really think you should tell me.

SALTER Yes, that’s what it was. (18)

¹⁹ See, for example, Beeny (1999) and Daniels (2004) for extended discussions of this from the perspectives of both the infertile fathers and their donor offspring.

However, gradually of course it becomes clear that this is not exactly the case. In line with the behaviour of many actual social parents of donor offspring, Salter denies the truth about B2's conception, evading answers, obfuscating and misleading him. As Maggie Kirkman reported in 2004 in relation to actual donor offspring: "offspring, at least of DI [donor insemination], are typically not informed of their origin . . . even when legislation demands it" (2).

The fact that Salter does not tell B2 about his origin constitutes a fundamental breach of trust which many real-life donor offspring and adoptees, just like B2 in the play, bitterly resent.²⁰ There is extensive research which shows that keeping the history of a child's origin secret results in feelings of alienation and resentment, especially if, as is the case in the play, offspring only discover the truth about their origin as adults (e.g. Scheib et al. 2004; Kirkman 2004). One such person, David Gollancz (2007: n.p.), has argued:

We use [stories], on every level, as a means of explaining and exploring who we are . . . For the donor-conceived, their story is a lie. When my father told me the truth back in 1965, I felt as though someone was standing in front of me, tearing up my autobiography page by page. Of course, all the things in my story had happened –but the 'me' to whom they had happened was not the me who had been telling himself the story. (2007: n.p.)

Gollancz's reaction here is quite different from that shown by Michael Black, Salter's third son, who feels no such resentment, and as such breaks that particular mould. Michael Black thus acts to confound assumptions about the predictability of individual responses to unexpected disclosures in his embrace, as opposed to a rejection or resentment, of that discovery. He is therefore the lynchpin in one of the play's key arguments, namely that responses to events, for good or ill, are not predictable, and that in such unpredictability lies also the possibility of the valediction of difference. 'Sameness', Churchill's play suggests, is not 'all', as Adam Phillips would have it.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Churchill's play, then, provides a complex intervention in the debates on divergent procreative processes and fatherhood. *A Number* queries many of the orthodoxies of conventional ideas about family formation and parenting. This includes the notion of the desirability of the conventional nuclear family; the pre-eminence of the mother (she is no good when she is not 'good enough' rather than she is always and inevitably 'the

²⁰ Interestingly, in a recent study Jadvá et al. found that "[t]he most common feeling offspring from heterosexual-couple families felt towards their mother was 'angry at being lied to' compared with just one offspring feeling angry towards their father. In comparison, the most common feeling towards their father was 'sympathetic'" (2009: 1918). But in *A Number* the mother is absent so it is harder to direct anger against her.

best’);²¹ a single-parent household headed by a man may be both wholly inadequate and good enough for parenting purposes; children might not hanker after absent parents (either mother or father), or may, on the contrary, be completely devoted to them. Most importantly, perhaps, the play refuses simple explanations. It suggests that parenting, in particular fathering, is a matter of doing rather than being, is not a single practice, even when undertaken by one father, but may be done differently under diverse circumstances, with the effect that all children experience their father in different ways, from being deeply attached to him to being uninterested in him.

Similarly, being the product of divergent reproductive processes is constructed as not resulting in one particular reaction by the offspring but different ones, depending on factors that are hard to disentangle and therefore not readily identifiable. ‘Nature’ plays a role—but so does ‘nurture’, and their interplay and its effects are not mappable in ready ways. Having been conceived through divergent procreative processes may be traumatic for one offspring but not necessarily for another. Disclosure of origin may, or may not, matter. That indeterminacy, which simultaneously points to the particularity and inalienability of experience, is articulated in the play through the similarity in appearance of the clones (played by one actor) on the one hand, and through the flow of the characters’ language, on the other—both broken in terms of incomplete sentences, repetitions, and *non sequiturs*, as well as mutual interruptions in the father-son dialogues, and continues through the minimal use of punctuation on the page. Language here mirrors experience—but the meaning of that experience is not ‘given’.

Beneath these complexities lies another key structure that Churchill’s play engages with: the assisted reproductive triangle that I referred to earlier and which, in this play as much as in many other accounts of parenting and reproductivity, is fuelled and sustained by narcissistic impulses, in particular—and here, in terms of the play, Salter is no different from B1 and B2—the desire to mean, to matter to an other as an entity in one’s own right. B1 and B2 in quite severe forms, Salter in a less severe version, all have to confront the notion that they do not matter to the other to whom they want to matter (the father, the son) or in the ways in which they want to matter.²²

They all want to be ‘more than a number’ but this, the play suggests, is not easily achieved. It is not easily achieved precisely because of the underlying narcissism of the procreative triangle. Churchill’s play leaves open how the destructive dimensions or effects of that narcissism might be overcome. However, a whole range of post-9/11 feminist writings and post-holocaust philosophical texts such as Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*, the work of Jean-Luc Nancy on community, and the writings of Emmanuel Levinas all suggest ways forward that centre on the suspension of preoccupation with self, of pre-emptive judgment, and on the recognition of the other. But this, as they say, is another story.

²¹ See Winnicott (1949: 1958) for details of the notion of the ‘good enough’ (as opposed to the ‘perfect’) mother.

²² For a discussion of mattering to the other see Butler (2005); Nancy (2000); Levinas (1999).

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