Laying Blame: Gender and Subtext in David Mamet’s *Oleanna*

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“The Bitch Set Him Up”—that’s what Daniel Mufson thought the working title of *Oleanna* could have been, after he appraised the critical responses to the play’s 1992 New York production, adding that “one can expect few other reactions when Carol is such a viper.” Mamet’s presentation of the conflict between a professor and his female student is marked by ambiguous discourse, troubling physical contact, and subsequent charges of sexual harassment. Mufson found, in the seventeen reviews of the play he considered, two typical responses: some critics, including John Lahr, seem to defend the play’s political message because they “[loathe] what Carol represents,” while others, Elaine Showalter among them, lament the construction of a play which “targets a woman as an ugly representative of the group that challenges the white masculine ruling class.” Each condemns Carol, some feeling that Mamet went too far in creating such a harridan in order to support his misogynistic views. As Deborah Tannen wrote, “we don’t need a play that helps anyone feel good about a man beating a woman.” Mufson shares Tannen’s view, remarking that “Oleanna’s aesthetic merit, if it has any, has become parenthetical to its polemics.” Significantly, none of these reviewers seems to have found any justification for Carol’s actions. Mufson mentions “the annoying little problem that one of the two characters in *Oleanna* is a cardboard cut-out, a nightmarish phantom conjured by the paranoid fantasies of a patriarchy peering over a cliff to see ... egalitarianism.” He quotes approvingly Tannen’s observation that Carol is “all surface: just a stereotype that audiences can join in hating,” and David Richards’s remark that *Oleanna* is “rigged” so that its action “slips out of control without our really understanding how or why.” Mufson also cites John Simon, who voices three possible interpretations: “Was [Carol’s] near imbecility in Act One ... an elaborate act of entrapment? Or is she a genuine idiot savant whom the Group has coached in some fancy lingo? Or is Mamet simply playing fast and loose with authorial responsibility?”

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The failure of these critics to uncover any dramatically consistent subtext for Carol within this "rigged" plot recapitulates Carol's plight within the play. Mamet achieves a wonderful irony in constructing a text which the audience must decode just as the characters are required to do. In fact, Carol's critics have ignored the behavioral motivations implicit in the play. Christine MacLeod notes this absence in her study of gender and power in *Oleanna*, focusing on the fruitlessness of imposing a Manichean gender interpretation onto the text. She observes, "the consensus is that the play has constructed Carol in such one-sided negative terms that no genuine debate about the merits of her position is necessary or even possible."10 MacLeod instead sees questions of power within the pedagogic relationship as the central concern in *Oleanna*, noting that "the gender difference between student and teacher is not the crux of the matter."11 In her analysis, gender becomes a factor merely as a tactic Carol can employ to change her position within her power relation with John, the sort of pragmatic strategy also employed within the power relationships in Mamet's other plays, such as *Glengarry, Glen Ross.*12

MacLeod is sensitive to the significance of popular culture and contemporary sexual politics as the interpretive field in which Carol maneuvers, yet she fails to recognize a series of transparent "hints" within the play which call to mind certain clichés within pop psychology that permeate the contemporary American consciousness. The reading I propose offers a subtext for the apparent contradictions in Carol's personality which appear throughout the play. Such a reading honors the play's dramatic complexity without resorting to polemics on either side of the struggle Carol wages with John. Without undermining valuable analyses of power and sexual politics in the play, and without diminishing the oppressive implications of John's patriarchal assumptions, an awareness of the clues offered as a subtextual context for Carol's actions frees *Oleanna* from charges that its plot is rigged. I think this interpretation bolsters MacLeod's argument by nesting her consideration of power strategies within a concrete dramatic context.

Carol's inability to recognize the normative, undistorted terms required to understand John's actions is implicit in the language of Act One and further supported by later passages in the play. If we as readers can interpret those misunderstood terms as examples of an aberrant, distorted contextual standard in her own life, she ceases to be "a cardboard cut-out" or simply a stereotype. Intimations of Carol's past experiences appear throughout the play: though one cannot make definite biographical inferences about her based on these cues, they do supply a plausible context within which she operates. Significantly, the first words spoken by Carol provide a clue to uncovering her subtext, as she asks "What is a 'term of art'?" to which John responds, "It seems to mean a term, which has come, through its use, to mean something more specific than the words would, to someone not acquainted with them ... indicate" (2–3).
In Act One of *Oleanna*, Carol constantly traffics in the code words of incest and child sexual abuse, speaking and responding in ways that are recognizable to anyone familiar with the representation of sexual abuse in today’s culture. She exhibits low self esteem, depression, and guilt, remarking: “Did ... did I... did I say something wr[ong]?” (3); “I’m stupid” (12); “I’ll never learn” (14); “nobody wants me” (14); and “I know what I am. [...] I know what I am” (14–15). Psychologist Dianne Cleveland has written that:

Considerable evidence is mounting that some females who experience incest in childhood consider themselves permanently injured and therefore seek therapy. ... Frequently these women report low self-esteem, sexual dysfunctions, depression, guilt, shame, feelings of isolation, and mistrust of both males and females.\(^1\)

Therapist Laura Davis describes such characteristics in her patients: “Every survivor I’ve ever met has battled with shame, with the awful sense that there was something wrong with them deep down inside that caused the abuse.”\(^2\)

Davis also notes that in adult survivors of child sexual abuse

[the] litany of verbal abuse becomes internalized, and instead of hearing it from the outside, you record and store it, and end up saying the same self-hating things to yourself. ... you get depressed and a voice inside says, “You’ll never amount to anything.” ...

These voices ... are the regurgitated lies of the abusers.\(^3\)

In the revised ending Mamet added to the play for its New York production, Carol replicates the phenomenon Davis describes. As John menaces her with a chair and bellows, “I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little cunt,” she seems to regress into a familiar pattern:

**CAROL** “Yes. That’s right. (She looks away from him, and lowers her head. To herself:) ... yes. That’s right.” (79–80)

These allusions in Mamet’s portrayal of Carol do not represent the necessary cause of her actions, of course; but they do repeatedly echo an accessible discourse most of his audience should be familiar with, providing them with a possible pattern with which to interpret Carol’s actions.

Sexual confusion and shame are confirmed later in Act Three as Carol accuses John of viewing her as an “abandoned young thing of some doubtful sexuality,” a statement reflecting her own insecurities (68). Carol also acknowledges that something other than her course grade is troubling her when the professor tells her she seems angry: “It is true. I have problems ...” (7). Late in the play, she refers to her past: “But we worked to get to this school. (Pause) And some of us. (Pause) Overcame prejudices. Economic,
sexual, you cannot begin to imagine. And endured humiliations I pray that you and those you love never will encounter” (69). This “sexual” allusion can be viewed as a generalized term exposing patriarchal oppression. But it can also be viewed as a personal reflection. In the film version of Oleanna, directed by Mamet, the actress Debra Eisenstadt gasps the word “sexual” and physically recoils during an otherwise assertive, self-contained oration.\textsuperscript{16}

The student-teacher relationship depicted in Act One is a pastiche of phrases and clichés associated with the secrecy and psychological manipulation of incestuous abuse. Carol’s “misunderstanding” lies in this coincidence. I suggest that she finds herself in a situation which replicates through her interpretive screen some sort of previous abuse. She is disturbed because the present seems to be repeating the past as she obeys the demands of a male authority figure and yet cannot “satisfy” him: “I’m doing what I’m told. It’s difficult for me” (6), and “I did what you told me. I did” (9). Several exchanges with John on the subject of his teaching principles follow the patterns of molesters seducing children. This is clearly so as he offers Carol an “A” if she will submit to unorthodox but well-intentioned instruction:

\begin{verbatim}
JOHN I say we can. (Pause) I say we can.
CAROL But I don’t believe it.
JOHN Yes, I know that. But it’s true. What is The Class but you and me? (Pause)
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 that it’s fine.
CAROL Why would you do this for me?
JOHN I like you. Is that so difficult for you to ...\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
CAROL Um ...
JOHN There’s no one here but you and me. (Pause) (26–7)
\end{verbatim}

She cannot contextualize this interchange properly because she lacks the normative experience necessary for recognizing an ideological abuse of language. She identifies John’s words as similar to a molester’s rap, and therefore misinterprets them.

Further evidence of Carol’s contextual confusion appears as John ironically (and perhaps disingenuously) attempts to explain that his role as teacher differs from that of a conventional authority figure:

\begin{verbatim}
JOHN Now, look: I’m a human being, I ...
CAROL I did what you told me. I did. I did everything that, I read your book. you told me to buy your book and read it. Everything you say I ... [...] I do. ... Ev ...
\end{verbatim}
JOHN ... look:
CAROL ... everything I’m told...
JOHN Look. Look. I’m not your father. (Pause)
CAROL What?
JOHN I’m.
CAROL Did I say you were my father?
JOHN ... no ...
CAROL Why did you say that ...?
JOHN I ...
CAROL ... why ...? (9–10)

In the film, this exchange is a slowly paced interlude, emphasizing its significance, during a frenetic conversation. It also recapitulates Mamet’s pregnant allusion to parental abuse in his film House of Games, in which the psychiatrist Margaret Ford unwittingly exposes her own troubled psyche when discussing an abused patient with another doctor:

FORD I know why she is in the hospital. she’s sick. [...] That poor girl, all her life my father tells her she’s a whore, so all her life she seeks out ...
MARIA “My father ...”? 
FORD I’m sorry?
MARIA You said, “My father says that she’s a whore.”
FORD My father ...? (Beat.) I said, “My” father ...?!

An earlier Freudian slip by Ford, substituting “pressures in my life” for “pleasures,” heightens the impact of this passage. Mamet seems to employ this strategy in both works in order to insinuate character motivation.

Returning to Oleanna, Carol’s abrupt defensiveness appears to mask a particularly sensitive secret which she nearly confesses later in Act One:

CAROL I feel bad.
JOHN I know. It’s all right.
CAROL I ... (Pause)
JOHN What?
CAROL I ...
JOHN What? Tell me.
CAROL I don’t understand you.
JOHN I know. It’s all right.
CAROL I ...
CAROL I can’t tell you.
JOHN No, you must.
CAROL I can’t.
JOHN No. Tell me. (*Pause*)
CAROL I’m bad. (*Pause*) Oh, God. (*Pause*)
JOHN It’s all right.
CAROL I’m ...
JOHN It’s all right.
CAROL I can’t talk about this.
JOHN It’s all right. Tell me.
CAROL Why do you want to know this?
JOHN I don’t want to know. I want to know whatever you ...
CAROL I always ...
JOHN ... good ...
CAROL I always ... all my life ... I have never told anyone this ...
JOHN Yes. Go on. (*Pause*) Go on.
CAROL All of my life ... (*The phone rings.*) (37–8)

In Marnet’s film, this interchange takes place in the shadows of a half-lit conference room adjacent to John’s office, accentuating the secrecy of Carol’s past as well as its tortured relevance. The passage serves as the hook on which my interpretation depends. This unspoken secret lies behind the “hints” previously described, compelling us to interpret them as echoes of Carol’s actual experience as well as reflective manifestations of John’s pedagogic hegemony.

With the beginning of the second act, Carol gains a voice she did not possess in Act One. This change involves the use of inflammatory language employed by her “Group,” a pugnacious style which goes hand in hand with the rhetoric of abuse to which Carol seems so sensitive. Controversial feminist legal scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon, arguing for restrictive laws against pornography in *Only Words*, describes the effect of sexual abuse on women:

[C]onsider what it does to one’s relation to expression: to language, speech, the world of thought and communication. You learn that language does not belong to you, that you cannot use it to say what you know, that knowledge is not what you learn from your life, that information is not made out of your experience. You learn that thinking about what happened to you does not count as “thinking,” but doing it apparently does. You learn that your reality subsists somewhere beneath the socially real – totally exposed but invisible, screaming yet inaudible, thought about incessantly yet unthinkable, “expression” yet inexpressible, beyond words. You learn that speech is not what you say but what your abusers do to you.19

This seems an apt characterization of Carol’s frustration and estrangement, serving as another key to the context through which she confronts the conflicts in the play. In Act Two she rebukes John:

You think, you think you can deny that these things happened; or, if they *did*, if they
did, that they meant what you said they meant. Don’t you see? You drag me in here, you drag us, to listen to you “go on”; and “go on” about this or that, or we don’t “express” ourselves very well. We don’t say what we mean. Don’t we? Don’t we? We do say what we mean.” (48–9)

With the help of the Group, she has become assertive and confident, and now exhibits indignation rather than guilt. No longer timorous and helpless, she can proclaim: “I don’t think that I need your help. I don’t think I need anything you have” (49).

This transformation is derived from the Group, which provides her with support and advice, unlike John, whose pedagogic role is simply a reformulation of other patriarchal structures, including the family. John Lahr notes this fact, though he fails to place it within a convincing dramatic context:

Carol, who lacked words before, has got educated in a hurry by what she refers to as her Group, and she speaks now with the righteous fervor of a woman whose day has come. This transition is jarring but intentional. She has acquired a new voice and a new vocabulary, whose authority precludes ambiguity. She adopts political correctness as an intellectual carapace that substitutes dogma for thought, mission for mastery. Naming is claiming, and since Carol won’t work to master a world she can’t comprehend, she changes the frame of reference to a world she can.20

Lahr correctly describes the process Carol follows, but he seems to feel that her motivation is her “adamant dinnness” and “the awful spoiling power of envy disguised as political ideology.” He insightfully remarks, “Carol’s rigidity is a sign of her insecurity,” but errs in seeing ignorance as the sole source of that insecurity.21

Most importantly, the ideological rigidity of the Group is antithetical to Carol’s previous abusive context, providing her with meaning, purpose, and hope. It serves as the answer to her plea at the end of Act Two: “WILL SOME- BODY HELP ME PLEASE ...?” (57). But though it seems to free her, in fact it merely replicates the manipulation of her abusive past, allowing her to repress rather than excuse her secret. The evasive effect is clear as Carol remarks: “What I ‘feel’ is irrelevant” and “The issue here is not [...] my ‘feelings,’ but the feelings of women” (49, 63). Thus, rather than gaining her own voice at last, Carol merely becomes the Group’s mouthpiece. As in so many of Mamet’s works, power structures pursue their own preservation, often disregarding those whom they claim to serve. In this sense, Carol’s relation to the Group mirrors her relation to John. In echoing the rhetoric of the Group, she is again merely reading back her notes as she did in John’s class. For example, she does not fully understand John’s use of the words “precepts” (14), “index” (24), “predilection” (31), “paradigm” (45), “indictment” (63), and “transpire” (66). Yet she parrots without hesitation the terms she undoubtedly learns from
the Group: "to countenance continuation," "manipulative" (51), "impinge" (56), "derive" (72), and "amenable" (74).

Carol appears to embrace the ideological rigor of the Group because it provides her with a ready-made tool allowing her to identify and challenge a world which she perceives as her victimizer. And John's fatuous pedagogy, revealing an essentially patriarchal position, is worthy of measured criticism. But the specific allegations of sexual harassment and assault seem unreasonable. And the harassment she perceives does not seem to be drawn from a "willful misinterpretation," as Lahr describes.22 Instead, it seems to be misinterpretation fated by her personal history and merely mis-channeled by the self-interested Group which pursues, in John, a legitimate perpetrator of hierarchic abuse, but the wrong representative of Carol's literal "patriarchal" abuse. Carol's relationship with her Group thus becomes a type of exploitation itself, which emphasizes the complexity of Carol's role within the text and validates the significance of her struggle within the context analyzed by MacLeod. The truths and errors Carol utters must then be acknowledged rather than dismissed as merely the tactics of a stereotyped p.c. "bitch."

In Act Three, Carol tells John, "I've profited nothing from your, your, as you say, your 'misfortune' " (68). But she has profited in overcoming the self-loathing and uncertainty of Act One. In this sense, she has clearly benefited from her contact with the Group, though, I would argue, she is avoiding the authentic source of her unhappiness. John is only partly correct in proclaiming early in Act Two, "I'm not a hageyman. I don't 'stand' for something" (50). One of the tragedies of Oleanna is that he does come to "stand for something" to Carol, as illustrated by the terms of child sexual abuse Mamet employs in the play. Daniel Mufson's reading of the play exhibits a failed understanding of Carol when he describes her as "femme fatale and p.c. fascist rolled into one," a stereotypical character constructed only to produce fury in the audience.23 Such angry responses to Carol fail to recognize the dramatic progression she experiences.

NOTES

2 See David Mamet, Oleanna (New York, 1993). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
5 Deborah Tannen, “He Said ... She Said ... Who Did What?” New York Times (15 November 1992), Arts and Leisure 6, quoted in Mufson, 113.
6 Mufson, 111. See note 1.
7 Ibid., 112.
11 Ibid., 204.
13 Dianne Cleveland, Incest: The Story of Three Women (Lexington, MA 1986), 11. Cleveland’s clinical text provides an interesting series of images which have entered American popular discourse.
14 Laura Davis, The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (New York, 1990), 256. Self-help books such as this illustrate the widespread rhetoric of abuse, easily recognizable in the popular culture, which Mamet exploits in Oleanna. For relevant insights into this topic, see also David Mamet, “Self-Help,” in Make-Believe Town: Essays and Remembrances (Boston, 1996), 161–66.
18 Ibid., 8.
19 Catharine A. MacKinnon, Only Words (Cambridge, MA, 1993). 6. MacKinnon’s polemic is yet another example of the pervasive rhetoric of abuse available for Mamet to appropriate in alluding to Carol’s past.
20 Lahr, 124. See note 3.
21 Ibid., 122, 121, 124.
22 Ibid., 124.
23 Mufson, 111. See note 1.