GENDER AND POWER IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER
Also by Victor L. Calm

Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard

The Heroes of Shakespeare's Tragedies

A Thinking Student's Guide to College

Shakespeare the Playwright
GENDER
AND POWER
IN THE PLAYS OF
HAROLD PINTER

Victor L. Cahn

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .................................................. vii

Introduction ......................................................... 1

1. A Slight Ache, A Night Out, Night School ..................... 11

2. The Collection .................................................. 31

3. The Lover ...................................................... 43

4. The Homecoming .............................................. 55

5. Tea Party, The Basement ....................................... 75

6. Landscape, Silence ............................................. 89

7. Old Times ...................................................... 103

8. Betrayal ........................................................ 119

Conclusion ........................................................ 131

Works Cited ....................................................... 137

Index .............................................................. 143

About the Author ............................................... 149
To my mother,
Evelyn Baum Cahn
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**Introduction**

One of the best-known anecdotes about Harold Pinter, and one that probably better than any other reflects his relationship with the theater public, is his reply to a woman who wrote in dismay about her inability to grasp one of his plays:

Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play *The Birthday Party*. These are the points which I do not understand: 1) Who are the two men? 2) Where did Stanley come from? 3) Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play.

To which Pinter wrote:

Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1) Who are you? 2) Where do you come from? 3) Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter.

(Quoted in Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, 41–42)

The response communicates a puckish wit as well as a subtle pleasure in turning aside an audience unwilling to experience art on the artist’s terms.
The exchange reflects as well an essential aspect of Pinter's drama. The central theme of his work is also the dominant theme of twentieth-century art: the struggle for meaning in a fragmented, unfathomable world. Virtually all his characters are at times uncertain of whom or what they understand, of whom or what they believe, and ultimately of who or what they are: "There is the problem of the possibility of ever knowing the real motivation behind the actions of human beings who are complex and whose psychological make-up is contradictory and unverifiable" (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 243).

This condition of incertitude regarding society and self has several theatrical consequences. Pinter's characters live in perpetual suspicion, regarding both familiar figures and strangers with trepidation. His characters are also protective of what they see as their own, objects and territory over which they can assert sovereignty. These possessions may range from the trivial (the cheese roll in *The Homecoming* or the knife in *The Collection*) to the extravagant (Deely's home in *Old Times*). Such holdings are the most defined entities in Pinter's dramatic universe and a source of stability for men and women baffled by so much else. As a result of this state of mind, his characters are forever on guard against invasion, both physical and psychological. They are always nervous that whatever few rights and possessions they claim may be snatched away, leaving them even more alienated.

These objects, however, do not exist in a vacuum. They must be placed somewhere, and that somewhere is fundamental to an individual's identity. Thus many of Pinter's characters take refuge in a room, a construction of familiar walls and furniture about which they know as much as they can know about anything and in which they feel as safe as they do anywhere. In characterizing several of Pinter's earliest plays, George Wellwarth wrote: "The conflict in Pinter's plays occurs when one of the outside forces penetrates into the room and disrupts the security of its occupants" (Wellwarth, 225). Such is the framework for many of Pinter's works.

This struggle for survival is not a declared state of war, nor is it merely a subtle, unspoken hostility. Frederick Lumley perceptively describes it as "...more than a theater of understatement, it is also one of irrational impulses ever present, which create an atmosphere of nervous tension" (Lumley, 270). Here is the crux of Pinter's theatricality, the source of the unique tone that has, to the playwright's annoyance and disdain, been labeled "Pinteresque."
His characters do not attack overtly, as happens in the plays of Strindberg, Albee, or Osborne. Rather, Pinter's characters proceed tenuously, creating a stage environment in which every word, every hesitation and gesture, demands attention from both actors and audience. The characters often speak minimally, amid frequent pauses, as if wary of revealing a tidbit about themselves or their background that might create a point of vulnerability. The language is therefore dominated by unanswered questions that lead to repeated questions, awkward pauses, silences, and repetitions. To further shelter themselves, the characters rely on colloquialisms, professional jargon, and convoluted word patterns. The result is dialogue that often lacks the coherence and logic of traditional stage language but that in its disjunction reflects the mind and emotions of the speaker.

Yet despite its seeming incoherence, the speech is both familiar and realistic, as Wellwarth notes: "The dialogue in Pinter's plays fascinates by its very monotony and repetitiousness because the audience recognizes it—they have heard this sort of talk before" (Wellwarth, 224–225). This realism, though, is part of a unique overall effect that F. J. Bernhard calls an "essentially suprarealistic quality. Any single line of dialogue might be taken as realistic prose. But in the pattern of the play as a whole, the words have a consistent rhythmic construction and a symbolic charge that lift them beyond conventional realism" (Bernhard, 191).

Furthermore, when characters do try to explain themselves, they often do so obliquely, in seemingly random remarks or obtuse stories that appear tangential. Yet such detail, whether genuine disclosure or intentional deception, proves revelatory. As Hugh Nelson notes: "... it often does not matter whether what they say is, in fact, true. An invented past can be as telling as a true one" (Nelson, 151). Nonetheless, we as audience try first to ascertain to what extent the characters are speaking what they know to be truth and, second, to understand the motivations and background that lead characters to speak and act as they do. Frequently, though, we are at a loss. The details simply are not there. Clarification is not provided. In Pinter's own words, "The desire for verification on the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied" (Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," 11). Thus a sense of mystery pervades every play: "The audience is left to supply whatever conceptual framework it can, but no single rational frame will
answer all questions... The plays—as aesthetic entities—are completed, but the conceptual matrices out of which the action arises are left gaping" (Schechner, 177).

Even when characters do try to divulge part of themselves, they may be unwilling or unable to speak honestly: "Words thus become barriers between the very persons they are meant to join together. They stand between persons and become part of the hard, disarranged furniture making our passage through the world more difficult" (Killinger, 102). This uncertainty of meaning, complicated by resultant multiple levels and meanings of text and subtext, is the fabric of Pinter's drama. The playwright, too, has commented that speech has ulterior motivations: "When true silence falls, we are still left with echo, but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness" (Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," 15). Consequently, the more words his characters utter, the more likely their insecurity. Yet no matter how much they talk, no matter how much they attempt to establish a bond through language, these characters remain trapped in loneliness: "Isolation is the common fate of Pinter characters, it is part of the insecurity of their world that they should be alone" (Sykes, 79).

The meticulous use of language is reflected in the physical behavior of the characters, who tend to move about the stage slowly, resorting to physical action only in desperation or after reflection and preparation. This disparity between the characters' plight and their inability or unwillingness to confront the opposition head-on contributes to the unique theatrical atmosphere that has been called "comedy of menace," a term first applied to Pinter by theater critic Irving Wardle.

The humor also grows out of a spirit of play that pervades Pinter's works. Many of his characters disguise movements under the mask of a game. In some cases the game is literal: a squash match in Betrayal or the football game described in A Night Out. More often the game is figurative: characters may relate narratives or remember incidents that become weapons. Sometimes the characters create stories that are used to establish dominance, therefore the audience, like other characters or the speakers themselves, cannot be sure where reality begins and fantasy takes over. Some games take the form of social maneuvering, as characters choose allies and enemies as a way to stake out territory. Some games are linguistic, as one character tries to outdo
another with wordplay. Whatever the rules, "the game, essentially, is the continual battle for emotional security" (Gale, Butter's Going Up, 149).

This battle is, at its core, a struggle for power, power that in and of itself provides some verification. In a world where meaning is uncertain, where objects and territory are all that are definable, where language is a vehicle for protection rather than communication, where doubt in many forms is ever present, supremacy over other people guarantees a measure of knowledge and identity. When characters are secure in their authority, when they control others, when they are confident that their own status is certain, then they are spared some of the anguish intrinsic to Pinter's dramatic world.

What I hope to demonstrate is that in these works such conflict takes place on two planes: the conscious and the unconscious. On the conscious plane the characters are in visible conflict for territory and for power within that territory. Wardle has written that this view is the key to understanding Pinter's most famous and controversial work, The Homecoming, and suggests that this perspective may be applied to other Pinter plays:

The Pinter character . . . is there to defend his room. If anyone invades it he is on his defenses; the intruder may be a victim, an ally, or an assailant. Until the proprietor finds out which, there is talk, a verbal tournament to decide who will gain the dominant position and territorial rights.

(Wardle, 38)

Pinter's characters are aware of their mutual contention, and if offensive and defensive tactics are oblique, they are nonetheless apparent to both the combatants and the audience. The second plane of conflict, however, is hidden; it is one in which characters function instinctively, propelled by biological forces of which they may not be aware. Pinter himself has suggested this very point, that his characters do not act "arbitrarily, but for very deep-seated reasons" (quoted in Hewes, 56). He was speaking about The Homecoming, but his words could be applied to any number of his works. Patrick Roberts has written that Pinter's "interest in people is very much at the level of the basic primitive stuff that he sees as the deepest stratum, enigmatic and threatening, of our lives . . ." (Roberts, 69). To an extent Pinter's characters operate by what playwright/anthropologist Robert Ardrey designated "the territorial imperative" (Ardrey, 7), a primal drive for possession and, thereafter, power. Peter Hall suggests a similar theatrical world
when he discusses directing Pinter's plays: "My vocabulary is all the time about hostility and battles and weaponry, but that is the way Pinter's characters operate, as if they were all stalking round a jungle, trying to kill each other, but trying to disguise from one another the fact that they are bent on murder" (Hall, 22).

Within this overall framework the tone of Pinter's plays has shifted over the course of his career. In his earliest works characters are preoccupied with immediate threats and desires, and tend to be inarticulate, to use almost antipoetic language. In his later plays many characters are more concerned with the past as a force continually shaping the present, as well as with recognition of loss and age. Such figures are often sophisticated and speak lyrically and elegiacally. Yet throughout the works we feel the inevitable struggle of all these characters to find security and identity, to satisfy those instinctive needs of human nature.

The participants in this warfare vary. Several of Pinter's early plays, such as The Room and The Birthday Party, are set in lower-class environments, while most of the later ones, such as Old Times and Betrayal, take place against wealthy backgrounds. In six of his plays, including No Man's Land, The Caretaker, and The Dumb Waiter, female characters are absent. In works such as The Room and The Birthday Party, women play integral parts, but the focus is not on relationships between men and women.

In many of Pinter's plays, however, the key struggle for power is between male and female, and this aspect of his output is my priority. To be sure, critics have disparaged Pinter's portraits of women. One representative view is articulated by Alrene Sykes: "Does Pinter say anything more about women than that they are mothers, wives, and whores? Not, I think, a great deal" (Sykes, 106). She adds, however, that some of these women characters "are saved by their mystery and by a charging vitality that comes to life in production better than on the printed page" (Sykes, 106).

Thus Sykes acknowledges the theatricality of Pinter's world, but she does not bring out its multitude of dimension nor the numerous subtleties of mind and emotion that characterize Pinter's female characters. Moreover, when men and women in Pinter's plays compete against one another, their conflicts not only are marked by all the elements noted above, but also are exacerbated by, among other forces, sexual desire, repulsion, and jealousy. These emotions may bewilder or torment the characters themselves, whose doubts
about what lies around them are made more painful by the uncertainty of what lies within them.

Furthermore, male-female conflicts take place largely apart from political or economic territory. The battlefield is the home, the most intimate arena of life. In this competition the women have some of the same goals as the men: power and security. Pinter's women do not retreat behind traditional womanly tasks. Indeed, few of these plays involve complications created by the presence of young children, and most offspring who are part of the characters' lives remain in the background. Maternal responsibility does not supplant the primary struggle for survival and authority, as the women seem determined to avoid letting gender limit their territorial rights.

Another intriguing aspect of the struggle between men and women is that the element of mystery troubles Pinter's male characters far more than it does his female characters. Many of the women in these plays operate with an understanding of their own bodies and minds and therefore of their own desires. The women also have insight into male behavior and thought. Pinter's men, on the other hand, are constantly perplexed by what women know and, even more, by what women want. Thus the overall comic tension is increased by the male realization that although men have the physical capacity to exert dominance, they are emotionally weaker than the women with whom they are in conflict.

At the same time, the dramatic tension grows because although the women may be internally more powerful than the men around them, the surrounding environment usually demands that the primary role of women is to react both to men and to predominantly male social values. In addition, even if the women in Pinter's plays do not allow maternal or domestic concerns to take over their lives, these priorities are still endemic to them. Pinter repeatedly dramatizes the psychological and physiological weapons that are unique to women and that they use in their struggle for identity and security. He implies as well that the sensibilities and more subtle needs of women are divergent from those of men. This area of distinction is especially important, for women in Pinter's works are forced to seek from men the emotional sustenance that men are often unable to provide.

Biology, mystery, passion, power: such are the components of sexual conflict in Pinter's plays.
The claim that male-female conflict is dramatized by Pinter as instinctive has been opposed by several feminist critics, who see such tensions as social constructs. One view has been offered about the characters in *The Homecoming*:

"Again, the suggestion seems to be that the gender roles ascribed in language are not natural or essential or biological ones, but are instead constructed" (Sarbin, 36). Such an estimation is not a fair reading of either *The Homecoming* or the rest of the plays. To the contrary, Pinter implies that much of the behavior of men and women is the product of their nature. In his plays, social and linguistic manifestations are not causes of the roles the characters play, but products.

Another feminist perspective is offered by Elizabeth Sakellaridou in her book *Pinter's Female Portraits*, in which she suggests that his works reflect a progression in his view of women: "This initial biased sexist attitude follows a steady, though often uneven, evolution, until it eventually crystallizes into a gentler, totally, androgynous vision" (Sakellaridou, 11). This judgment may be inspired more by ideology than accuracy. Although some of Sakellaridou's insights are useful, too often she slants her readings so that they conform to her claims about androgyny, even though the plays themselves communicate a different attitude. Pinter always dramatizes men and women as fundamentally contrasting in nature, with distinct values and desires revealed in the seemingly eternal struggle for power.

Some critics resist any kind of realistic approach to Pinter's characters. In a statement that represents the post-structuralist view, Almansi and Henderson derrogate audiences who react to the plays as realistic pieces: "To search for psychological plausibility, behavioural congruity, confessional eloquence or epistemological clarification in his plays is, most of the time, a vain enterprise" (Almansi and Henderson, 23). However, they also suggest that "as with Chekhov, one has to reach into the subtext of the unspoken, for rarely is there the comfort of a stated unequivocal fact" (Almansi and Henderson, 28–29). In following this second approach they end up working against their own dictum about psychological consistency, for throughout their book they grapple with the motivations and implications of characters' actions and words.

This apparent contradiction in discussing Pinter's works plagues readers who seek to avoid analyzing the plays in the context of "real life." Yet the need to find a "through line," some consistent psychological path that may