

The Modern Fairy of an Urban Folktale

An introduction to Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*

Strange creatures populate Caryl Churchill's one-act play *The Skriker*, interfering with the lives of two young sisters Josie and Lily. The suspicious gang, which comes from the Underworld, is lead by a shapeshifter fairy, the Skriker, of whom it is very difficult to say anything certain at first, except that she appears to the sisters in various forms, she desperately seeks love, and that she is capable of doing the most unusual things. Sometimes she is old, sometimes she is young, sometimes she is a man. She is good and she is bad. She is mysterious.

The name of the fairy provides the first puzzle. The word 'skriker' can be found neither in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English nor in the Collins Concise Dictionary, it must be therefore nearly as exotic to an average English speaker as, say, tamagochi. However, the large Oxford English Dictionary reveals the secret, claiming that there exists a verb 'to skrike' which means 'to utter a shrill harsh cry; to scream.'¹ The Skriker then is the one who screams, a 'screaker.' Still according to the Oxford English Dictionary, unlike some other members of the company from the Underworld, such as the Kelpie, which is a water-spirit or demon in Lowland Scottish folklore, or the Bogle, which is a phantom or spectre of the night causing fright, the skriker is *not* a traditional figure of British folklore, it is rather Churchill's own artistic invention. The name, though its meaning has now been found, is still subject to interpretations. When Josie, accompanied by the Skriker, visits the Underworld, the stage instruction reads as follows: "Blackout. A horrible shriek like a siren that goes up

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, Vol. XV) p. 628.

to a very high sound and holds it.”² It is not clear to whom or to what the shriek can be attributed. It can be the Skriker who shrieks, but also the shriek can simply accompany their descent. One way or another the shriek is part of the effects which go with the descent into the Underworld – and with the ascent from it too, since the same shriek is heard when Josie returns to the material world. Leaving our world and diving into the Underworld is surely not a pleasant experience; even if it is not Josie who shrieks, the horrible sound is there, it is heard, and expresses elemental pain, despair and terror. The same qualities can easily be attributed not only to the descent and ascent, but to the Skriker herself. Shrieking in her case means stalking her victims, Josie and Lily, until they give up and succumb to the temptation of that other world of sham represented by the fairy.

The very first scene of the play is an extremely long monologue spoken by the Skriker, which at first sight resembles a senseless pile of words put together haphazardly. All the same, after a while the words miraculously begin to form a meaning, however obscure and impalpable, and when the Skriker finishes her speech one has the inexplicable feeling of what Polonius would say “though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.”³ The method might be concealed deliberately, yet a great deal of the meaning can be detected and explained.

Churchill’s play is a fairly traditional one in the sense that the initial speech of the Skriker retains the function of a prologue. A good prologue creates the atmosphere of the oncoming play, puts the spectator or the reader in a mood in which they are able to tune into the plot and the lives of the characters to be presented. It often refers to the events to come, sometimes it turns to the audience with some request or another. Similarly, the Skriker’s monologue is able to create the strange, half-rational, half-irrational aura of the scenes to come:

Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater, daughter could spin span spick and spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonesse under the castle for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved. Chop chip pan chap finger chirrup chirrup cheer up off with you’re making no headway. Weeps seeps deeps her pretty puffy cream cake hole in the heart operation. Sees a

² Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994) p. 28. References to this edition will henceforth be made in the text.

³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) Act II. Scene II. 205-206.

little blackjack thingalingo with a long long tale awinding. May day, she cries,
may pole axed me to help her ...

(p. 1)

The unhindered flow of the words addresses the readers' subconscious rather than their conscious, rational mind; one feels, by means of a mysterious sixth sense, rather than knows the exact meaning of what the Skriker is speaking about. By the end of the speech, therefore, we have seemingly unstructured clusters of information about a young girl who is in trouble now, ("may day, she cries," p. 1), about an unnamed baby ("put my hand to the baby," p. 2; "But if the baby has no name better nick a name, better Old Nick than no name," p. 2), and even about a bloody event that might have taken place ("mother a murder," p. 3, "My mother she killed me...", p. 5).

Besides the function of creating a strong sense of atmosphere, the above extracts retain another role from the traditional prologue: they also refer to the main points of the action. "May day, she cries," says the Skriker and she presumably speaks about Josie, who, having murdered her baby, is in a mental hospital at the beginning of the play. Josie does not actually use the well-known radio signal of planes and ships in danger, but she is clearly in danger due not only to her murderous act but to the disquieting presence of the Skriker as well. The baby without a name is Josie's daughter who had been killed before she could be baptised. Without being christened the soul of this baby is the property of the Devil, whose informal name is Old Nick.

There are numerous other places within the prologue which, though less evidently than the ones above, foreshadow certain parts of the play. Lily helps the Skriker and is rewarded with one pound coins falling out of her mouth (p. 11; the reference to this part in the 'prologue': "out of her mouthtrap, out came my secreted garden flower," p. 1); both Josie and Lily visit the Underworld of the Skriker, which, for a short while, seems to be a shelter for refugees who have fled from the whirling world of reality (p. 28 and 51; in the prologue: "seek a sleep slope slap of the dark to shelter skelter away, a wail a whirl a world away," p. 1-2); a certain hag – one of the miraculous creatures in the Underworld – is chopped up while Josie is there (p. 29; "Chopped up the hag," p. 2); Josie is warned in the Underworld not to eat anything if she ever wants to return to the real world (p. 30; "Never eat a fruit," p. 3); holding a candle is part of the mysterious ceremony during which Lily is preparing to succumb to the Skriker's supernatural power at the end of the play (p. 51; "Hold this candle the scandal I said," p. 4).

The initial monologue of the fairy has also a significant role of characterising the Skriker herself in at least two ways. In the first place the way it is rendered is very

much like a speech of a shaman in trance which only the initiates can understand. The shaman, who is connected with transcendental forces, brings his tribesmen a message from the world beyond, and the Skriker's uncontrolled string of free associations based on puns, alliterations, homophones and rhymes has a similar effect. The uneasy feeling that we do not understand it, yet it might have a coherent meaning, gives the speech an air of other-worldliness and suggests that its speaker is not of our familiar material world.

In terms of literary precedent the Skriker's monologue has a close relationship with Molly Bloom's famous flow of thoughts in Chapter 18 of *Ulysses* by James Joyce. There Molly-Penelope is thinking about her sexual affairs, her relationship to her husband, about her entire life before falling asleep. The style of Chapter 18 is often referred to as 'stream of consciousness' for apparently its only organising element is the character's state of mind. The Skriker's speech, however, is slightly different. It is not the character's state of mind that has the unifying role but something even more profound than that. The speech contains several references to persons, objects, concepts and literary pieces which are more or less significant parts of the Western, and especially of the English speaking world. They are sometimes fairly explicit, sometimes distorted, or even carefully concealed, yet a lot of them can be detected. One of these references has already been mentioned, it is the "nickname" of the Devil, Old Nick. There is another, extremely complex reference to the Devil in the following sequence:

Out of her pinkle lippety loppety, out of her mouthtrap, out came my
secreted garden flower of my youth and beauty and the beast is six six six
o'clock in the morning becomes electric stormy petrel bomb."

(p. 1)

The biblical allusion to the Book of Revelation⁴ is woven into a net of other allusions: the "secreted garden," Eden, is inseparably connected to an allusion to a figure of speech "the flower of my youth," which again is partly a constructive element of the cliché that follows "youth and beauty." "Beauty" is put together with "beast" and thus forms a reference to the legend of the beauty and the beast. Among the wide variety of cultural allusions there are further biblical ones, for example the one to the story of the fall in the Book of Genesis (cp. 2,15-3,24 and "eat the one forbidden fruit," p. 3), or the one to the seven angels and their trumpets in the Book of Revelation (8,6). Another

⁴ *Book of Revelations* 13,18 "Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six."

layer of allusions is the one made to literary pieces: "everything gone with the window cleaner" (p. 3) includes the title of Margaret Mitchell's famous best-seller, *Gone With the Wind*, another well-known title is concealed in "wail whale moby dictated the outcome into the garden maudlin" (p. 3), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick or the White Whale*. The sequence "what can the matternhorn piping down the valley" (p. 5) hides a part of a line from William Blake's *Introduction to the Songs of Innocence*,⁵ and "roast cats alive alive oh dear..." (p. 5) brings into mind an Irish folksong, "Dublin's Fair City," in which a Molly Malone cries, "cockles and mussels alive alive oh..." Yet another layer is that of familiar clichés, sayings, idioms: in "crackerjack of all trading places" (p. 3) one can recognise the English saying "jack of all trades, master of none," "Serve her right as raining cats and dogshit" (p. 4) is a peculiar version of the idiom "it rains cats and dogs," while the cat o' nine tails ("strike her blind alley cat o' nine tails," p. 4), the jacket potato ("no family life jacket potato," p. 4) and the apple pie ("Blood run cold comfort me with apple pie," p. 5) are as much part of the English speaking culture as anything mentioned before.

Such a delicate net of cultural references suggests that the Skriker is not an ordinary person, not even an ordinary fairy. She has pre-eminently the English, in a wider sense, the whole of Western culture in her unconscious, and now she lets it pour out, lets it come to the surface. The clearly recognisable references are but the tip of the iceberg, what is below in the depth is everything made, every word uttered or written, every legend conceived, the sum of all human beings dead or alive. Probably the closest relative of such profundity is Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the collective unconscious which contains in each individual an obscure and secret corner of archetypes, ancient memories and fears. If the idea of such a relationship holds water, the style of the Skriker's speech can be characterised by the term "stream of the collective unconscious" and is organised in a surrealist way by the ocean of the common cultural memories of mankind.

I have already mentioned that the Skriker is a shapeshifter fairy, or when we meet her in the first scene, "a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged" (p. 1). The contrast between this damaged figure and the one "full of energy" (p. 51) in the last scene is conspicuous. The road from the beginning to the end, the hard journey of the Skriker in the material world is not that of development, but that of a quest rather. It is not really a road either but a continuous struggle for something of which love is only one aspect. In order to be able to approach the meaning of the Skriker's

5 "Piping down the valleys wild, / Piping songs of pleasant glee, / On a cloud I saw a child, (...)." William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 111.

transformation from an ancient death portent into an energetic fairy we should now examine the intermediary steps, the various forms the Skriker takes during the play.

When she is described as ancient and damaged the Skriker is in the Underworld. From here she sets off and appears again in the next scene as a fifty-year-old patient in the mental hospital where Josie is being treated. "She looks about fifty but she's I don't know maybe five hundred a million, I don't know how old these things are" (p. 9), says Josie to her sister, Lily. She also tells Lily that she was impressed by the Skriker's magic, but now she thinks there is something wrong with her. Lily does not ask much about this mysterious figure; she knows before the reader or the spectator does what sort of "thing" Josie refers to, though she questions whether the Skriker is a real magician or just pretends to be one. Such things happen in a mental hospital. But Josie tries to pass on to her sister what originally belonged to her, the strange vision of a strange person: "I thought maybe she could go home with you" (p. 9). This seems to start all Lily's problems. The Skriker feels that Josie does not love her, that is why she appears with a reproachful remark, "I heard that... You don't like me." Josie explains: "I'm thinking what you'd enjoy and you'd like her better than me. She's stronger, she's more fun. I'm ill and I think you're ill and I don't think –" (p. 9).

The Skriker makes a last effort to persuade Josie to "keep" her, but soon realises that she has lost the case. In the next scene she takes the form of a derelict woman shouting in the street and begins to stalk Lily. First Lily gives her some money, but later when she cannot resist the woman's violent approach, she hugs her. Do well and have well: as Lily speaks one pound coins fall out of her mouth – the fairy's first miracle. The scene is repeated in almost the same way when Josie, discharged from hospital, meets the Skriker. The derelict woman asks for the price of a cup of tea only, but Josie says no. Her reward is toads coming out of her mouth when she speaks.

At a bar of a hotel Lily meets a slightly drunk American woman of about forty, who is again the Skriker. The conversation starts quite innocently. The American woman, as if being from another world, asks about the way television works. In return she offers Lily her knowledge of how to fly, how to make poisons, and how to tell if her loved one is faithful. Lily being a simple and uneducated young girl is of course unable to explain in technical terms how a television functions, though she does her best. But it is not important at all, the Skriker only wants to make friends, she wants to get close to Lily, as she finally admits: "You now have one friend in London. And I have one friend in London. Ok? Not ok?" (p. 16). When she sees that Lily recognises her she thinks the time has arrived to confess everything:

Lily, I'll level with you, ok? You ready for this? I am an ancient fairy, I'm hundreds of years old as you people would work it out, I have been around through all the stuff you would call history, that's cavaliers and roundheads, Henry the eighth, 1066 and before that, back when the Saxons feasted, the Danes invaded, the Celts hunted, you know any of this stuff? Alfred and the cakes, Arthur and the table, long before that, long before England was an idea, a country of snow and wolves where trees sang and birds talked and people knew we mattered...

(p. 16)

Now the spectator learns that the Skriker is an ancient fairy, and not only that. She belongs to the land and people of England whether they be English, Saxons, Danes or Celts. And she is from a time when people still believed in the reality of fairies, when supernatural beings were as much part of everyday life as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummernight's Dream*. Although the fairy-world of Titania's and Oberon's has vanished the Skriker, rather anachronistically, demands a role in modern life. Not seeing the anachronism and its consequences at once Lily tends to accept the fairy's friendship and her explanation of being here "I'm here to do good. I'm good" (p. 17). When, however, the Skriker offers Lily her help, Lily has an obscure feeling that something might be wrong about a good fairy doing good things and backs out. The first temptation was unsuccessful.

Later on Lily and Josie, now discharged from hospital, are sitting on a sofa. Lily feels ill, she is cold. Josie's explanation of this is that the Skriker must be somewhere around them ("she's cold"), but Lily will not accept an explanation of this kind. Yet it is her who feels the fairy in the sofa: "I can see her. Josie, see her, you must." And Josie replies, "She's for you now. You took her money" (p. 21).

Josie is now calm; she has managed to pass on the fairy to her sister with all the troubles and uneasiness. When the Skriker suddenly springs out of the sofa as a winged pink fairy Lily thinks she is dreaming and has a nightmare. "Don't you want a wish, Lily" (p. 22), the Skriker asks. Lily, perhaps to test whether she is really dreaming or not, wishes for flowers. And the miracle happens, flowers fall from above. The Skriker is happy, she has managed to persuade Lily to have a wish and now she feels warmer. She knows she has just taken the first step towards getting hold of Lily's soul. Lily is still undetermined: "And if it's not a dream it's even better" (p. 22). She does not really know what to do with all this.

The following scene is one of the key scenes of the play. The Skriker appears in the form of a small child. Lily shows her how to play cat's cradle. Again it proves to

be a bad strategy for this willingness to play shows a clear sign of Lily's intention of "making friends." The Skriker grows bold and now claims not only to be friends, not only to be loved but to be the sister of Lily's baby to be born.

LILY: You can't really be its sister.

SKRIKER.: I can, I can be, please let me. I want a baby, I want a baby brother or a baby sister.

LILY: You'll have to ask your mum to have a baby.

SKRIKER.: I haven't got a mum. Please let me be a sister. Say yes. Say yes. Please say yes.

LILY: Yes all right.

SKRIKER: I'll be its sister and you can be my mum.

LILY: Who do you live with?

SKRIKER: Please say yes. Pretend.

(p. 24)

The mother-daughter-game is ended when Josie turns up and recognises the Skriker in the small child. From this point on the fairy becomes even more violent and aggressive than before. Josie tries to keep her away from her sister, in vain. The Skriker expresses her demand for a part of Lily's life and love when she starts hitting Lily's belly. First, the young woman takes it for the child's desperate need of attention and kisses her but when she starts pulling her hair Lily hits the fairy-child. We have seen this type of scene before; in the American woman offering her help to Lily, who first tends to accept it but finally rejects it, then in the pink winged fairy trying to persuade her to have a wish. Lily is under siege. She is again and again attacked and insulted by a mysterious being who apparently does not want anything particular except to be loved. It is this latest scene, however, which raises doubt as to whether the Skriker's intentions are all that innocent. Hitting Lily's pregnant belly – an attempt to kill the foetus? – expresses the fairy's strong wish to be the only one in her life. The thematically similar scenes I have just mentioned are not simply mirror images of each other; every scene repeats the theme of the previous one at a higher emotional and expressive level. What is suggested in the first two is condensed in the third, the ambiguous relationship of Lily and the Skriker. Lily is not strong enough to reject the promises she is offered and she is not careless or blind enough to accept them without question. On one hand the possibility of having someone who fulfils all her wishes pleases her, on the other hand, however, she is still too frightened to embrace a supernatural power, the function of which she is not yet fully clear about.

While Lily is hesitating her sister is ready to join the supernatural company of the fairies. What induces Josie to change her mind after having passed the Skriker on to Lily is her weakness, her inability to face her own fate without assistance.

LILY: Josie, remember what it felt like / before, don't do it.

JOSIE: But when you've lost her you want her back. Because you see what she can do and you've lost your chance and it could be the only chance ever/in my life to –

(p. 28)

It is her hope that the miraculous Skriker will somehow make her life bearable that Josie has in mind here. Unfortunately enough Lily interrupts her sister before she could explain what she actually expects from the Skriker so one can only guess. Josie's journey into the Underworld, which follows, is a possible answer.

The Underworld "springs into existence" only when the Skriker and Josie arrive, without them it would not exist. And the way it exists is also worth mentioning. Churchill's stage instruction in which she describes the Underworld is telling:

It looks wonderful except that it is all glamour and here and there it's not working – some of the food is twigs, leaves, beetles, some of the clothes are rags, some of the beautiful people have a claw hand or hideous face. But the first impression is of a palace. SKRIKER is a fairy queen, dressed grandiosely, with lapses.

(p. 29)

Everything is sham including the Skriker herself, who appears to be a fairy queen beautifully dressed, but she confesses to Lily, as the American woman shortly before, that she is "one of many, not a major spirit but a spirit" (p. 16), what is more, her wonderful transformation from an ancient and damaged death portent into a fairy full of energy has not yet happened. When at the end of the play Lily takes the same journey the Skriker as a narrator tells us how she behaved when they arrived:

Lily appeared like a ghastly, made their hair stand on endless night, their blood run fast. 'Am I in fairyland?' she wondered. 'No, said the old crony, this is the real world' whirl whir wh wh what is this?

(p. 51)

This is the real world, we are informed. In the “real world” there is a feast as Josie can see, everyone is singing and dancing, it does really seem beautiful. At least until Josie is warned by a human inhabitant, a girl, who was in search of her love and “got lost in an orchard,” not to eat anything, for it is “twigs and beetle and a dead body” (p. 30). The divine prohibition in Paradise against eating the fruit of the forbidden tree is grotesquely distorted here. Adam and Eve were kept away from the tree of knowledge in order that they can stay in Paradise, Josie, on the other hand, is expected to eat something, anything, in order that the supernatural forces can make her stay in the make-believe Eden. As the prohibition did not work in the case of the first pair, it does not work with Josie, either. The true nature of the unreal Eden is soon revealed, the glamorous feast is followed by silence and gloom and Josie finds herself to be a slave. The Skriker appears to her as a monster this time. Yet, when Josie manages to leave her slavery and returns to the material world she feels that “everything’s flat here like a video” (p. 38) as opposed to what she experienced there, among the fairies.

The Underworld-scene is all the more important because it sheds light on the character of the Skriker, too. Josie feels that long years pass while she is in the custody of the fairyland, so does the girl who warns her not to eat anything. However, on her return she finds everything just as she has left it. Lily is surprised to learn that her sister thinks she was away for a long time. “I never stopped seeing you” (p. 35), she says, because for her nothing really happened. If Josie is there with Lily all the time yet Josie still thinks she spent a whole life with the fairies it is only possible if Josie’s sinister journey was only an imaginary one, everything took place in her mind. If so, the Underworld, the fairies and goblins and spirits and demons including the Skriker have sprung out of Josie’s disturbed mind and are real only as long as Josie wants to believe that they are real. She is afraid of eating in the fairyland because she believes the girl, and she comes back because she wants to come back. It would be a mistake, however, to say that the world of the Skriker does not exist or it is unreal. It does exist and it *is* real, it exists in a disturbed mind and it has a psychic reality. What is remarkable, however, is Josie’s (and Lily’s) ability or power to have control of the time when this reality comes into existence.

After Josie’s adventure the Skriker leaves the sisters alone for a while, although she is constantly following them from a distance. Josie’s feeling that something is watching them is not without basis. When the Skriker turns up again, this time as a man of thirty, she/he explains it to Lily:

SKRIKER: You meant me to follow you or I wouldn't have done it.

LILY: I never saw you.

SKRIKER: Unconsciously meant. Or in your stars. Some deep...

LILY: Oh like that.

(p. 41)

During the apparently peaceful time without the disturbing presence of the Skriker Lily has her child. She lives with Josie and suffers from her sister's strange ideas. Once Josie claims that Lily's baby is a changeling, the real one having been kidnapped by the fairies. The only way to get her back is to put this one on a shovel and put in on a fire. Lily wishes Josie was not mad. So she recovers her senses for a few minutes but it is even worse than before. What the Skriker says is perfectly true: Lily unconsciously wants the fairies to come back to make her miserable life better. She wants the fairyland. She wants to escape from her reality.

The Skriker now being a man "woos" Lily trying to exploit her need either of a fairyland or of a man. He knows that Lily needs consolation. First, he is ready to bring into the picture some of the factors that make modern man feel uneasy. He is eager to point out the consoling role of nature which was available to people in earlier times but not to the people of today. Nowadays nobody can take comfort from nature either because of the unpredictable effects of global warming ("Spring will return and nothing will grow") or of other unusual meteorological phenomena. Then he mentions the show-business-like Gulf war ("I like the kind of war we're having lately. I like snuff movies," p. 44) only to offer himself as the only way out of the dark world of depression. A cunning, but probably far too transparent strategy. Lily says no. The Skriker, in a way quite unusual of him, becomes irritated. Lily feels pity for him. He makes an attempt to benefit from it turning his anger towards himself, then showing a touch of self-pity, a display of characteristically male behaviour:

I'm useless, I get something beautiful and I ruin it. Everything I touch falls apart... I worship you. I'm so ashamed. I feel sick. Help me. Forgive me. Could you ever love me?

(p. 45)

The pathetic theatrical performance is interrupted by Josie, who attacks the great hypocrite with a knife injuring him on the arm. But the injury, as so many things with the fairies, is only a sham. The Skriker cannot be hurt or killed with a knife. Her power – to retain the feminine pronoun which denotes the original sex of the otherwise sexless character – lies not in the physical world, so a material weapon can do no harm

to her existence; she simply takes off the bloodstained shirt and tie, under which she has clean ones.

The Skriker then appears as Mary, an old friend of Lily's. She seems to be in trouble, or at least she claims so: her boyfriend is going to kill her. She pleads with Lily to have mercy on her and to help. She seems to know a lot about Lily's childhood, the *waste ground*, the *corner with the nettles*, and a *wall* where they used to put messages. Lily, either because she is now suspicious or because she is tired of strange people coming to her and asking for help, resists. She will not help anyone. She does not care about anyone. The Skriker leaves, but, as she gives an account of the further events, Lily's soul is now disturbed and infected with a strange need:

But she worried and sorried and lay far awake into the nightmare. Poor fury, she thought, pure feary, where are you now and then? And something drove her over and over and out of her mind how you go.

(p. 49)

Finally Lily gives in and goes to find the Skriker in a hospital. However, before going on to discuss the final scene of the play, it might be useful to stop and attempt to answer a question: who or what is this assertive, miraculous character, who is the Skriker? She is certainly not a flesh and blood figure; her world, the Underworld, and her entire company which includes a Kelpie, a Bogle, a Brownie, a Black Dog and many others belong to an imaginary sphere rather than to the material world. What Josie feels to be a whole life actually happens in no time. Lily's charge, "These things only come because of you" (p. 46), because of Josie that is, is only part of the truth. It is Josie who first meets the fairyworld, though not in the hospital of the second scene, so she might appear to Lily to be the cause of everything. However, the fact that the Skriker is presented before the actual plot – and the way she is presented linguistically in the prologue – suggests that she, the Skriker, is something more ancient and profound than Lily could imagine, and Josie is but a medium of a higher, or deeper, power.

We last see Josie towards the end of the play with the Skriker, who is now a man again, "a shabby respectable man about forty."

JOSIE: She didn't know anyone. She didn't have anywhere to stay the night. I slipped a wire loop over her head.

SKRIKER *laughs*.

So that'll do for a bit, yeh? You'll feel ok. There's an earthquake on the telly night. There's a motorway pileup in the fog.

SKRIKER: You are a good girl, Josie

JOSIE: There's dead children.

SKRIKER: Tell me more about her.

JOSIE: She had red hair. She had big feet. She liked biscuits. She woke up while I was doing it. But you didn't do the carcrash. You'd tell me. You're not strong enough to do an earthquake.

(p. 48)

It is not clear enough who Josie is talking about. *She* could be her little daughter – then how is it possible that she liked biscuits and had big feet? – or she could be somebody else of whom we have not yet heard. Nevertheless, what Josie is talking about is a murder. This would not be a valuable piece of information since we already know that she has killed her baby. What is important, however, is that she seems to put the blame on the Skriker, who is not strong enough to make an earthquake, but, as Josie's words suggest, is strong enough to do a murder. It was not me, says she, who killed, but something in me encouraged by the Skriker. The monster, originally sleeping somewhere deep in Josie's soul, is thus personified, becomes a third person, and now being independent of her maker is able to haunt others, especially Lily.

The Skriker bears a frightening resemblance to another great tempter of history, Satan, or the devil, who visits the fasting Jesus in the wilderness:

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.⁶

The fairy visits the sisters in the urban wilderness and in exchange for love she offers them a wonderful world of glamour and the fulfilment of all their wishes. Still, there is the question where does the Skriker-tempter come from? Does she arise from the disturbed mind of the baby-killer Josie, a mental illness later affecting Lily, or is it the other way round: Josie kills her baby acting on the advice of a sinister force outside of her, which attacks Lily, too? Or are both Josie's mental illness and this external force just various aspects of one and the same *instinct* to escape from the horrors of this world and to hide away in an imaginary one, either arising "naturally" within, or generated from the outside? The Skriker might well be a symbol of naturally developed insanity or of one artificially achieved through chemicals, alcohol or in any other way; in either case she produces Paradise on Earth, a fairyland out of place – which is escapism in its most hideous sense. Any attempt at creating a beautiful and real world

⁶ *Matthew*, 4,8–9

out of the delusive material of phantasmagoria, at bringing back the allegedly good old times when people believed in the existence of a dreamland is abortive and anachronistic. Josie and Lily should face their fate, their surroundings, their lives, and neither of them is capable of that. Instead of trying hard to build up a future relying solely on the sober acknowledgement of their present they escape from the present thus killing the future. Josie's baby is dead. Lily's great great granddaughter is deformed.

The last scene shows how Lily, finally giving up all resistance, joins the company of the Skriker, who, being embraced, is rejuvenated at once. Lily hopes to be able to save the world without being harmed, but she is unable to save herself. She eats the forbidden fruit, and a morsel here means everything. This is a whirlpool of desires – once you taste the fruit you want more. And for Lily there is no way back – she is “tricked tracked wracked” (p. 52). Her spoilt future is half shown on stage, half told by the Skriker: her granddaughter and her deformed great great granddaughter appear only to pour their rage upon Lily. Lily's future is not a possible one of many, the Skriker's laconic account of the girl's fate – she “bit off more than she could choose. And she was dustbin” (p.52) – suggests that this is really what happens to her after she has chosen the fairy-world.

Throughout the play the figure of the Skriker appears to be an extremely assertive one. She is determined to force love and acceptance out of the sisters in any way, a goal she finally accomplishes. Her method varies from shape to shape she chooses to take. When she is a stranger – an American woman – all she wants from Lily is her attention. When she is a little girl she is after motherly care and love. In the form of a man she-he demands love and when she takes the form of Mary she asks for help. The concept of love on its own is a neutral one. The borderline between good and evil is dependent on *what* we love. The love the Skriker is so desperate to have seems to be the love of evil and destruction. This will probably be more conspicuous if we consider the role of the fairy's company. The course of the various dumb shows that entwines the whole play has a role similar to the subplot in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. When Gloster complains that

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects: love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in

cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father,⁷

he not only refers us to morsels of obsolete knowledge or superstition but generalises the fate of King Lear and his daughters (and also his own fate and that of his sons) showing that Lear's problems are not individual ones but are characteristic of a period in time. The "subplot" of dumb shows in *The Skriker* has the same function. It generalises the problem, it presents us a hideous picture of a world in which an almost religious quest for artificial heavens is a global problem, not merely that of two young sisters. The human characters in the dumbshows try to find somebody or something, one of them with a telescope even, but when they find it they take the first step on the road of corruption and decay. The telescope girl, who first watches the Green Lady and the Bogle has a bandaged wrist after losing sight of them, the man who meets the Green Lady ends up in a wheelchair, and the woman who flirts with the Kelpie is dismembered in the end. Everybody who is weak enough to get in touch with a fairy comes to grief. So do Josie and Lily. However, it would be far too easy and unjust to blame all the miseries on the Skriker and her company. They may appear as beautiful, kind and amiable beings to Josie and Lily but ultimately the choice is whether the sisters should embrace or reject them. They fail to make the right choice and they fall. Caryl Churchill is of the opinion that a playwright should only ask questions, she or he should not answer them.⁸ If the playwright's task is to ask questions rather than to answer them, one of the possible questions posed in *The Skriker* may be: "Why should the characters choose a fairyland instead of reality?" Or rather: "What is reality like if it is better to escape even though this escape results in the physical and mental corruption of the characters?" The answer to this question, however, is beyond the scope of this essay – the question itself, I believe, is an important one to keep in mind when one goes to the theatre to watch the Hungarian production of Churchill's play,⁹ to which I hope I have managed to provide an introduction.

⁷ Shakespeare, *King Lear* Act I, Scene 2 in: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Hamlyn, 1987) p. 864.

⁸ Amelia Howe-Kritzer, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment* (London: Macmillan-Houndsmills, 1991) p. 1.

⁹ The play has in fact not been produced yet, but thanks to Kornél Hamvai's virtuoso translation (published in László Upor, ed. *Holdfény antológia – Öt mai angol dráma* [The Moonlight Anthology – Five Contemporary English Plays], Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1996), the possibility for us to see the play in a Hungarian theatre is there.