A MATTER OF SIX INCHES
THEATRICAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND POWER
IN DAVID MAMET'S OLEANNA

by

MARNIE DAWN RICE

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Department of **Theatre**

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the construction of power and identity in *Oleanna*, David Mamet's controversial play about sexual harassment and political correctness. It subjects the play to literary, dramaturgical, performative, psychological, legal and ideological analyses in order to demonstrate how the play alternatively transcends and is weighed down by divisive issues that construct our historical moment.

There has not been, in recent memory, a Vancouver production that generated so much media attention and viewer feedback. Mamet has orchestrated a carefully constructed "participatory" event that manipulates his audience into judging and debating issues concerning sexual antagonism on the basis of oppositions of gender, age, status and privilege. On the one hand, Mamet has infuriated many feminists who see *Oleanna* as a manipulative, misogynist and dangerous play that blames women for causing their own oppression. Other critics, conversely, have described it as a stimulating masterpiece that puts a mirror up to contemporary society to show how we are all prone to the use and abuse of power. The crucial questions here are: why does this play incite such opposing responses, how does Mamet manipulate his reading and viewing audience into taking sides in a hot debate about sexual harassment, and whose position, if any, does he privilege?

This thesis uses a four part approach. Part One examines how Mamet, through his body of work, critiques cultural distopias within a masculine theatrical and discursive space. Part Two applies a similar analysis to *Oleanna* to uncover the play's spatially and linguistically masculine framework. Part Three examines the play in performance. Using a semiotic critique, it demonstrates how these cultural and theatrical challenges were alternatively confused and clarified when *Oleanna* was produced in Vancouver in 1994. Finally, Part Four highlights contemporary ideological issues by delving into *Oleanna's* subtext to ask the question: can a constructive social critique be drawn from a play which is so mired in constricting and antagonistic ideologies?
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INTRODUCTION
A MATTER OF SIX INCHES
Theatrical and Cultural Construction of Identity and Power in David Mamet's Oleanna

Just what is it we feminists hope to accomplish by examining popular texts—or, for that matter, any text at all?¹

It's a matter of six inches. I don't mean it like that. I mean it's where your hand is. Is your hand here or is your hand there? That is the ludicrousness at which the situation has got to at times.²

To even begin to answer Tania Modleski's question vis-à-vis David Mamet's Oleanna I have to think back to my first encounter with the play. In the summer of 1993, I was travelling with a friend in Europe and had a two day stop-over in London before flying home. It was our intention to see as much theatre as we could while we were there, and one of the plays we decided on was being produced at the Royal Court: directed by Harold Pinter and starring David Suchet and Lia Williams in the roles of John and Carol. Knowing some of Mamet's, Pinter's and Suchet's previous works, this combination of proven talent and notoriety made the four pound price (for the worst seat in the house) seem a reasonable enough value.

The first act of Oleanna seemed long and full of too much exposition, and I was distracted by the forced New England accents of the actors. But the second and third acts of the play were engaging, even frightening. I was not witness to the now infamous cries of "Kill the Bitch,"³ but three men sitting behind me did clap and cheer when John, pushed to his limit of endurance, threw Carol under his desk and kicked her. David McIraith, who played John in the Alberta Theatre Projects production of Oleanna, described those final, brutal moments as the point in the play where "hopefully the [audience] allegiance shifts back to her."⁴ Why, then, did

those three men not stop their cheers or "shift their allegiance" when they
witnessed such a graphic representation of male violence?

I was both challenged and changed by that production of Oleanna. Leaving
the theatre shaking, I was winded by a maelstrom of sensations: exasperation,
sadness, confusion, self-doubt, disillusion—all sprinkled with the occasional bout of
paranoia. How could that happen, I asked myself: how could there be such disparity
between our reactions to a woman being beaten, even within the fictive realm of the
theatre? And now, after nearly three years of analysing, dissecting and
dismembering the play, I still cannot shake those feelings. My curiosity has widened
since then to include a culturally-based analysis. I now ask, how do we let that
happen?

Soon enough, Oleanna was being produced in Canada and by the close of
1994, it had become a Canadian theatrical and cultural phenomenon with ten
productions already mounted nationwide and two yet to open in early 1995. In fact,
since its original performance at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge,
Massachusetts in 1992, Oleanna has been produced from Ashland to London to
Sarajevo with high audience turnout almost everywhere it has played. Given that
Canadian performing arts venues have watched both their audiences and their
government grants slowly dwindle over the past five years, it is no small wonder
that artistic directors would choose to include Oleanna in their season of plays. It
had just the right combination of ingredients—a small cast, a simple interior set
requirement (as one critic put it, "the scenery consists of a few sticks of used office
furniture"), and explosive subject matter—that could get audience attendance up
and keep operating deficits down. Locally, the Jessie award-winning production of
Oleanna at the Vancouver Playhouse did just that: grossing $35,000 more than
expected in single-ticket sales. Simply put, Mamet is good business.

7 See Max Wyman "A Surprising Seduction--The Shock of the New," The Vancouver Sun 26 Nov. 1994:
But is Oleanna a good play? Absolutely. It is a tightly constructed, highly manipulative, clandestinely metatheatrical play which demands a tremendous amount of participation on the part of readers and viewers to look beyond its situational landscape and see into a broader realm of ethical signification. In other words, one needs to resist the temptation to debate the very real and deeply troubling topics of sexual harassment and political correctness in order to critique the wider cultural distopia that underlies them. But, by the same token, Mamet was so manipulative, so controlling, that many people—audience members and critics alike—have continued to be bogged down by these contemporary and divisive issues. Many have called Oleanna an anti-feminist, or anti-feminine, play and pointed to Mamet's often misogynistic treatment of women in his body of work. Others have praised it as a masterful critique of the use and abuse of power. This widespread disagreement about the meaning of the play raises the question: how are cultural critics going to categorize Oleanna and how will they look back upon this play that has communicated such disparate, contradictory and controversial meanings to its viewers?

This dilemma presents many intriguing challenges to directors, designers and actors who need to clarify the play's complexities for a viewing audience. While each point made in this dialectically-structured text is counter-balanced by another equally passionate and convincing (or erroneous) argument, it is possible that some theatre practitioners may have tried to overcompensate for the play's equation which seems, at first, to side against the young female student. This thesis, therefore, will include a look at some of the choices made in the local production of Oleanna that was directed by Glynis Leyshon at the Vancouver Playhouse. The production received unprecedented local media coverage, most of which cited its power to engage and enrage its audience.
For those audience members who were angered by the play, one might ask at what or at whom were they so angry: at Mamet for writing the play, at society for creating the circumstances for Mamet's critique, or at themselves for being taken in by Oleanna's controversy? The answers are as plentiful as people who saw the show. In addition, the impetus that motivated audience members to see the play on any particular night were similarly varied. As Susan Bennett describes:

Perhaps they were regular attendees at [the theatre.] Or perhaps they had read preview materials in [local] newspapers and magazines. Or perhaps it was as coincidental as a friend having asked if they'd like to go and see a new show. Whatever the reason, these factors had already influenced how any and every spectator would view the play.⁸

In light of the fact that reactions to Oleanna have been so varied and numerous, I have resisted trying to attribute permanent definitions to the play. Instead, I have linked the play to other current cultural forces—literary, theatrical, psychological, legal and ideological—that constitute this historical moment for the North American (and often Canadian or specifically Vancouverite) audience who came to see Mamet's play. The investigation has taken the form of four separate "entrances" into the play which approach the play from different perspectives.

The first entrance I take into the play can be called a "garden entrance," for although I enter Mamet's territory as a playwright, I do not deal with Oleanna directly. Instead, I provide a retrospective look at some of Mamet's writings—his interviews, essays, plays—in an attempt to define the type of theatrical space that he constructs on his page and stage. In so doing, I opt not to use a universalist interpretation of his play space, but instead define it as an engendered, masculine space which has tended to marginalize and even erase its female characters in order to critique a homosocial order. While Mamet's overall critique is justifiable, not to mention well crafted, it leaves me as a female reader in an awkward position of eavesdropper⁹: trying to find a point of entry into a text which tends to include

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⁹See Nancy K. Miller, "Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice," The Female Body in Western
women only to objectify them. Thus, this first chapter is provided to "arm" my readers with insight into Mamet's dramaturgy, as it pertains to sexual antagonism, as they accompany me into the text proper of Oleanna.

In the second entrance into the play, I delve into Oleanna's linguistic space which is structured like a classical dialectic. In this chapter, I set out to deconstruct how power and knowledge are generated primarily through a process of linguistic domination. In particular, I analyse the binary oppositions that Mamet establishes in the expository first act of Oleanna, in order to investigate how those power structures are simply reversed, rather than negotiated, in the rest of the play. In other words, I deconstruct Mamet's own critique of a machinery of power which exists to perpetuate itself regardless of who is victimized by the process. In addition, I explore the ways in which Mamet's critique is both enhanced and undermined by some very manipulative playwriting techniques: techniques which guide and limit the reader's appreciation of each character's position within the debate.

The third entrance leads me to a theatrical space, as I examine some of the transformations that occur when the play is handed over to theatre artists whose task is to physicalize, energize and clarify Oleanna's linguistic debate. In particular, I focus on the Vancouver Playhouse's October-November 1994 production of Oleanna and examine it using aspects of performance criticism generated through a semiotic analysis. The theatre, as Anthony Dawson writes, is "inescapably practical, concrete, anti-theoretical. But its resistance to theory does not preclude theories about it." It is in the spirit of this inherent contradiction that I have undertaken an analysis of that production: sometimes reading the performance as a text, sometimes as something quite separate from text. In both cases, I argue that the Glynis Leyshon-directed production of Oleanna employed certain theatrical "signs" which situated the play in a specifically contemporary and local setting, sometimes to the detriment of the play. As we shall see, Oleanna was "sold" to audiences in a

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way that often exploited contemporary controversy rather than celebrated the artistic achievement of the production. These choices implicated the audience so much that it was difficult to rise above its "hot" issues of sexual harassment and political correctness.

The fourth and final entrance I take into the play moves into a space occupied by (sometimes conflicting, even exclusive) feminist ideologies. This chapter is undertaken as an investigation on Carol's behalf, whose feminist identity must otherwise be constructed by a reader/viewer through conjecture and suspicion. A reading of the subtext of the female student's political, pedagogical and socio-economic circumstance has led me, at times, to connecting with works seemingly unrelated with the text at hand. However, the interplay between these texts generates a new discursive space that explores the influence of ideology on author and audience alike, where it is demanded of all parties to position themselves within the ideological continuum. From this new perspective, I take a final look back on Mamet's text to see how it both can and cannot rise above the circumstances surrounding its historical moment.

I would ask that the reader be guided throughout this thesis by the above obliquely sexual comment by R. H. Thompson, because it captures Mamet's philosophy that "the true nature of the world, as between men and women is sex, and any other relationship is either an elaboration or an avoidance." I have adapted both statements in my own investigation of Mamet's works to mean that expectation and interpretation of intention and meaning in Oleanna may well continue to be divided--by characters and audience alike--by a matter of six inches.

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CHAPTER ONE
Defining Mamet's Masculine Space

Why can't men and women get along?12

Most of the major critiques of Mamet's works that appeared in the late 1980s (Bigsby, Carroll, Dean) focus on his position as a fierce social critic in what Mamet himself calls "a morally bankrupt time."13 C. W. E. Bigsby writes that Mamet is a social dramatist, concerned with "exposing the myths, the values and the processes of society,"14 and Dennis Carroll describes Mamet's deconstruction of "American myths and principles of liberalism that have lost moral value and become institutionalised and debased pieties."15 In fact, Mamet's voice has become synonymous with the inversion, even perversion, of fundamental American social myths, particularly the success myth which promises possibility, opportunity and renewal. Thomas E. Porter termed this peculiarly American mode of wishful thinking "the-impossible-takes-a-little-longer."16 Consequently, while they are waiting for the arrival of the impossible, Mamet's often cynical and abrasive characters take advantage of America's present state of affairs, where the Dream, now proven to be little more than a "prick-teaser,"17 has become an excuse for exploitation and manipulation. Walter Cole, called Teach, one of the petty criminals in American Buffalo, explains the new meaning of an old dream: "The Freedom . . . of the Individual . . . To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit"18 (57).

14C. W. E. Bigsby, David Mamet (London: Methuen, 1985) 68.
18Emphasis Mamet. I will continue to use this format for quotations unless otherwise indicated.
Commodity-fetished, Mamet's world is built upon a desire for acquisition, possession and consumption, and the object of those desires runs the gamut from money to sex to power. "The law of life," writes Mamet, "is to do evil and good, to eat and be eaten, and the most supposedly innocuous good, is, perhaps, also and occasionally violence in disguise." These observations of a world ruled by Social Darwinism are not new. Mamet has long acknowledged his debt to the theories about conspicuous consumption in a capitalist society that were articulated by American turn-of-the-century sociologist Thorstein Veblen. Veblen, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, studied the multiple effects of material acquisition on the American consciousness, concluding that our basic human values were in danger of being eroded. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith writes in the preface to Veblen's study: "Possession and consumption are the banner which advertises achievement—which proclaims, by the accepted standards of the community, that the possessor is a success." Mamet's characters, likewise, struggle to possess and proclaim those successes.

What the critics seem to have shied away from, until recently, is an in-depth analysis of Mamet's focus on male characters and masculine spaces--a focus that he uses to dramatize such social concerns. In other words, as Carla McDonough points out, all too often "the male protagonist is treated as a non-gendered referent." Shoshana Felman, writing from an explicitly feminist perspective, highlights this change in critical reading: she argues that we have learned, in the modernist tradition, to accept the protagonist's story as a universal truth, displaying themes that were relevant to humanity rather than specifically to men.

As educated products of our culture, we have unwittingly been trained to "read literature as men"--to identify, that is, with the dominating,

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male-centered perspective of the masculine protagonist, which always takes itself—misleadingly—to be the measure of the universal.22

Educational theorist Henry Giroux tells us that in our historical moment—postmodern, pluralistic, fluid—culture and literature are no longer seen as the "reserve of white men."23 Building on Giroux's postmodern concern for pluralism, and on McDonough's and Felman's feminist political purpose of redressing gender imbalance, in this chapter I will attempt to provide a counter-reading to the more traditional criticism of the likes of Bigsby and Carroll. For, while the "universal" reading does provide one helpful lens through which we can initially approach Mamet's dramas, it ignores what are important theoretical questions to me: how, as a feminist reader or spectator, can my voice find belonging in Mamet's dramas? How are my concerns and issues reflected (if at all) in his work? These are questions which have been voiced with more and more frequency since feminist scholars began posing them during feminism's second wave in the 1970s.

Adrienne Rich, for example, has called for a re-reading, or re-visioning of old texts. By seeing with fresh eyes, she writes that one can "enter an old text from a new critical direction."24 Critics in Renaissance studies, for example, have been practicing this act of theoretical re-visioning for decades; but what does one do with a living author, who is both outspoken and prolific in his views, and who, in his writings, is himself in the process of re-visioning the American experience? Bigsby states that Mamet's perspective is that of a "virtually Marxist analysis of capitalism in a state of decline."25 What Bigsby glosses over is Mamet's treatment of women in his (re)presentation of the American social landscape in his plays, essays and interviews. "My job," said Mamet in an interview with Mel Gussow, "is to create a

25Bigsby, 49.
closed moral universe." What the female reader may question is why that closed moral universe is so often portrayed as exclusively male. Why, that is, is she asked to mediate her way through the effects of a misogynistic recording of her own material experience in Mamet's dramas, or uncover the meaning of her total absence from Mamet's community of men? Michelene Wandor suggests a possible point of entry to Mamet's single-gendered world.

The single-gendered play may be "unrealistic" in the sense that we all inhabit a world which consists of men and women, but it does provide an imaginative opportunity to explore the gendered perspective (male or female) without the complexities and displacements of the "mixed" play.

Guido Almansi, in fact, uses Wandor's analysis to speak directly about Mamet: "His best plays," he writes, "are immune from any female contamination; the existence of women only filters on the stage through the preconceived ideas of the opposite sex." In other words, Almansi suggests that an engendered reading is detrimental to the appreciation of Mamet's work. If we wish to find meaning in the general absence of women in his universe, we must also exclude ourselves from participation in, and enjoyment of, the play. The push from most critics, therefore, is backwards to the "universal" or male-centered reading. Ilkka Joki explains that Mamet actually writes for that male-centered reading. His ideal audience member (superaddressee) is a "youngish urban 'person,' preferably male, somewhat literary and cultured, but not so cultured that 'he' would find it beneath 'himself' to recognize and appreciate a well-formed utterance in the vernacular."

Before we can analyse more precisely how Mamet establishes an onstage masculine universe, however, free from "female contamination" and exclusively "his," it is instructive to look at how he conceives of masculine space in society as a

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28Almansi, 191.
whole. In *Some Freaks*, a recent collection of essays, Mamet espouses his beliefs about masculinity during the emergence of feminist ideologies when masculine activities have become suspect. "What ever happened," he laments, "to 'spending time with the boys'? What happened to The Lodge, Hunting, Fishing, Sports in general, Poker, Boys Night Out?" It is in these communal leisure activities that men may find inspiration and renewal in order to continue to interact and negotiate with their opposites: women. In "Women" Mamet writes with false naiveté of his discovery that "women are people too, [therefore] they must have thoughts and feelings too!" The problem for men, of course, is unearthing what those thoughts and feelings are. Herein lies the problem. Even at his most generous ("We feel, based on constant evidence, that women are better, stronger, more truthful, than men."), Mamet's perception of women is contained within the categories of either the fixed or the unknowable "Other." One loses sight of what they want, because the man's wants—sex, solace, compassion, forgiveness—cloud his ability to see beyond himself. Furthermore, Mamet speculates that "women [actually] want to be men."

As a female reader of this text I question Mamet's ability to see beyond *himself* in explaining, in a five page essay, the essence of female subjectivity, and advising men how to "get on" with women. Written on a dare from his wife, who believed that he did not know very much about women, Mamet seems to prove his naiveté with "Women." This naiveté threatens to cloud the reception of his plays, however. Once essays such as this one enter the public domain, it becomes difficult, particularly for the female reader of his plays, to return to a state of innocence about both Mamet's limited understanding of the category of Woman and his lack of critical investigation about the female subject. In general, it should not matter that a playwright who creates an artistic experience does not possess extensive theoretical knowledge on his character subjects. Nevertheless, Mamet does not limit his input

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30Mamet, "In the Company of Men," *Some Freaks*, 88.
33Mamet, In the Company of Men," 86.
to artistic creations only; by theorizing on issues of gender difference, however innocent or well-meaning his intentions, he opens himself up to criticism of those theories which, in turn, affect the reading of the plays. Furthermore, Mamet’s combination of playwriting and philosophizing has the disadvantage of blurring certain boundaries between his perspective and those of his characters when he dramatizes issues of gender relations.

Carla McDonough, in her recent doctoral dissertation on contemporary American playwrights, has also chosen an engendered critical approach to dissect Mamet’s dramatic and prose writings. Both of the above essays, she points out, "set up ideas of masculinity in contrast to or defiance of women [who are] the objects against which the male identity positions itself." Thus, as women forge new ground for themselves in society, unsettling relations of power and knowledge and changing or rising in status, the male's very identity is subject to instability. "Our society has fallen apart," Mamet states, "and nobody knows what he or she should be doing." At the heart of the matter, public social roles being a mask of private fears, is sex. "For the true nature of the world," as we have seen Mamet proclaim, "as between men and women, is sex, and any other relationship between us is either an elaboration, or an avoidance."

In the plays, this fear of destabilizing sexual relationships is most often expressed in misogynistic terms through the voice of an often skeptical and inarticulate protagonist. Steven Gale suggests that despite the general absence of women in the texts, Mamet aims to incorporate female experience into the plays within the scope of the male's.

Mamet either does not understand women's fears of men as well as he understands men's fear of women, or feels that he is making his point

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35 Mamet, "Women," 23.
36 Mamet, "In the Company of Men," 90.
through male characters and that since the females' fears are the same, they can be seen mirroring those fears without much development.37

Jeanne-Andrée Nelson is less generous in her criticism of the narrow definition of female subjectivity in Mamet's dramas. She writes,

The enrollment of female experience under the banner of male perception, the subjugation of female alterity into male categories, is a fraudulent scheme in these instances, since Mamet does not glorify the homogeneity of human experience, but rather, the supremacy of male modes of being and thinking. His reader will construct textual interpretation by constituting sexual differences, that is, by obliterating the woman.38

Nelson uses a psychosemiotic critique of women in Mamet's plays as a site of social or cultural meaning. Within this psychoanalytic or Lacanian critique, she attempts to reveal the tactics of dominant representation—the acceptance of the language of gender roles—and reception, the gaze under which they are seen. Other critics might counter Nelson's position that Mamet glorifies the supremacy of male modes of thinking. The sites of investigation, or "world" of Mamet's plays, are unquestionably male, but in almost all circumstances the established phallocentric social order falls into chaos by the end curtain. Hence, the point can also be argued that Mamet's plays aim to critique those social structures that have enabled and perpetuated the dominance of the male modes of thinking and being. Carla McDonough agrees, citing Mamet's "deconstruction and not his celebration of masculine identity that speaks so forcefully to his audiences."39

At this point, it is helpful to carry out our own deconstruction of some of the plays which earned Mamet his reputation as a formidable playwright and not just a "foul-mouthed diatribe,"40 as the early critics saw him. American Buffalo (1977), Glengarry Glen Ross (1984), and Speed-the-Plow (1988) are generally grouped as the

39McDonough, "Every Fear," 205.
40McDonough, "Staging Masculinity," 86.
"business" or "men-at-work" plays because they show male characters—their fears, loyalties and desires—within the traditionally masculine environment of the workplace. Here, in the "unrealistic, single-gendered" setting, the male characters are able to express the complexities and contradictions of certain fraternal activities that can only transpire in the company of men. It must be noted that Mamet differentiates between the communal and celebratory leisure activities that he describes in the above essays and the fierce competition and rivalry that erupt in the business activities of the plays. Interestingly, with women generally banished or operating on the margins of these masculine spaces, their worst values, in Mamet's philosophy—invidious comparison, secrecy and stealth—become ingrained in the male's behavior. The best "feminine" values—compassion, honesty and strength—are pushed out of this masculine space altogether as the men race after "homosocial" desires of acquisition, possession and consumption. Hersh Zeifman describes this competitive universe as a "theatrical 'Phallus in Wonderland': a topsy-turvy world in which all values are inverted by characters who think with their crotch." 42

With Zeifman's metaphor in mind, we can now begin to decipher the reasons why the desires and actions of Mamet's men in these plays are always punctuated by what Guido Almansi calls a virtuoso of obscene expressions: usually misogynist, homophobic, racist or a combination of the three. The men turn this language of hatred against each other in an attempt to prove their supremacy in a competitive homogeneous order. As a result, men attack their competition by questioning their "manhood:" a quality which is achieved by being good (or the best) at one's job. In Glengarry, Glen Ross, Levene proclaims that if "you don't have the balls" to do a job, then "you're a secretary" (76). The target of Levene's insults in this instance is Williamson, the office manager who stays in the office, and who,

41Mamet, "In the Company of Men," 86.
therefore, has not proved his masculinity where it counts: by closing a deal. Roma, the best closer and therefore the most masculine of the salesmen, hurls accusations at Williamson after the supervisor has ruined his deal with his target, Lingk. "Where did you learn your trade. You stupid fucking cunt. You idiot. Whoever told you you could work with men?" (96). Charlie Fox similarly accuses Bobby Gould in Speed-the-Plow, when he learns that he has been double-crossed by his friend over a woman. "... you fool--your fucken' sissy film--you squat to pee. You old woman..." (70).

Just as woman is defined in this homosocial order as the not-man, as "lacking," so racial minorities and homosexuals are lumped into that same category of not-man. They are, as Hersh Zeifman points out, merely "another cognate of misogyny."43 Fletcher, in American Buffalo, a symbol of authority and false friendship for Teach and Don, becomes a "cocksucker" (57), Bob, the young junkie, is called a "fruit" (75), and the target of their robbery is a "fucking fruit" (45). Grace and Ruthie, the off-stage women who are sexual partners and therefore not potential conquests, are "Southern buldyke assholes" (11), and "dyke cocksuckers" (45). In his conversations with Don, Teach easily interchanges these homophobic insults for racist ones. "Without this [a chance to make a profit] we're just savage shitheads in the wilderness sitting around some vicious campfire" (58). Angry at Don for being ordered around, Teach lashes out at his friend, "I am not your nigger. I am not your wife" (79). Objects of hatred become conflated; therefore the terms of abuse are interchangeable. What matters is that all of these groups are "not-him," not white, not straight, not masculine, and therefore, not acceptable.

For the most part, however, abuse in this all-masculine world is directed at women, even when their presence is restricted to its margins. Ruthie, who has been characterized as one of those women who wants to be a man in this masculine space, will never be accepted as "one of the boys," because she lacks the proper

43Zeifman, 130.
characteristics. Teach argues with the junkshop owner, Don, over Ruth's prowess at cards. "She is not a good card player, Don. She is a mooch and she is a locksmith and she plays like a woman" (15). Teach, naturally, is the last person who would see the paradox inherent in his insult. As for Ruth's partner Grace, Teach dismisses her as a "cunt" who is "always on her shoulder" (15). Stan, one of the low ranking seamen on the T. Harrison, the cargo boat in one of Mamet's early plays, Lakeboat (1970), has developed a philosophy similar to that of Teach: women do not belong in masculine spaces as equals, they are sexual conquests, not companions. "What do they know of booze, the cunts? . . . They can't drink. You ever know a woman who could drink? . . . They don't understand it. It's a man's thing, drinking" (30). Stan is typical of many of Mamet's characters: essentializing women down to their sexual function and linguistically dismembering them to isolated body parts. They are whores, pussy, cunts, tits and ass. Stan says to his fellow seaman Fred, "A woman, Freddie, a woman. You remember them? Soft things with a hole in the middle" (59).

Thus, the men's gaze upon women is focused primarily on their sexual makeup. Or, perhaps more specifically, it centres on the man's unfulfilled desire for sex within a homogeneously masculine and homophobic space. Needing release, the male characters' tensions become gradually sublimated into angry, derogatory streams of sexual expletives. Guido Almansi calls this a "catharsis of the obscene," and Hersh Zeifman describes it as "verbal swaggering." After all, as Mamet has asserted above, the "true nature of the world, as between men and women, is sex." Ruby Cohn shows how this aspect of Mamet's philosophy is dramatized in his plays: the most frequently used obscenity by Mamet's men is "fuck." Cohn cites two pages of examples from the plays with explanations as to the creative uses of the word. She does offer some interesting explanations as to semantic and grammatical

44 Almansi, 199.
45 Zeifman, 126.
46 See Ruby Cohn, "How are Things Made Round?" David Mamet. A Casebook, 109-121.
possibilities, but does not comment directly on the assertion of power that results from this mode of speaking. "Fuck" is a sexually aggressive word which endows dominance and release on the part of the speaker and submission on the receiver. And, to compete for dominance within the confines of an inarticulate vocabulary, to assert an image of one's manhood in this masculine space, requires some sort of linguistic strength.

The problem, to be explored in further detail in Chapter Two, is that everyone must learn the dominant language, or hegemonic discourse, in order to participate, let alone thrive, in this world. Fred, in Lakeboat, explains why the men's fears and desires are collapsed into a single profane word. While showing the ropes to Dale, the newest member of the crew to circle the harbours of Lake Michigan, he explains the logic behind the frequent appearance of "fuck" and "fucking" in their vocabulary.

FRED: Well, Dale . . . Coming on like this out of nowhere you got a thing or two to find out. Now, the main thing about the boats, other than their primary importance in the Steel Industry, is that you don't get any pussy. You got that?

DALE: Yes.

FRED: Except when we tie up. This is important to know because it precludes your whole life on the boats. This is why everyone says "fuck" all the time.

DALE: Why?

FRED: They say "fuck" in direct proportion to how bored they are. Huh? (52).

If the derogatory remarks become tiresome or repetitive to the female ear, it is not surprising. While writing the plays, Mamet may have anticipated female spectators or readers in his theatrical audience, but these male characters have retreated to a space where they can perform their masculinity for each other without the constraints that come with a critical feminine eye. Psychologist Ray Raphael asserts that masculinity is as much of a cultural performance as femininity, that men must watch, practice and encode their gender roles in the
same way as women. But this encoding requires more than just "becoming a man," to invert the oft-used phrase from Simone de Beauvoir: it must be proved. As women become less and less available to play the role of "supporter, encourager and reflector of men," it must be proved within the confines of a masculine space. In other words, as Carla McDonough writes, "the male gender role, then, is a performance which requires acknowledgment and acceptance by an audience."

In *Oleanna*, John's audience is a heterogeneous group of students; without a supportive male audience, his performance as teacher is vastly misunderstood. McDonough writes that, ideally, masculine performances refresh the spirit through ritual and public acknowledgment. To illustrate, she cites the activities organized by the men's movement such as retreat weekends. Nevertheless, these masculine spaces cannot remain permanently hermetically sealed; they are unsustainable fictions. Weekend retreats must give way to weekday drudgeries and explorations of the exclusively male gendered perspective will be ultimately contaminated by the complexities and displacements of female presence. In Mamet's plays, the characters, in fact, are obsessed with a fear of that presence. As we have seen above, the male characters continually "deny, attack, or degrade what they perceive as feminine qualities in themselves and others." When women are physically present, usually in supporting roles, as we shall see in this short case study of Karen in *Speed-the-Plow*, the fears of femininity and instability are heightened and the female characters receive the brunt of masculine animosity.

*Speed-the-Plow*, on one level, is a more mature look at issues of misunderstanding within sexual relations than Mamet had previously explored in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. The Hollywood camaraderie between Bobby Gould and his subordinate Charlie Fox is reminiscent of the dynamics between Bernie

47See Raphael's *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).
Litko and Dan Shapiro as well as Mamet's later con men. They all perform their masculinity to and for each other by proving their success both in business and in their conquest and debasement of women. Not that women are incapable of resistance to such objectification. As a woman amidst male producers in Hollywood, Karen, a temporary secretary, threatens to destabilize their masculine performance, friendship and business alliance by resisting conquest unless it reflects and advances her own desires. In the first act of *Speed-the-Plow*, Fox sets a challenge to Gould: a $500 bet is wagered on whether Gould can seduce his new secretary. The bet is meant to bring the two men closer together through acceptably masculine mores: the acquisition, possession and consumption of the female body. They set Karen up "in the now familiar role for Mamet's female characters as sexual object, a space upon which men seek to inscribe their identities."\(^{51}\)

Both Gould and Fox are shocked, then, when she asserts an identity, a potential "voice," of her own. She is not a passive vessel on which to inscribe their identities; instead, she "proselytizes, pleads, coaxes, demurs."\(^{52}\) More important, she tries to convince Gould that he need not perpetuate the system of exploitation that he labours in as an "old whore." He can make a difference by "greenlighting" a film based on a radiation novel, a film that would be more socially responsible than the "buddy picture" that Fox had previously pitched to his friend and associate. Advising Gould on his personal life as well, she points out that the project could give him transcendence, something to aspire to. "You say that you prayed to be pure. What if your prayers were answered?" (60). If Karen's prayers are answered, she would be involved in the production of the film, seemingly because its issues are so important to her. "I don't care in what capacity, well, why *should* I, 'cause I don't have any skills . . . that's presumptuous, of *course*, in any way I could. But I'd just like, it would be so important to me, to be there" (52).

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51McDonough, "Staging Masculinity," 94.
When she is in private with Gould, Karen knows how to appeal to his cynical sensibilities. Knowing her audience, in fact, seems to be a key component to her personality, which suggests, as more than one reviewer has done, that she has had as much experience in the "con game" as either Fox or Gould.\textsuperscript{53} She confesses to him in a way that prefigures Carol in Oleanna: "I, I, I've been depraved, too, I've been frightened. . . . I know what it is to be bad, I've been bad . . . " (58). We are left to insinuate the precise circumstances of both her downfall and her triumph over depravity, but the confession does add layers to Karen's character in regards to background, motivation and objective. She has obviously learned the language and behavior needed to survive in this space and with this background knowledge, or subtext, about Karen an audience can construct her as a three dimensional character. Perhaps she is not as interesting or as roundly drawn as Fox and Gould, but her behavior indicates resistance to objectification and idealization in this dominant space.

Much of the potential agency that Karen represents seems to have been undone--reduced to two-dimensionality--by the forces that brought Speed-the-Plow to the stage for its first production in New York in 1988. Madonna was cast in the role of Karen, and while her notoriety could bring audiences to the theatre, her presence diverted attention away from the character and onto her own persona. As Jeanne-Andrée Nelson writes, Madonna, regardless of her performance, could only "lend to the character two archetypical female attributes: femme fatale or redeemer, poison or medicine."\textsuperscript{54} It seems that director Gregory Mosher could not see beyond those attributes either. "The audience is meant to go out asking one another: Is she an angel? Is she a whore?"\textsuperscript{55} One might ask how (and indeed if) an audience is meant to critique Fox's perception of Karen in terms of those two rather


\textsuperscript{54}Nelson, 80.

tired, essentializing categories when the director of the play wants them to do the same.

Fox feels threatened by Karen's sudden influence on Gould, rightly believing that their antagonistic positions cannot both hold power over him. Thus, the paranoid Fox tries to discredit her in the mind of his friend and so systematically reduces Karen into base sexuality.

I'll explain it to you. (Pause) A beautiful and an ambitious woman comes to town. Why? Why does anyone come here? You follow my argument? (Pause) Everyone wants power. How do we get it? Work. How do they get it? Sex. The End. She's different? Nobody's different. You aren't, I'm not, why should she? The broad wants power. How do I know? Look: She's out with Albert Schweitzer working in the jungle? No: she's here in movieland, Bob, and she trades the one thing in that she's got, her looks, get into a position of authority--through you (71).

Like Teach before him, Fox cannot conceive, or cannot admit in this masculine space, that a woman could earn her way to power. Rather, she must con, and the proper, masculine con is a display of convincing verbal prowess. Karen's manipulation, by comparison, is sexual. And because Fox cannot compete with Karen on that level, he fears he will be displaced by her. Thus, he further discredits Karen in his associate's mind by convincing Gould of her insincerity. "You came to his house with the preconception, you wanted him to greenlight the book ... If he had said 'No,' would you have gone to bed with him?" (77). She responds, "No." The only way that the two men are able to interpret her reply is that she has, indeed, traded sex for power. She is banished, pushed off the stage and out of the studio offices under the threat of violence if she tries to return. "You ever come on the lot again, I'm going to have you killed" (80). Thus, with the assertion of physical domination, the play ends with male loyalty and companionship restored in Mamet's masculine space.

FOX: What are we put on earth to do?
GOULD: We're here to make a movie.
FOX: Whose names go above the title?
GOULD: Fox and Gould.
FOX: Then how bad can life be? (82).

Karen, the "temporary," is now erased from this masculine order. No matter how much she thought, desired or acted, her voice alone—her presence as a solitary woman in a masculine world—is not powerful enough to unsettle these masculine relations. In fact, she seems to have brought the men closer together. "As a woman," counters Jeanne-Andrée Nelson, "she perseveres to register her voice within the discourse of two men. Her mode of reading the novel on radiation is in itself an interpretation, an irruption in the symbolic order." However, if Karen can be swept out of the office and silenced so decisively, one must question the effectiveness of her irruption. If Fox and Gould reinscribe misogyny in Speed-the-Plow, does Mamet see his audience, or himself, for that matter, as complicit in that reinscription?

As his last full-length play before Oleanna, Speed-the-Plow returns Mamet’s masculine space to a state of ambivalent equilibrium. Carla McDonough cogently argues that since masculinity and dominance are asserted or performed primarily through speech, the masculine space itself "disappears the moment [the characters] are silent." And, this time, when Mamet reopens the dialectic of sexual antagonism, he takes to task issues of language, space and dominance which seem to be drawing men and women ever more apart. As for the female character in Oleanna, she seems to have some knowledge of the history of the "Mamet Women" that came before her, as illustrated by her unrelenting struggle for equality in the masculine space of the university. Wanting not to be silenced, dismissed, marginalized or objectified, she asserts herself, mistakenly on behalf of all women, with a blinding and destructive vengeance.

56 Nelson, 81.
57 McDonough, 101.
CHAPTER TWO
The Intriguing Action of Language and Learning

People can say what they will, we men think, but if I get pushed just one little step further, why I might, I might just ____ (FILL IN THE BLANK) because she seems to have forgotten that I'M STRONGER THAN HER . . . . We've all got to have an ace in the hole when dealing with those who are stronger.\textsuperscript{58}

In Chapter One of this thesis I established a feminist analysis of Mamet's theatrical space and examined how the playwright's "universal" critique of a society devoid of morality is generally dramatized in a masculine space. In \textit{Speed-the-Plow}, when Mamet deals explicitly with the issues of sexual negotiations and gender antagonism, he introduces Karen, a strong female subject, who manages to register a protesting voice in the male domain of film production where language and sex are used as weapons in a quest for dominance. Nevertheless, she is, in the final analysis, quite easily banished by the men who control that world. This action presents a difficult paradox for the female reader: on the one hand, she is asked to endorse Mamet's indictment of the immoral behavior of the male characters, while, at the same time, accepting that any such critique is only achieved by first "obliterating the woman."\textsuperscript{59}

Mamet's \textit{Oleanna} concentrates and intensifies the conflict presented in \textit{Speed-the-Plow}. Indeed, in \textit{Oleanna} Mamet grapples with a similar issue, but here the female character will not allow herself to be banished. In fact, by the final curtain, it seems certain that it is the male character who will be cast out of the masculine space: in this case, the once stable university system. Thus, the very definitions of space and dominance in \textit{Oleanna} are at risk of rupturing.

\textit{Oleanna} is first and foremost a drama about changing power relations. The play revolves around a seemingly false complaint of sexual harassment, brought against John—a male university professor in his forties—by a twenty-something

\textsuperscript{58}Mamet, "True Stories of Bitches," \textit{Restaurants}, 44.
\textsuperscript{59}Nelson, 73.
female student named Carol. In terms of a character portrait, there are many parallels between John and Ricky Roma from *Glengarry Glen Ross*: they are both intelligent, witty, outwardly charming, yet inwardly cunning and fueled by competition and self-interest. Carol is the perfect foil (and spoil) for John's manipulative charms: vulnerable, suspicious, angry, dogmatic and envious, she battles John to either usurp his security and privilege or destroy them altogether. Already, in just his choice of characters and their relative social positions, we can see how Mamet has set up the terms of a power imbalance in the play through several binary oppositions: teacher and student, man and woman, age and youth, experience and ignorance, privilege and deprivation, dominance and subjugation. These opposites are subject to frequent reversals, as we shall see in this chapter, but they are never actually reconciled.

In an interview with Melvyn Bragg, Mamet has stated that these choices are intended to make the specific issues of the play give way to a broader realm of ethical signification. "If the play has any life past it being a 'succès de scandale,' it's because it's provocative in a way larger than the issues. Not that it's about sexual harassment, which of course it is--that issue's going to fade--but that it's about power." He has held this philosophy throughout his career as playwright, expressing that "the purpose of the theatre is not primarily to deal with social issues; it's to deal with spiritual ones." But *Oleanna's* durability remains uncertain, because, as we shall see throughout the next chapters, its success in the theatres was, perhaps, too strongly rooted in controversial social issues.

There are, however, many opportunities in the play to see beyond the issues, as Mamet suggests. In this chapter, I will investigate some of the ways in which *Oleanna* attempts to and succeeds in transcending the specific issues in which it is

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60 Mamet, interview, *Arts Edge*, The Knowledge Network, Vancouver, aired 5 Feb. 1996. All quotations by Mamet specific to *Oleanna* are my own transcriptions from the Arts Edge interview and some have been altered or condensed to appear more fluid on the page.
grounded, as well as the ways in which that transcendence is undermined by Mamet's own playwriting choices. Specifically, I will concentrate on two aspects of power dynamics in the play as they relate to gender relations (man and woman, mind and body), and pedagogical theory (teacher/student relations) to show how these oppositions are (re)presented through language.

The plot of *Oleanna* involves three private meetings between a teacher of educational philosophy and his struggling student. In the first meeting, Carol has come to her professor's office to seek help after receiving a failing grade on her term paper. At the second meeting, we learn that she has felt threatened by his words and actions during this meeting—particularly a touch on her shoulder—while she was alone with him, because she files a complaint, citing sexual harassment and misuse of power both in and out of the classroom. Carol uses the opportune gathering of the Tenure Committee who are in the midst of granting tenure to John, the professor, to deal with her complaint—diverting their original purpose and restructuring their investigation into a trial about John's "fitness" for tenure. Believing he can reason with the student and settle the matter—which in his perception is a clear case of Carol's misinterpretation of events—before the Committee meets, John calls a second meeting. Teacher and student, man and woman, they present and argue their positions, reminiscent of the dialectic of Creon and Antigone, each one trying to convince the other to see the events "truthfully." When their cases are argued, and stalemate is unbroken, Carol readies to leave the office. John means to keep arguing until he has won, and "restrains her from leaving" (57) the office.

Between the second and third meetings, the offstage Committee has met and judged in favour of Carol's position. Not only have they denied John tenure, but they have dismissed him as an instructor at the school. John tries a second and final time to reason with Carol in what has now become a nightmarish situation for him: his tenure and job gone, he will also lose a house that he was in mid-negotiation to
buy. At this point in the story, plot and logic seem to fly almost out of control. Carol agrees that there is a way for her, and the feminist Group that backs her, to retract her complaint and possibly reinstate John in his position: she "feels entitled to dictate the new curriculum" and presents him with a list of books to be banned from the course reading list--his own included. "Someone chooses the books. If you can choose them, others can" (74). In short, if he is to be reinstated, it will be as a puppet for the agenda of Carol and her Group. Next, he learns that Carol has filed another charge, this time in the courts. His "restraint" has been upgraded to "rape" and Carol's motivation seems to be less a pursuit of justice than a witch hunt. He yells at her to get out of his office because reasoning is no longer possible between them. As she is just about to leave, almost as an afterthought, Carol interjects into John's telephone conversation with his wife, instructing him that his language is demeaning: he has called his wife "Baby." Here, whatever linguistic domination John has previously displayed suddenly erupts into physical violence, as he beats Carol and knocks her to the floor, calling her a "vicious little bitch" and a "cunt" (79). After a pause, the two speak, seemingly unaware of each other's presence. The play ends with John articulating shock ("... well...") and Carol, resignation ["Yes. That's right... yes. That's right" (80)].

In the interview with Bragg, Mamet asserts that, as a tragedy, Oleanna is a play about a man who comes to the realization that he is the cause of his own downfall. This statement contradicts what many critics and audience members have seen as a story about a man destroyed by one woman's vengeful "political correctness." It is an interesting phenomenon that opinions about this play, very vocal and often angry, have been so divided along lines of allocating "fault." In general, audience members have tended to align themselves with the arguments of either Carol or John. It is clear that they are manipulated into taking sides in a

63 Mamet, Arts Edge.
"complicated, intense, personal and subjective"\textsuperscript{64} debate of sexual politics that currently rages in North America. Audience members and readers familiar with Mamet's plays or screenplays about the art of the "con,"\textsuperscript{65} for example, may well enjoy uncovering Mamet's playwriting tricks and strategies as the story unfolds; those unfamiliar with his tactics of persuasion have a greater chance of being manipulated.

Most important, Mamet positions his audience members as witnesses to a controversial event and so implicates them directly in a divisive and topical debate about sexual politics--part of the everyday discourse governing their world--that is represented in the play by the flawed, yet often persuasive arguments of the two characters. And while a need to voice an opinion does draw audiences into the theatres, it frequently leaves them mired not only in a need to judge right and wrong, but in a carefully constructed confusion of the issues. Mamet explains during the Bragg interview that,

\begin{quote}

The play was legitimately controversial, in that . . . one group would say, he's \textit{absolutely} right. "You don't understand," they'd say, "You don't understand. I know what controversy is. Controversy's all well and good, but YOU'RE WRONG." And then the other person says, "No, you're wrong." . . . Each group would then say, "Yes, I understand, but you're mistaken."\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

The phenomenon will become more clear, however, after I review Mamet's manipulative playwriting choices in \textit{Oleanna}: containing the play, for example, within a professor's office, and therefore limiting what can and cannot happen in the drama; playing with perceptions of time; couching the problem of domination within an intellectually hegemonic discourse; withholding information from the audience about Carol and supplying it about John. This list is extensive and will be addressed more fully in the chapters to come.

\textsuperscript{64}Glynis Leyshon in Harry Flood, "John, Carol, Dread and Malice," \textit{Living West} Oct. 1994: 14.
\textsuperscript{65}See \textit{Glengarry Glen Ross}, the film \textit{Things Change}, and especially \textit{House of Games}.
\textsuperscript{66}Mamet, \textit{Arts Edge}. 
In this chapter, I will focus on the textual strategies that Mamet constructs in his "blueprint for mimetic action." Seeing and reading a play have different advantages and disadvantages. Readers, for example, have one advantage over viewers in that they can see the epigraphs that Mamet has chosen for the play. The purpose of such quotations is to link the play to external discourses, both enriching and distancing the reader from the text at hand. Especially in Mamet's case, they usually act as an "ironic indicator" to guide the reader towards understanding the subtext that permeates throughout his plays. Mamet frames the text of Oleanna with two epigraphs: the first comes from Samuel Butler's posthumously published novel, The Way of All Flesh; the second from an American post civil war folk song.

Written between 1873-1884 and published in 1903, Butler's novel has been said to have rung the death knell of Victorian values, asking for the "recovery of common sense." Mamet, too, writing during our own purported fin-de-siècle crisis of morality, may have prescriptive aims of exposing and undoing what he sees as a return, in American society, to narrow Victorian dictates of acceptable sensibilities:

Everybody in America, well men and women . . . at least middle class white men and women . . . seem to be terrified of each other, in the main. What can one say? What can't one say? How does one behave correctly?

More specifically, the selected quote from the novel seems to point to an individual's inability to see beyond him/herself to the institutions or environments that shape them.

The want of fresh air does not seem much to affect the happiness of children in a London alley: the greater part of them sing and play as though they were on a moor in Scotland. So the absence of a genial atmosphere is not commonly recognized by children who have never

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70 Mamet, Arts Edge.
known it. Young people have a marvelous faculty of either dying or adapting themselves to circumstances. Even if they are unhappy—very unhappy—it is astonishing how easily they can be prevented from finding it out, or at any rate from attributing it to any cause other than their own sinfulness.\textsuperscript{71}

E.M. Forster called Butler the "master of the oblique,"\textsuperscript{72} and certainly this passage is difficult to make sense of. I see it as a sympathetic gesture towards Carol, the only "young person" in the play. If \textit{Oleanna} is an indictment of the attempted democratization of "college education since the war" (33), then Carol will never have known a different systemic "atmosphere," as Butler defines it, other than the post-war system into which she was born. Influenced by different political beliefs and socio-economic pressures than were known by the generation preceding her, the young student must adapt to her historical circumstance or risk failure in the system. As well, like the urban children in Butler's novel who blame themselves for their poor living conditions, Carol confesses her "sinfulness" in the first act of Mamet's play. "I'm bad. (Pause) Oh, God. (Pause)" (38). She must learn to see beyond herself, to look towards systemic failures as well as her own. On the other hand, the professor, John, must learn to bring his own analysis inward, and learn how his behavior perpetuates an inhospitable "mental atmosphere" in the education system. Thus, the epigraph sets up the terms of a personal journey that each character must go through in the play.

The second epigraph cites a verse from an old folk song:

\begin{quote}
Oh to be in \textit{Oleanna},
That's where I would rather be.
Than be bound in Norway
And drag the chains of slavery.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

The song speaks of a desire to throw off terms of enslavement and join a utopian community. At first, like the passage from Butler's novel, its link to the play seems

\textsuperscript{72}In Butler, xi.
\textsuperscript{73}Mamet, \textit{Oleanna}, x.
nebulosity, as the name "Oleanna" is never mentioned in Mamet's text. But, any missed cultural references are explained by the playwright. According to Mamet,

_**Oleanna** was the title of a song . . . in Western Pennsylvania, a planned community set up in the post-Civil War period by a Norwegian singer who made a lot of money and wanted to make a beautiful community for Norwegians to come and live in. His name was Ole and his wife's name was Anna, so he called it Oleanna. It failed and everybody went bust. _**Oleanna** is a play about a failed Utopia, in this case the failed utopia of Academia._

Through these epigraphs, Mamet already signals--to his reader at least--that his social critique is aimed at the institution of the university: an institution which, as Henry Giroux explains, is only now developing a pedagogy that allows students the "opportunity to develop the critical capacity to challenge and transform . . . the conditions of knowledge production and acquisition._

_Previously, Giroux writes, the institution would simply "expunge the stories, traditions and voices of those who, by virtue of race, class and gender, constitute[d] the "Other."_ Giroux's analysis is reinforced by the specifically feminist study of Dawn Currie and Valerie Raoul who track the socio-historical development of certain differentiations between men and women: the former is associated with the mind and the latter, the body. They speak of a patriarchal authority which privileged and institutionalized reason and logic as "legitimate" knowledge, whereas women's "ways of knowing" were more or less dismissed. They state that this action has "rob[bed] women of authority by denying them a meaningful role in the making of knowledge and culture._

Eventually, groups who have been denied meaningful input into knowledge production, by virtue of their race, class or gender, will want to (re)claim that right, as Carol tries to do in _Oleanna_. As for the university system

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75Giroux, "Modernism," 47.

76Giroux, 24.


78Currie and Raoul, 4.
itself, it needs to accommodate this growing unrest, as Giroux suggests, through (pedagogical) reform which, according to the old adage, is the best nemesis to (intellectual) revolution.

If, as the title suggests, the play is about Oleanna, the utopia, and not limited to the conflict or issues that are generated by the actions and passions of the two characters in the play, then Butler's passage may be re-visioned to have systemic implications. The system itself must adapt to its historical circumstances, the demographics of which, "since the war" (33), have widely included women, racial minorities and openly gay students: in short, the targets of abuse and hatred by many of the characters in Mamet's earlier plays. Veronica Strong-Boag, the director of the Centre for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations at UBC, addressed that very issue during a debate on November 9, 1995. "[If] universities today continue to privilege the remnants of a patriarchal, homophobic and racist class order, they guarantee growing irrelevance."79 To reverse this process, the institution, like John, must turn its examination inward to acknowledge its own "sinfulness." And, as we shall see, both John and Carol will undergo a change from their experiences in the play, but the system itself will remain unmoved.

The audience must extrapolate the nature of the system's sinfulness from the conflicting fears and desires of individuals that they see within it. At first, the system seems to conform with Currie's and Raoul's notion that the man (John, the intellectual) is associated with the mind, and the woman (Carol, the self-perceived victim of sexual harassment) with the body. For now, let us focus on Carol who demonstrates a profound fear of both intellectual and sexual domination. I would argue that Carol's conflation of sexual and intellectual rape (67) represents a reunification of the Cartesian mind/body split: the idea that the "mind exists independently of bodily need and individual experience."80 In other words, in Carol's perception, the linguistic domination that she experiences in either John's

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80Currie and Raoul, 1.
classroom or his office registers in her body as corporeal experience even before physical interaction occurs. In this excerpt from the third act of the play, she conjoins her description of John's verbal and physical harassment, implying that she believes them to be equally harmful.

**CAROL:** A joke you have told with a sexist tinge. The language you use, a verbal or physical caress, yes, yes, I know, you say that it is meaningless. I understand. I differ from you. To lay a hand on someone's shoulder.

**JOHN:** It was devoid of sexual content.

**CAROL:** I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT. Don't you begin to see? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY (70).

Carol's intense and single-minded push to assert her subjective experience as proven fact raises the idea that she is driven by a desire to force a seemingly unwavering system to acknowledge that her subjectivity is as legitimate a claim to establishing "fact" and "truth" as either reason or logic. When Carol sees the abuses of that system take human form in the guise of John, she pursues him until, she feels, her opponent can be beaten.

In Carol's antagonist, Mamet has created a slippery figure; he is a man whose behavior probably deserves to be investigated for abuses of power, but not based solely on his interaction with this one student. Because Mamet chooses to limit the scope of the play to the conflict between these two characters, he does not allow his audience to see John behaving "inappropriately" with other people or in other situations. Thus, one cannot prove that he is guilty by nature. On the other hand, it is clear that John, as theatre critic Colin Thomas rightly argues, has managed to sublimate or redirect a "fundamentally abusive nature." Evidence of this can be seen, first in his conversational domination of Carol, and then in the physical restraint of his student. Last, in the final moments of the play, John resorts to physical and verbal assault against the young woman. This sudden outbreak of pre-cultural domination, or, as Mamet describes it, the male's "ace in the hole,"

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explains, in part, Carol’s paranoid sense that John has been abusive all along and had to be held accountable for it.

Still, John had to be badgered beyond endurance before he struck out at Carol. Indeed, in one respect, he is victimized throughout the play. After he has tried to help his student, she returns with inflammatory charges about his intentional use of sexual domination and abuse of power. So, one must ask the crucial question, does John use either his gender, age or status to wield power over Carol? There are many ways of interpreting John’s motivation, but let us first assume that he is unaware of the effects of his actions because—in the terms set out by Sigmund Freud’s theory of sublimation—

82—he has not only buried his instinctual impulses (violence, anger and sexual drives), but buried the memory of this denial. Consequently, his instincts have been so well repressed that he seems to have no awareness that his words or actions carry in them the potential of a double meaning: "Let's, get on with it" (5); "I don’t know how to do it, other than to be personal" (19); "I like you" (21); I have problems . . . with my wife" (22); "I’ll make you a deal . . . If you come back and meet with me. A few more times. Your grade's an 'A'

(25); "There's no one here but you and me" (27). Such are the phrases that are included in Carol’s report and, plucked out of context, they all seem to be dripping with sexual innuendo. In light of Carol’s fear and John's unawareness, one can see how Carol could infer that John was setting the stage for a sexual liaison with her.

It is also possible that John intentionally uses his power over Carol to satisfy certain of his needs or desires: perhaps it is John's self-confessed "love of performance" (43) that incites him to show off for his student, flirting with the possibility that she might find him attractive. In this case, he may not even wish to follow through on his advances, but needs to allow himself this fantasy. At the same time, he could well intend to pursue a relationship with Carol throughout the semester. After all, he would have a captive and private audience if she agrees to

continue to meet with him for these tutorials. If this motivation is true, it sheds a
different light on John's tactics; he lies throughout the rest of the play. As such,
John is not victimized by either Carol or the Tenure Committee, but rather, held
accountable for his inappropriate behavior. He calls Carol back to his office to
convince her of his innocence, but it is a false innocence. In this way, he continues
to implicate himself and ruin his chances of being cleared of the charges of sexual
harassment. Matthew Roudané explains how this typical "Mametian" act of trying
to undo the effects of unethical behavior turns into unconscious self-destruction.

The problem facing Mamet's characters is that they struggle to avoid
crux confrontations while, paradoxically, committing ethically perverse
deeds which drive them deeper into the very predicaments from
which they desperately try to escape.83

In any of the above possibilities, Carol believes herself fully justified in her
accusations of sexism, and so continues to attack John's basic patriarchal rights: the
right to economic privilege, the right to employment, and so on. But when she
dictates that he is no longer entitled to the rights to a proper defense and a fair trial,
as well as the sacrosanct right to free speech, she loses ethical justification. At this
point, her abuse of power eclipses John's. In fact, looking ahead to the end of the
play when John lashes out against Carol, she has completely reversed the power
dynamics of the first act. As Pascale Hubert-Leibler points out, "the character in the
teacher's position has to deal with the double threat of creating a rival for himself
and losing his domination over the student."84 Certainly, Carol is now the
"teacher" with the right to instruct, offer reward and distribute punishment. She
possesses the power that the dominant group bestows upon itself, whereas John has
lost everything. By staging John's retaliation against this oppressive force, Mamet
gives the audience a much needed cathartic release.

84Pascale Hubert-Leibler, "Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher-Student Relationship in the Plays of
Until the final moments of the play, Mamet weaves this narrative of dominance and anguish almost entirely through language. It could easily be transferred to the radio, as Mamet prescribes, "and lose nothing"\(^85\) in the transference. Thus, we enter into Mamet's mastered dramaturgical territory: plays of language where plot and action are generated from dialogue.\(^86\) Admittedly, the very choice to use the dramatic form most often means that a writer wishes to explore themes through character dialogue, but, as William W. Demastes explains, Mamet will almost always privilege his "intriguing 'action' of language"\(^87\) over any extravagant, metaphoric business on-stage. And according to Anne Dean, "the very structure of the play reflects its linguistic strategy."\(^88\) In *Oleanna* we see Mamet utilizing a new level of language, one that may not seem familiar to his regular readers and audience members. In general, his subjects have been the inarticulate outsiders and "social failures of American society"\(^89\): in short, characters on the lower echelons of society who are recognizable to, but not included in the company of, the cultured, young, urban male that Ilkka Joki describes as Mamet's ideal reader or viewer of his plays.\(^90\) Thus, Mamet has usually let his audience members distance themselves from his characters, so that they can ironize and objectify the characters' inferior (albeit fictional) behavior and language.

In *Oleanna*, especially in the dialogue of the professor, Mamet puts a new spin on his usual tactic of having his characters speak "below" his audience. In this play, John has access to and agility within a level of language which is elevated far above everyday conversational levels, and which is specific to his role as an academic and educator. Unless an audience--whether that audience, like Carol, is contained within the play or is a viewer from beyond the fourth wall--is familiar

\(^{85}\)Mamet, *Arts Edge*.
\(^{87}\)Demastes, 68.
\(^{89}\)Almansi, 195.
\(^{90}\)Ilkka Joki, "David Mamet's Drama: The Dialogicality of Grotesque Realism," 80-98.
with John's job-specific jargon, his language will seem abstracted and inaccessible. But John was not born "knowing" this language; he has raised himself into understanding from a position where he felt he was "stupid" (15), "incompetent," "unworthy," and "unprepared" (17). "The simplest problem," he states, "was beyond me. It was a mystery" (16). Now, John is in a privileged position of being able to move between these two levels of language, as he does, for example, in his phone conversations with his wife Grace and friend Jerry. And, most overtly in Act II, he uses that knowledge to his advantage in order to create distance between himself and Carol and consciously try to assert power over her.

That Mamet chooses to have John speak over the heads of his readers or viewers potentially puts them in a position to empathize with Carol: the sense of humiliation that she feels during her first encounter with the professor can easily be understood by an audience who is also excluded from his discourse. Indeed by having John read a passage from her essay aloud—an exaggeratedly comical/tautological part—Mamet establishes our allegiance with Carol. Who, during their schooling, has not felt at some point either unprepared or incompetent in a student-teacher exchange? Carol not only feels that she is unprepared for this particular exchange, but has convinced herself that she is actually unable to learn. "That meant I'm stupid. And I'll never learn. That's what that meant. And you're right" (14).

Faced with this sense of inadequacy, she resorts to a style of learning, probably the only one that has been required of her throughout her education, that popular education theorist Paolo Freire has called the "banking method." 91 In it, the student is treated as a storehouse of information—receiving, collating and cataloging "facts" of a fixed content. Accordingly, Carol parrots John's lectures, constantly referring to her class notes to "make sure that [she has] it right" (27). It follows that when she is asked to write an essay to express her own ideas, she cannot do it. She writes, "I

think that the ideas contained in this work express the author's feelings in a way that he intended, based on his results" (8). The quality of her writing is so poor and the argument is so weak that we must ask a fundamental question: by what merit has Carol been granted access to her university courses at all? Whatever judgments we come to, we must remember that they are based on highly select information. Perhaps the rest of Carol's essay did make some valid arguments, and the above passage, which seems to be the conclusion to her paper, simply reflects a lack of time, thought or experience in restating her arguments and closing the paper.

Nevertheless, Carol cannot learn in a vacuum; teaching and learning are inseparable components of the same process. Part of the responsibility is the professor's, who must employ a style of teaching and establish an atmosphere in his classroom that will encourage his students to participate in the process of learning. As education teacher John should, above all, act as a model for creating a supportive atmosphere in a classroom, because he knows that his students will, in turn, become teachers. Yet, he uses his class as a personal space to speak solely as an expert in his field, and not as a facilitator for his students' ideas. From evidence in the text, John supports his lectures with information from a textbook that he himself has written. What other sources, if any, he is using is never made clear; and without this information, the audience is left to assume that he uses his classroom to propagate his "self-generated theories."92 Pascale Hubert-Leibler defines this as an "autonomous" mode of teaching. According to this mode, the teacher "delivers the text of his lesson, gives orders and advice, without inviting any comment other than unconditional acceptance from his listener, whose role it is to commit his words to paper or memory and submit to his authority."93 In this way, the classroom becomes, not so much a space for learning, but rather a linguistically dominated space where power is created and perpetuated by the speaker.

92Mamet, Arts Edge. Interestingly enough, Mamet uses this phrase as a type of self-parody in his interview with Melvyn Bragg.
93Hubert-Leibler, 71.
As for the atmosphere inside John's classroom, Mamet has made it clear that John is an aggressive teacher who sees it as his task to provoke his students, even if it means creating a combative learning environment.

JOHN: . . . that's my job, don't you know.
CAROL: What is?
JOHN: To provoke you.
CAROL: No.
JOHN: Oh. Yes, though.
CAROL: To provoke me?
JOHN: That's right.
CAROL: To make me mad?
JOHN: That's right. To force you . . .
CAROL: . . . to make me mad is your job?
JOHN: To force you to . . . (32).

These complexities and contradictions in John's character give him a three-dimensionality that is never quite manifest in Carol. His brevity and impatience, his aggressiveness and condescension are balanced with an apparently genuine love of teaching and a desire to help a student that he had previously overlooked in his classroom. For all the badgering of his student in the first act, John is trying to counteract the negative vision that Carol has built of herself and replace it with a positive one to which she can aspire. "Listen to this. If the young child is told he cannot understand. Then he takes it as a description of himself. What am I? I am that which can not understand" (16). Nevertheless, John does not speak to Carol's experience. Note the pronouns John uses: he always speaks in terms of a masculine subject. Carol constantly tries to make his references gender-neutral in Act I, but John shows no sign of noticing. It is not until the second act that Carol finds a context to explain her disapproval of his use of masculinist language. In fact, John's terms of reference always stem from his own experience; he never waits to hear Carol define her own. Paolo Freire, by comparison, builds his theory of education from the idea that students can participate in their own learning process through that vast source of knowledge accrued through their own life experience. In this process, called the "conscientization" of the classroom, it is the teacher's place to
facilitate the evocation—rather than John's preference for provocation—of those experiences in order for all parties to learn from each other.

Mamet, as Hubert-Leibler rightly argues, uses an alternative paradigm of teacher-student relationships where the "teacher has the automatic right to speech." The teacher teaches, but does not necessarily learn from his student. In this way, John's speech habits echo those of earlier mentor figures in Mamet's dramas, such as Bernie Litko in Sexual Perversity, Teach in American Buffalo or Fox in Speed-the-Plow who all dominated their theatrical space through language. As a professional teacher, rather than a mentor figure, John lends an immediate sense of authority to his speech which "grants [him] control over communication." As bell hooks describes, there is many a classroom filled with "compelling, benevolent dictators" who "exercise power and authority within their mini-kingdom." This description fits John quite well. Whether consciously or unconsciously, John repeatedly uses this authority to dominate conversation, people and space with his "right to speech." Indeed, Oleanna opens with one of John's most dominating, and repetitive, actions: he talks on the phone to his wife, completely ignoring the student in his office. This one-sided conversation, in effect, demonstrates the "right to speech" as well as the relative powerlessness of Carol. Genuine communication between teacher and student is simply not possible when John is speaking in this manner.

The opening monologue sets up several motifs and manipulations that Mamet continues to use throughout the play. First, when John talks on the phone, we are given access to his private life outside the setting of the play. Such a link into his personal life gives an audience the opportunity to identify with John as a rounded, three-dimensional character. Similar insight into Carol's "self" is never offered; her alignment with the amorphously characterized "Group" lacks the same

94 Hubert-Leibler, 71.
95 Hubert-Leibler, 74.
96 bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress (New York: Routledge, 1994) 17.
impact. With John's public and private worlds conflated, brought into contact and conflict on the phone, we witness how he might behave with people other than Carol, even if they are not actually brought onstage in the play. Specifically, we see his anger break through during his conversations with his wife. "Where are the notes we took with her. (Pause) I thought you were? No. No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I just thought that I saw you, when we were there . . . what . . . ? I thought I saw you with a pencil. WHY NOW?" (1). If the telephone becomes a kind of third character, moving along the plot by feeding information to John and Carol (as well as the audience) that would otherwise remain unknown, it is significant that this information is always filtered or spoken through John. In his office, Carol does not have the right to use the phone for similar long and illuminating conversations. Unable to speak in this space, owned and dominated by her professor, Carol cannot tell similar tales about herself, so she remains more or less unknown, except through what we see of her, or our own conjecture, throughout the play.

John, however, is endowed with a life outside his profession: specific family ties, struggles, and aspirations. He is in his tenure year, moving into a new phase in his life of secured status and privilege. Moreover, he is buying a new house to reflect this change. He even speaks for the first time in the above monologue in terms of a legacy for his son: "The yard for the boy" (2). Equally important, in accordance with the teacher's "right to speech," John uses terminology with such authority that the audience should assume he understands its meaning, even when we do not. "What did she say," he asks his wife, "is it a 'term of art,' are we bound by it . . ." (2). When Carol asks him to define the term's meaning, he cannot.

CAROL: (Pause) What is a "term of art"?
JOHN: What is a "term of art"? 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. That, I believe, is what a "term of art," would mean. (Pause).

CAROL: You don't know what it means . . . ?
JOHN: I'm not sure that I know what it means (2-3).

Perhaps put off by not having "unconditional acceptance" from Carol, in being caught not knowing something that he feigned to know, John pushes himself to prove that he is an authority with the "right to speech." Indeed, he himself states that people feel anger when they are opposed (30). John's instinctive domination is apparent in the following sequence from the play where he does everything—interjects, interrupts, instructs, hypothesizes, philosophizes, condescends—but converse with her.

CAROL: . . . that it is prejudice that we should go to school?
JOHN: Exactly. (Pause)
CAROL: How can you say that? How . . .
JOHN: Good. Good. Good. That's right! Speak up! What is a prejudice? An unreasoned belief. We are all subject to it. None of us is not. When it is threatened, or opposed, we feel anger, and feel, do we not? As you do now. Do you not? Good.
CAROL: . . . but how can you . . .
JOHN: . . . let us examine. Good.
CAROL: How . . .
JOHN: Good. Good. When . . .
CAROL: I'M SPEAKING . . . (Pause)
JOHN: I'm sorry.
CAROL: How can you . . .
JOHN: . . . I beg your pardon.
CAROL: That's all right.
JOHN: I beg your pardon.
CAROL: That's all right.
JOHN: I'm sorry I interrupted you (30-31).

This exchange between teacher and student began with Carol's need for explanation and clarification of John's class lectures, and, indeed, much of this expository first act revolves around the explanation of John's philosophy of education. This critique of educational establishments tends to be overshadowed by the more dramatic events of the second and third acts, but it is important to remember that this information is a basis for understanding the debate that is to come. The seeds of antagonism are sown in this first act when John and Carol take different sides on issues such as the usefulness and right of access to higher education, as well as the moral responsibilities of teachers to their students. In
Carol’s eyes, John has taken a hypocritical stance on the issues, arguing that college education is "something-other-than-useful," (28) and a "prolonged and systematic hazing" (35); yet he reaps the benefits (tenure, security, economic advancement) from a system that he belittles.

The inspiration for Mamet’s creation of yet another system lapsed into moral disarray stems from theoretical works by a great range of authors: historians, economists, psychoanalysts, theatre directors, etc.. In the case of Oleanna, the source text for John’s pedagogical stance can be traced back to Thorstein Veblen. In his 1918 text, Higher Learning in America, Veblen formulates an argument similar to John’s. The idea that education is "something-other-than-useful" is an extension of Veblen’s assertion that people "look to the universities to continue this work of idle curiosity and disinterested scholarship under some plausible pretext of practicality." Veblen defines idleness as that which is "extra-economic" and not, therefore, a gainful pursuit. John, by comparison, sees education’s lack of benefit, not simply in economic terms, but in the manner in which he sees knowledge passed on in the system; it is like a confidence game where the student stands to lose everything.

We shove this book at you, we say read it. Now, you say you’ve read it? I think that you’re lying. I’ll grill you, and when I find you’ve lied, you’ll be disgraced, and your life will be ruined. It’s a sick game. Why do we do it? Does it educate? In no sense. Well then, what is higher education? It is something-other-than-useful (28).

Veblen explains how universities have exploded in size and scope by "answering to the manner of ideals and aspirations" of the upper middle classes. Changing the university’s areas of study to include their own interests, those people have permanently "diverted the academic establishment to anything beyond the

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97 Dennis Carroll writes, “Mamet’s moral vision . . . has been developed and bolstered from a variety of sources: Aristotle, the Stoics, Freud, Karl Marx, Bruno Bettelheim, Joseph Campbell, the Chicago turn-of-the-century economist Thorstein Veblen, Tolstoy and Stanislavsky.” David Mamet, 19.
98 Veblen, Higher Learning In America (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918) 36.
99 Veblen, Higher Learning, 117.
100 Veblen, Higher Learning, 36.
pursuit of knowledge for its own sake." John speaks of essentially the same issue, giving a post-war perspective on Veblen's turn-of-the-century ideas.

I say college education, since the war, has become so a matter of course, and such a fashionable necessity, for those either of or aspiring to to (repetition Mamet) the vast new middle class, that we espouse it, as a matter of right, and have ceased to ask, "What is it good for?" (33).

At the same time that John is denigrating the post-war education system, he is also using--however unskillfully--post-war teaching methods which have developed in response to demands to democratize the classroom. As an instructor in the department of education, it is his responsibility to be familiar with any changes or developments in his field. Consequently, John tries to use some of the lingo of popular educators, asking Carol: "What do you feel?" (37). Although most of John's beliefs run counter to her philosophy of teaching, he uses some of the techniques of bell hooks, who advises that teachers use "confessional narratives" to show "how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material." Sometimes successful, sometimes perplexing, irrelevant or inappropriate (the "rich copulating less often than the poor" (32) analogy is out of place and unillustrative), John's narratives nevertheless represent an attempt to bridge the gap between experience and theory. Once again, as mentioned above, even though John "takes the first risk" in relating his own experience, he does not complete the initiative by allowing Carol to relate hers.

This lesson that composes the first act is bookended by another call from John's wife who continues to worry about the potential loss of their new home. Here again Carol is rendered silent. Finally, it becomes clear that all of the stressful

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101Veblen, Higher Learning, 47.
103hooks, 21.
104hooks, 21.
phone calls from John's wife were really trumped up excuses to get him to come home to a surprise party in celebration of his tenure announcement. Thus, anxiety proves to be manufactured—a misconception. Grace has staged the crisis all along. Likewise, Mamet has staged the crisis for his audience and sets a subtextual precedent in our minds that John can be set up or manipulated by women. In this way, the tone established by this false frenzy is carried over into the second act when the real crisis of the play begins.

Mamet withholds several important contextual markers from his audience at the opening of Act II. In other words, using a pseudo-filmic technique, Mamet asks the audience "to make the jump between the cuts"105 of the first and second acts. First, the passage of time since the first act is left purposefully ambiguous. In fact, we are not informed how much time has passed until Act III, which occurs four months after John and Carol's first meeting. Since Mamet's plays usually conform to the Aristotelian unities of time, space and character, the audience might assume that this second meeting follows closely on the heels of the last. If that is true, however, we will have difficulty conceptualizing how so much off-stage plot, as well as Carol's change in status and confidence, could unfold in so little time.

Second, John opens this act with another, more antiseptic, more dominating monologue than his first. John is still in control of this space; he again asserts his "right to speech" and imposes silence on his listener. He continues to articulate his philosophy of education and of the rights and responsibilities of teachers. Now, however, he tries to use Carol's vulnerability—her inability to understand his specialized discourse—against her; thus, his tone is purposefully distant, professorial and condescending. "Now," he claims, "I was not conscious that it was given me to err upon the other side. And, so, I asked and ask myself if I engaged in heterodoxy, I will not say "gratuitously" for I do not care to posit orthodoxy as a given good" (43). Furthermore, John begins to re-write, as it were, his earlier criticisms of the

education system and its perpetuation of privilege by striking his dissension from the record. Still, the audience has no framework to understand the meaning of his shifting position.

It is at this point, then, that we learn of Carol's complaint; and John's strategy of constructing a linguistic space where Carol feels foolish, unknowledgeable and humbled is slowly but tellingly deconstructed. He does not, as Carol puts it, want to "force [her] to retract" (46) her complaint, but rather to show her the consequences of her actions on him, his job and his family, which he believes she could not have considered. But Carol has considered the consequences, and, in fact, blames John for not seeing the effects of his actions. As such, her silence during his monologue shows someone who is not humbled, but disdainful. When he is done soliloquizing, she openly defies him about his dominating use of language:

JOHN: I don't know . . . I'm always looking for a paradigm for . . .
CAROL: I don't know what a paradigm is.
JOHN: It's a model.
CAROL: Then why can't you use that word? (45).

The next leap of faith Mamet asks his audience to make comes in the text of Carol's report. For all her disdain for John's exclusionary language, she now also engages in intellectually complex descriptions, metaphors and concepts: differentiating, for example, between wrongs done to her body private and body politic. "Whatever you have done to me--to the extent that you've done it to me, do you know, rather than to me as a student, and so, to the student body, is contained in my report" (47). Many critics have cited this leap in Carol's articulateness and powers of conceptualization as a major flaw in the play. I would argue that it is another strategy on the part of the playwright to force his audience either to take sides in the debate of sexual politics or to see beyond these issues. When Carol begins to position herself against John on the basis of class, gender, sexuality and ideology, she alters the nature of Oleanna's original debate about a rather gender-neutral discussion of conflicting philosophies about education. If one can overcome initial resistance to Carol's leap of intelligence and enter into the logic
behind her impassioned argument, it will seem at the same time both artificial and persuasive—as will John's. Neither argument, however, is likely to be reconciled to the other. One feels compelled, therefore, to extend into the process of identification with the characters based on their opposition, rather than the possibility of their reconciliation.

That Carol finds an appropriate (feminist) framework and supportive ears for her experiences is paradoxically both empowering and disabling for her. She is able, on the one hand, to articulate her experiences—something that was denied to her in the more formal institutional setting of John's classroom. Her experiences, however, seem no longer to be hers; they have been appropriated by a Group with a militant political agenda. And, while Carol is justifiably critical of John's dominating behavior, she is wholly indiscriminate about her own increasing domination and manipulation. John denies her skewed version of the events that passed between them: "That is not what I meant at all. I think you know that it is not" (46). Speaking for her once again, denying her experience, and disbelieving that she has "used [her] own words" (49) in the report, John exacerbates the conflict by privileging his "truth" over Carol's. As one critic has pointed out: "Argument versus visceral experience; John's and Carol's positions cannot be reconciled because they take place in different spheres."106 Hence, Carol warns that in this climate an "atmosphere of free discussion is impossible" (69).

Irreconcilable differences and an unwillingness to accept responsibility for their dominating behavior means that both characters can only repeat themselves and escalate their conflict or else end it in a stalemate. At this point, each expands on their opposing positions and they blame each other for disrupting their acquisition of security and status through education, and fail utterly to listen to each other. Truth, they believe, is their own prerogative. For John, truth can be found in his intention; for Carol, it is contained in her report. Still, since neither character is

106 Thomas, "Base for Discussion," 46.
willing to open up their definition of truth to the other's perspective, and since they both need so strongly to win that they continue to meet despite all rational thought, a violent conclusion seems inevitable. Thus, Act III becomes an explanation of how, rather than if, that conclusion will be met.

Act III is the first act to open with John and Carol on equal footing in the linguistic space of the play. They alternate quick bursts of sentence fragments, neither one able to complete a thought and both struggling for dominance. Each has consented to argue, not to agree but to win their objective. Point for point at the opening of Act III, John and Carol are at their most compelling, and, as Mamet has asserted, "they are absolutely both wrong and they are absolutely both right." However, when Carol begins to assert her "right to speech" to the point that she dominates John's office with condescending lectures about his abuse of power and privilege, she turns into little more than an iconoclast of cultural feminism. In these moments of absolute assurance that she has the moral high ground, Carol's characterization dissolves into the status of a mouthpiece for an argument.

Mamet's decision to construct her as a one-dimensional figure of power is unrealistic, even within the fictional space of the play. As long as John has his "name on the door" (76), the physical, if not the linguistic, space in the office is his, and Carol cannot claim that space nor can she dominate it.

However, there are two points that are more worrying here. First, Carol's quick and sweeping victory over John vis-à-vis the sexual harassment charge is an obvious misrepresentation of the long and complicated process of inquiry that would be undertaken by either a departmental or an external review committee at a university. Second, Carol's choice to return to John's office time and time again, after all that has transpired between them, is possible but not probable. On the one hand, Carol might believe that she now wields total power over John so that he can

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107 Mamet, Arts Edge.
108 This issue is crucial to understanding Mamet's manipulation of his audience, and will be examined in further detail in Chapter Four.
no longer harm her. On the other hand, she states that they need to "stick to the 'conventional' process" (56) with regards to her complaint against John, yet she defies court orders that tell her not to see him alone. Ultimately, she compromises her case against him by returning to his office. Worse, she stays there so long, badgering, lecturing and belittling John, that the audience may very well want John to put her back, as it were, in her place.

At this point in the play, the audience must constantly reassess the acceptability of the opposing arguments and then realign itself with one of these characters in the face of the increasing artificiality of the situation. In particular, Carol's case must be entirely reconsidered, as the contrived turn around in her role from victim student to feminist oppressor is problematic to say the least. Where John once negated her experience by speaking for her, she now presumes to speak for other victims who have not yet found their voice. Her use of the pronoun "I" is supplanted by the communal "we." "You write of your 'responsibility to the young'... You write that education is just hazing. (Pause) But we worked to get to this school. (Pause) And some of us. (Pause) Overcame prejudices" (69). Carol finally changes the dynamics of the dialectic absolutely by labeling John's domination of his students "intellectual rape." "I saw you, Professor. For two semesters sit there, stand there and exploit our, as you thought, 'paternal prerogative,' and what is that but rape; I swear to God" (67).

Carol's analogy is what Claudia Brodsky Lacour describes as a "speech act" which "brings a previously nonexistent state of affairs into being." Lacour analyses the example of Justice Clarence Thomas changing forever the nature of his appointment hearings in naming himself the "victim of racism," and thereby redirecting attention away from himself as a perpetrator of sexual harassment. In Oleanna, Carol changes the nature of her conflict with John by opening the

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possibility that his intellectual domination is equivalent to corporeal violation. What John (and the audience) does not know at this point is that Carol has actually charged him with rape. Ultimately, this intangible speech act is overshadowed by the more consequential performative act of charging John with a prosecutable crime.

We do not learn, in fact, that Carol has placed the rape charge against John for some ten pages of text after she first mentions the word. Carol assumed John had knowledge of the charge when he called her to his office, as shown by her repetition of the phrase, "I thought you knew" (77 and 78). So, from her perspective, John had a context for her accusations. But Mamet once again denies his audience that context and, consequently, they must (re)read Carol's actions as manipulative, unethical, even cruel. Thus, in the space of six pages of text, Mamet strips Carol of what was an increasingly persuasive argument that took the entire play to construct. First, her list of books to be banned; second, her rape charge against John; third, her invasion of his privacy by demanding that John not "call [his] wife baby" (79): all these actions or speech acts make up that "push too far" that Mamet writes of in "True Stories of Bitches." The only strategy that John believes to be left for him, his "ace in the hole," is his physical strength. In assaulting Carol, he enacts the possibility that she had created by citing the rape metaphor.

In the moment of Carol's victimization, she gains back her credibility and John undergoes the brutal realization that he has become the thing that Carol most feared him to be. In other words, he accepts, internalizes and physicalizes Carol's constantly negative "description of himself" (16): sexual exploiter (71), rapist (77) and batterer (78). Finally, he beats her because she has told him again and again he has already done it. It is a problematic ending to this controversial play because we are asked, in effect, to learn through violence. Mamet stated in his interview with Melvyn Bragg that in this play he intends that:

the hero, or heroine, is going to—as Aristotle tells us—come to the end of the play and realize that he or she is the cause of their own
problems, and undergo a change at the last moment of the play; such that the audience will say, "Oh, now I understand. I’ve seen something which is both shocking and inevitable."¹¹⁰

If violence between these opposing positions is that which Mamet deems inevitable, then Oleanna is a bleak critique of both a faltering education system and gender relations as a whole. Does the play, then, subvert or reinforce these irreconcilable oppositions? Theatre critic Colin Thomas offers this response:

**Oleanna** is more of a Rorschach test than a reinforcer of reactionary attitudes. Almost every detail in the play can sustain diametrically opposed interpretations. Does John beat Carol because his essential nature is violent or because he is provoked beyond all human endurance? The most fruitful course is to avoid taking sides, to consider the validity of both interpretations. If audiences react to Oleanna with demonstrations of their own brutality, the play can hardly be held responsible for revealing its viewers' sins.¹¹¹

Johan Callens suggests that all of the verbiage that is bandied about in a play like Oleanna becomes a "defensive [tool] which keeps the speakers from facing the void, the existential crisis into which American society has sunk, and from owning up the truth about themselves."¹¹² Perhaps it is a fitting closure to this chapter to look ahead to Chapter Three where I give the play over to theatre practitioners to see if they can bring clarity to the play's complexities and get either the characters or the audience of the play to own up to their truths.

¹¹⁰Mamet, Arts Edge.
¹¹¹Thomas, "Base For Discussion," 46.
¹¹²Johan Callens, 14.
CHAPTER THREE
From Text to Performance

In the last chapter, I examined the ways in which Mamet manipulates the text of Oleanna, thereby both guiding and limiting the readers' understanding of the play's dialectic, compelling them to side, alternatively, with one character's position and then the other's. In particular, I highlighted Mamet's choice to present his critique of the acquisition and abuse of power and knowledge primarily through language, which Matthew Roudané describes as the "most conspicuous feature of Mamet's dramaturgy."\footnote{Matthew Roudané, "Public Issues, Private Tensions," 37-38.} It seems to follow that the next step towards understanding the play as a whole is to analyse how theatre practitioners have translated this Mamet play to the stage. In Oleanna, as in most of Mamet's plays, directors, designers and actors are faced with the task of enlivening a primarily language-oriented play in which stage action is used with utmost economy.

Johan Callens cites Mamet's minimalist tendencies in regards to plot, text, stage directions and characterization as the main problem and yet the main source of creative potential for directors or interpreters of his plays. At worst, Callens claims, in bringing the play to performance, those interpreters will "fill in the gaps with a psychological subtext in order to compensate for the writer's supposed reticence, or as some might claim, negligence."\footnote{Callens, 15.} At best, they will allow the script to do the work for them by letting it speak for itself. Dennis Carroll adds that Mamet "defends his minimalism on the grounds that, through what his characters say, his intentions as a playwright are sufficiently clear, and that any remaining ambiguities are intentional."\footnote{Carroll, 118.} Significantly, then, Mamet has set out an entire performance aesthetic for those artists who want to produce his plays: to guide them to "do what the text calls for, neither more, nor less," and so to "increase the metaphorical power and suggestiveness of his plays."\footnote{Callens, 16.} Mamet writes that truly powerful and inventive
theatre is not cluttered with "production values" so that a bad script, or weak acting and directing are hidden under a mountain of effects. He writes:

Everything which does not put forward the meaning of the play impedes the meaning of the play. To do too much or too little is to mitigate and weaken the meaning. The acting, the design, the direction should all consist only of that bare minimum necessary to put forward the action. Anything else is embellishment . . . The notions of [Stanislavskian] objective, activity, moment, beat, and so on are all devoted toward reducing the scene to a specific action which is true to the author's intention (emphasis mine), and physically capable of being performed.\(^\text{118}\)

With words such as these, David Mamet takes his place among theatre artists who have not only created works for the theatre, but have provided a manifesto, a set of criteria, for how that work is to be produced. One can trace the shape of this manifesto in his essays and public addresses collected over the years. And, as a practicing theoretician, Mamet's own dramas, adaptations and screenplays incorporate his answers to the "technical and philosophical problems of theatre."\(^\text{119}\)

Inspired by the writings of Stanislavsky\(^\text{120}\) and his work at the Moscow Art Theatre, which was, in turn, popularized in America by The Group in the 1930s,\(^\text{121}\) Mamet is clearly influenced by a realist tradition which, as he states, aims to bring "the truth" to the theatre.\(^\text{122}\)

Now, to claim that one can access "truth" in the theatre is nothing if not problematic, especially in light of the ever-growing body of work in contemporary cultural criticism spearheaded by such theorists as Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, etc., who have, to a large degree, put "truth" under the microscope only to find that it is not there. Judith Butler counters Mamet's position on the accessibility of "truth" with her thesis that it is "a shifting and contextual

\(^{117}\)Mamet, Arts Edge.

\(^{118}\)David Mamet, "Realism," Restaurants, 132.

\(^{119}\)Brewer, 31.

\(^{120}\)Mamet's indebtedness to Stanislavsky appears throughout the collected essays in Writing in Restaurants and is mentioned by such critics as Carroll, Roundane and Callens.

\(^{121}\)Look to Mamet's "Stanislavsky and the American Bicentennial," Restaurants, 28-30 and also to "Acting," 128, for his assessment of the "great and vital theatres" of this century.

\(^{122}\)Mamet, "A Tradition of the Theater as Art," Restaurants, 21.
phenomenon . . . a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations."\textsuperscript{123} While Mamet remains vague in defining his meaning of "truth," he is more clear in outlining the manner in which theatre practitioners should access, interpret and produce meaning in plays (read his plays). For him, meaning, as we have seen in the previous chapter, begins and ends with the words of the playwright. "When you write for the stage you retain copyright. The work is \textit{yours} and no one can change a word without your permission."\textsuperscript{124} Not surprisingly, much of the criticism of Mamet's drama hones in on his choice to privilege dialogue over narrative or plot.\textsuperscript{125}

David Mamet's texts, often compared to a musical score, inform and limit the choices that are available to theatre makers who choose to produce his plays. Despite his preference for "skeletal scripts,"\textsuperscript{126} Mamet does not grant absolute interpretive powers to actors and directors. Rather, he maintains a great deal of control over the liberties they are able to take by carefully constructing the rhythm, pace and emphasis of his lines. His plays "tell" as much to his interpreters--with his ellipses, repetitions, italics, title case sentences and block capitals--as, for example, George Bernard Shaw does in a fifty-page preface to one of his plays. The challenge, therefore, begins with careful scrutiny of the dialogue to uncover why Mamet has made particular grammatical or emphatical choices in his text. The next step in translating his work from page to stage is to find the possibilities for action during the text's many pauses and ellipses in order to clarify to an audience the rationale behind Mamet's choices.

With so much creative control in the hands of the playwright, it follows that there are a great many similarities in the productions of Mamet's plays--be they in New York, Los Angeles or abroad. In fact, we have even come to associate certain actors with Mamet because of frequent involvement in his works; Joe Mantegna,

\textsuperscript{125}See, for example, Demastes, 68.
\textsuperscript{126}Callens, 15.
William H. Macy, Mike Nussbaum, Greg Mosher and Lindsay Crouse have all been identified with "The Mamet Family," and their presence, especially Mantegna's and Macy's, lends as much of a sense of continuity to Mamet's mise-en-scène as motifs and themes in his writing and directing. Therefore, in a "typical" Mamet production which has "stuck to the channel," that is to say, stayed close to the story and left out all the "packaging," one would find simplicity of design, of character, of objective and of action.

The best tool a dramatist can employ, says Mamet, is that of "withholding information," because it "draws an audience deeper into a story." Consider what we already know of Mamet's choices in setting the scene in Oleanna: neither John nor Carol has a last name, the specific university where John works is not mentioned, and the stage directions are minimal. The full meaning of these dramatic "sketches" must be insinuated by readers, directors, actors, and spectators. Thus, the "essentials" of these elements are put on the stage with the purpose of involving the audience through their "endowment of characters, [time], place and especially action." If production choices, then, are simple and specific they will enable all participants in the event--director, actors and audience--to work symbiotically to understand the "Scenic Truth," or meaning, that the writer has presented in his text. Gay Brewer echoes Mamet's mission statement with her suggestion that the writer/director has the ability to elicit a "proper interpretation, and, hence, a 'proper' response" to the text.

The meaning of a production as a whole, however, cannot be understood without deconstructing it into its constituent parts. And often, these constituent parts are thought only to consist of those dramatic signs that can be seen as part of

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127 Things Change: Production Information," (Press kit, Columbia Pictures, 1988) 1; and Brewer, 64.
128 Mamet, "Radio Drama," Restaurants, 15.
129 Mamet, "Radio Drama," 15.
131 Brewer, 1.
132 Brewer, 14.
133 Mamet, "Realism," 132.
134 Brewer, 4.
the staging behind the proscenium wall. Jill Dolan, by comparison, extends her interpretation of meaning to include the workings of the whole theatre apparatus: "stage, lights, sets, casting, blocking, gestures, the location of the auditorium, and the cost of tickets, the advertising and the length of the run."135 As a guiding principle, I will be utilizing Dolan's model of dramatic criticism which insists that a play's content and form cannot be separated from the "material and ideological forces that shape what a theatre event means."136 By highlighting aspects of a theatrical machinery which were present both within and outside the October-November 1994 production of Oleanna at the Vancouver Playhouse, I will incorporate a wider cultural critique in my investigation of the play. My aim, as stated in the introduction, is to link Oleanna to concerns of identity and power, as the play has, to use Butler's words, become a "relative point of convergence" for these issues.

At the Playhouse director Glynis Leyshon spearheaded a rich, compelling production of Oleanna, which, overall, balanced the dialectic of the play and, as Mamet instructs, presented only the bare minimum necessary in acting, directing and design to put forward the "meaning, the action of the play."137 In this chapter, I will show how, overall, Leyshon's production concept highlighted Mamet's "intriguing 'action' of language."138 Nevertheless, some of the individual choices made for this production--the verbal and non-verbal signs of drama that create meaning on stage--rather than simplifying the meaning of action, character and dialogue from scene to scene, actually complicated the Vancouver audience's ability to decode those signs. I will begin by analysing some "external" signs of drama that drew Playhouse audiences into the theatre by means of simplified, even exploitative, advertising. Then I will argue that the publicity established judgmental expectations which may have thwarted some of those audience

136Dolan, 48.
137Mamet, "Realism," 130.
138Demastes, 68.
members from understanding Mamet's cultural critique. Next I shall turn my attention to some of the more traditional signs of drama which include style of staging, set, lights, set dressing, casting, costumes, blocking and gestures. My primary focus will be on the Playhouse's production of Oleanna, although other productions will be referred to in order to compare and contrast alternative choices made by other directors and designers when they were faced with similar challenges in the text.

As a starting point, I want to look at one particular sign or signifying element of theatre, advertising, which set up certain expectations for audience members before they entered the theatre and were difficult to let go when the play itself began. As Jill Dolan and Susan Bennett remind us, "the play does not ever simply begin at the moment when the first word is spoken." 139 The advertising for Oleanna was perhaps the most compromising choice that was made for his production. It "sold" the play by virtue of its controversial issues and discouraged the audience from seeing beyond those issues and into Mamet's cultural critique. In essence, the advertising framed the production as a "participatory" event that could help its audience members judge the divisive issues during the presentation and then debate them in a post-show forum.

One exceedingly jolting advertising scheme that the Playhouse used, aimed directly at university students, exploited one issue in particular—sexual harassment—which had, for some time, dominated the daily and monthly presses that define and circulate issues of cultural discourse. With harassment scandals involving the likes of Clarence Thomas, Robert Packwood and Robin Blencoe, not to mention the "chilly climate" controversies at the Universities of British Columbia and Victoria 140

139Bennett, 15.  
140Locally, two major reports have been written on the issues of sexual harassment and discrimination against women on campus. For the University of Victoria, see Somer Brodribb, "Report of the Climate Committee to the Department of Political Science," Victoria, BC: s.n., 1993. For the University of British Columbia, Joan I. McEwen, "Report in Respect of the Political Science Department of the University of British Columbia." Prepared for the Deans of the Faculty of Arts and Graduate Studies. Vancouver, 1995.
still resting uneasily in the public mind, the Playhouse distributed its rush seating flyers. In black print over a blood-red background, the flyer read as follows:

SEXUAL HARASSMENT . . .
You be the judge!

David Mamet's OLEANNA
On Stage to November 5

LIMITED RUSH SEATING
ONLY $13.00
WITH THIS FLYER
(VAILD STUDENT I.D. REQUIRED)\(^{141}\)

Capitalizing, quite literally, on the controversy that the play generated in the New York and London productions, this flyer set up the expectation of controversy on a local level. In addition, it sought to frame the Vancouver production along the lines of a court trial—where a "truthful" version of the events could be found after careful weighing of evidence: one party must be innocent, the other guilty.

The flyer had all the integrity of a soundbite for such exploitative "current affairs" programs as Hard Copy or American Journal, not to mention the countless television talkshows that specialize in presenting "both sides" of controversial issues, and for that reason, it was difficult to believe that its creators cared as much about exposing "truth" or privileging justice as they did about drawing an audience into the theatre. Perhaps it is this "dumbing down" of the process of participatory justice as a cultural trend that disturbs me, rather than the Playhouse's attempt to capitalize on it. Homi Bhabha points to the multitude of venues and levels of discourse that continue to focus on the subject of justice: "live on prime time, maximum exposure in the academic journals, repeatedly regurgitated in that slew of

\(^{141}\)Font sizes were larger on the flyer, but I have tried to reproduce them here to a similar scale.
intellectual reviews that Woody Allen once collectively named 'Dissentary.'”

Thus, states Bhabha, the American unassailable right to justice "must not only be done, it must be seen to be done." And so, in the same way that justice is "seen to be done" in popular culture (e.g. the film Philadelphia, where the issue of discrimination against homosexuals was "put" directly into the courts), or in nation-wide political culture (e.g. the hearings leading to the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas), audiences may have expected that they had been invited to bear witness to justice being served in Oleanna. Certainly, the media exposure preceding the play capitalized on the fear that "those common values and consensual freedoms that have defined the 'American' way of life, circa Norman Rockwell or Andrew Wyeth, are now being policed by racial, sexual or 'ideological' minorities.”

As we have seen in Chapter Two, however, the trial in Oleanna stems more from the imagination of Kafka than from Rockwell. Similar to Kafka’s The Trial, the protagonist in Mamet’s drama is arraigned by an unseen special interest group and charged with a crime that, supposedly, he did not know he had committed. In Act I, John, in a frighteningly prophetic moment, first cites the issue of universal entitlement to a trial, speedy and fair. But, he says, "it does not follow, of necessity, a person's life is incomplete without a trial in it" (29). By the end of the play, the tenure committee, the members of whom John first believes "not worthy to wax his car" (23), and who then become, in his cosmology, "Good Men and True" (50), are turned into an off-stage jury of peers. Carol's testimony, her report to the tenure committee, which began as a one-sided interpretation of the events that passed between herself and the professor, are presented to and accepted by the committee as fact.

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143Bhabha, 232.
144Bhabha, 233.
Your superiors, who've been "polled," do you see? To whom evidence has been presented, who have ruled, do you see? That you are negligent. That you are guilty, that you are found wanting, and in error; and are not, for the reasons so-told, to be given tenure. That you are to be disciplined. For facts. For facts. Not "alleged," what is the word? But proved. Do you see? By your own actions (63-64).

In the world of the play, the committee--as I will discuss in Chapter Four--does not consult with John for his version of the events, and they find him guilty of sexual harassment. The audience members, as voyeurs of his actions or witnesses to the "facts," are encouraged to voice their own acceptance or disapproval of the trial verdict.

Moreover, those judgments, as indicated by the above flyer, were debated each night, in a post-performance talkback, where "viewers [could] vent their feelings and debate the issues raised by the play." Colin Thomas, reviewing the Vancouver production, wrote that "the most important questions and reactions are the ones generated by and in the audience." But those reactions generally displayed opinions as "adversarial and deeply entrenched" as those of John and Carol. I would argue that one reason for the entrenchment of adversarial positions among audience members was the manner in which the Playhouse handled the talkbacks, another of Dolan's "dramatic signs" in the semiotic event of attending theatre. A moderator from the Playhouse staff came on stage to give the floor to people with comments or questions but did not direct or contribute to the discussion. Bronwyn Drainie explains that the initial "venting" of feelings is helpful for spectators, but only superficially so. Referring specifically to Oleanna, she writes:

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147 For documentation of public reaction, I have used my own notes from attending three performances of Oleanna, as well as reviews by Barbara Crook, Colin Thomas and Max Wyman. Further opinions were broadcast after opening night on the CBC morning show. Source, Malcolm Page and Charatra Jasmin, interview, The Early Edition Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vancouver, 14 October, 1994.
148 Thomas, "Base for Discussion," 46.
Naomi Levine, a lawyer and harassment consultant in Winnipeg, thinks just letting people talk isn't good enough. "When you've got a bunch of high school students applauding a man who's beating up a woman before their eyes, you need an expert facilitator afterward to help them see how the playwright made them feel that way."  

Because the Playhouse chose not to follow Levine's advice, their talkbacks were less dialogue or discussion than a reiteration of the argument and the dangerous miscommunication presented in the play. Mamet's complex issues tended to be simplified to matters of right and wrong as audience members, fulfilling the Playhouse's marketing strategy, "judged" the characters in the play.

These comments, which honed in on issues of sexual harassment and political correctness, in turn fed the press coverage of the play that also acted as a marketing tool to pique the interest of potential ticket buyers. CBC's morning show, "The Early Edition," broadcast an interview with Simon Fraser Professor of English, Malcolm Page, and Communications student Charatra Jasmin. When I talked with "Early Edition" producer Ellen Sangar, she stated that the professor and student were chosen for the interview to echo the teacher-student and male-female dynamics found in Oleanna. At the crux of the interview was the question of whether the play portrayed a "real-life" situation on campus. The play itself was soon put aside as the interview focused on the more general issue of sexual harassment on campus which might have appeal for a broader listening audience, most of whom would not have read or seen the play.

These examples of both press and marketers seizing the topic of sexual harassment and, in essence, "selling" the play to potential consumers as an issue-oriented social tract, ultimately clouded the achievements of the artistic team's more complicated production concept. In other words, audiences were assembling less for creativity than for controversy. And, while the information circulating

149 Drainie, El.
150 A similar situation arose with Mamet's casting of Madonna as Karen for his 1988 Broadway production of Speed-the-Plow. Reviewer Kevin Kelly wrote that the opening night audience "seems charged. Has the audience come to see Mamet or Madonna or both?" "Good Mamet, Passable Madonna," Boston Globe 4 May, 1988: 79. John Simon added that "flashbulbs during the show were
outside the performance space was successful in drawing audiences into the theatre (the Jessie award-winning production grossed $35,000 more than expected in single ticket sales),\textsuperscript{151} some audience members were on the defensive before the performance even began, seeing the play, and perhaps Mamet himself, as a personal, political and polemical adversary. Still, the combination of these elements allowed audiences to participate in not merely a theatrical event, but a cultural one. Not surprisingly, it was an event where many people had great difficulty in seeing beyond the controversial topics of sexual harassment and political correctness which had been sold to them as cultural commodities.

Of course, the signifying elements that most problematized the production—"influencing whether the play was interpreted in terms of realism or allegory"\textsuperscript{152}—were bookended before and after the play itself, and fortunately did not reflect the artistic integrity that had gone into constructing the physical performance. In order, now, to read those dramatic signs that appeared inside the proscenium at the Playhouse, I will first look at Pam Johnson's design concept, especially at the spatial design of John's office which, in \textit{Oleanna}, had a strong role in framing the way audiences approached and interpreted the story.

In the Playhouse production of \textit{Oleanna}, it was the physical stage design—as opposed to the epigraphs in the actual text—that gave an audience its first view of the world of the play. In "Realism," Mamet writes that in order to access scenic truth, a designer's first question should be "what does [an office] mean in this instance?"\textsuperscript{153} In \textit{Oleanna}, the office is a place which "imprisons"\textsuperscript{154} the characters within its walls, thereby forcing their conflict to escalate. Furthermore, as a piece of writing, as we have seen in Chapter Two, \textit{Oleanna} manipulates the audience,
trapping them in its issues and forcing them to take sides in the debate. Therefore,
the office on stage should, in some way, pull the audience into the action.
Johnson's design with its prison-gray colours, sparse decor and small, almost
constraining, acting space created an environment which imprisoned all the
participants in this theatrical event. As C. W. E. Bigsby has found to be true in most
of Mamet's dramas, this office environment was "less fact than image." And,
while the story of Oleanna could have been told with much less of the designer's
stamp added to it, Johnson's design in many ways enriched the play for a local
Vancouver audience.

By filling in the proscenium walls of the Vancouver Playhouse Johnson also
provided images of the public arena outside of the private world of the play. This
false proscenium appeared as a gray concrete monolith that seemed to climb,
pyramid-like, toward the heavens. This wall served two important purposes. The
first, primarily practical function was to close in the playable space of the stage to
allow for more natural blocking choices within an otherwise enormous acting area.
This smaller acting area compelled the director to use a style typical for producing
Mamet's play, where one usually "relies on static visual tableaux, [and] pares down
movement and business." The second function of this wall was more iconic; it
created an impression of a particular architecture within a particular space and time.
Certainly, Johnson's Ivory Tower should have looked familiar to Vancouver
audiences, suggesting, as it did, the landscape of Arthur Erickson's designs for
Simon Fraser University. By so evidently contextualizing the stage space in terms of
a modern and local academic community, the set designer placed the action in
present day Western Canada, and gently alluded to the "chilly climate"
controversies on which the media continue to focus when commenting on local
universities at this point in our history. As Dennis Carroll reminds us, the stage
design has "a very important bearing on the 'perceived' realism of Mamet's

155Bigsby, 14.
156Carroll, 121.
and while Johnson's design did not try to recreate the actual landscape of Simon Fraser University, her choice to present that familiar marker did, more subtly than press and marketers, blur the lines between a realistic and metaphoric representation of the play.

Therefore, before the "action" of the Playhouse production began, the audience could start to decode the signs of the play as drama. For example, they knew what this production of Oleanna would not do. It would not attack the famous establishments--the Eastern American, Ivy League schools that Mamet may have originally envisioned while writing the play. Accordingly, it would not concentrate on the accents, biases or extreme class divisions that, through stereotypical cultural representations, one has come to expect to see in critiques of the Establishment. In other words, the play would not be about some other person's problem in some other time. It would be very much about "us," the discourses that inform us and the problems that concern us. As we have seen above, this choice has a paradoxical effect: on the one hand, audiences can be engaged and implicated by a play that is about themselves; on the other hand, if those audiences feel that they are being criticized, they may react so subjectively and defensively that they cannot see beyond the issues of the play towards a wider cultural critique.

Lighting designer Gerald King aimed for the former effect by bringing evidence of a cultural critique right onto the set of Oleanna through use of slide projection. While Mamet might say that the designer's effects were cluttering the stage with unnecessary production values, King's slides did register the importance, typical in Mamet's body of work, of the "action" of words. In the minutes before the play began, the second epigraph from the playtext--a verse from the folk song "Oleanna"--was projected onto the set. By allowing the audience literally to read this information before listening to the opening monologue, King positioned them both as viewers and readers of the play. In this way, he created a framework similar

157Carroll, 121.
to that of Mamet's original text which, as we saw in Chapter Two, opened up the specific issues and conflicts of the play to a broader cultural critique. Enhancing the script without embellishing it, the ingenuity of stage and lighting design meant that Oleanna, both as a play and production, was able to hint at the broader spiritual issues beyond the social ones--political correctness and sexual harassment--on which audiences and promotors invariably focused.

The slides were used again during the intermission and blackouts between acts. Again, to highlight Mamet's portrayal of a cultural distopia, sentence fragments from the play's dialogue were projected onto the concrete "outer" walls of the building structure. Several dramatic themes were suggested by this choice. First and foremost, the projection of words onto the set communicated to an audience that this play and this institution where the play was set were to be constructed through issues of language. Similarly, in the 1994 Toronto production at Canadian Stage, quotations were intermittently projected onto the stage. There, the citations came from sources outside of the play: writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Naomi Wolf and Andrea Dworkin. In short, the Toronto designer used Oleanna as a "relative point of convergence" to gesture towards a larger cultural debate which currently rages about issues of constructing identity, gender and power.

In Vancouver, however, the source for the projected sentence fragments always came from the playtext. The dialogue was reconfigured to pinpoint moments of miscommunication. An example of this reconstructed dialogue can be found on the front cover of Oleanna's playbill.

that's not what I... I heard you say it... no I didn't... what I meant was... it's not... don't try to deny... that's not what I heard... do I have to repeat myself... what do you mean... listen... I was only trying to make myself clear... you said I wasn't... yes you did... try to understand... understand what... what in the world are you talking about... 158

158 Mamet, Oleanna: Program Book.
The construction of this dialogue (for while they were Mamet's phrases, this was not his dialogue) was quite fascinating. No character names were mentioned, no full sentences were formed, no punctuation appeared beyond Mamet's signature ellipses. Nor, for that matter, was the subject of this exchange ever made clear. In short, the exchange was so strongly rooted in accusing, insinuating, denying, justifying, absolving and grandstanding—in miscommunicating—that the issue that caused the breakdown was no longer important.

At the beginning of Acts I and II, the Professor's office, which fell in the middle of the word-filled slide projection, remained dark. The field of play was, in essence, a dark area. In an institution that exists to analyse, to uncover and to interpret meaning or truth, this place, ironically, lacked illumination. During the blackout before the final act, however, the slide shifted and was projected directly on to walls and floors of the Professor's office. This signaled a shift in the way the discourse, or conflict, was going to be handled. On the one hand, it may have implied that the "illumination" that had been previously lacking was going to be found. On the other hand, it was more likely that this indicated a heightening of the conflict, as the discourse of miscommunication changed to implicate directly the characters that occupied the playing space.

A choice was made to implicate the audience as well and draw them, more than figuratively, into the conflict: Leyshon placed the action on a semi-thrust stage. Even though the action of Oleanna took place in the private sphere of one man's office, the semi-thrust stage moved that action past the boundary of the performative fourth-wall and into the discursive, public sphere that was occupied by the audience. Not only was this conflict happening, then, in nearby institutions of learning; it was among the audience members, right in the theatre. In another, more flexible space, one may well have chosen to use corridor or arena staging to force audience members to look at each other's responses during the action. This could heighten the self-reflexivity of a drama that continually poses the question,
"Do you see? Don't you see? You don't see, do you?" (48). In the Kingston production of Oleanna, the set designer tried such an effect. In Act II, the entire set was reversed, implying that the audience was now going to see the action from another point of view.

That effect can work to a point, as the text creates a tremendous shift in character status and audience expectation at the beginning of Act Two. But the actual point of view in the text of Oleanna never really changes; the tragedy, the lesson, the story is John's. He is the character with a "readable" life outside the office-world of the play: he has a wife and child, friends, as well as tenure and a new house within his reach. In short, he has more tangible "stakes" in the play. While Oleanna lasts ninety minutes, the story of the play unfolds over one school semester, and in that time we see John lose his house and job, and potentially face a criminal charge of rape. And while, as I showed in Chapter Two, John may well have abused power in his office or classroom and should be held accountable for his action, in terms of what the audience actually "sees," his punishment seems clearly to outweigh his crime. He is badgered and pushed to the limits of his endurance. To look at John's story from this point of view—as the victim of exaggerated and malicious accusations—one can hardly blame him, indeed some would expect him, to strike out in anger against the women that Mamet paints as the source of his downfall.

It is, perhaps, because there was no justification in the text to stage different points of view in Oleanna—as, for example, in the style of Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon or the second act of Edward Albee's Three Tall Women—that the designer of the Vancouver production made no such attempt to play with the point

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160In Act III, Carol produces the notebook she has been writing in throughout the play. Through the device of reading from her notes, Mamet finally reveals the four month time lapse of the action which otherwise seems to unfold in a matter of days. In their first meeting, Carol reacts to John's suggestion that they start the course over, "But the class is only half over ..." (25). In their final meeting, she accuses, "I saw you. I saw you Professor. For two semesters sit there, stand there ..." (67).
of view of the action. Instead, she focused on establishing dramatic tone with her choice of colour scheme for the set: all gray. The decor inside the office picked up the same gray tone in the structure's outer walls. In fact, from the carpet to the post-modern, functional furniture and the artwork on the walls, this zone was a gray area. The implication was that the play's dialectic is more complex than any right-or-wrong judgments could explain.\textsuperscript{161}

The room was as modern and sparse in its decorative tastes as it was gray in colour. The professor kept on hand only the things that were necessary for writing and organizing files and books: a waist-high bookshelf with a dozen-odd texts, a three-drawer filing cabinet, phone, index card files, jar for pens and pencils, coffee maker and mugs, and a few personal items of mail. In this way, as Johan Callens advises, the designer did not fill up the physical environment with unnecessary information to flesh out character psychology or make the setting realistic. Instead, Johnson provided a skeletal sketch that told the audience where the play would be set, who might occupy that space, and what action might arise in this type of setting.

It is possible that choosing any set dressing at all added more information to the stage than was necessary to tell the story of Oleanna. After all, "purists have seen and raved about this play performed elsewhere on a near-bare stage."\textsuperscript{162} Again, we are reminded of Mamet's words about Stanislavsky's "Scenic Truth," when he advises stage designers to heed the difference between "acceptability and necessity,"\textsuperscript{163} and to discard that which does not advance the meaning of the play.\textsuperscript{164} Nevertheless, Johnson never pushed symbolism in her design beyond that which could be directly justified in the text. In fact, one of her choices actually encapsulated

\textsuperscript{163}Mamet, "Realism," 131.
\textsuperscript{164}In his self-directed 1992 production of Oleanna at New York's off-Broadway theatre The Orpheum, Mamet's set consisted of "a few sticks of used office furniture" (Simon) which, according to Clive Barnes, was more "suitable for a read-through than a staging." Aesthetically pleasing or not for a professional run, Mamet's staging demonstrates his notion of the "Scenic Truth" in a remarkably pure form. For more information on the New York production, see Clive Barnes, John Simon et al in The New York Theater Critics' Reviews 53.19 (1992): 351-363.
the "stakes," or degree of importance, of the conflict for the Professor. Hung on the upstage wall, between the entrance to the office and the filing cabinet, were eight certificates and diplomas. They did not quite form a square and clearly needed a ninth to complete the image. We learned soon enough that the professor was about to be granted tenure. Of course, a certificate is not awarded in recognition of that fact, but nevertheless this image alluded clearly to a single element which was lacking in the professor's career. Johnson's design suggested that this missing "piece of the puzzle" was about to be filled in. With every certificate representing a significant achievement in the professor's career, one might assume that this person had laboured diligently over a long period of time, and therefore must deserve the trappings of success. In this way, Johnson's design not only tells a story of character, setting and theme, but it also sets up expectations, associations and allegiances in the audience.

A semi-private, semi-public space—a place where John as teacher should be accessible to his students, but which is also the focal point of his academic activity—John's office naturally directed the audience to associate territory, authority and power with its occupant. Within the office at the Vancouver production, the locus of power was the large, executive-style chair which sat behind the gray slab table-top desk. Anyone else entering the office (invited or otherwise) would have to attempt to make themselves comfortable on the much smaller, less sturdy classroom chair which sat on the opposite side of the desk. This space, in effect, was a microcosm of the institutional hierarchy which continues to exist both inside and outside most academic offices; anyone but the office's occupant entering its threshold would have to enter in a "lesser" position. And, one might assume that any power imbalance which resulted from this division would be justified by right of the work, commitment and expertise it takes to "gain" office.

Any theatrical space needs actors in it to complete the picture. The actors chosen for the Playhouse production of Oleanna were Bill Dow as John and Leslie
Jones as Carol. For the most part, the casting choice of these two actors was very strong as each one brought experience and confidence to their roles, as well as complexity to their acting choices and a trust in the script. For my part, however, I was distracted by one choice in particular: the casting of Jones as Carol, the young student. Jones, while appropriately mousy and slight for the role, was at least ten years older than the "woman of twenty" (vii) who is described in the script. For this reason, I tended to see her as an actress making strong character choices rather than a character struggling with difficult life choices. For that reason, I found it easier to identify with and be persuaded by Dow's representation of John's side of the dialectic.

At this point, I wish to show how other signs of drama such as costumes, blocking and gestures dealt with that challenge: did they balance or unbalance the play's dialectic? It seems most efficient to analyse these signs more or less at the same time, as they cannot easily be looked at in isolation. I will divide them into three sections as they correspond to the three acts of the play.

Pam Johnson's costume design for Oleanna could have easily received Clive Barnes' criticism that it was more suitable for a staged reading than a full production. A greater problem than the thrift to which Barnes alluded was that the costumes in this production were so similar to everyday street wear that their "texts" or signs of economic, social, even sexual, difference became difficult to recognize. By the end of the play, Carol states that she has had to overcome economic and social prejudices in order to study at the school, but the primarily middle class audience at the Playhouse could not see actual visual evidence of Carol's difference. And surely, as I pointed out in Chapter Two, the crux of the play's conflict can be found in binary oppositions, in difference: man versus woman, teacher versus student, privilege versus deprivation, dominance versus subjugation, freedom versus censorship.
Leslie Jones as Carol appeared in the predominantly casual, even sloppy, look of the day, but she bore no trace, no scars, no "text" of verifiable social or economic impoverishment. She first appeared uncomfortable and fidgety in the asexual uniform of the middle class: worn running shoes, faded Levi's and a gray, frumpy kangaroo jacket. She was, by her own estimation, an outsider in the academic world.

CAROL: . . . I come from a different social . . .
JOHN: . . . ev . . .
CAROL: a different economic . . . (8).

Carol's self-identification of difference at the beginning of Oleanna broadened into "politics of identity" by the end of the play. Physically, her transformation occurred in the three stages or three acts of the play. First, Jones played Carol as isolated in the space and relatively static in her movement. And, as we saw in more detail in the last chapter, Mamet's text denied Carol a form of expression. "I don't understand. I don't understand what anything means . . . and I walk around. From morning 'til night: with this one thought in my head. I'm stupid "(12). At this stage, Carol's perception of difference was turned inward and expressed in self-defeating terms: her manner of dress, her language and her inability to express herself. "That meant I'm stupid. And I'll never learn. That's what that meant. And you're right" (14).

On stage, Carol's sense of inferiority was expressed most of all in Jones' gestures. She fidgeted in her chair, sporadically and nervously shook her legs as she rubbed her sweaty palms up and down the pant legs of her jeans. Sometimes asserting herself but always taking up as little space as possible in the office, Jones constantly referred to her gray binder--her notes--to "make sure that she got [her facts] right" (28). Later on this binder became the locus of truth for Carol in the same way that John's chair was the locus of power on the set. More memorable, however, was Jones' decision to close her body up in this first act. It had a negative effect on

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165Bhabha, 242.
me as audience member. This gesture seemed to signal that there was no way that anyone, audience included, could access her needs or vulnerabilities. As such, her position as an "untouchable" made her, once again, less sympathetic than Mamet's script makes her out to be.

Bill Dow as Carol's nemesis, on the other hand, appeared open and "accessible," although his gregariousness was soon enough exposed as another "aspect of performance" (43) that John confessed to loving so much. He was dressed as a middle class "blandly institutional man,"\textsuperscript{166} with an appearance that would probably draw no notice if he were to have stepped out of the play and into the streets of Vancouver. Comfortable and conservative in a long-sleeve denim button-down shirt with a green and red paisley tie, beige chinos and brown oxfords, John was at ease with his role, having now "performed" the part of the professor for some time.

For those audience members who were familiar with past performances by the actors in the show, there was an additional "sign" to read in John's costume. Dow's "silly toupee"\textsuperscript{167} masked the actor's natural appearance in a way which ran counter to the comfortable and conservative look that was otherwise achieved with this costume. If spectators decided that the toupee was John's choice and not the costume designer's, then the perception of his characterization was altered by that choice. He became tainted with vanity, with foolishness, with embarrassment at his "natural" look. This protean quality is one aspect of John's character, changing as he did from a man who once thought himself "unworthy and unprepared" (17) for learning to an (almost) tenured professor, but the story of transcending one's former limitations is certainly not told with this costuming choice.

Act II brings the first in a series of challenges to directors of \textit{Oleanna}: most notably with regards to Carol—her jump in intelligence, verbal dexterity and self-assertion. The Mamet-directed production in New York used costuming choices to

\textsuperscript{166} Thomas, "Base for Discussion," 46.
\textsuperscript{167} Crook, "Hallelujah," C8.
alleviate some of that ambiguity. The first act, according to Alisa Solomon, saw Carol in an innocuous student habit: "a mousy ankle-length dress." Once Carol had found identification and agency in Act II with her "Group," the "people [she's] been talking to" (55), her manner of dress became less individualized and more institutional. The critics had, naturally, different interpretations about which institution controlled Carol's uniform choices. Whether she has been subjugated by a "dyke" influenced PC brigade or a Maoist paramilitary organization, Carol's army-like "greens and blacks" moved her representation towards a nightmarish symbol of political hegemony and away from the portrayal of one woman's conflict with her professor. She was less body than body politic.

In Mamet's self-directed film of Oleanna during what would be Act II in the play, W. H. Macy as John countered Carol's transforming appearance with his own change in look. In John's case, his politics of identity allied him with the Old Boys Club of the Academy. Dressed in a dark blue tailored three-piece suit, John drew upon all the powers of intimidation that were available to him by symbolically backing his case up with his fellow "suited" men in the Establishment. By self-consciously costuming John in the manner of another equally organized Group, Mamet was able to balance the dialectic of the play with non-verbal signs. Carol and John were battling each other as individuals, but both characters knew they were also struggling against a powerful organization: in Carol's case her nemesis was the university and in John's, he fought against his student's feminist Group.

At the Playhouse, on the other hand, Johnson's costuming choices for Act II drew stronger portraits of both Carol and John as individuals, outside of the institution or organization that defines them. When Carol made the leap from "self-doubting wall-flower" in Act I to confident and articulate accuser in Act II,

169 Solomon, 355.
Jones' gray kangaroo jacket was exchanged for an equally bulky, but more colourful, blue sweatshirt and an Ecuadorian-style shoulder bag. While the latter could imply connotations of Carol's leftist political allegiance, on a local level—the signs having been established that this production was located in a West Coast academic community—it could just as easily have no political "meaning" at all. Such indigenous Central American piece work has been appropriated by fashion designers in this area and sold at inflated prices to people of Carol's age and stature as folk art, and as such, has been drained of its original significance. Nevertheless, this costume choice did show that for Carol the meaning of things was becoming less gray, whether the audience was prone to agree or no. Jones' gestures became stronger, larger, echoing this increase in confidence and stature: she looked John in the eye instead of looking down into her lap, she shook her head in disgust more quickly than before, and moved around the room with the confidence of one who considered herself an equal in his territory.

By Act III, Jones as Carol had traded in her body-masking androgynous clothing altogether for black tights and a slim-fitting mauve sweater. This was quite a different choice than the New York production, for at the Playhouse, when Carol said that any wrongs done to her were, in fact, done to the "student body" (47), she did not clearly ally herself with any one organization through her style of dress. And yet, by this point in the text, Carol has risen through the ranks of "The Group" to become not just an anonymous member, but a leader and spokesman for its goals.

The issue here is not what I 'feel.' It is not my 'feelings,' but the feelings of women. And men . . . Because I speak, yes, not for myself. But for the group; for those who suffer what I suffer. On behalf of whom, even if I, were, inclined to what, forgive? Forget? What? Overlook your . . . (63 and 65).

Blocking choices, particularly Jones' actions and movement, communicated that the characters in Act III were becoming increasingly unrealistic. She swaggered almost as much as Dow had at the beginning of the play, grabbing his book off his
bookshelf with scorn, leaning on his desk, waving it accusingly and pointing her finger at him. It came to represent the source of his manipulation and domination, and, accordingly, her report and list of censored books became the source for her single-minded dogmatism and push for the "truth." When Jones moved behind John's desk and lectured at him from the focal point of power, his chair, she had usurped his position and the transfer of power was complete.

John tried to waylay this transfer of power by setting up a meeting with Carol to appeal to her reason and ask her to retract her damaging accusations. By this meeting, having not "been home for two days," (77) John's casual and conservative teaching outfit was a memory and he appeared rumpled and unkempt in chinos, a white polo shirt and hiking boots. Perhaps we were to assume that John's objective in appearing in this manner was to secure Carol's pity and remind her of the effect that her indictment has had on him as a person outside of his teaching profession. In effect, along with being stripped of his house, his tenure and his position at the school, Carol stripped him of his right to identify himself with his profession. In the end, then, at the Vancouver Playhouse, the costuming choices frame this political battle as a balanced conflict between individuals.

One must ask what is the better directing choice for this controversial play. Does one aim to construct, as the Playhouse did, realistic individuals and a realistic story out of the sketches of motivation, characterization, plot or staging that Mamet has provided? To this question Bronwyn Drainie dismissively answers, "If this were the story of two people, it would indeed be riveting. But Oleanna is the story of one person and one monster"172 who symbolizes John's "fear of castration."173 It seemed that the Playhouse's choice to privilege "realism over allegory"174 compromised Mamet's "Scenic Truth." One alternative for directors is to follow

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172Drainie, E1.
173 Brewer, 165.
174 Carroll, 121.
Mamet's own production choices and portray both John's and Carol's journey in the play as a progression from an individual to a symbol: disembodied in its ideal form.

But, in seeing the text in performance, one cannot forget the presence of actors' bodies: bodies which depend on text and other elements of production—costume, blocking and set, as we have seen—to contextualize their performance of character. A director cannot tell the actor to forget her character choices and "disembody" herself into a symbol. More important, the audience cannot forget the actress's body at the moment that her character is attacked by the professor. Leyshon chose to display the corporeal evidence of the attack: Carol emerges—nose bloodied—from the upstage right corner of the office where John beat her. In the Harold Pinter-directed production at London's Royal Court Theatre, Carol cowered under the professor's desk as he grabbed and kicked her.

In both cases, Carol's political threat, onstage and in the text, is eradicated by John through physical violence. But does he strike out in rage against a symbolic nightmare which represents a political force that he fears will subjugate him, or does he beat a young woman, half his age and strength, that has provoked him? The difference is staggering. It is easier to fear and despise—for the professor and audience alike—an unknown and uncontrollable ideological power than it is to reckon with an individual who, through the course of the play, argues and demonstrates certain needs and objectives.

These issues of power and ideology raise the question: how might the play be received by feminist critics who feel that their position is being muted and yet decimated in a "backlash" by the authoritative, male voice of the playwright. If this play does take place in an allegorical or nightmarish landscape, why does Mamet place all of John's fears in the guise of one young woman where he has to exercise such manipulations of circumstance and character in order to make the story work. These questions will be explored in further detail in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR
Feminist Ideologies and the "Problem" of Carol

As the rhythmic words subside/ My Common Ground invites you in/
or do you prefer to wait outside/ Or is it true/ The Common Ground
for me is without you... Oh is it true/ There’s no Ground Common
enough for me and you.¹⁷⁵

Ivo Kamps, editor of the challenging and provocative anthology on literature
and ideology, *Shakespeare Left and Right*, sets up a very useful framework to
understand the inter-relations of theory and ideology in the context of dramatic
literature. He roughly categorizes literary critics into the Right--those who believe
that Shakespeare transcends his historical moment with themes that are true,
universal and enduring--and the Left or new or counter-critics--who reinterpret,
expose or negotiate with those established readings of the plays. While the
contributors to Kamps' anthology focus on Shakespeare and respond to Richard
Levin's accusations¹⁷⁶ that recent critical theories and theorists are "using literature
as an ideological whipping boy,"¹⁷⁷ they also gesture towards similar questions that I
wish to look at in *Oleanna*. Namely, is there a way to re-examine the play, and
especially Carol, from both sides of an ideological debate in order to investigate it as
a site of merging discourses about theatre, authorship, feminism, power and
ideology.

We have already investigated Mamet's various tactics of manipulation that
control his readers' and viewers' perception of acceptable and unacceptable uses and
abuses of power. Looking at the signs of theatre of the Playhouse production of
*Oleanna*, we have seen how audience allegiances might be made to alternate from


¹⁷⁶Richard Levin's paper, entitled "Ideological Criticism and Pluralism," was presented in its initial form at a Special Session of the Modern Language Association on "The Role of Ideology in the Criticism and Metacriticism of Shakespeare" held in Washington, DC in 1989. It is included in Ivo Kamps, *Shakespeare Left and Right*, 15-22.

John to Carol and back to John as linguistic domination gives way to censorship and then physical abuse. Moreover, we have seen how Mamet constructs Carol, until the final moments of the play when she is beaten before the audiences' eyes, as a more sinister ideologue and powermonger than John. This particular choice has provoked many feminist critics who fear that Mamet endorses a neo-conservative backlash against the gains made in the women's movement. In this chapter, I will try to uncover Carol's subtext in order to use it as a convergence point for examining alternative feminist ideologies which either feed into her argument or are fed by it.

The term "ideology" has undergone many changes since it was originally coined in the late eighteenth century by French philosopher Destutt de Tracy. At the time, it was meant to express, in philosophical terms, the "science of ideas" and was actually a subsidiary of zoology. Gradually, through the writings of Marx and Engels, it became known as a state of consciousness where one's "conceptions and ideas are based on material experiences and history." Although ideology has been used in the neutral sense of a "system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group," by the end of the twentieth century most counter critics would argue that no one can remain ideologically neutral, because, as French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser has convincingly argued, "there is no 'outside' to ideology."

Carol, at first reading, is the most obvious representative of an ideological viewpoint in Oleanna. In Act I, she tries to assert a gender-neutral language when John's references are unwaveringly masculine. Midway in the play, when Carol's accusations against John are made explicit to the audience, she formalizes her ideological viewpoint by using the vocabulary of a materialist-feminist agenda. Her

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180 Williams, "Ideology," 187.
full list of accusations would read: "sexist, elitist" (47), "classist, manipulative, pornographic Patriarch" (51). Like Marxists, cultural materialists, new historicists and other counter critics, feminists will usually admit their ideological bias when analysing a text. One can expect that a feminist "reading" will be carried out in engendered terms, revealing or subverting the patriarchal framework that influenced the author, to show the female subject as contained within the dominant culture.

One reason that Carol is problematic to feminist critics, aside from her seemingly false accusations of sexual harassment against John, is that she does not actually position herself within the ideological debate. Rather, she accuses John, in quite limited terms, of abusing his power as a white male within a patriarchal system. Thus there are several levels of "labeling" at work within the play: Carol's naming of John's ideological practices and John's naming of hers. More important, the controlling hand is the playwright's, who sets an ideological conflict in motion by endowing Carol with a militant feminist discourse. In all cases, the act of naming sets up certain boundaries in terms of expectations of behavior and tolerance of argument. Each person's interpretation, audience included, of another's actions and agenda, ultimately, is clouded by their perception of the "other's" ideology. Mamet himself, as we will see, has been under attack by certain critics who feel that his agenda is fueled by a desire to put feminists in their place, or as H. J. Kirchhoff said more colourfully, Mamet's "solution to the problem [is to] slap the bitch down."\textsuperscript{182} I intend to look deeper into the ideological forces which merge and collide in the play to see if we can answer Mamet's challenge to his audience to look beyond their own ideological framework when viewing his play. "Do you see? Don't you see. You don't see, do you?" (48).

According to Michael Bristol, John and Carol's, and even Mamet's, type of ideological naming is reductive and superficial. Bristol defines "any ideology that

\textsuperscript{182}Kirchhoff, C2.
can be designated as a conveniently named 'ism,' as a substantive ideology." Such "isms" may prove helpful to situate oneself initially in a more complex debate, but Mamet's subjects, John and especially Carol, certainly do not delve into the deeper ramifications of their own conflicting ideologies. They vie for power, but do not see how their use and abuse of that power is prompted by personal objectives as much as ideological differences.

The theatre, it is said, "speaks more than it knows." And, in the case of Oleanna, this claim may be applied not only to the half-conscious ideological subjects, Carol and John, but to the play and perhaps the playwright himself. After the initial production of Oleanna at the American Repertory Theatre near the Harvard campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Mamet was accused by students there of being "politically irresponsible." Annalena McAfee attributes this irresponsibility to Mamet's characterization of Carol's case as "patently feeble," thereby trivializing the real-life question of sexual harassment. Journalist Melvyn Bragg interviewed Mamet about two years after the initial furor over the play had died down. When asked for his reaction to the oft-enraged responses to Oleanna, some of which pin-pointed his unbalanced presentation of the issue of sexual harassment, calling it, for example, a "tract peopled with caricatures," Mamet said that he was "flabbergasted." In addition, Annalena McAfee quotes him as saying, "I wouldn't have felt more shocked if they'd said it was too Jewish. For the first time, I'm really scared for this country. America doesn't want a democracy, it wants a priesthood."

We have seen in previous chapters the ways in which Mamet intended to use the current social issues of sexual harassment and political correctness as a jumping off point to access such spiritual issues as the loss of communication and the

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183 Michael D. Bristol, "Where Does Ideology Hang Out?" Shakespeare Left and Right, 35.
184 Dawson, 311.
186 McAfee, 10.
188 McAfee, 10.
struggle for power in society today. However, whether Mamet intended to or not, through the choices he has made in Oleanna he has added his voice to an ongoing, ideologically-framed cultural debate in literary and popular criticism which has a vested interest in questioning the meaning of its cultural products. As Linda Woodbridge writes, "noticing how literature shapes our social roles and constructs our very identities is a first step to understanding how culture molds us."\(^{189}\)

"Ideological," writes Terry Eagleton, "is not synonymous with 'cultural': it denotes, more precisely, the points at which our cultural practices are interwoven with political power."\(^{190}\) By setting Oleanna in a university, Mamet found an ideal convergence point of cultural and political practices for his critique of social distopias. There are a number of scholarly texts which similarly critique universities as "sites for the reproduction of power and privilege."\(^{191}\) Like Mamet, Himani Bannerji et al recognize academic institutions "as sites of feminist struggle;"\(^{192}\) unlike Mamet, they see difference as being accepted, however slowly, by the academy to the benefit of all its members. Where Mamet exposes cynicism, these women celebrate improvement.

While the contributors to Unsettling Relations do want to "disrupt social relations of power and knowledge,"\(^{193}\) within the once all-male establishment, they fully recognize that their voices are not representative of all women. "The very idea," they write," that anyone has to speak for someone else is a problem."\(^{194}\) Carol, on the other hand, grows to believe that her experience entitles her to speak on behalf of other students. "The issue here is not what I 'feel.' It is not my 'feelings,' but the feelings of women. And men" (63). It must be said that Carol is not all women and her unfounded harassment suit against John does not represent the

\(^{189}\)Linda Woodbridge, "Afterword: Poetics from the Barrel of a Gun?" Shakespeare Left and Right, 295.
\(^{190}\)Terry Eagleton, "Introduction," Ideology, 1.
\(^{191}\)Bannerji et al., 5.
\(^{192}\)Bannerji et al., 5.
\(^{193}\)Bannerji et al., 6.
\(^{194}\)Bannerji et al., 9.
actions or prerogatives of all women, but we see no other representation of women in the play, and for that reason, Mamet does paint Carol as a representative of sorts.

There is another woman in this world, albeit on the margins. During the first of his many phone conversations in the play, John is in contact with his wife Grace. As we have seen in Chapter Two, Grace stages the first "act of aggression" (41) against John using the threat of a nullified purchase agreement on their new house to get him home for a party in honour of his tenure announcement. As the plot unfolds, however, Grace's presence has progressively less importance and she comes to represent part of the "real-life" loss of bourgeois security that Carol has cost John. In this way Grace is not an autonomous character, but a device to give John more characterization and life in his world outside the play. Thus, it is through Carol--her vocabulary, her actions and her interpretation of events--that we read the tone and temperament of this engendered and unstable world.

Since agency and power, abused as they are, rest in Acts II and III primarily in the hands of the "hysterical" Carol, feminist critics have critiqued the play as being part of a "major conservative shift in the cultural climate" since the gains of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, in which a "male backlash" seeks to "negate the critiques and undermine the goals of feminism." Not that we should disallow Mamet's dissenting voice; after all, as Linda Woodbridge tells us, "disagreement [is] a healthy testing of academic life." But feminist critics are worried that within this healthy disagreement is a "possible political agenda, part of a backlash against the women's movement they [have] encountered in other places:" popular culture, journalism, academic criticism, inequitable hiring policies, anti-abortion legislation, and so on. While Mamet himself may not
endorse a backlash against feminism, his play could easily be appropriated by the ideological conservatism of some viewers or readers who do endorse that backlash.

In the early 1990s, around the time that Mamet was writing Oleanna, two popular (and populist) feminist texts appeared on the scene in North America. Susan Faludi's Backlash and Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth appealed to women to raise their self-awareness about the ideologically "chilly climate" that constructed their historical moment. Wolf writes, "after the success of the women's movement second wave, the beauty myth was perfected to checkmate power at every level in individual women's lives." Her thesis did not so much espouse a conspiracy theory which could be traced to a plot contrived behind closed doors by a small and powerful elite; rather, it pointed to images in advertising of beauty which is, for most women, inconceivable and unattainable. By buying into the myth that they should look like the doctored photos of professional models with ever-changing wardrobes, women internalize their own subjugation and "deplete [themselves] psychologically."

Susan Faludi extends her argument beyond Wolf's to encompass backlash phenomena in popular psychology, the media and the political system.

The backlash is not a conspiracy, with a council dispatching agents from some central control room, nor are the people who serve its ends often aware of their role . . . For the most part, its workings are encoded and internalized, diffuse and chameleonic . . . generated by a culture machine that is always scrounging for a "fresh" angle. Taken as a whole, however, these codes and cajolings, these whispers and threats and myths, move overwhelmingly in one direction: they try to push women back into their "acceptable roles."

Both Wolf and Faludi add their voice to a whole body of criticism by such counter critics as Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky, who theorize about the ways in

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202Wolf, 19.
203Wolf, 19.
204Faludi, xxi-xxii.
which a democratic society—without need of the scare-tactics that are used in totalitarian states—polices itself. In particular, feminists such as Sandra Lee Bartky explain how women become their own disciplinarians in their approach to food, body, dress, and cosmetics: the "tyranny of slenderness and fashion, the discourse of exercise and other technologies of control." A backlash, these critics argue, responds to a force or movement which has accumulated too much power for itself. Presumably, then, a new force will rise up in response to the now status-quo backlash forces and the cycle will begin anew. Given these rather war-like images, it is no surprise that feminist gains or losses are often expressed in military terms: "battles won, battles lost, points and territory gained and surrendered."

There are voices of dissent within the movement, however. Christina Hoff Sommers blames writers like Wolf and Faludi for inciting women's anger and resentment when such feelings are not warranted. Even though they "skirt the claim of outright conspiracy," writes Sommers, they "freely use the language of subterfuge to arouse [women's] anger and bitterness." Furthermore, says Sommers, writers like Faludi, Wolf, Gloria Steinem, Marilyn French, Catherine MacKinnon etc., are misusing and misquoting data in their hypotheses which distort the perception of American life to look as though the entire system is "rigged against women." Some of the sociological studies are generated from agenda-based groups to begin with, states Sommers, which means that the method of investigation and data gathering is skewed at the source.

207Giroux, 44.
208Faludi, xx.
212Sommers, 16.
It is not news to most of us that statistics can be used to mean anything. Mark Twain quipped that there are "lies, damn lies and statistics." But the example that Sommers uses to open her book is quite disturbing. She quotes from Steinem's *Revolution from Within* which states that "in this country alone . . . about 150,000 females die of anorexia each year."\(^{213}\) Steinem admits the danger of comparing this "mass self-immolation" to the Holocaust, but does so anyway. When Sommers traced Steinem's figure back to its source, the American Anorexia and Bulimia Association's 1985 newsletter, she found that the association "had referred to 150,000 to 200,000 sufferers (not fatalities) of anorexia nervosa."\(^{214}\) On average, from 1983 to 1990 the Division of Vital Statistics at the (American) National Center for Health Statistics reports about 75 deaths a year from anorexia nervosa.\(^{215}\) Next Sommers traced the misquoted figure out from the source and found it in such books as *The Beauty Myth* and Joan Brumberg's *Fasting Girls*, in Ann Landers' syndicated column and in a recent women's studies textbook entitled *The Knowledge Crisis*.

I chose to demonstrate the manner in which this figure could journey from misquote to fact because, even in the fictional realm of the theatre, the likes of Carol and her Group are hearing and reading the exaggeration, accepting it as truth and incorporating similar hyperboles into their own engendered perception of society. Furthermore, with the backlash metaphors emphasizing the oppression or subjugation of the female body, we can see why resistance to oppression in *Oleanna* is presented in terms of corporeal exploitation. "Sexual harassment," write Linda Brodkey and Michelle Fine, "sits at the nexus of gender, power and sexuality in the academy."\(^{216}\) In a sense, Carol's exaggeration, if not encouraged by the literature with which she must have come into contact, is justified by the ideological framework by which she perceives the world around her. For example, Carol

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\(^{213}\) Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from Within* 222. In Sommers, 11.
\(^{214}\) Sommers, 12.
\(^{215}\) See Sommers, 12.
describes John's arrogant and dominating classroom manner as rape. "And what is
that but rape; I swear to God" (67).

In some ways, exaggerating the degree of urgency of such "noble lies" on
subjects such as eating disorders, rape, battery and wage differentials might act as
effective propaganda to catalyze people to definitive action who would otherwise
remain hardened to a cause. On the other hand, according to Sommers, "being
incorrect . . . leads to nothing constructive in the way of alleviating the actual
suffering of women." I would add that envisioning our society as being entirely
oppressive and paternalistic essentializes women as victims. Even if, within this
philosophy, women find agency to overcome their oppression, they still begin their
journey from the origins of victimhood. Mamet himself has expressed his
agreement with this concept, as we see in this excerpt from lawyer Frank Galvin's
closing statements from Mamet's 1982 screenplay for The Verdict:

You know, so much of the time, we're lost. We say "Please, God, tell
us what is right. Tell us what's true. There is no justice. The rich win,
the poor are powerless . . ." We become tired of hearing people lie.
After a time we become dead. A little dead. We start thinking of
ourselves as victims. (Pause) And we become victims.

In the midst of this discourse is Carol, ostensibly at John's office to talk to him
about her grade. However, she must have a more personal objective that keeps her
in the office when John's rushed demeanor implies so resolutely, particularly at the
beginning of the act, that he has no time for her. Clearly, Carol has had no previous
meetings or tutorials with the professor. In the Vancouver Playhouse production of
Oleanna, Bill Dow as John had to consult the title page of Carol's paper in order to
remember her name. As well, if the brief quotation that John reads from Carol's
paper is indicative of her intellectual prowess and writing ability, then she probably
has not sought help for her studies from other sources. Discussing the paper or her

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217Sommers, 188.
218Sommers, 17.
grade masks more deeply held needs. Carol, consciously or unconsciously, needs to confess to John.

In fact, the whole first act, from Carol’s standpoint, is prelude to confessing. She tests John, questions him. "Who should I listen to?" (36). At that moment, John feels he has connected with her and he "goes over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder" (36). During the interchange that follows that action, John tries to encourage her to share her feelings, not her thoughts on the class lectures, but her feelings. "What do you feel?" (37). She answers that she feels bad. Then she actually defines herself in that capacity. "I'm bad" (38). At heart, she sees herself as worthless, a victim. She tries to tell John the cause.

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 my life . . . (The phone rings.) (Pause. John goes to the phone and picks it up) (38).

Just as at the beginning of the act, Carol is relegated to an inferior position as John deals with matters of his family, house and tenure announcement. If she hoped to find support from John to overcome her victim status, her opportunity ended in the moment that the phone call interrupted her confession.

Psychologist Joanna Harwood hypothesized that Carol may have been raped by her father and any further action that she takes against John is actually a transference of vengeance from her father to her professor. Mamet provides no evidence to support any definitive motive for Carol's actions against John, but as a theory, this does begin to explain Carol to an audience, short of actually justifying her. I do not accept Harwood’s hypothesis, it demands too many leaps of faith, but certainly something has happened to Carol, as she herself tries to confess. It is interesting, however, that Mamet chooses to characterize Carol as a victim. And, despite the overwhelming criticism of both Mamet and his play as a whole for

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220This information comes from a lecture that I attended on Nov. 2 1994 when Joanna Harwood addressed the American Drama course taught in the UBC Department of English by Sherill Grace.
"blaming women," his characterization of the young female student does stem from the same perception of women as victims as the aforementioned books by the likes of Faludi and Wolf.

Since Carol is, in a sense, rejected by John, Mamet infers that Carol seeks out the sympathies of people who will not reject her. Whether by accident or by design, Carol finds the ears of a feminist organization, and, one presumes, she confesses to them instead. I must point out that Carol's question of "who should I listen to" does open the possibility that she has been attending meetings of the feminist group before she even enrolls in John's class. In fact, some people have seen Carol as an avenging ideologue who was planted in his class by The Group to plot against John from the beginning. Glynis Leyshon, the director of the Vancouver Playhouse production of Oleanna, asserts that she did not use that choice when approaching the play. In her mind, Carol is not an ideologue posing in John's classroom as a failing student. "Our take is that none of the characters lie. Carol is not setting out with an agenda of entrapment. I don't think that would have been useful."

Leyshon's decision is an interesting one considering that many of the characters in the "Mamet canon" actually make their living by telling lies. We saw, in Chapters One and Two, how the characters in Mamet's exploitative and manipulative society need to adapt to their surroundings or risk failure in that system. Is Carol, then, to be seen as separate from that tradition because of her purported victim status? Does Mamet not make clear to a generalized audience the cutthroat competition inherent in the university system as he does, for example, with Glengarry Glen Ross, where the salesmen will be fired at the end of the month if they are not one of the top two "closers" in the company? These questions only raise more questions about Mamet's intentional choices as a playwright to leave these issues so ambiguous. He leaves the burden of accounting for these ambiguities to directors and readers, knowing that their decisions will expose their

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221 McAfee, 10.
222 Thomas, "Stagecraft," 41.
own ideological framework. Glynis Leyshon says that Carol does not lie, that she
does not set out with an agenda of entrapment. I agree with her decision. Carol’s
decision to persecute John arises during her first tutorial with him. The alternative
simplifies the dialectic and makes Carol out to be sinister when she is not. At this
point, I would like to begin to unravel more of Mamet’s challenges and
manipulations about Carol’s story to show how she is, alternatively, justified and
misguided in her accusations of sexual harassment against her teacher.

Perhaps Mamet’s most important challenge in regards to Carol’s story to
either readers or directors comes in that gap between the first and second acts. In
particular, his challenge comes in the form of his manipulation of time: condensing
time in the case of one character and extending it for the other. In Carol’s case, time
is condensed and events occur much more quickly than is possible in "real time."
As readers or audience members, we need to know where and how she learns or
appropriates her new vocabulary that is used in her report to the tenure committee
in which she charges John with sexual harassment. The committee is holding a
hearing to deal with Carol’s complaint. How soon after John and Carol’s initial
meeting this hearing takes place we have no way of knowing. But John, strangely,
still seems to be held up in his negotiations over his new house. "In the
intervening period," he states, "I will lose my house. I will lose my deposit, and the
home I’d picked out for my wife and son will go by the boards" (45). My
assumption, then, is that Carol has submitted the report within days of her meeting
with John, at which point his teaching position, salary, buying power--and in that
sense, time--are frozen.

It becomes difficult, almost impossible, to account for Carol’s leap in
articulateness and her incorporation of a feminist vocabulary if the time lapse
between these two scenes is really just a matter of days. John cannot account for it
either. He believes that someone has fed her the information, proposed a plan of
action to end his "rule" and coached her in her behavior.
JOHN: Can't you . . . . You see what I'm saying? Can't you tell me in your own words?
CAROL: Those are my own words (Pause) (49).

At the Playhouse, during that pause, John threw Carol a look of scornful disbelief, constructing her to be a liar and a pawn for someone else's agenda. Thus, just as the off-stage Grace represents the power and privilege that John stands to lose, Carol's off-stage Group, "the people [she's] been talking to" (54), represents the power and privilege that she stands to gain.

Even in Act III, when we have a better grasp of the time lapse in the play ["I saw you. I saw you, Professor. For two semesters sit there, stand there" (66)] still not enough time has lapsed for Carol to move so dexterously within her new vocabulary. There has been, however, enough time to gather some of the popularized, yet misleading statistics that Christina Hoff Sommers analyzes in Who Stole Feminism. But a sophisticated understanding of the philosophy and methodology behind any particular ideology or theory--be it feminist, marxist, humanist, etc.--takes practice, reflection and time. Carol has not achieved such understanding because she has not taken that time. Therefore, says Journalist Bronwyn Drainie, the "eloquent truths . . . about the eternal power struggle between the sexes" are put into Carol's mouth by Mamet so that he does not get "accused of woman-hating."\(^{223}\) Drainie believes that Carol's allusions to the systemic abuse of power in a patriarchal order are a red herring, which conceals her real purpose: to subject John to the same humiliation and victimization that she experienced.

"Now you know, do you see? What it is to be subject to that power" (70). After all, Carol as much as admits that she has come to teach him a lesson.

You asked me in here to explain something to me, as a child, that I did not understand. But I came to explain something to you. You Are Not God. You ask me why I came? I came here to instruct you (67).

Carol may be within her rights to illustrate how John has collaborated with an oppressive patriarchal order, "You. Do. Not. Have. The. Power. Did you

\(^{223}\)Drainie, E1.
misuse it? *Someone* did. Are you part of that group? *Yes.* *Yes.* You are" (50). But she is guilty of "reverse stereotyping"224 of all white heterosexual males as members of the oppressor class. Worse, she replaces an old oppression with a new one when she brandishes her list of books to be banned from the course. This is an interesting moment in the play. Audiences tend to gasp in disbelief at this point. On the one hand, viewers may be gasping at the gall of Carol and her special interest group to censor academic freedom of speech; on the other hand they may direct their disbelief at Mamet and his "paranoid vision of feminist ascendancy."225

But is this sheer paranoia? Linda Brodkey and Michelle Fine cite historical precedent that it is not. In the early 1980s, at the University of Pennsylvania, photographs of prominent male professors were displayed, "once a week with great regularity," around campus with the captions, "WANTED FOR CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN."226 As well, Christina Hoff Sommers produces examples in *Who Stole Feminism* which argue the same case. She identifies the high profile anti-pornography feminists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin as "gender wardens"227 in positions of influence within the academy whose ideological intimidation has already monitored and censored works in the name of equity. Commenting on her role in removing from an exhibit by artist Carol Jacobsen a videotape that was deemed offensive, MacKinnon stated:

> What you need is people who see through literature like Andrea Dworkin, who see through law like me, to see through art and create the uncompromised women's visual vocabulary.228

Of course Carol is not Andrea Dworkin (although Mamet clearly constructs her with a similar stroke); rather, she is an undergraduate student, and alone she has relatively little influence. With the backing of her Group her power increases, and together they do share Dworkin's and MacKinnon's abhorrence of compromise.

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225 McAfee, 10.
227 Sommers, 272.
Contrast their voices against those of Bannerji et al., who state, "We have no right to speak for anyone but ourselves." In these two examples, we begin to see the divisiveness among feminists on matters of methodology, willingness to "dialogue" and respect for alternative points of view. They are struggling towards the same goal, however: to end the reproduction of power and privilege for white, middle class, heterosexual men within the university system.

*Oleanna* argues that there is not enough "common ground" for any two opposing positions or truths to exist in the same discursive space. If one group has power, it will always be at the expense and exclusion of another. Carol seems unconcerned by this dilemma and keeps pushing, in the uncompromising style of MacKinnon and Dworkin, for change in the system. And, on the grounds of pervasive, systemic discrimination, Carol does have a case against the dominant group to which John belongs, if not against John himself. Lawyer Joan McEwen states that within the university system, "discrimination is so pervasive that members of the dominant group fail to recognize it." The sheer volume of commissioned reports and personal testimonies written by people who are not part of the dominant white male Anglo-European group attests to the fact that universities maintain a "chilly climate" on their campuses.

As a middle class white woman who was not long past my own undergraduate years when Carol was introduced to theatrical audiences, I could not help but empathize with the part of her argument which sought, as she put it, to end the "continuation of a certain method of thought" (31). As I pointed out in Chapter Two, John, in his position of privilege, does not appreciate or empathize

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229Bannerji et al., 9.
230McEwen, 77.
231Examples of these reports which highlight system-based racism and/or sexism in universities can be found in Roberta M. Hall and Bernice R. Sandler "The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?" and "Out of the Classroom: A Chilly Campus Climate for Women?" *Projects on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges,* (Washington, DC, 1982 and 1984).
with the ideas or interests of his students because he had not tried to learn of their experiences.

CAROL: You write that education is just hazing. (Pause) But we worked to come to this school. (Pause) And some of us. (Pause) Overcame prejudices. Economic, sexual, you cannot begin to imagine (69).

For Carol, the heart of the matter is the instructor's power to grant or deny grades based on ideological opposition to the student.

By the teachers. By you. By, say, one low grade that keeps us out of graduate school; by one, say, one capricious or inventive answer on our parts, which, perhaps, you don't find amusing (70).

On a system-based level, I agree with all these issues. The system fails certain groups of students by either excluding or merely paying lip service to their theoretical and experiential concerns. Thus, they remain on the margins of a dominant discourse, unable to take full advantage of their situation in the university. While Carol's theoretical and experiential concerns clearly are denied expression in this case, Mamet constructs her as a failing student which suggests that her poor showing in John's class could as easily stem from a lack of effort as from ideological opposition from her teacher. In this way, I feel that Mamet has encouraged me to distrust Carol's motives, despite my predilection to sympathize and agree with her.

Again, Mamet plays with my sympathies with the way in which he constructs Carol's dogmatic push for change, making "the process more adversarial than it already is."233 She cannot wait to chip away at the self-perpetuating establishment; she wants a dramatic, sweeping victory in a battle that clearly distinguishes right from wrong. I could not help but draw parallels between Carol's case and a recent controversy at my own university over Joan McEwen's "Report in Respect of the Political Science Department." One student in particular, Political Science MA student Lorraine Rigo, has received unprecedented local and national media attention because of her testimony in the McEwen Report. According to the report,

233McEwen, 53.
she told her TA supervisor that "the students in her group were starting to take her seriously now that she had just given out her first set of marks." The now infamous (alleged) response of the supervisor, Professor Don Munton, was, "Yeah, now they probably think that you are just one big, bad, black bitch." Echoing Carol's censorial book ban in Oleanna in exchange for the withdrawal of her Group's complaint against John, Rigo responded to her incident with a list of "non-negotiable requests which included $40,000, six letters of reference that were acceptable to her, the replacement of her grades with a "P" for pass, and admission into the PhD program of her choice."

Most women, however, are unlikely to make public either their suspicions or documented evidence of private incidents which they perceive to be sexual harassment. The institutional procedures that could make their names known to the public and jeopardize their (possible) future professional lives would outweigh any moral victory that might arise from a successful legal trial. Furthermore, most sexual harassment policy guidelines would not encourage confrontational approaches for their complainants, as is documented in the case of Lorraine Rigo. A Sexual Harassment Advisor responded to Rigo's complaint:

I am not clear about your objectives. If you only want to criticize or present ultimatums to the department and the University, neither I nor the Sexual Harassment Policy Office are able to be much help. If you want to push the system to create a better situation for graduate students, including yourself, you can count on our support and assistance in creating and following an effective procedure to this end. It might not be as dramatic or as fast as a more confrontational approach, but the long-term results would be more satisfying for everyone.

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237 McEwen, 54.
If a complainant did choose to pursue legal action, however, they would, like Carol or Rigo have recourse to two types of legal action which human rights law now recognizes. McEwen describes them in her report:

Human rights law has evolved to recognize not only "direct" (namely, individual, intentional or otherwise) forms of discrimination, but also the more subtle and pervasive forms of discrimination, such as "adverse effect" discrimination and "systemic" discrimination.Both of these women, one real, one fictional, use the argument of the more subtle, systemic discrimination to prop up their personal charges against their alleged harasser. In Carol's case, she both conflates and confuses the definitions of "direct" and "systemic" discrimination. I will add to a quote which I have already cited to show how Carol misunderstands the difference between the two terms.


John does not deny that he has done these things; he even hints that he could learn to "change in those things in which [he is] deficient" (70). "Well, I... I... I... You know I, as I said. I... think I am not too old to learn, and I can learn, I..." (71). What angers John is that Carol's accusations are based on her perception of his intent. His actions, he says, were "devoid of sexual content" (70). Carol counters that his intentions are irrelevant. "I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT. Don't you begin to see...? Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY" (70). A good deal of our empathy for John in the play originates from our belief that his intentions are relevant. Many audience members at the Playhouse production of Oleanna, myself included, on witnessing Dow's actions would concur that John's intentions were devoid of sexual desires.

And yet, as McEwen points out in her report, human rights law, as defined by the Supreme Court of Canada, states that "'intention' is not a prerequisite to a

238McEwen, 72.
finding of discrimination."²³⁹ She quotes from Supreme Court case "Action Travail des Femmes v. C.N.R. Co."

It is not a question of whether this discrimination is motivated by an intentional desire to obstruct someone's potential, or whether it is the accidental by-product of innocently motivated practices or systems. If the barrier is affecting certain groups in a disproportionately negative way, it is a signal that the practices that lead to this adverse impact may be discriminatory. That is why it is important to look at the results of a system.²⁴⁰

This finding does grant Carol's case a great deal of credibility both in terms of "systemic" and "direct" discrimination. It reveals that, according to the law, Carol's case is anything but "patently feeble."²⁴¹ She maintains her conviction that his jokes, his dominating language and his physical caress have done her injury. At times, it seems that McEwen speaks directly on behalf of Carol when she reminds us that "human rights laws are premised upon the effects of certain behaviors on the recipient thereof. Hence it is no answer for a respondent to say, 'I did not intend to cause offense (for example) by telling that joke.'"²⁴²

What the above finding does not explain is the cosmetic solution to a pervasive problem that is presented by Carol and her Group: banning certain books from being "representative examples of the university" (75). In fact, it runs counter to one of McEwen's recommendations in her report to my university that it practice ideological and critical pluralism in its classrooms. As Linda Alcoff advises, the method of Carol and her Group cannot "mobilize a movement that is always against: you must have a positive alternative, a vision of a better future that can mobilize people to sacrifice their time and energy toward its realization."²⁴³ Even Richard Levin, who was so much attacked in Shakespeare Left and Right, offers a positive alternative to ideological domination in the classroom. He advises that

²³⁹McEwen, 72.
²⁴¹McAfee, 10.
²⁴²McEwen, 23.
interpreters of literature practice ideological and critical pluralism: teaching and learning different approaches to the analysis of literature so that as many points of view may be used and appreciated. The alternative, he writes, is that each "approach is confined to its own hermeneutically sealed-off discursive space, and adherents of different approaches can only discourse with each other about the politics of their respective ideologies." Conversely, Director Glynis Leyshon explains that Mamet's play opens itself up to various discourses by leaving "the debate open for the critical final act--an act where you, in the audience, add your voice to the vital dialogue Oleanna is meant to provoke."

Leyshon's statement begs the question--have we actually partaken in that vital dialogue? Certainly Oleanna has sparked a new round of opinions from many positions on the ideological continuum--essays, articles, editorials, academic papers--but it is difficult, at this point, to see if the dialogue can actually move into concrete actions to be taken on the issues. All too often, writes Mark Leiren-Young, people gather to "discuss issues, not solutions." Remembering Ivo Kamps' categorization of discursive spaces into "Left" and "Right," I would argue that many of the critiques of the play do not venture out of their own ideological comfort zones. Colin Thomas warns that this lack of exchange reproduces the tragedy of Carol and John in the play.

A tragedy of a similar sort is experienced by audience members who see in the play nothing more than an opportunity to leave the theatre with ever-more-adversarial, ever-more-polarized positions ever more deeply entrenched.

Carol and John do not want dialogue, nor are they capable of it. John does try to extend an olive branch to Carol by re-initiating communication with her. "I say something conventional, you respond, and the information we exchange is not

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244Levin, 19.
245Glynis Leyshon, "Director's Notes," Program Notes to Oleanna, Vancouver Playhouse Oct. 8-Nov. 5 1994.
246Leiren-Young, "Incorrect Politics," 25.
247Thomas, "Base for Discussion," 46.
about the 'weather,' but that we both agree to converse" (53). And while his offer may be sincere, John's previous actions belie his desire to converse. As we have seen in Chapter Two, John condescends, dominates, provokes, instructs, interrupts, flourishes etc., but he does not converse. And, as Carol herself points out, his real purpose in Act II is not to converse or share ideas, but to show her that he meant no harm and "convince her to retract" (46).

Threatened by his attempts to reassert dominance, Carol goes on the attack. And in so doing, she uses John as a scapegoat for the abuses of the system. "I'm not a bogeyman," he tells her, "I don't 'stand' for something, I . . ." (50). But in alluding again to Althusser's observation that there can be no "outside" to ideology, we can say that, in fact, John does stand for something. Although Carol is the only character that we see who perceives John as standing for a privileged, dominant group, there are other off-stage characters in the play who are complicit in his downfall. The Tenure Committee, The Group, the court officers and Carol's lawyer are all willing to use John as a scapegoat for the failings of the system. They may remove John from his seat of relative power, but the actual system remains intact and unchallenged. This inclusion of faceless authority has worked its way several times into Mamet's dramas; think of Fletcher in American Buffalo, Mitch and Murray in Glengarry Glen Ross and Ross in Speed-the-Plow. By keeping the representational locus of true power out of sight of the audience, Mamet sustains the illusion that "institutions are immutable and hence oppression is inevitable."

Even if John had been wielding power in a less abstract way—if he were using his position intentionally to sexually dominate one or more of his students--simply removing him and him alone from the institution would not cure the more pervasive, more subtle system-wide environment which is not free from discrimination and harassment. It seems that the "system," in a concerted effort to protect itself from closer examination, uses John's misfortune as an opportunity to

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248 Brodkey and Fine, 113.
appear to be actively and quickly eradicating isolated incidents of discrimination. "My charges are not trivial," announces Carol, "You see that in the haste, I think, in which they were accepted" (70). Without a doubt, the root cause of a controversial and divisive issue such as this cannot even begin to be addressed in the hasty manner with which the invisible powers deal with it in Oleanna. Mamet’s point in playing with the "real life" due process that surrounds sexual harassment cases? One cannot say for certain, but as I argued in Chapter Two, he likely wished to show how both Carol and John are victims of this system, as well as each other’s desire for power. Also possible is a more scathing critique of the power held by feminist and/or Politically Correct policy makers on university campuses.

Moreover, Mamet seems to be addressing issues similar to those of American cultural critic Wendy Kaminer who is troubled by the lack of recognition, in some feminist discourses, of different degrees of suffering or victimization. In the act of naming herself a victim of harassment, Carol places herself on sacred ground. If one questions her testimony, as no one does but John in the world of Oleanna, then s/he could be in danger of being perceived as a member of the injudicious oppressor class that victimized Carol in the first place. This has been the case with Oleanna where Mamet himself has been criticized as much as the politics of the play. Kaminer writes,

In some feminist circles, it is heresy to suggest that there are degrees of suffering and oppression, which need to be kept in perspective . . . It is heresy to suggest that a woman who has to listen to her colleagues tell stupid sexist jokes has a lesser grievance than a woman who is physically accosted by her supervisor . . . All claims of suffering are sacred and presumed to be absolutely true. It is a primary article of faith among many feminists that women don’t lie about rape, ever; they lack the dishonesty gene.249

Right until the last moments of the play Mamet keeps us at odds with Carol; her victim status resulting from perceived sexual harassment, in Kaminer’s framework, is relatively low. Glynis Leyshon, when wrestling with the interpretive

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challenges in *Oleanna* at the Vancouver Playhouse, made certain that no staging choices would heighten the play's ambiguity and therefore Carol's claim to a "greater" victim status. "To set anything," says Leyshon, "like a brush across the breast, would be unfaithful to Mamet and what he's trying to achieve. I think what one tries to make compelling is Carol's sense of being assaulted." We are all Othellos. To believe in Carol's victim status, we need the ocular proof. Mamet gives us that proof in the final moments of the play.

David McIlraith who played John in Calgary describes his experience in the Alberta Theatre Projects' production of *Oleanna* in September 1994: "Responses from our audience would suggest that they truly hate her, right up until the very end of the play when hopefully the allegiance shifts back to her." Hopefully, our allegiance changes because, in seeing physical abuse, even in the fictional framework of the theatre, we need no longer grapple with such abstractions as perceived discrimination and its effects upon an invisible student body. Now the body is real. John's dominance is not discursive or ideological, but physical and violently so. At the Vancouver Playhouse Bill Dow as John slammed Carol's (Leslie Jones') back up against a wall and hit her in the face, bloodying her nose. Next, he threw her onto the floor towards the audience and accused her with the lines, "I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little cunt . . ." (79).

Through this dialogue and these images, the play points towards the destructive violence that happens inside and outside the "chilly climate" of universities and the fictive realm of the theatre. It reminds us, as Kaminer does, that the "victimization of women as a class by discriminatory laws and customs, and a collective failure to take sexual violence seriously, are historical reality. Even today women are being assaulted and killed by their husbands with terrifying regularity." My question to readers of the play and to Mamet himself is whether

250 Thomas, "Stagecraft," 41.
252 Kaminer, 68.
they believe that this play, which concludes with the violent assault of a female character, helps or hinders the cause against violence against women.

I have already pointed out several times Mamet's taunt to his audience, "Do you see? Don't you see? You don't see, do you?" (48). At this point, I would like to put that question back to the playwright: does he see the consequences of such a play "in that world beyond the page [and stage] in which women live."253 For, like Linda Woodbridge, I am of the conviction that literature matters and has an effect on the "extra-literary" world. If Carol and John cannot compromise about their conflict, if audiences leave the theatre with their positions more polarized and entrenched than when they arrived, and if critics remain divided between Left and Right after reading or viewing this play, then where, we must ask, is that "vital dialogue" that Oleanna is meant to provoke leading us? This is the issue that I have examined from various perspectives throughout this thesis and it will continue to be tackled by every reader, critic, director, actor or audience member that tries to interpret this text. If it is, as Mamet suggests, too late for John and Carol to learn to negotiate, then perhaps we, outside the world of the play, can heed Ivo Kamps' advice and find some common ground.

253 Woodbridge, 286.
Johan Callens asserts that Mamet is a playwright who "solicits tolerance, beginning with oneself, to avoid the build-up and eruption of violence."\textsuperscript{254} Throughout this thesis, however, I have argued that--while this might be the ideal reaction to Oleanna--Mamet, in fact, diverts his audience's attention from the play's "universal" issues about the problem of violence erupting out of the use and abuse of power, to the contemporary issues of sexual harassment and political correctness. For that reason, many of the play's spectators and critics may not have seen, or did not believe in his intended call for tolerance. As Jill Dolan argues, "the process of reception and the entire hermeneutical endeavor will--and should--be different for different spectators. The meanings derived from any one performance will vary endlessly."\textsuperscript{255} In this thesis, then, I have shown the different cultural and theatrical meanings that were voiced by critics, performers, directors and viewers of Mamet's dense and polemical play.

In particular, my goal has been to analyse the play from a primarily feminist point of view. At times, this has meant that I have had to deal with some of the discourse and methodological contradictions inherent to feminist theory as I have tried to uncover the intentions and effects of Oleanna's disparate, contradictory and controversial meanings. These contradictions, however, provided a rich and productive platform of ideas from which to look at Mamet's Oleanna as a mainstay of dominant culture. Indeed, the overwhelming popularity of Oleanna in Canadian regional theatres signified the play's entrenchment in mainstream culture which usually desires, as Dolan states, "an entertaining, consumable commodity."\textsuperscript{256} Such desires raise the issue of audience reaction. For, as this thesis has shown, if audiences consume Mamet's dramatic work, and especially Oleanna, without

\textsuperscript{254}Callens, 10.
\textsuperscript{256}Dolan, Critic, 120.
questioning his playwriting choices, they risk identifying with the dominant discourses and ideologies that Mamet claims to criticize. In this way, their "participation" in Oleanna will result in their perpetuating rather than critiquing inherently distopian social structures. True participation in Oleanna's cultural critique requires vigorous investigation into the more complex meanings behind the seemingly simple issues that Mamet raises and the supposedly prescriptive answers that he provides.

Mamet has since gone on to raise new questions about memory, family and deception in The Cryptogram, his most recent play to date. The domestic space and poetic style of The Cryptogram is set against a metaphoric puzzle; here meaning is found by unlocking hidden memories, each one containing a piece that helps to decode the puzzle's meaning. I see my own deconstruction of Oleanna in a similar light: as a puzzle it asks, as I stated in my introduction, how and why is domination--be it linguistic authority or physical violence--presented, contextualized and received in either the fictive realm of the theatre or society at large? To begin to piece together an answer, I presented and analysed contemporary artifacts that create meaning in this moment in history: the text of the play; reviews of various productions; interviews with the playwright, directors, and actors; relevant theory and reports on our current ideological climate. I chose to deconstruct possible textual, performative and cultural meanings of the play because I saw an overall lack of in-depth analysis about the literary, educational, performative, psychological, legal and ideological questions that Oleanna raises. For all that, I feel the puzzle is yet unsolved; the final part of the equation rests in the hands of each reader or viewer who has come into contact with the play. As a means of closure, I defer to the playwright who puts the challenge to every member of his audience: "You are a Free Person," he writes, "you decide" (74).


McEwen, Joan I. "Report in Respect of the Political Science Department of the University of British Columbia." Prepared for the Deans of the Faculty of Arts and Graduate Studies. Vancouver, 1995.


