Cloud 9 is a wickedly funny, take-no-prisoners, carnal romp that challenges conventional notions of gender and sexuality. Set amid the patriarchal domination of sexual and colonial politics of the 19th century, the first act begins in a Hollywood version of darkest Africa circa 1879.

Clive: *This is my family. Though far from home We serve the Queen wherever we may roam
I am the father to the natives here
And father to my family so dear.*

Clive is a representative of a British imperial empire posted in colonial Africa where he is the ruler over everyone and everything he surveys. Betty, Clive’s subservient wife, is played by a man.

Betty: *I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.*

Clive is the patriarch of this land and his duty is to civilize [whiten] the natives. Thus, his native servant Joshua, played by a white man, serves as a visual metaphor.

Joshua: *My skin is black but oh my soul is white. I hate my tribe. My master is my light.
I only live for him. As you can see,
What white men want is what I want to be.*

Clive’s son, Edward, is played by a woman.

Edward: *What father wants I’d dearly like to be.
I find it rather hard as you can see.*

And Clive presents the rest of the family: Victoria, portrayed by a rag doll, Maud and Ellen.

Clive: *No need for any speeches by the rest.
My daughter, mother-in law, and governess.*

* from *Cloud 9*
And so we are led through the looking glass into the play. Act two opens in 1979 London, though the characters have aged only 25 years. Here, there is a reversal of gender power. Victoria is a middle-class professional woman struggling for control; she is married to Martin who does household chores. Betty has divorced Clive and Edward is a gardener with a faithless lover named Gerry. Into this mix, Lin appears. She is a lesbian with a young daughter who chants scatological street rhymes and plays with a toy gun. In this play about relationships (between women and men, men and men, and women and women), the characters seek their own kind of happiness. The divisive world in which they live forces them to examine industry, motherhood, power, family, money, geography, government and sex. Each character, as we all do, explores new options in the hope of gaining a simple sense of freedom.

“CLIVE: I look after Her Majesty’s domains; I think you can trust me to look after my wife.” —Cloud 9

Born in London on September 3, 1938, Caryl Churchill grew up in England and Canada. In 1960, she received a BA in English from Oxford University where she wrote three plays: Downstairs, You’ve No Need to Be Frightened and Having a Wonderful Time. After graduation she began to write radio plays for the BBC including The Ants (1962), Not, Not, Not, Not Enough Oxygen (1971) and Schreber’s Nervous Illness (1972). This form forced Churchill to develop a certain economy of style which would serve her well in her later work for the stage; it also freed her from the limitations of the stage, allowing her the freedom to write very short scenes or make great leaps in time and space.

In 1974, Churchill began her transition to the stage. She served as resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre from 1974-75. During the 1970s and 1980s, she collaborated with the Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment companies which used an extended workshop period in their development of new plays. Both companies had a deep impact on Churchill’s development as a playwright. She later wrote, “This was a new way of working—[I felt] stimulated by the discovery of shared ideas and the enormous energy and feeling of possibilities.” While working with Joint Stock and Monstrous Regiment, Churchill wrote a number of successful plays including: Light Shining on Buckinghamshire (1976), Vinegar Tom (1976), Cloud 9 (1979) and A Mouthful of Birds (1986). Many of her most well-know plays, such as Cloud 9, Top Girls (1982) and Serious Money (1987), scrutinize themes of gender identity, feminism, capitalism, industry and politics.

Even after striking out on her own, Churchill continued to make use of an improvisational workshop in the development of some of her plays. Mad Forest: a Play from Romania (1990) was written after Churchill, the director and a group of student actors from London’s Central School went to Romania to work with acting students there and find out more about the events surrounding the fall of the dictator, Ceausescu. What finally emerged from this process was a play that revealed the dreadful damage done to people’s lives by years of repression and the painful difficulties in adapting to lasting change.

As Churchill’s career continues to develop, her plays seem to be growing more and more sparse and less and less inhibited by realism. In The Skriker (1994), she employed an associative, dream logic that some critics found nonsensical. The play, a visionary exploration of modern urban life, follows the Skriker, a kind of northern goblin, in its search for love and revenge as it pursues two young women to London, changing its shape at every encounter.

Churchill married David Harter in 1961 and has three sons. Her awards include three Obie Awards (1982, 1983 and 1988) and a Society of West End Theater Award (1988).
The British Sense of Humour

There are as many types of British humor as there are Britons and their humor ranges from the sophisticated verbal comedies of Oscar Wilde to the vulgar humor of Benny Hill. One can say that British humor is not generally as physical or slapstick as that of their European neighbors or as situational as American comedy. British humor has been described as highly verbal, mocking, outrageous, bawdy, rowdy, droll, witty, deadpan, pithy, vulgar, wacky, subtle, dry, irreverent, off-the-wall, self-deprecating and cynical but never as cloying, emotional or mushy. Of all the variety in British humor, the techniques are often the same: eccentricity, irony and innuendo.

Many British view eccentricity as their “birth-right” and do not find erratic behavior distasteful. As humor in the entertainment industry has become more hostile, aggressive and sometimes even pointless, the Brits have been the birth mothers of such groups as Monty Python’s Flying Circus. To illustrate the comedy group’s eccentric humor, a 1969 skit with a new kind of crime follows: “Gangs of elderly women were attacking respectable citizens, beating young men to the ground with their purses, riding their motorbikes through yarn shops, marking their turf with spray-painted slogans such as ‘Make Tea Not Love.’” The “Hell Grannies” skit, as it came to be known, was a hilarious example of deviant behavior and a reversal of stereotypes, something Caryl Churchill also employs in Cloud 9. In the play, a motley crew of Victorian types couple in taboo combinations with twisted love affairs and dichotomous characters.

Irony is another element of British humor. For example, if it’s raining hard, an Englishman might say dryly: “lovely weather.” In the movie, Goldfinger, James Bond always undermined his daring actions by mocking them. “It is easier for the British to slip into an ironic detachment from their feelings than it is to express them. …However, this inability of Britons to frankly express their emotions without the corrosion of irony is in itself a source of humour.”

“But what makes us [Britons] laugh? Well, I suppose the main theme of much [of our] comedy is sex. It is often said that the English don’t have sex, they have hot water bottles. This of course is not true, but what is true is that open, frank discussion of sex is largely absent from British life. What we have instead, and this is another verbal aspect of our humour, is innuendo,” the indirect usually derogatory insinuation.

Caryl Churchill’s Cloud 9 is a daring comedy with its gender-bending and sexual politics. The play employs “a special combination of mockery and gravity; that it represents a nervous rather than intellectual reaction; that it assumes unexpected disguises; that it is indigenous and possesses a strong imaginative quality; and that it sometimes degenerates into buffoonery and childishness.” Churchill mocks Victorian attitudes and their persistence in today’s society. In addition, disguises proliferate in the cross-gender casting and adults portray children with all their playfulness and petulance. It is bawdy and droll, vulgar and irreverent, and full of eccentricities.
In the first act of *Cloud 9*, Clive is the center of a microcosmic world. He governs as father and colonial power; his desires are law. He coerces sexual favors from the neighbor, Mrs. Saunders while condemning his wife’s flirtation with their friend Harry and, although repulsed by Harry’s revelation of his homosexuality, refuses to acknowledge Ellen’s. When his affair with Mrs. Saunders is revealed, he blames her and orders her to leave as he embraces Betty with renewed affection.

Clive’s language of power equates sexual repression with colonial oppression. For example, he tells Mrs. Saunders she is “dark like this continent. Mysterious, treacherous.” Betty’s infidelity is compared to threats from the natives. To Harry, Clive confides: “There is something dark about women that threatens what is best in us.” Furthermore, any disloyalty to Clive implies disloyalty to the Empire. “Thus, sexual non-conformity implies covert resistance to authority.” He tells Betty that if she were unfaithful, he would have to expel her from the household. When Harry tells Clive of his homosexuality, Clive asserts that homosexuality contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire and insists Harry get married at once. When he observes effeminate behavior in his son, Edward, he rejects him. Finally, Clive wants all the natives to be docile like Joshua, who has internalized his oppression, but as master, uses violence on the stable boys when trouble erupts.

Caryl Churchill presents her view of sexual and social conditioning as artificial and farcical. As a result, she crosscasts many of the roles. Betty, a Victorian lady, is performed by a man, her adolescent son by a woman, and a white actor portrays the black servant. This crosscasting serves to undermine Clive’s strict moral standards and imperialist/paternalistic attitudes, and challenges the audiences preconceptions. “Divorcing male and female stereotypes from physiology was intended to physicalize the characters’ psychologically ambivalent identities.”

In Act II we see changes in structure of power and authority, particularly as they affect sex and relationships. The sexual norms of Act I have changed. A setting in a public park may symbolize openness, especially in terms of overthrowing sexual taboos. Language changes; instead of the stilted and proper speech of Act I, characters now speak openly of their desires and pleasures. There is no center of control as provided by Clive in Act I. Only Lin, the lesbian mother, seems able to make decisions without constant questioning.

Still, there are hangovers of the Victorian sensibility in issues of gender and sexual politics. Martin, Victoria’s husband, is like Clive in that “he seeks to define women to fit his needs.” He is writing a novel from a woman’s point of view, but attempts to control Victoria by complaining of her sexual unresponsiveness and her indecision over a proposed job change. Edward, now a gardener in the park, worries that he’ll lose his job if his homosexuality becomes known. Cathy, Lin’s daughter runs around with a toy gun and eventually wants dresses, earrings and a perm. Lin, as a single woman, is still relegated to a low-level job as a clerk in a clothing store and Betty has divorced Clive, but has problems overcoming her feelings of dependency and inadequacy. “All the characters make changes in their personal lives, but they all emphatically acknowledge the difficulty of doing so.”

In Act II, Cathy and Betty are played by men. “Cathy represents the future; she is the product of liberated post-1968 parents who have dedicated themselves to the excavation and development of the essential truth of the individual.” She is animated and articulate; she resists guidance in the interpretation of her painting, and her dress and gun suggest she hasn’t identified with any gender yet. When Betty feminizes her with jewelry and hat, then Cathy expresses her desire for womanly things. The end of the play is left open, encouraging us all to examine our society and ourselves.
The British presence in Africa began in the 1600s with their participation in the slave trade. By 1650, this enterprise was flourishing with fortified and garrisoned trading stations on the shores of what are today Gambia, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria. Africans were obtained through barter with the tribal rulers of West African seaboard states and then shipped for sale in the West Indies.

The late 1860s witnessed an economic revolution that affected every part of Africa. The discovery of diamonds in Griqualand attracted investment and immigrants at an unprecedented rate. Digging for diamonds and laying railway tracks required a vast workforce which could only be found among the native population. If industrialization was to proceed, the blacks of Southern Africa had to be pacified and brought under white control.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 benefited Great Britain more than any other nation. This waterway, connecting the Mediterranean Ocean with the Red Sea shortened the sea route to India, the Far East and Australia. Freight could be transported more quickly and inexpensively; the canal provided for more rapid movement of British warships and troops to trouble spots in the empire.

Between 1880 and 1902, British acquisition of Africa was impressive: Egypt, the Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar, Northern and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), much of Nigeria, the hinterland of the Gold Coast and more. By the 19th century, British imperialism had swept across the world. From 1872 to 1896, world trade patterns were changing which hit all countries, including Britain, with a recession. Tariff barriers were set up and British exports to France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United States tumbled. The argument for expansion of the empire was based not upon trade, but upon a new philosophy. In his book, *The Expansion of England*, Sir John Seeley wrote of the special genius of the Anglo-Saxon race. To him the British represented a super-race; and the fact that they “had dispersed across the globe and mastered their environment added to the general feeling that they were ideally qualified to rule.”

With all these territories, Great Britain needed colonial administrators to control the native population and keep the English constituents satisfied. Clive of *Cloud 9* could have been modeled on Frederick, Lord Lugard, an administrator in both East and West Africa in the 1880s. Lugard believed that white men in Africa should always stick to a separate way of life that was an “assertion of superiority which commands the respect and excites the emulation of the (black).” Insolent familiarity by natives was never to be tolerated and would be instantly rebuffed by an English gentleman. Survival in Africa needed physical as well as moral stamina, and Lugard, unlike Clive, exhibited self-discipline and a stringent regime. “The British people gave their wholehearted support to men like Lugard, who had shouldered what Rudyard Kipling called ‘the white man’s burden’.”

“An Englishman thinks he is moral when he is only uncomfortable.”

—George Bernard Shaw. *Man and Superman*. Act III.

“(England) must found colonies as fast and far as she is able … and there teaching her colonists that their chief virtue is fidelity to their country, and their first aim is to advance the power of England by land and sea.”

London in the 1880s was a patriarchal society that attempted to control human sexual behavior through severe social and legal sanctions against any deviations from the male-headed, heterosexual, monogamous, child-rearing, indissoluble family. Sex was supposedly confined to married couples and was solely for procreation rather than recreation. In proper middle and upper class circles, for example, women were supposed to have no sexual contact before marriage—“a hand around the waist, a kiss, and a fervent pressing of the hand was probably the accepted limit in most cases.” 

Challenges to the heterosexual family stereotype have always existed, but have gained momentum in this century with the growth of the women’s movement, the sexual revolution and gay liberation. In Act II of the play, we find a different kind of family—the lesbian Lin and her child, Cathy, living with Victoria, a heterosexual, and Edward, Victoria’s homosexual brother. On the periphery are: Martin, Victoria’s husband; Gerry, Edward’s former lover; and Betty, the mother of Victoria and Edward.

Liberation for homosexuals was the very antithesis of early British law. The English Buggery Statute of 1533 prescribed death for acts of sodomy; by 1861 it was replaced with the Offenses Against the Person Act which promised a sentence of 10 years to life for similar behavior. In 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act made gross indecency, which includes all homosexual activities, punishable for the first time. Lesbian activities were not acknowledged to exist and therefore, were ignored. By 1967, the sexual climate had changed. Based on the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report that investigated homosexual offenses and prostitution, the Sexual Offenses Act was passed. It stated: “A homosexual act in private shall not be an offense provided that the parties consent thereto and have attained the age of 21 years.”

In the 1960s, North Americans looked upon England as the sexually permissive, swinging London. The Beatles, who toured the United States in 1964, made sex look nonthreatening and fun and the Pill made it possible. Young men sported long hair as young women bared their thighs in mini-skirts. The British model Twiggy exemplified the new female form: flat-chested, skinny, girlish look. British clothing designers produced skimpy clothes that claimed to free the female figure, but actually accentuated its vulnerability.

With sexual freedom came more visibility for gays and lesbians. Gays were sympathetically portrayed in two British films, *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *Victim* (1961). Most major cities had gay clubs, bars and bathhouses that provided commercialized proof of gays’ existence. In 1965, the average person could not name a single well-known homosexual; by the end of the 1970s, it was impossible to ignore them. Thus in 1977, the first lesbian Member of Parliament and in 1980 the first gay Member of Parliament publicly declared their sexual orientation.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of Great Britain and an era of conservatism began. The American pop journalist Tom Wolfe had labeled the Seventies “The Me Decade,” referring to the narcissism and self-indulgence that seemed to characterize contemporary society. But an economic downturn in the mid-seventies replaced that attitude with one of pessimism. Restraint and cutbacks colored the early Eighties with political retrenchment and more conservative moral standards returned.
Sources

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Notes

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12. James, p. 205.
13. James, p. 289.
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