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Pinter and Mamet: Sex, Power and the Patriarchy

GINNY McCOYSWINEHEART
Muhlenberg College

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Introduction

Sex, power, and desire are three major components of relationships, and the works of Harold Pinter and David Mamet capture the complex and absurd dynamics of reality. Their characters battle for power through words and use sex as a means to assert strength. We see this, for example, in Pinter's 1971 play *Old Times*, in which the characters of Anna and Deeley fight for the attention of Kate. There are also notes of queerness in *Old Times,* which show a war between inside and outside, homosexuality or heteronormativity. Similarly, David Mamet stages a war for power between a student, Carol, and a professor, John, in his 1992 play *Oleanna*. Mamet's depiction of Carol and the audience's reactions to her reveal how society views women who seemingly "take advantage of" men as evil, while allowing guilty men to go unpunished. However, when women give into the inevitable sexualization of their bodies, like Ruth in Pinter's 1965 play *The Homecoming,* they are sometimes rewarded, but in reality they are often punished. Sex, desire, and power all become intertwined in Pinter and Mamet's representations of alliances between and relationships among their characters, who reflect real societal expectations and often revolt against those expectations.

Case Study: *Oleanna*, by David Mamet

Pinter's writing, as well as the writing of those who derived inspiration from him, like David Mamet, shows the complex relationship of sex, gender, relationships, and power. Certain women in these works have been examples of going against the ideal of what women should be. They're shown as going against the expectation of being docile and submissive. One of these characters is Carol in *Oleanna,* and she is a complex character, though many critics have seen her as simple or spiteful. Carol starts off the story confused by her professor, John, because she does not understand the course material he is teaching. He uses this as a chance to

undermine her and to try to finish her sentences.

Instead of giving Carol the chance to think and formulate her thoughts, John speaks for her and tells her what she was trying to say, which shows an unfortunate continuation of the historic treatment of women in the modern day. This is evident through her taking slight hesitations to contemplate her words and him stepping in to speak for her:

> Carol: I come from a different social…
> John: …ev…
> Carol: a different economic…
> John:...Look:
> Carol: No. I: when I *came* to this school: (Mamet 1618)

Whenever there was the slightest chance for John to step in and supposedly help by speaking for Carol, he did. Really, however, this seems more like silencing her, ignoring the fact that she is a student going to her teacher for help.

As a result of this, Carol finds it difficult to formulate what she wants to say because not only is she struggling in class with academic language, but John also does not recognize her problems as real. In addition to being a man and having power over her based on gender, he is also her teacher, a person meant to act as a mentor above her and guiding her. Instead of doing his job, he demeans her throughout the first half of this play. It is clear that he is trying to tell that her feelings are incorrect when she is trying to be honest and trying to get help from him:

> Carol: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's quite difficult for me. It's difficult…
> John: ...but…
> Carol: I don't… lots of the language…
> John: ...please…
> Carol: The language, the "things" that you say…
> John: I'm sorry. No. I don't think that's true.
> Carol: It is true. I…
> John: I think…
> Carol: It is true.
> John: ...I…
> Carol: Why would I…?
> John: I'll tell you why: you're an incredibly bright girl (Mamet 1618).

Carol was telling John how she did not understand his language very well, and he just wrote off her worries as illegitimate. He states that he does not believe that she does not understand the language and invalidates her difficulty by stating that she is smart. Of course, one can be smart and not speak academic English fluently. John's response is problematic, considering the fact that they are from different cultures and different linguistic systems. So, to comfort her and her worries about the class and the theoretical language he uses, he resorts to giving her empty compliments. He does this instead of actually offering her legitimate help, advice, and resources as an authority figure and someone who is supposed to actually teach her. This is reflective of how men in society provide women in need with empty compliments as a way to take advantage of their distress or low self-esteem, rather than actually helping them.

John cuts off Carol and says that what she's saying isn't true, a degrading statement that suppresses how she feels. It is her experience, so she gets to say how she feels and what she is struggling with. This is consistent with the patriarchal dynamic of men undermining women's emotions, because of a historical idea

that women supposedly feel too much. Additionally, if women show too many signs of agency over their own life and feelings, and attempt to stick up for themselves and communicate their needs, men may invalidate these statements for their own sense of power. This can be achieved through a form of flattery in order to avoid the actual issues themselves, to provide a distraction by calling a woman smart or beautiful while she's trying to tell you about the serious challenges she is facing.

As the play progresses, John says a few suspicious things about admiring Carol and bending the rules for her:

> Carol: There are rules.
> John: Well. We'll break them.
> Carol: How can we?
> John: We won't tell anybody.
> Carol: Is that all right?
> John: I say it's fine.
> Carol: Why would you do this for me?
> John: I like you. Is that so difficult for you to…
> Carol: Um…
> John: There's no one here but you and me. (Pause) (Mamet 1623)

John stating that he likes Carol, pointing out that they're alone, and insisting that he's willing to break the rules for her all sounds like it is alluding to sex. It sounds as though John might be setting himself up to ask Carol to do him a sexual favor while they're alone since he likes her and since she needs help and wants a good grade. Instead of offering her actual help, he just gives her more empty compliments, makes suspicious offers, and suggests inappropriate solutions. Also, John stating "I say it's fine" shows his belief that he has the power in this situation. Carol identifies a biased treatment given to her by her teacher and points out both the rules and the moral dilemma that comes with breaking them, but John states definitively that if he says it's okay, then it is, although Carol is obviously uncomfortable in this situation.

Additionally, Carol starts hesitating less as the play goes on; there are fewer pauses and she speaks for herself rather than having John speaking for her. This is seen in the quote above, as Carol seems to keep up in the conversation with John, leaving no gaps for him to fill. Carol gaining linguistic ability as the play progresses is reflective of the power she gains over the course of the story, which all culminates in the play's shocking ending, in which the roles are reversed . Now John finds it difficult to speak as Carol holds power over him:

> John: What. (Pause) What does it mean. (Pause)
> Carol: You tried to rape me. (Pause) According to the law. (Pause)
> John: ...what…?
> Carol: You tried to rape me. I was leaving this office, you "pressed" yourself into me. You "pressed" your body into me.
> John: ...I…. (Mamet 1633)

John takes more pauses as he speaks, whereas Carol speaks clearly and without any hesitation while making her claims, reversing the dynamic as he is in the vulnerable position and she is above him.

Along with this linguistic power shift, this ending shows Carol flipping the typical and unfortunate outcome of sexual assault perpetrators: this time, in a blurry situation, it is the man who is not believed. That said, while John may not have physically assaulted or raped Carol, he made allusive propositions, touching her and being an unhelpful teacher who used his position as an excuse to not do his job and help his student. This

dramatic ending points out how men in positions of power are oblivious to the uncomfortable positions they put women in. It shows a woman punishing a man for his behavior which crossed boundaries.

This has unfortunately resulted in Carol being viewed as cruel by society, as Christine MacLeod explains in her essay, "The Politics of Gender, Language and Hierarchy in Mamet's *Oleanna*": "Carol seems to be regarded, from all points on the political spectrum, as a monster straight out of men's worst nightmares" and a "cold-blooded bitch," "a dishonest, androgynous zealot" (Macleod 200). Although John may not have raped Carol, he was still pushing boundaries and making an uncomfortable environment. Critics are this outraged when an "innocent" man gets punished, however when men who actually rape women go unpunished, they're not called bitches and monsters and justice is often never granted.

There has been backlash against *Oleanna* because of its shocking plot; for example. MacLeod states:

> Those who defend *Oleanna* claim that Mamet's treatment of gender issues, though confrontational, is justified because it serves to expose the neo-McCarthyite underbelly of "political correctness." Katie Roiphe, for example, sees in the play's violent climax a warning to doctrinaire feminists about "the consequences of sexual harassment propaganda." Those in the opposite camp claim that Mamet has attempted to discredit serious and legitimate feminist concerns by blatantly stacking the deck in favour of John, his college lecturer protagonist (Macleod 200).

A lot of audience members view Carol as a bitch and think that her claim was ludicrous and motivated from her devil-woman instincts. However, I do not agree with this extreme perception of her. John was talking over her and abusing his position of power, ignoring her by talking on the phone, finishing her sentences for her and not helping her when she was asking him to.

Throughout the story, Carol made it clear that she needed help, and it was not provided to her. Instead she was met with flattery and strange and suspicious offers as to how she could get a good grade automatically. Those who call her a bitch must be unaware of how uncomfortable it feels to be a woman alone with a man that has power over you and who is making you uncomfortable. Carol stated she was uncomfortable, but her boundaries were still crossed. While he did not literally, physically rape her, he still was out of line. He was taking advantage of this position over her and he deserved to experience repercussions for not doing his job and abusing his position rather than being afforded tenure, a beautiful home and a loving wife.

Case Study: *Old Times*, by Harold Pinter

Another dominance battle is staged in Pinter's *Old Times,* where Anna and Deeley get into a power struggle over the attention and desire of Kate. Although Deeley is Kate's husband, Anna also seems to be romantically interested in Kate. She is very concerned with getting Kate in the bath and keeping her inside the house, perhaps in an attempt to have authority over her and to be able to watch over her. Anna wanting to run a bath for Kate is rather flirtatious:

> Kate. I'll think about it in the bath.
> Anna. Shall I run it for you?
> Kate. (standing) No. I'll run it myself tonight
> Kate *slowly walks to the bedroom door, goes out, closes it.* Deeley *stands looking at* Anna *They both look at each other.* (Pinter 42)

Anna wants to run Kate a bath to do her a service and be close to her in this vulnerable and naked position. Starting the bath could perhaps imply more happening romantically or sexually once they were in the bathroom together.

Anna and Deeley go on to describe the process of towel-drying Kate in depth, which further displays the power and sex struggle in the play. As A.R. Braunmuller notes in, "A World of Words in Pinter's *Old Times*":

> Deeley and Anna compete for Kate and seek to dominate each other in the process. These two set pieces reveal, very theatrically, the play's competition (capping verses) and its sensuality (Anna and Deeley each drying the "moisture" which "collects on women's bodies" [p. 56]), but they finally lack the power and the comprehensiveness which the memories and the rememberings command" (Braunmuller 60).

There is an inherent power both members of a relationship hold, and they both have a certain level of control over one another in terms of linguistic and sexual power and desire. *Old Times* makes the battle for who holds this power quite evident, as seen through the competition between Anna and Deeley for Kate. They both crave her time, attention, and love, and they fight for it.

Anna's desire to have Kate to stay indoors with her is evident in the play:

> Anna: (Quietly) Don't let's go out tonight, don't let's go anywhere tonight, let's stay in. I'll cook something, you can wash your hair, you can relax, we'll put on some records.
> Kate: Oh, I don't know. We could go out.
> Anna: Why do you want to go out?
> Kate: We could walk across the park. (Pinter 39)

Anna reveals a desire to stay where there is a sense of order and, implicitly, domesticity, within the home. Perhaps Anna is a representation of a so-called masculine force trying to keep Kate inside where she is controllable. This could be a reference to the more dominant role men were believed to have in society versus female attachment to the home. It is possible that Anna thinks they should both stay inside because since they are women, and so they are aligned with duties indoors and domestic life rather than being strongly connected to society. Also, Anna steps into the role of cooking for Kate and wanting her to take care of and clean herself, looking out for her in the way a mother or wife would.

Another explanation could be that Anna wants Kate to stay inside with her because in a gay relationship, partners were often forced to hide their sexualities and romantic connections. This play was written during the early '70s, a time which was still heavily focused on hetereo-normativity in society, female submissiveness, and house wife behavior. This could be reflective of the freedom and ability to go outside as one pleases while in a hetero-normative relationship or marriage versus societal entrapment indoors out of shame and unacceptance in a gay relationship. If Kate were to explore things with Anna, their relationship would be confined to the home due to societal pressures. A queer interest in or relationship with Anna would force Kate to be seen as an outcast, and it would limit her ability to do certain things in society and force her to stay indoors. Indoors, they are free from judgment on the outside, and they can express themselves and any romantic interest they may have for one another. This could plausibly be why Anna is so desperate to get Kate to want to be inside and feel content with home life. It is possible that Kate is with Deeley, even if she may be queer, because he offers her the ability to do as she pleases. With Deeley, Kate is viewed as normal by society, avoiding the challenges and restrictions placed on gay people.

Deeley allows Kate outside to do and go as she pleases rather than trapping her indoor, as he often is

away for his travels:

> Anna: Is he away for long periods?
> Kate: I think, sometimes. Are you?
> Anna: You leave your wife for such long periods? How can you?
> Deeley: I have a lot of travelling in my job.
> Anna: (to Kate) I think I must come and keep you company when he's away. (Pinter 35)

Deeley's frequent traveling means that Kate can act on her own without answering to or having to please anyone. This contrasts with the stereotypical notion of straight married couples where the husband holds the dominant role in the household and has control over where his wife goes and what she does. In this relationship, Kate is free to do and go as she pleases. There is a freedom and ability to go outside whenever and wherever one wishes while in a hetero-normative relationship that differs from the societal norm of entrapment due to the shame and lack of acceptance in a gay relationship. Deeley and Kate have been married for a long time, and they are able to be "out" in society because of the conventional nature of their relationship. Kate does not have to hide from the world or feel scared to go outside when she presents herself as a straight woman.

Case Study: *The Homecoming*, by Harold Pinter

Another representation of sex and desire is seen in *The Homecoming*. In this play, Ruth, a woman who clearly knows the effect she has on men, stages a female rebellion against domesticity. As Pinter himself stated in an interview with Mel Gussow in *The New York Times*, "Ruth in *The Homecoming*—no one can tell her what to do. She is the nearest to a free woman that I've ever written—a free and independent mind"(quoted in Galens 206). Ruth is different from most other women in Pinter's plays because she is in complete control of the men around her. She uses what she knows about male expectations of women as a means to achieve power.

Early on in Peter Hall's 1973 film adaptation of the play, we see that Ruth is not one to listen to what she is told to do by the men around her. For instance, Teddy, her husband, asks her to come to bed:

> Teddy: Are you tired?
> Ruth: No.
> Teddy: Go to bed. I'll show you the room.
> Ruth: No, I don't want to. (Hall 23:35)

Teddy is trying to get Ruth (supposedly his wife, though she may not be) to come to bed with him for the night. Teddy remains insistent in trying to convince her to come to bed, as he does not want her to be up without him or to walk alone at night without him. Similarly to Anna's attempts with Kate, he is trying to keep her inside where she is controlled, domesticated, and safely in his bed where she is "his" for the night. Teddy perhaps wishes to take possession of Ruth by getting her in bed with him, since a conventional wife would usually be found sleeping with her husband. But Ruth says no.

Instead, Ruth wants to be free outside on her own, away from the domestic family home which belongs to Teddy, who states "The last thing I want is a breath of fresh air, why do you want a breath of fresh air?" Ruth replies, "I just do" (Hall 25:16). The camera then shifts to Teddy looking at Ruth walking away through the window with his hand to his mouth and a worried expression. This leaves the viewer wondering if he is concerned about her safety as she walks alone in the dark as a woman, or if he is just worried that she

will be sleeping in another man's bed that night. This thought must make him feel uncomfortable as he would ideally like her to be only his and to have full possession over her and her body and where she goes.

Instead of listening to Teddy and going to bed with him, Ruth shows that she is an independent person who will say no as she pleases and do as she wishes. When confronted with her "husband" and his desires, she holds her own. The husband is stereotypically thought to hold power and control over the wife and her choices and can maneuver her into submission. But Ruth insists on doing as she pleases, stepping out of the domestic space and into the bigger world. Another interesting aspect of the film is that, nearly each time the camera shifts to Ruth, it is from above, making her look smaller. This, along with her being seated in a chair, make her seem physically beneath and smaller than the man or men she is speaking to. This angle along with her smaller stature makes the fact that she goes against the norm of submissiveness stand out even more. Although she is physically daintier, weaker, and more feminine than the men of the play, she holds power over them, uses her femininity to her advantage, and is unafraid to stake her own claims, desires and opinions. Even when the men surround her and gang up on her, crowding her and speaking down to her, she remains calm, states her wants, and never shows weakness.

Ruth draws attention to her body as a way of exerting sexual power over the men: "Look at me. I…move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear…underwear… which moves with me…it…captures your attention" (Pinter 68-69). Ruth is obviously aware of the sexual power a woman can hold over a man and uses their attraction to her body to her advantage. She points out the simple ways in which her body moves that mesmerizes the men around her, making her capable of getting benefits out of the sexual allure she holds over them. Pinter evokes the idea of woman as "whore," paid to spend time with her "husband" and later on with the rest of his extended family. However, he complicates this idea by making Ruth a woman who is clearly strategizing how to use her body to get her way. Instead of depicting her as an archetype of a prostitute, who are often represented as mindless, Pinter makes Ruth an intelligent character who knows how men work and uses that knowledge to make deals in order to get her way. Ruth points out that as a woman, what she says does not matter to society: "My lips move. Why don't you restrict…your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant…than the words which come through them" (Pinter 69). Ruth knows that men view her as an object to be looked at rather than a person with anything valuable to say. She uses the fact that society treats women as bodies and sources of sexual gratification as the source of her power. Instead of trying to fight against the way in which society treats women as objects for the pleasure of men, Ruth leans into this notion.

Ruth finds her power through using the way society views women to her advantage, and she plays the role of the whore that has been assigned to her. In return, she seeks power as a reward for being a willing participant in this sexual fantasy. Men tend to sexualize all women, both madonnas and "whores", so by purposely sexualizing herself, she takes some control back from the men who would objectify her. As David Galens stated on his perspective of the play, "The whole family of men assumes that women are there to be used. Teddy sees Ruth as a mother and helpmate. Max and Lenny immediately assume she is a whore" (Galens 206). Ruth intentionally allows them to sexualize her because she is aware of the way men view her as a person who is meant to provide a service to them rather than a fully fleshed out human. So, she purposely draws attention to her body as a means of pleasing them to get her way.

The sexual power Ruth holds over the men of the family ends in her making demands in exchange for her services:

> Ruth: I'd need an awful lot. Otherwise I wouldn't be content.
> Lenny: You'd have everything.
> Ruth: I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses.

Lenny: Naturally. (Pinter 93).

Ruth has drawn attention to her body, touched, kissed and allured her way into getting a three bedroom apartment close to town that is completely her own. Ruth has played the patriarchy to her advantage and exploits the value they place on her body rather than her as a person.

Ruth's situation is reminiscent of modern day pornography and sex work, where some women make money because of the male fixation on sex and female bodies. While some women may choose this for themselves out of their own desires, these industries are still riddled with power imbalances and women often face violence, assault and mistreatment. Pinter's Ruth represents women who use their bodies and the male obsession with sex as a means of gaining money, power, or housing. However, Pinter does not show the consequences that women often have to face and the abuse they often endure by being in a position where their safety lies in the hands of men who view them as objects rather than people. While the play ends with Ruth holding power over all the men in the household, in reality, men often use their inherent strength and dominance over women as a means to force them into submissiveness and sex.

Conclusion

Harold Pinter and David Mamet show intriguing depictions of sex, gender, relationships, and queerness. They highlight the power dynamics and imbalances present within sexual relationships and show how words can be a mechanism to rebel against inequality and gain power. Both of these writers showcase the real power struggles present in sexual relationships because of societal expectations and gender roles, and in turn they reveal the mechanism's uses in an attempt to level the playing field.

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