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Staging Trauma: Intentionality in Depictions of Aggression towards Marginalized Groups in Harold Pinter's Works

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I argue that Pinter generally, although maybe unintentionally, writes queerness and femininity into his characters and stories not in an attempt to represent queer or female people properly or to comment on the state of their marginalized experience, but rather as mechanisms to tell stories of power.

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Across the various kinds of literature that I have studied by Harold Pinter, I am interested in the way he writes queerness and femininity into his characters and his stories. It became very apparent to me that Pinter generally, although maybe unintentionally, uses these elements of identity not in an attempt to represent queer or female people properly or to comment on the state of their oppression or some other faucet of this marginalized experience. Rather, he uses them as mechanisms to tell other stories, generally stories of the greater sense of power. While power undeniably plays a large role in the oppression of people from these marginalized communities, the difference lies in using those identities for the sake of telling the story rather than using those identities because the story could not operate without their presence. Therefore, the stories are not about them, but merely include them.

To be clear, not every story that includes queerness, diverse racial identities or female characters needs to be about the experience of living in those bodies. However, Pinter almost never addresses the important socio-political aspects of living with the labels of any of those identities as they relate to the socio-political issues that he is already taking up and that are highly relevant to issues of the oppression of marginalized communities. Instead, he codes characters in certain ways that allow audience members to speculate broadly on these aspects of the characters. He never solidifies whether those broad speculations are meant to guide the narrative or not. So, in stories like *Old Times*, *The Caretaker*, and *Betrayal*, characters with these different identities end up finding themselves in conflict with each other rather than in community simply as a means to produce conflict.

First, I want to start by introducing a similar but far more notorious and extreme case where lack of intentionality for writing a character in a compromised position of power resulted in brutal and violent reactions. I think it is important to note that Pinter's work is not nearly the most extreme case of this that we have seen in literature that has come from the same period, but I want to use this as a means of analyzing how Pinter's work, at times, may easily be manipulated to support the opposite intent of his writing in the first place.

David Mamet's "Oleanna" (1992) uses the character of Carol, a student, as the primary means of showing the shortcomings of John, a professor, and the power inequities present in his classroom and teacher-student dynamics. Mamet does this instead of prioritizing Carol herself as a character who has been abused and traumatized. The play details the interactions of John, professor, with Carol, student, when she

makes a claim of sexual harassment against him that, after a series of individual showings of manipulation for control, leads to John being denied tenure, losing the opportunity to buy a new home, and ultimately dismissed from the college, but not before brutally beating and nearly killing Carol.

Historically, performances of the play have been met with severe backlash, specifically towards the character of and the actor playing Carol in favor of John's perspective in the play. In observation of this, Marc Silverstein in his essay "'We're just Human': *Oleanna* and Cultural Crisis" begins by recounting:

> Never before has his audience…shown itself so ready to embrace this misogyny. The beating [of Carol] is often accompanied by applause, cheers, and quite audible exclamations of encouragement to the professor. That the beating answers an insistent desire the play generates in certain audiences is suggested by the ease with which some of its spectators forget the distinction between actress and character. Leaving the theatre after a performance, Mary McCann, the second actress to play the student in Mamet's own Off-Broadway, encountered shouts of "bitch" of such intensity that she ran back into the theatre for safety (Silverstein 103).

As Silverstein suggests, clearly the impression of this play on audience members allows them to feel entitled to some form of cathartic release about their own violent tendencies towards female bodied people. He later suggests that this may in part be the intention of the play: to "perform an ideological critique on the desires and values inhabiting our national unconscious" (Silverstein 104).

I posit, contrary to Silverstein's claim, that Mamet has some responsibility not only for the physical brutalizing of Carol in the script but of the emotional brutalizing of that actress because of the way he has chosen to write the narrative. To be clear, I do not claim that Mamet as a single person is able to predict one hundred percent of the reactions his work will receive, but I think it is his job as the playwright to try and understand how an audience might receive the information. One of the primary claims against Carol and in support of John is the claim that Carol lied about being sexually harassed by him. The people think this refers to the initial physical incident of the play depicted through a stage direction that reads, "He goes over and puts his arm around her shoulder" (Mamet 1625). But this moment of physical touch is the culmination of a much larger and longer conversation where John undervalues education, dismisses Carol's very presence more than once, uses heavy subtext to imply inappropriate relations, and ultimately establishes a clear understanding that he has power over her. That being said, many audience members and critics claim that this is not actually sexual harassment, and her claim as such warrants all of John's subsequent violent responses because she provoked him.

There are many arguments that I could make against these claims, but in the larger sense, my concern about Mamet and the play is this: that, as the male playwright, he is able to construct a narrative where the circumstances of the sexual assault are "unclear" enough to warrant public aggression outside the walls of the theatre that contain the performance. This allows for so much ambiguity that Carol's death has been justified in the moral and ethical perspectives of many audience members, meaning that Mamet does not actually understand the problem with the national and international "unconscious," as Silverstein puts it, that threatens the safety of, particularly but not exclusively, female bodied people. It means that he did not do enough to protect Carol, but instead was more concerned with using her presence to write a commentary on power dynamics in academic systems where Carol was purely a casualty.

Returning to the work of Harold Pinter, I have found that, more than once, he has similarly written characters where the physical or emotional trauma they sustain is utilized to bolster another story, while the characters with those traumas are ultimately left unresolved or unsupported. These moments teeter on a very fine line between productive discomfort in the media and harmful showings of trauma. This line has been far more prevalent in the last decade following the MeToo movement and other more public displays of unsavory and unethical abuses of power, especially in the United States.

We see this line blurred in the case of Pinter's play *Betrayal,* where critics, particularly male critics, have demonized the primary female character, Emma, as a manipulator and emasculator that is responsible for the downfall of Jerry and Robert both as individuals and as friends. While not nearly as violent as "Oleanna," critics and audience members have taken a distinct liking towards hating Emma in a public way. Katherine H. Burkman takes up this concern in her analysis of the Pinter triangle of the play where she deems Emma to not only be the primary victim of the various betrayals, but also the only "victor" of the whole affair by the

end, or in the structural case of this "reverse-chronological" play, the beginning. In her essay "Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*: Life Before Death—and After," Burkman puts herself in conversation with those critics that view Emma as a villain writing:

> During the unfolding of the past, the audience must continually reassess the nature of victimization in the play. Silvio Gazzi suggests that until the last scene we may regard Jerry as the most victimized…The final scene, Gazzi contends, forces us to reevaluate this judgment, for in it we see the characters quite self consciously playing out their roles in a classical Oedipal triangle…Some critics, Thomas P. Adler reminds us, see Pinter's men as dependent victims of negative, emasculating women; in these terms, Emma could readily be considered the villain of the piece (Burkman 516).

In short, all aspects of the dynamic are complicated, ambiguous, and easily manipulated to fit various perspectives and theories—it would not be a Pinter play if it was not complicated. But my concern lies in the easy reading of Emma as a villain with her super power being the emasculation of every man she meets, and poor Jerry and Robert for being caught in her chaos. As is the case with Mamet's play, I do not claim that Pinter intentionally ignores the circumstances of his female characters, but I think that he simply was not writing her as a full person—she was just a way to create conflict between Jerry and Robert in their subtly queer-coded relationship. By the end of the play Emma is the only character with a way out of the toxicity of the love triangle through the introduction of her budding romance with Casey. However, this is still used as a mechanism to unsettle Jerry.

Another example of this is in Pinter's play *The Caretaker* where the character of Aston is heavily queer-coded and the relationship he and his brother Mick have is speculated as not actually being brotherly. But Aston in particular is revealed to have had a deeply traumatic experience with electroshock therapy, with ambiguous but coded reasons as to what warranted this treatment in the first place. In Act 2 of the play where he is recounting his experience after being committed he tells the tramp Davies:

> And he showed me a pile of papers and he said that I'd got something, some complaint…he said, we're going to do something to your brain. He said…if we don't you'll be here for the rest of your life, but if we do, you stand a chance…I knew I was a minor. I knew he couldn't do anything to me without getting permission. I knew he had to get permission from my mother. So I wrote to her and told her what they were trying to do. But she signed their form, you see, giving them permission (Pinter, *Caretaker* 64-65).

This description of Aston's experience could easily relate to an infinite range of mental illnesses or health experiences. And to be clear, I am by no means discounting the hardships of living with poor mental health conditions. It is important to note, though, that at the time, there were a variety of "mental illnesses" that might have been treated in this way that we would now characterize as unethical. In particular, queerness was often responded to with the criminalization or institutionalization of the queer person. Additionally, Aston's entire monologue puts emphasis on the men that were around him—doctors, patients, his brother, workers, etc.—with the only mention of a woman being his mother. In regards to his mother, the last sentence of this quote strikes me as being veiled in a certain amount of shame. I'm interested in this overtone because the lack of communication with his mother seems more like an intentional separation by her from him, which feels more directly rooted in the experience of coming out or forced coming out to parents. If this were purely about mental health, I wonder if there would be the same lack of communication, considering it seems like he and his mother shared a caring relationship prior to the incident. And while I do understand that mental health is also historically shrouded in shame, the cutting off of contact and the lack of support are associated with the discovery of queerness in a loved one, especially in regards to the historical fear of it being transmissible in some unidentifiable way. Also, as a more external factor, Davies is shown to be highly judgmental of and blatantly discriminatory towards marginalized groups earlier in the play where he says, "All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there…" (Pinter, *Caretaker* 17) followed by a slew of other comments essentially complaining about the proximity of people of color to him. And later in the play, during an altercation with Aston, Davies says, "I've seen better days than you have, man. Nobody ever got me inside one of them places, anyway. I'm a sane man!

So don't you start mucking me about. I'll be all right as long as you keep your place" (Pinter, *Caretaker* 76). Because of Davies' proclivity toward discrimination and his fixation on Aston's backstory, as well as his multiple comments in this most recent moment about "mucking him about" and keeping his distance, I think these undertones also point towards a sort of queerness about Aston that disturbs Davies.

The reason that I include *The Caretaker* here is because of the deeply rooted trauma that Aston has to cope with. I would argue that the weight of the trauma that he has been given compared to the necessity of it to the plot is not a one to one ratio. It seems like, for as much time as it is afforded at the end of Act Two and in Act Three, it only really serves to escalate the already existing conflict between Aston and Davies. And whether Aston is meant to be queer or not, I must ask the question of whether it was necessary.

This seems to me another facet of the conversation about the way that authors choose to represent oppressed peoples in a state of being oppressed: is it always necessary? While it is incredibly important to tell the stories of struggles of people from marginalized communities, it's also important to tell stories about people from marginalized communities that do not center their identity struggles. However, there are also times where pieces unnecessarily show trauma on the bodies of these groups of people, and it is ultimately not relevant to the plot, meaning that if it did not occur, the story would be unchanged.

I understand that these are characters, not real people. But a special quality about theatre is that people often see themselves or people like themselves reflected back at them in a tangible way. So, the ethics and boundaries of showing people physicalizations of trauma on the body when they are sitting as close as at the actor's feet does mean that it matters when and how we choose to show it. Unnecessary utilizations of trauma specifically on kinds of people who are already predisposed to experiencing it could mean compromising the safety of the people sitting in the theatre who may not be equipped to see it and fetishizing the experience of that group of people in the process. Just as Mamet or Pinter cannot predict all of the reactions their audience members will have, it is impossible for the workers of a theatre and the creative team to do the same, but that is, again, where the operative word here is *necessary*. This depiction of Aston experiencing electroshock therapy teeters on the line of what is necessary for the plot to function, making it something that makes Aston vulnerable in such a large way that in the wrong hands could be exceedingly harmful.

Lastly, I would like to turn to Pinter's play, *Old Times*, where an assumedly married couple, Kate and Deeley, receive a visit from one of Kate's college roommates, Anna, who she has not seen for roughly two decades. This play is arguably the most distinctly queer-coded of all of the pieces mentioned, but also the most ambiguous in its overall plot line. It is also one of the most notable examples of objectification of a female-bodied person in the most literal sense in any of Pinter's plays.

Throughout the play, Pinter suggests that Kate and Anna's college friendship may have likely been a relationship. It becomes particularly obvious in a few different moments, such as when Deeley and Anna essentially have a competition to prove their superiority over each other. For example, early in their interaction Anna says to Deeley, "You have a wonderful casserole…I mean wife. So sorry. A wonderful wife," to which Deeley responds, "You're not a vegetarian, then?" (Pinter, *Old Times* 15). Not only does this literally reduce Kate to a casserole, but it also creates one of the many metaphors surrounding lesbianism and the ability to satisfy sexual partners throughout the play. But it absolutely does not stop there. Later in the play, Anna and Deeley bicker about who gets to dry Kate after she bathes saying, "She's so totally incompetent at drying herself properly," (Pinter, *Old Times* 37) and more of these moments continue from there. Kate is made to be solely an object of the two other characters' affections and competition without any agency over her own narrative.

But Pinter takes it a step further in the play by characterizing Kate's past relationship with Anna as unstable and dirty. Conversely, her relationship with Deeley seems clean and stable as opposed to happy, which culminates in a short monologue from Kate towards the end of the play where she says to Anna, "I remember you lying dead. You didn't know I was watching you. I leaned over you. Your face was dirty" (Pinter, *Old Times* 48). She then describes bringing Deeley into the bed that Anna's body had once occupied.

The metaphor here is not entirely clear, but what the play does seem to suggest is that Kate is torn between either sexualities or lifestyles that affect the presentation of her sexuality publicly. She may see her relationship with Anna as dirty in the way that homophobia had shrouded queerness in this veil of immorality, in turn seeing her relationship with Deeley as clean because she finds it to be morally acceptable and tolerable where she ultimately chooses moral cleanliness and stability over desire. And all the while, it is not entirely

clear if Kate is even fully alive.

That is what troubles me most about this play. Choosing to suppress one's sexuality in a time and place where queerness was not only seen as immoral but criminal was warranted for many people, and Kate may have chosen the safer option in order to stay alive. This is a key element that is not specific to the story and deserves historical critique. However, the complete lack of agency Kate has over herself, for Pinter to spend an entire play objectifying a female character in this way, feels counterintuitive to trying to prove the point about homophobia forcing people into hiding because we never learn to respect her in the first place. She becomes a caricature of a woman whose life is decided for her, if she even is alive.

Although all of these plays explore different facets of what it means to represent stereotypes of oppressed groups and the trauma they endure, they all ultimately act as examples of the potential ethical downfall of using trauma as a mechanical element rather than for the sake of developing and protecting the character. I do not believe Pinter sat down intending to undervalue or misrepresent his characters, but it is all too clear that the moves Pinter makes in his plays are intended to get the plot to hone in on those important conversations about power on various levels. This is also particularly important to remember: Pinter did concern himself with inequities in power dynamics on more localized and broader levels. He was undeniably representing these issues in ways that nobody else was.

But Pinter never fully realized the ways in which he was undervaluing those characters because he never experienced their particular issues. Rather, he implemented them like cogs in a machine without considering those larger consequences, especially when placing all of these implications on the back of a singular character in the play.

Thankfully, the reception of these plays has never reached the extreme case of Mamet's "Oleanna" which led to compromising the safety of actresses playing Carol. But I think about plays like Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We are Proud to Present…* which was performed at Muhlenberg College in 2022. That play provoked similar conversations about what the line is between performing trauma for a reason and performing trauma for the spectacle. We should be asking white creators like Harold Pinter to be involved in similar conversations and to be subject to those same concerns because he inserted himself into this conversation through the content he writes. I just do not think he really thought about it in those terms when he wrote his works. One of the biggest fears one has as a playwright is that their play will end up in the hands of a director who will misrepresent it. So it is the playwright's job to anticipate and be sure when it comes to depicting those really difficult and emotional moments so that the wrong director does not use it to empower undesired ideologies and harm their audience members.

Finally, I do think it important to note that I understand that I am applying more recent sensibilities about consent and boundaries in art-making spaces to works that were not necessarily operating under those ideas as an industry standard. However, Pinter plays are considered timeless and eternal, part of the canon of great theatre. So whether those sensibilities were prevalent at the time of creation or not, they need to be considered in the production of these plays now.

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