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#MeToo Pinter & David Mamet's *Oleanna*.

Graham Saunders

Abstract: While reviews of David Mamet's last stage play, *Bitter Wheat* (2019) have dismissed it as a misjudged reaction, both to the Harvey Weinstein and #MeToo movement when it premiered in London, his earlier play, *Oleanna* (1992), had a more profound effect on debates around sexual politics in the early 1990s. This article looks at Harold Pinter's direction of the 1993 London premiere of *Oleanna*. Drawing closely on archival materials from the David Mamet, Harold Pinter and Royal Court archives, discussion will focus on Pinter's use of Mamet's rejected original ending that gives the character of Carol greater agency. Given Pinter's insistence that Carol's accusations of rape against her tutor have absolute legitimacy, the article also argues that this attitude offers a reassessment on how issues of sexual consent and assault can be interpreted in his own drama, especially when – as like Mamet – Pinter has been periodically criticized for misogyny.

Keywords: David Mamet; *Oleanna*; Harold Pinter; #MeToo; sexual assault

When the American actor and activist Alyssa Milano sent out a tweet on 15 October 2017 asking other women whether they had direct experience of being sexually harassed or assaulted, she, “opened the floodgates to an outpouring of testimony and witnessing ... that reverberated throughout social media” (Rudakoff 1). Christened #Metoo, what became noteworthy was the speed by which theatre institutions reacted directly. Within weeks of Milano's tweet, two articles in the *Guardian* newspaper reported inappropriate sexual behaviour by the actor Kevin Spacey during his time as artistic director of London's Old Vic theatre between 2004 and 2015 (Brown

and Weaver). Similar allegations were also made against Max Stafford-Clark, a former artistic director of the Royal Court (Topping)

One of the first to respond directly to the events associated with #MeToo via a new play was the American dramatist David Mamet. However, the London premiere of *Bitter Wheat* in June 2019 was widely seen as an ill-conceived response to the Harvey Weinstein affair and the #MeToo movement in general. Several reviews drew comparisons with past work, but only insofar how *Bitter Wheat* had fallen short in comparison to earlier plays such as *Speed the Plough* (1983) that had so brilliantly "anatomized power play between men and women" (Maxwell).

While *Bitter Wheat* might be seen a swift, yet flawed response to #Me Too – whether he knew it or not, Mamet had already written the urtext on the subject over twenty years before with *Oleanna* (1992), a play that at the time succeeded in hitting a collective nerve on both sides of the Atlantic around issues of sexual consent and gendered power relations *Oleanna's* American premiere was also directed by David Mamet, and for its London opening by Harold Pinter. Both productions were defined by the extraordinary audience reactions initiated during the second act when Carol, a young student, brings a charge of battery and rape against her tutor. Accounts of audience outrage range from the apocryphal – such as the group of Harvard professors standing up collectively at the end and booing during a preview performance in Boston Massachusetts, (*Oleanna*, Lxv), or the elderly woman attending a preview performance at the English spa town of Bath, who at the post-show discussion allegedly confessed, “I’m a very mild woman Mr [David] Suchet [the actor playing John] and I don’t know what it was but when you started to hit her [Carol] I nearly stood up shouted 'kill the bitch' and I find myself appalled by what I nearly did” (Lahr 119). Later, when the production moved to the Royal Court theatre in London, daily

show reports completed by the Company Stage Manager record other forms of audience dissent. For example, in one matinee performance on 20 November 1993, “There was a lot of laughing and cheering during the fight and a woman's voice shouted, 'shut up you bastard’”! (Ford), while on 15 January 1994 after the production had moved to the West End with a new cast, the report noted, “Applause as Mr [Dennis] Lawson 'kicked' Miss [Michelle] Fairley and some laughter” (Earle).

Mamet's writing of *Oleanna* had been prompted by events in the early 1990s, where gender politics played a significant part. These included the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas hearings over accusations of sexual assault; the fierce battles emanating from American university campuses over politically correct discourse and behaviour around race and gender and the publication of Susan Faludi's prescient warning in *Backlash* (1991), of imminent attacks by patriarchal forces against the gains made by feminism over the previous two decades.

Given the groundswell when #MeToo broke in 2017, this article partly sets out to reappraise David Mamet's *Oleanna* against a dominant view, summarized by Christine MacLeod of it being “perceived, publicized and reviewed almost exclusively as a manifestation of backlash sexual politics [... and] a work characterised by outrage and hostility toward the agenda of contemporary feminism” (MacLeod 199). Instead, I want to argue that such views were in no small way shaped by Mamet's decision to change the ending shortly into the run of its first American production and remains in the published version of the play text. However, Harold Pinter's insistence on using Mamet's original ending when invited to direct the first London production, offers a radically different interpretation. It challenges accusations of *Oleanna* as either a reactionary tirade about the dangers of political correctness, or a play about a confused young woman seeking revenge against her patronizing, but well-meaning lecturer. Instead,

Pinter's direction of *Oleanna* offered a critique on how systems of male privilege operate. He also made it clear in interviews that Carol's accusation of attempted rape was entirely justified. By doing so, the London production not only offered a fresh insight into how sexual politics operated in Mamet's *Oleanna*, but also by implication how the same processes manifest in Pinter's drama, and as such offered a corrective to periodic accusations that it demonstrated "simultaneous attraction to and rage at women" (Watt 173).

Examples of this in Pinter's work are numerous and range from Robert's offhand admission in *Betrayal* (1978) that he sometimes beats his wife Emma, simply compelled by 'the old itch' (Pinter 2005, 33). Elsewhere in *A Night Out* (1960), *Night School* (1960) and *Tea Party* (1965), female characters are either largely confined to the domestic realm, or in the case of Ruth in *The Homecoming* (1965) and Sarah in *The Lover* (1963) discover that this confinement also comes with further expectations of sexual duties. Even women such as Stella in *The Collection* and Emma in *Betrayal* are only granted partial autonomy through their careers, and still mainly appear within domestic settings – Stella on a sofa with a white Persian kitten (Pinter, *Plays 2* 127) and Emma in the kitchen of the Kilburn love nest 'wearing an apron' and making stew for her lover Jerry (Pinter, *Plays 4* 101). It is through examples such as these that Andrew Wyllie, with some justification expresses surprise that Pinter has been "freed from any accusation of misogyny to a quite exceptional degree" (89). The reason for this lies in no small part through an influential cohort of female / feminist academics that includes Ruby Cohn, Katherine H. Burkman, Elin Diamond, Ann C. Hall, Susan Hollis-Merritt, Judith Roof and Elizabeth Sakellariadou, who have formed something of a protective critical cordon around Pinter that has lasted for several decades.

However, under the exposure of #MeToo, Pinter has proved less immune to criticism. One of the most significant recent British plays that addresses gender injustices within the hierarchies and practices of British theatre has been Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018). Written from the perspective of a young female dramatist who wants to cleanse the stage, amongst its targets are Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard whose work is summarily dismissed as “Two people, you and me, standing on stage, intellectual back-and-forth. [...] dialectic, one oppressing the other, it's wordy, it's Stoppard, it's Pinter, it's power struggle, it's patriarchy” (67).

A Tale of Two Endings

In his biography of Harold Pinter, Michael Billington misrepresents the disagreement between Mamet and Pinter over the ending of *Oleanna* as “a sad fracas” (352). However, it is true that their relationship became strained during the rehearsals for *Oleanna* due to Pinter's insistence on retaining the original ending that had been performed during previews at Cambridge Massachusetts on May 1992 before opening at the Orpheum Theatre in New York that October. During this period, Mamet's dissatisfaction with the original ending was noted by Leslie Kane who recalls witnessing the dramatist continually rewriting during final rehearsals prior to New York (Kane 183)

Mamet's changes to the final scene were purportedly made after his wife, Rebecca Pidgeon, who played the role of Carol, became subject to verbal abuse from the audience and Mamet feared for her safety (*Oleanna*, Lxv). This story, even if true, made no difference to the vituperation she was subjected to throughout her time in the role. Ira Nadel provides an alternative and more plausible explanation that in order for John to express his pent-up anger

more effectively in the final scene, the physical fight between the pair needed to be extended, which necessitated cutting Carol's speech (123). However, one reviewer's comment comes closest to explaining why Mamet originally felt the need to make changes, and why Pinter was determined to reinstate the original ending. The review described how John, during one of the early American performances when the original ending was still being used, resembled one of the "broken spiritual figures in anti-communist plays by Pinter and Havel" (*David Mamet's Oleanna* 227). Here, the reviewer is likely to be referring to either *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) or *Party Time* (1991). While inaccurate to refer to them as anti-communist plays, the figure of the tortured prisoner is common to them all. With this in mind, Pinter himself might also have recognized something of his own work in the original ending, which seemed to both echo, and at the same time reverse, the victim / torturer relationship, whereby John finally recognizes and confesses his failings to Carol.

At this point it is worth comparing the two endings. Contained in David Mamet's papers held at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas and the Harold Pinter archive at the British Library is a copy of the script with its original ending. The point where it differs from the published version comes immediately after Carol's tutor physically attacks her. In the published version following the attack, the play ends in the following way:

[Carol] cowers on the floor below him. Pause. He looks down at her. He lowers the chair. [John] moves to his desk and arranges the papers on it. Pause. He looks over at her.

...well...

Pause. She looks at him.

Carol Yes, that's right.

She looks away from him and lowers her head. To herself.

...yes. That's right. (*Plays*:4 52).

However, in the original ending, John immediately apologizes after he attacks her. Carol quickly recovers her composure and continues to read out the demands made by her group and the statement that John is to make publicly:

JOHN (PAUSE) Oh my God (PAUSE) (SHE GETS UP) Oh. My god. Oh Lord, forgive me. I didn't mean what I did. I didn't mean what I said to you
CAROL (PAUSE)... I have a list.
JOHN... I'm sorry
CAROL Don't worry about me. I'm alright (SHE HANDS IT TO HIM)
JOHN How did this happen...?
CAROL ...and we have a statement (SHE HANDS IT TO HIM)
JOHN What?
CAROL We need you to sign and deliver this statement (PAUSE)
JOHN ... to deliver
CAROL In front of the school. That's right.
JOHN I don't understand
CAROL ...you can't be granted tenure, of course, but we would consider...
JOHN I don't understand.
CAROL ...provisional employment
JOHN Yes, but...
CAROL Yes? What? Tell me.
JOHN What happened today?
CAROL What happened today, listen to me: what happened today is no worse than what happens every day. Do you see?
JOHN...yes
CAROL No. But you will. (PAUSE). Read it. (HE READS THE STATEMENT)
JOHN 'For sexual harassment and misconduct'
CAROL Go on.
JOHN 'For injustice to my students, and the student body. I have come to plead for your forgiveness.' But what happened today...?
CAROL Read it
JOHN 'As I see that I have failed' (PAUSE)... 'In my responsibilities...'
CAROL Yes. That's right.
JOHN ... 'to the young'
CAROL Say it again.
JOHN 'That I have failed in my responsibilities to the young'
(Mamet, Script copy of *Oleanna* 28 April, 1991).

Correspondence in the Harold Pinter archive relating to *Oleanna* starts from November 1992, where plans are discussed for a production at London's Royal Court the following year. John Malkovich, who was subsequently to star in *Bitter Wheat*, was first choice for the role of John in

the London production. In a letter dated 2 November the Royal Court's newly appointed Artistic Director Stephen Daldry tells Pinter that they are trying to get Malkovich's agent to confirm his availability for the following year (Daldry). When this proved not possible, his replacement was found in David Suchet – an actor now most well known for playing the role of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot in a long running UK television series. For the role of Carol, Lia Williams, then a relative newcomer, was chosen from a shortlist that included Catherine Zeta Jones (Pinter, Letter to Lisa Makin).¹ On 1 March 1993 Pinter invited Mamet to see him performing as Hirst in a production of his own play *No Man's Land* (1975) at the Almeida Theatre (Pinter, Letter to David Mamet), where afterwards they discussed the choice of actors and designer.

Ira Nadel maintains that Pinter was sent the original ending of *Oleanna* by mistake (123), and archival correspondence appears to confirm that Pinter was unaware about the new ending. However, several days later, Pinter received a letter from Mamet, written from the Connaught Hotel in Mayfair, expressing second thoughts about Pinter using the original ending. The reasons given are the awkwardness Mamet envisages of returning to London in June, and on still disliking the ending, the ensuing disruption that would cause to the production. Moreover, Mamet recognizes that if he gives approval, he would then face the dilemma of having a play with two possible endings (Mamet, Letter to Harold Pinter 19 April 1993). Pinter copied Mamet's portion of the letter and sent it to David Suchet, Stephen Daldry and Associate Director Max Stafford Clark, but at this point does not comment on Mamet's decision, except to say that he will be writing to him shortly and encloses a copy of the new ending (Pinter, Letter to David Suchet, 22 April 1993).

Pinter's written response to Mamet (which he also copies to the *Oleanna* cast, Daldry and Stafford-Clark) is highly significant, expressing as it does both his certainty about the superiority

Commented [RM1]: I did not see anything from the Pinter estate giving you permission to use this content.

Commented [GS2R1]: It's true that the Pinter estate does not allow direct quotation from correspondence - even our Harold Pinter: Histories & Legacies' project which had Antonia Fraser and Judy Daish on our steering committee emphasised this. However, here I am not quoting directly from the correspondence, but rather reporting on content. This is no more than William Baker, Stephen Gale and Susan Hollis Merritt have already done in their work. I think this is useful contextual information which should be included. If we don't make use of the Pinter archive, while respecting the state's edict about quoting directly from correspondence, then this has serious repercussions on the future of Pinter scholarship.

of the original ending and how it offers the possibility of change for both Carol and other disenfranchised groups “who suffer what I suffer” (*Oleanna* 43). In the letter, Pinter expresses surprise at the existence of the revised ending and much prefers the original ending, which he describes as “dramatic ice,” where Carol “goes straight for the throat.”² The letter concludes with Pinter asking Mamet to let him rehearse the play with the original ending and then show it to him when he visits London that June (Pinter, Letter to David Mamet 26 April 1993).

Mamet's response demonstrates something of his regard for Pinter's standing - both as a literary influence and as a mentor. ~~It has been~~ Critics have pointed out that ~~from early on - from~~ early in Mamet's writing, ~~- demonstrated noting~~ similarities in rhythm and syntax, together with a shared preoccupation regarding male friendship and rivalry - often over a woman (*David Mamet's Oleanna* 29-30). Mamet also spoke about Pinter's early sketches and plays such as *The Homecoming* (1965), which led him to become a writer (*Oleanna* Lxi). In turn, Pinter later became a champion for Mamet's work, most notably using his influence as an associate director at London's National Theatre to lobby for the premiere of *Glengarry Glenross* (1983) to take place there. In response, Mamet dedicated the play to Pinter. Mamet's obeisance to Pinter also perhaps indicates a shrewd awareness that dissent could lead to ex-communication. When asked about their relationship less than a year after *Oleanna* had ended in London, Mamet alludes to Pinter's five years of estrangement from the director Peter Hall, following the publication of Hall's diaries, which had discussed the breakdown of Pinter's first marriage and his affair and later second marriage to Lady Antonia Fraser. Mamet concludes by saying, “So, if you think I'm going to say anything about Harold Pinter you're crazy” (Rose 173). The same note of caution towards Pinter appears in Mamet's brief reply by fax, regarding the ending of *Oleanna* where he appears to acquiesce over the use of the original ending (Fax to Harold Pinter 27 April 1993).

Commented [RM3]: This is confusing. Could you rephrase. Also, who are these critics? I take you to mean that critics pointed out a similarity between Pinter and Mamet, reflected in each's use of rhythm and syntax, along with their preoccupation with male friendship and rivalry as often mediated by women. This seems like something you should cite, however, if this is something that critics pointed out or discuss.

Commented [GS4R3]: I've revised this sentence.

The matter appeared to be settled and rehearsals used the original ending. However, Mamet was only prepared to give way so far. Copies of the play text with the revised ending were sold at the Royal Court theatre during the production, but Pinter wanted each copy to have a slip of paper inserted with the original ending he was now using. Here, Mamet refused outright to grant permission, which in turn led to a strong letter of rebuke from Pinter, where he again passionately advocates the choice of the original ending which he describes as “superb – totally effective and persuasive and that your instincts were right in the first place.” Pinter also attempts some emotional blackmail, reminding Mamet of his championship of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, adding, “You trusted my judgment then and I believe you should trust it now.” Pinter ends the letter in a petulant flourish, saying that if Mamet refuses to grant permission he will ask for the play to be withdrawn from sale in the theatre. (Fax to David Mamet, 30 June 1993).

Mamet responds with two faxes, both on the same day. In the first, Mamet says that he only ever agreed to the use of the original ending out of the respect he holds for Pinter, and something he would not consider doing for anyone else. However, he points out that with the prestige and authority associated with Pinter's production comes the risk of emboldening other directors to choose either version of the ending. In the second fax, Mamet calls Pinter's bluff, and refuses permission for the original ending to be included in the published play, adding that he is quite prepared for Pinter to remove all copies for sale in the theatre lobby. However, there are conciliatory words in the first fax, with Mamet sending his thoughts to the cast and the performance that night (Fax to Harold Pinter, 30 June 1993).

One playwright contemporary who came to a partial defence of Mamet's view was Arnold Wesker. Pinter discussed the matter over the telephone with Wesker, who followed up their conversation with a letter:

Thank you for sharing that information about the Mamet play with me. I was intrigued. And on reflection – confused. You are absolutely right to believe that the writer’s job is not to do what the audience wants him to do, and there is no doubt in my mind that his original ending is the superior one. The confusion arises in me because although I agree with you about the ending, to have gone against Mamet’s wishes raises grave implications. I think about the quote I often use of you – stirring and justified- outburst over "Old Times" in Rome: *Let me remind you that a play is not a public property. It belongs to its author under the international law of copyright.*³

I would like to think that had I been Mamet I would have been persuaded of your view of my original intention, but had I not been and had I felt strongly enough I might have taken out a court injunction to stop the play opening.

What would *you* have done had someone in England had done the same...

I suppose part of the answer must be that if Mamet cared sufficiently about the ending he'd have made absolutely certain you were in possession of the text he'd sanctioned. A production of [Wesker's play] *The Kitchen* had to be cancelled half-way through rehearsals in Athens because they'd started without asking me and I had made changes to the text after my production of it in the States. I didn't want the old version performed.

It sounds as though Mamet was being careless. Surprising. Or else he secretly suspected his original ending was the right one and he was ashamed to have been bullied into surrendering it.

What a difficult moral quandary. I'm glad I didn't have to face it
(Letter to Harold Pinter 12 August, 1993).

Given Pinter's fierce insistence on absolute fidelity from actors and directors to his own play texts, Wesker's reminder is pertinent. However, in his reply, Pinter points out that the major difference with *Oleanna* is that Mamet had already given his permission, albeit reluctantly, to use the original ending, and he agrees with Wesker's assessment that secretly Mamet believed the original ending to be superior, but for whatever reasons had felt the need to revise it (Letter to Arnold Wesker 11 August 1993).

Pinter's #MeToo *Oleanna*

On first hearing that Harold Pinter was to direct the London premiere of *Oleanna*, Katherine Burkman expressed disappointment. While not denying that the characters in Pinter's plays express misogynistic sentiments, Burkman interpreted this as a canker that damaged perpetrators and victims alike. By contrast, Mamet was someone "helplessly caught in the web of misogyny he [has] wove[n] into [his] dramas and films" (27). *Oleanna* simply continued this process. By choosing to direct the play, Burkman feared Pinter might expose himself to the same accusation and become guilty by association.

For Mamet, *Oleanna* is "a tragedy about power" (Kane, 'Mamet in Conversation' 125). In comparing it to Aristotelian tragedy, Mamet notes John's *hubris*, leading to a reversal of fortune and finally a recognition of his error – but he also goes much further in the analogy – even to comparing the periodic interruptions from the office telephone functioning as a chorus (*Oleanna* x-xii). While such comparisons with classical tragedy are not wholly convincing, Mamet's comments about *Oleanna* being "a tragedy about power" are more credible and find agreement from the theatre critic John Peter, who, after seeing the play in New York, noted that while chiefly interpreted as a condemnation of political correctness, the play was more concerned with power relations: "To Carol, John represents betrayal power; he is power" (742). Likewise in Pinter's drama, where the struggle for power between his characters is paramount, it is not difficult to see why *Oleanna* appealed to him. In one interview, Pinter underscored his directorial approach to Mamet's play: "I want to get the arguments as clear as possible. What she's doing [Carol] is a truly revolutionary thing, challenging a value system that no matter how liberal, is based on a male system" (Grant).

Commented [RM5]: I am not sure that I made this sentence any better. Consider rephrasing.

Commented [GS6R5]: I've rephrased. See what you think.

Commented [RM7]: Is this right? Does not make sense. Please look at source material to ensure the language is right. If not, use *sic* to signify error.

Commented [GS8R7]: Revised

Commented [RM9]: Appealed to what or whom? Pinter?

Commented [GS10R9]: Yes, Pinter. I have revised for clarity.

Pinter's view that Carol is an iconoclastic figure found accord in some quarters. Thomas E. Porter observes that "She [Carol]...mutated from bewildered student to confident accuser, overturning hierarchies, conjuring surprises" (24). By the end, Carol has challenged everything John stands for – his assumption at being granted tenure; the new home in a more affluent neighbourhood; private schooling for his son; the language and conduct he displays towards his students and even his choice of taught texts. In Pinter's production, Carol represents disenfranchised groups within the university and wins a small victory for those subjected on a daily basis to the powers that can grant or remove "that same dream of security...by say, one low grade that keeps us out of graduate school; by one, say, capricious or inventive answer on our parts, which perhaps you [John] don't find amusing" (46). Under Pinter's direction, the play reverses this pre-existing power dynamic although not in the sense of classical tragedy that Mamet supposes, with a heroic but flawed male protagonist. As Carol says towards the end of the play: "Why do you hate me? Because you think me wrong? No. Because I have, you think, power over you.... It is the power that you hate. So deeply that any atmosphere of free discussion is impossible" (45).

In truth, it is Carol's threat to institutional power structures, rather than her charge of attempted rape, that led to such extreme reactions among critics and audiences and it is not difficult to see why. In his excoriating book *Helping Themselves: The Left-Wing Middle Classes in Theatre and the Arts*, the playwright Gregory Motton writes disparagingly about the likes of David Hare and Howard Brenton in the 1970s and 1980s, who on receiving the National Theatre's full resources wrote, 'truistic and rather pointless political plays to an audience who may well have felt better for the experience, but who could be seen stepping haughtily over the beggars outside, on their way back to the Tory suburbs. (I know I used to watch them)' (68). Ian

Stuart, the editor of *Theatre Record*, expresses a similar sentiment when, after seeing Leo Butler's play *Redundant* (2001) at the Royal Court, perplexingly asked "what change are we and all the chardonnay-clutching Sloane squares going to achieve by looking at it," before concluding that its main effect was "sending us home mighty glad we don't live off crack in a tip in Sheffield" (1190). This same constituency who attended *Oleanna* at the Royal Court, if Motton and Stuart are to be believed, would in all likelihood have shared the same values and self-interests that John espouses in *Oleanna*. When the representatives of those interests become subject to direct attack they strike back vociferously. As Marc Silverstein perceptively observes, the collective instinct that led sections of the audience to applaud and cheer when John physically attacks Carol comes not from any sense of misogynistic pleasure, but a recognition that John as their representative defends their interests, including "the institutions (the family and the university) ... *Oleanna* attaches a name and a face to this enemy within – the enemy who must be prevented through the use of violence if necessary, from contaminating the community" (13). Pinter's production seemed to recognize the threat Carol posed to this collective sense of entitlement, and it was these feelings that Pinter wanted audiences to confront. In one interview, he sets out the problem succinctly: "I find it striking how the male reaction at the climax has sometimes been total fury and delight, because they are actively cheering a woman almost being kicked to death" (Grant). There is some evidence to support the view that Pinter successfully justified Carol's right to speak truth to power by the end of the play. For example, Peter M. Lewis saw it "as an expression of patriarchal and institutional power" (746); elsewhere, in a letter congratulating Pinter, the actor Jeremy Irons not only observes that Pinter's direction has considerably slowed the rapid Mametian dialogue exchanges to beneficial effect, but also successfully altered his opinions of *Oleanna*. Before, Irons had considered it to be an anti-

feminist play, but Pinter's production caused him to undergo a complete reassessment (Letter to Harold Pinter 17 July, 1993).

However, John's acknowledgement of his wrongdoings, articulated in the original ending, demonstrates a problem that Pinter must have encountered during rehearsals: namely, Mamet's construction of the narrative. By making the audience privy to each of their meetings, Carol's accusation of attempted rape and battery against John becomes easy to dispute. Keeping with Mamet's interpretation of *Oleanna* as a modern tragedy, action hinged on audiences perceiving John as a well-meaning, if misguided, figure brought low by a vindictive and vengeful student. This perhaps explains Mamet's rejection of his original ending as it contradicts the tragic impulse that he wanted audiences to recognize. As Brenda Murphy observes, the revised ending, which shows Carol cowering under John's desk, "is an image of defeat, not of triumph [and] indicates that Carol's empowerment through the feminist language of her Group has been an illusion" (135). Under Pinter's direction, the incorporation of the original ending completes this reversal: Carol emerges from under the desk after the assault, recovers, and proceeds to force John to acknowledge that he has "failed in my responsibilities to the young" (Mamet, Script copy of *Oleanna*, 28 April, 1991). Ira Nadel maintains that despite Mamet's grudging permission for Pinter to use the original ending, his ultimate reason for rejecting it was "because he believed more strongly that the accuser should not be the sole judge of a person's action" (123). And in one review of the Royal Court production, the theatre critic John Peter expressed a preference for the revised ending that he had first seen in New York "which left both characters humiliated [and] was much harder to take." (742). On the contrary, Pinter's production, with its "brutally neat" ending where "Ts are crossed and Is are dotted," left Peter

Commented [RM11]: Word choice. Could probably find a better way to phrase this.

Commented [GS12R11]: I like 'brought low' and would like to keep it.

feeling ~~as though the production dictated the play's lesson to him, "I do not want the lesson read to me"~~ (742).

Commented [RM13]: Feel free to amend, but in its current form the quotation read awkwardly.

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Pinter's preference for the original ending was perhaps also motivated by another thematic strand that runs throughout *Oleanna*. The play makes this explicit when Carol explains why she and her group bring charges against John: "You think I want 'revenge'. I don't want revenge. I WANT UNDERSTANDING" (47). Ira Nadel believes that the incorporation of the original ending in Pinter's production successfully illustrates how "verbal empowerment counters the physical violence" (122), which the production sustained when we see John finally acknowledges his complicity in upholding repressive power structures. The original ending also allows a reappraisal of Carol's changing beliefs and value systems, where like a contemporary Nora Helmer from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), she slowly emerges from each tutorial with an understanding of how patriarchy operates. She comes to realize that John protects his own position, denying others the opportunities for personal and social attainment; moreover, he paradoxically shows contempt for the very same systems that maintain his privileged status. This leads to Carol's accusation, "You believe *not* in 'freedom of thought,' but in an elitist, in a protected hierarchy which rewards you And you mock and exploit the system which pays your rent." (44). Up until then, Carol feels powerless, and this is perhaps what comes through in Lia Williams recollection that during rehearsals Pinter commented, "you've been beaten up, I'm hurt, but nevertheless you're going to make this statement" (Gussow 148). However, elsewhere Pinter's comment, "what happens in the last five minutes the audience are absolutely silent. Lia has really triumphed" (Gussow 149) - is more disputable. As Jill E. Silvius perceptively observes, "the multiple endings confirm the irreconcilability of various viewpoints on power in *Oleanna*" (22). John's recantation, reminiscent of protagonists in Brecht's *Galileo* (1943) and

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), are also the representatives of knowledge or truth who are persecuted by repressive forces. This was clearly in Wesker's mind in a copy of a passage he makes available to Pinter from a separate letter written to Mamet on the subject of *Oleanna*:

I'll go out on a limb and say that for me the play was bigger than the contemporary issue of p.c. [political correctness] The student personified all the Lilliputian mentalities who, since Adam, with their disturbing inferiority complexes, have brought down the name of God, equality, all manner of 'isms and 'ologies, or those they feared were cleverer, more talented, more beautiful or startling different in anyway whatsoever. They were around during the inquisition, the French Revolution, the Soviet Union after the early years; they held meetings to condemn and send their professors into the fields during the Chinese Cultural Revolution; they stood round the burning of books by the Nazis and were certainly gleeful to watch the Jews inhale gas; and they've banded together in various Muslim countries demanding the death of a writer called Salman Rushdie (Letter to Harold Pinter 12 August, 1993).

Reminiscent of Wesker's assessment, Brenda Murphy describes how the defeated John in Pinter's production resembles someone "reading a McCarthyist confession" (134), while Ira Nadel sees the ending as a vindication of "female triumph and male guilt" (125). Collectively, such views suggest a resistance to Pinter's interpretation of *Oleanna*.

Pinter's production was also arguably further undermined by the release of Michael Winner's film *Dirty Weekend* (1993), which came out in the same month that *Oleanna* previewed. The film also starred Lia Williams, who in this adaptation of Helen Zahavi's novel, plays Bella, a young woman who, after being sexually menaced by a neighbour, embarks on a murderous spree against him and six other men. Parallels between Pinter's assessment of Carol being a "true revolutionary" are also applicable to Bella, whose actions are set against a background of toxic masculinity. For example, in one scene an elderly female vagrant is burnt to death by a gang of men. The film attracted a great deal of press attention (not least for the opportunity it afforded of showing accompanying pictures of Lia Williams in various states of undress), but its simultaneous release with the London production of *Oleanna* led to a conflation,

where both film and play became reduced in the media to simple revenge dramas. (Sarler; Schulman; Smith)

'What is that but Rape; I Swear to God'

Another notable aspect of Pinter's direction concerned Carol's accusation of rape. In an interview, Lia Williams recalls Pinter explaining to her that in Act Two, John's attempt to prevent Carol leaving his office is "an invasion of your space, your territory, therefore it's rape." Williams also spoke about how during the production she'd "get letters from women and have conversations with women who would say....'it wasn't invited or asked for. Absolutely it's rape'" (*Oleanna*, Li). For a dramatist where the semantics of language are often ambiguous, Pinter's response is significant, not only in relation to *Oleanna*, but to the ways sexual assault is depicted in his own plays.

Yet, critics and audiences at the time generally responded sceptically to Carol's accusation of rape. For example, Steven Price's chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* believed that justification for Carol's complaints "get lost amidst accusations of rape that are so ridiculous, not least in her abuse of language, as to make her appear unhinged" (165). The reason for this prevailing interpretation again comes from Mamet's dramatic construction: by making the audience privy to every meeting between Carol and John, rape, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "Originally and chiefly: the act or crime, committed by a man, of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse with him against her will, esp. by means of threats or violence" (OED Online), has clearly not taken place. As a result, Carol's accusation is interpreted as false.

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Despite Pinter's own understanding of the term, his cast were more divided over the issue. In one interview, David Suchet commented, "No way is that rape. On the simplest level she [Carol] is lying and she's on her way to getting him [John] destroyed," whereas Lia Williams, concurred with Pinter: "Her accusation is absolutely one hundred per cent legitimate [...] Putting his hand on her shoulder is not a licence for him to take" (Harris). With the actors expressing such divergent views in public, it is not surprising that Pinter reportedly forbade them from giving interviews (Church). Nevertheless, Lia Williams's comment about John's presumption of ownership over Carol's body comes across in the video recording of the Royal Court production, where at one point John tries to console Carol by taking her hand which is resting on her leg. This unscripted moment in performance lasts for some time before John finally removes his hand,⁴ and lends credence to Carol's accusation that John exploits what she calls his "paternal prerogative." However, it is her next line, "what is that but rape; I swear to God" (44) that so angered some audiences. Although Carol quickly modifies her statement to 'attempted rape' (51) [my italics], as Thomas E. Porter argues, John's actions interpreted through "feminist eyes raises the possibility of rape and results in her cries for help" (24). This is especially so, when earlier in the play John tried to prevent her from leaving his office.

It is Carol's understanding of rape ("I was leaving this office, you 'pressed' yourself into me. You 'pressed' your body into me" (51)) that led *Oleanna* to become such a widely discussed case-study in wider debates concerning sexual consent. Motivated perhaps by several high profile cases at the time where women had falsely claimed charges of rape against men, Christa D'Souza article in *The Sunday Times* blamed the doctrine of political correctness for blurring definitions by which the term rape had **formerly been understood** and imagines a dystopian future "where it will be illegal to root for anything *but* the dippy student in re-runs of *Oleanna*"

Commented [RM17]: I am not really sure what you mean by formerly understood...how was it previously understood and how did this matter change it?

Commented [GS18R17]: I've looked at this again and think the meaning is clear i.e.. rape as physical act of sexual violence through coitus against Carol's accusation of rape coming from John's action of pressing his body into her when she is attempting to leave his office. Earlier I give the dictionary definition of rape as a way of comparison.

(D'Souza). However, Matthew Parris, writing in the same newspaper, took a more measured view, commenting, "If we men were vulnerable when drunk in the way that women are, then we might not be so cavalier about blame and rather touchier about what amounts to consent" (Parris).

As mentioned, issues of sexual consent and rape are recurring issues in Pinter's work. For instance, towards the end of *The Birthday Party* (1958) when Lulu and Goldberg meet again the following morning after having spent the night spent together (58), we might assume that the liaison was consensual, having witnessed Lulu's attraction to Goldberg the night before at Stanley's party ("You're the dead image of the first man I ever loved" (55). Yet, this becomes increasingly questionable when Lulu recounts how Goldberg came to her room uninvited with a mysterious briefcase and then, "made use of me by cunning when my defences were down". However, Lulu's accusation becomes muddled by Goldberg's retort, "who took them down"? He then reminds Lulu, "Who opened the briefcase, me or you"? to which Lulu does not respond (*Plays I*, 74). These exchanges also lose their sinister tone by being conducted in what Andrew Wyllie calls a "parody [of] the language of trash melodrama [...that] expose[s] the blatant insincerity of both Goldberg and Lulu" (106). Consequently, lines such as Lulu's, "You quenched your ugly thirst. You taught me things a girl shouldn't know before she's been married three times!" (74), produce a comic effect that blurs underlying anxieties over consent or sexual abuse.

At times, Pinter's directorial approach to *Oleanna* repeats some of the same confusions and contradictions towards the end of *The Birthday Party*, particularly concerning characters' intention, such as his decision to combine John's paternalistic interest in Carol with an implied sexual attraction. The actor David Suchet, who played John, concurred with this approach,

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likening the relationship between John and Carol to the sexual tension "that seems to exist between fathers and daughters" (Grant). This may have been a contributory reason as to why

Katherine Burkman, while conceding that the London production had gone some way towards a recalibration, still believed *Oleanna* to be firmly weighted towards seeing Carol as the aggressor and John as the wronged victim (79).

However, when it comes to his own plays, Pinter is less ambiguous about the issue of rape. For example, in *The Homecoming*, Lenny and Joey's account of an encounter with two women on a bomb site is redolent with threat. The women's two (presumably male) escorts are told "to go away...and then we.... got the girls out of the car....and there in the rubblewe had them" (75). Lenny then talks about the woman with Joey at first refusing sex unless he uses a contraceptive: "Yes you will, says Joey, never mind about the contraceptive protection" (76). By the time of *One for the Road*, we encounter a political regime that sanctions systemized rape of its enemies. When the interrogator, Nicolas, asks his prisoner, Gila, how many times she has been raped, she cannot remember (243). If we consider how the issue of rape and sexual assault between *The Birthday Party* and *One for the Road* shifts from nonchalance and ambiguity to uncompromising brutality it becomes easier to understand why Pinter made such an uncompromising defence of Carol's charge of rape against her tutor in *Oleanna*.

It should also be remembered that earlier in his parallel career as a screenwriter, Pinter explored some of the same issues concerning sexual misconduct and the abuse of power between a tutor and his student in his 1965 screen adaptation of Nicholas Mosley's novel *Accident*. In the film, Stephen, an Oxford don, takes advantage of an Austrian student, Anna, while she is recovering from a car accident outside his home. In an earlier flashback scene, Stephen meets one of his students William, who later becomes engaged to Anna. After expressing his romantic

Commented [RM22]: Seriously? He said that?

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interest in Anna, William asks Stephen his opinion of her. In a response like that of John in *Oleanna*, Stephen displays paternalistic concern:

WILLIAM
I'd like to know what you think of her [Anna] , that's all
STEPHEN
You realize I'm her tutor?
WILLIAM
Naturally. I also realize you're my tutor.
STEPHEN
And that being her tutor, her moral welfare must be my first consideration
WILLIAM
Ah. You mean besides being her tutor you are also her protector.
STEPHEN
I mean that I refuse to countenance or encourage male lust as directed against any of my women students.
WILLIAM
Well said.
STEPHEN
Thank you (358)

This exchange, with Stephen's self-regarding espousal of his responsibilities as an educator and mentor are highly reminiscent of John's blandishments in *Oleanna*. In *Accident* these exchanges are shot through with dramatic irony as they come in a flashback sequence prior to Stephen taking sexual advantage of Anna after the car accident.

Conclusion

In a parallel career as director, with over thirty plays to his credit, Pinter's most controversial production is *Oleanna*. From his insistence on retaining Mamet's original ending, to deliberately attempting to steer away from the hysteria that had surrounded its American premiere, Pinter set out to reclaim this much misunderstood play. For him, Carol is not a "grotesque monster or a cripple, but a normal young girl who is complicated and serious and vulnerable, and pretty ruthless when she gets going. We have to find the wholeness of this girl." (Grant).

Although Daniel Rosenthal has called *Oleanna* "absolutely a product of its times" (*Oleanna*, xxvii), its 2021 revival in London's West End - significantly amongst one of the first production to be staged after COVID - marketed itself as "David Mamet's #MeToo play" as well as highlighting its female director, Lucy Bailey. After seeing the production, Aleks Sierz concluded that in the intervening years audience sympathies had had now switched entirely in favour of Carol rather than John (Sierz). Bailey also spoke about how she endeavoured "to balance out the power" (Akbar), but it could be argued that this began with Pinter's 1993 production.

As a coda, reports of a lasting rift between Pinter and Mamet over the ending of *Oleanna* are much exaggerated. In October 1993, Pinter sent Mamet one of his poems during *Oleanna's* transfer from the Royal Court to the Duke of York's Theatre in the West End. In the accompanying letter, he reports that *Oleanna* is doing as well and that his new play *Moonlight* will be joining it in the West End the following month (Letter to Mamet 5 October 1993). In 1998 the Heinz Awards contacted Pinter to serve as a referee for Mamet's nomination to receive a \$250,000 prize that acknowledged his contribution to the Arts and Humanities. Here, Pinter gives a characteristically brief and bluff response that expressed mystification at being approached since Mamet's standing as a dramatist of world repute was already assured (Fax to Lauren Kintner).⁵ In February 2000, Mamet directed Pinter in a film version of Samuel Beckett's play *Catastrophe* (1982) in the role of "Director" with Rebecca Pidgeon as "Assistant." Later that September, Mamet requested whether Pinter would consider directing his new play - not named, but almost certainly *Boston Marriage* (1999). Despite admiring its humour and poignancy, Pinter declines the invitation, citing both a screenplay (his adaptation of *King Lear*)

that he is about to start⁶ that will take him out of circulation for the next six to nine months as well as his advancing age (Fax to Mamet 20 September 2000).

That Pinter's production of *Oleanna* did not entirely succeed in its aims is perhaps beside the point: its attempt to accentuate Carol's resistance to patriarchal structures of power distinguishes it as a drama that in retrospect was far ahead of its time. Pinter's conception of *Oleanna* through his direction also allows us to reinterpret his own body of work afresh in terms of its treatment of sexual consent. In the age of #MeToo, this has never been more timely or more welcome.

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Notes

¹ Other names include Annabelle Apsion, Jennifer Ehle, Katrina Levon, Maggie O’Neill, Emily Raymond, Joanna Roth, Helen Schlesinger, Saira Todd and Saskia Wickham. Despite wishing to audition the group, a strong suggestion comes at the end of Pinter’s letter that Lia Williams was strongly favoured by his insistence that she be included on the short-list.

² In the original draft of the letter Pinter writes ‘heart’ before crossing it out. It should also be noted that the phrases that Pinter includes within inverted commas are his own interpretations of the original ending and not direct quotations from it (Pinter, "Letter to David Mamet" 26 April 1993).

³Here, Wesker is referring to a quote that he attributes to Pinter over a 1973 Italian production of *Old Times* directed by Luchino Visconti. After seeing it Pinter held a press conference at which he objected strongly to the ways that the director had radically altered the text (Billington 237-9).

⁴ A video recording of the Royal Court production can be viewed at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of their National Video Archive of Performance. See <https://vanda-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/2018/07/23/08/16/41/2af48316-9039-497d-9d11-f6b5a1adaadd/NVAP%20PDF%2007.2018.pdf>

⁵ Mamet was unsuccessful – the recipient that year was the musician, Walter Turnbull, founder of the Harlem Boys Choir.

⁶ Pinter is perhaps being disingenuous as he had already finished the first draft of the screenplay at the end of February 2000 (Gale, 370-2).