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The Reception of David Mamet's "Oleanna": The Politics of Interpretation and Received Opinion

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-qakm-wn38>

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THE RECEPTION OF DAVID MAMET'S OLEANNA :
THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION AND RECEIVED OPINION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Emily White

1997

APPROVAL SHEET

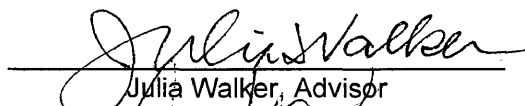
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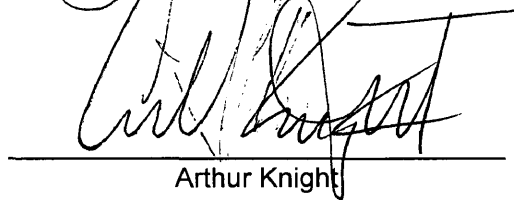


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Approved, May 1997



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Emily would like to thank Professor Julia Walker for her support, her time, and her thoughtful comments over the course of many months. The writer would also like to thank the second and third readers, Professors Arthur Knight and Nancy Schoenberger, for their valuable input and feedback.

ABSTRACT

This paper will examine Oleanna and its reception, which considered it an anti-feminist, anti-Political Correctness work.

Section one will present a different reading of the play, asserting that it looks not at characters John and Carol, but at the struggle to interpret in which they engage. This struggle depends upon and is influenced by the power position they occupy. The play presents both characters as economically motivated and, when dominant, as exhibiting their power through language control, or censorship, of the other person.

Section two will discuss the reception of the play. As a work by David Mamet and as a "realistic" theatre piece, Oleanna was interpreted in a certain way. Because the work is by Mamet, it was assumed to be sexist, and because of its apparent realism, it was interpreted in ways that rely upon character development and motivation. The politics of the reviewers led those individuals in their interpretations, by the very nature of reviewing. The liberal feminists who accepted the play as sexist ignored the voice that Carol has in the play, and reveal their sympathy for John. The split between their professed politics and those implicit in their interpretation reveals that they speak from a conservative, privileged position in culture--that of a writer and interpreter--and must work to sustain their privilege.

Section three will discuss how the culture and media's creation of both terms of analysis and ways of interpretation is a way of disseminating ideology. As with the reviews of the play, interpretation involves politics. To dictate the way others interpret is a mark of power and a way of transmitting identification with your perspective. The media's terms of discussion for the political correctness debate reflect the position of privilege they occupy and an idealism that protects this privilege by discussing an abstract realm --that of culture and souls; while the actual concern of conservatives is for their status as authors, that depends upon notions of stable authorship and institutions which are threatened by multiculturalism and feminism. This paper attempts to look at the play and the conflict it depicts--the struggle to interpret and author your words--along different lines that may not be prescribed by the author, and in doing so, perhaps enact change or draw attention to the conventions it violates.

THE RECEPTION OF DAVID MAMET'S OLEANNA :
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INTRODUCTION

David Mamet's play Oleanna opened in New York's Orpheum theatre in 1992, setting off a spate of interpretative popular, critical, and academic reviews. While almost all have interpreted the play as being about sexual harassment, I shall argue that Oleanna focuses on problems of communication and questions who has the power to interpret meaning, revealing that the relationship between language and the people who use it is vexed. The problems that arise when people use language have far-reaching and numerous consequences in the setting of a university campus, where issues of power and learning rely on both communication and interpretation.

The difference between my interpretation of Oleanna and that in its reviews is that the reviews express a blindness to the ambiguity of language in Mamet's play—and, indeed, language's ambiguity in itself. Examining it within the context of "political correctness" and the subsequent defense of "freedom of speech" that the media publicized beginning in the 1980s, I shall show how Oleanna critiques traditional models of communication and learning and demonstrates the power relationship in which the university system is engaged whereby the formation of meaning and knowledge is connected to material gain. Because the play demonstrates the repercussions of language's ambiguity, it does not endorse one position. Most reviews, however, give it one and read it as a critique of political correctness.

This conservative reading of the play and discussion of political correctness rely on assertions of stable authorship, stable institutions, and stable ideals; reviews assume that authors--theirs and Mamet's--have the power and right to dictate how they are interpreted, or to say what they "mean." Oleanna undercuts and questions the possibility of such stability with the disputes John, the professor, and Carol, his student, undergo. In fact, these reviewers enact the roles of Carol and John--they are interpreters and authors, whose interpretations are subjective, not absolute, and linked to and expressive of their power. The play shows the unreliability of communication and allows one to see that the media's struggle

is similar—the writers who speak from a dominant position in culture create the terms and “the Interpretation” of a phenomenon. The dominant interests, however, work to keep the power they have with the status quo and work to naturalize their perspective¹. This paper attempts to show that the stable author is a myth and that people who rely on that assumption have a stake in keeping it alive.

Section one of this thesis will argue that Oleanna is a play about interpretation itself². Carol and John interpret the first act of the play and the educational system differently because of the power positions they occupy. The balance of power shifts from favoring John to Carol, but both characters “lose” because they express the same behavior when they have power when they censor each other. The ideal of an apolitical university stands in defeat at the play’s conclusion—even with the politics of inclusion predominating—because language and knowledge cannot ever be free from politics.

Section two will argue that the reviews expressing “The Interpretation” (that Oleanna lambastes political correctness and feminism) arise from two factors: first, they conceive of Mamet as a macho playwright, and second, the reviews express politics and traditional ways of seeing that sympathize with John. Ironically, the fact that the response to Mamet’s play depends on a reviewer or reader’s ideology supports the theory that the media and dominant interests so resist—the theory behind the political correctness movement that says “everything is ideology.” The reviews express a blindness, an unwillingness to see Mamet’s questioning of how language works because they benefit by perpetuating the notion of a stable Author who can say what he “means,” or can dictate a stable meaning, or interpretation, of their language. As authors and writers, these reviewers derive legitimacy from notions that validate authorship. (These reviewers echo John in their desire to believe they know how

¹ My language, of course, reflects my material and political position. To wit, I am from an upper-middle class family, have been to both undergraduate and graduate school, and am a fan of contemporary literary theory. I do not claim to speak in “objective” terms; however, I suggest that by being aware of the connections between language and power, I do not share the “blindness” that I speak of in the reviews of Oleanna.

² My reading will, unlike those of the reviewers, interpret the text rather than the performance. The effect of this difference on my reading one can only speculate about, and that difference will not be discussed in detail as the focus of this article lies elsewhere—with how the reviewers used the audience, an image of Mamet, and their politics in their interpretation.

their actions should be interpreted). As in the play, however, the reviewers cannot control their meaning, and they do not question the assumptions that underpin language and its ability to mean.

Section three will argue that the idealism that leads people to side with a characters, such as John, because of qualities they possess or their actions is a traditional, culturally encouraged way of understanding. This idealism repeats that of the media and the conservative attack of the university for its politicization in its focus on abstract, "higher" concerns rather than the material or power relations. This traditional idealism masks and upholds the privilege of the upper classes, and the conservative attack on the university results from a need to defend the systems that give them privilege. As dominant members of the system, they benefit, and work to continue the systems, and hence their privilege. Reviewers speaking from a conservative position, as Authors (believing in the stable meaning and stable, self-reliant Self) construct this idealism and define, as seen with John and Carol in Oleanna, the terms of others by defining the terms of debate.

I. Oleanna's Investigation of Language and Education: Power Creates Meaning

David Mamet's Oleanna begins its investigation of how interpretation is influenced and dictated, at least in part, by power relations when Carol, a student, visits her professor, John, to discuss her failing grade in his class. John speaks freely with her and criticizes the educational process when he tells of his adolescent struggle with authority in the classroom, although he is now tenured and the classroom's authority figure. Carol says that she has done all the required reading, but does not understand what it means and is worried because she needs to pass "to get on in the world." John offers to give Carol an "A" if she will come to his office and continue their conversation. He hopes that without the pressure of being evaluated, Carol will be free to learn. She becomes hysterical at the idea of looking at a chart, another means of communication she cannot decipher, and John touches her shoulder. Act one ends with Carol leaving quickly after brushing John's arm aside. Acts two and three

consist of John making appeals to Carol, who has interpreted the actions in act one as sexual harassment and made a formal charge based upon the interpretation. John invokes his position as head of a family to appeal to Carol's sense of decency and asserts that he has done nothing wrong. Carol expresses anger at John's patriarchal attitude which, because it is empowered, allows him to partially critique the university, which she values as a means for advancement, and to act as if his interpretation were the only one. In act three their debate continues, punctuated by phone calls from John's wife and their realtor concerning their attempt to close a deal on a house, a consequence of his recent award of tenure. The two exchange comments on freedom of thought and the hindrance of communication by power and subordination until Carol offers John a deal on behalf of her mysterious Group, from which she draws support for her accusations. If John agrees not to assign books on a list they created, Carol will retract her charges. Because his book is on the list, however, John feels wronged and refuses the deal. As Carol is leaving his office, John speaks to his wife on the phone. When he calls her "baby," Carol admonishes him. John becomes so angered that he lifts a chair over his head threateningly. Both characters stand in defeat at the conclusion.

Oleanna takes as its subject the struggle over how interpretation is related to and dependent upon power relations between individuals and institutions. It presents this investigation in the guise of a realistic play. This paper questions the realism of the play, or the way realism is allowed to be interpreted, and examines not the characters of Carol and John but their dialogue as a creator of meaning and power positions. In its treatment of language and interpretation, the play raises exciting questions about the power of authorship to dictate how it is received and how much room for interpretation exists. The discussion of what was meant and how people's selves interfere with communication show that the play investigates interpretation and language as tools of power. Rather than only criticizing political correctness, it critiques both the ideal of apolitical, true communication for which John strives and the fact that even a reforming group such as Carol's is not wholly inclusive when it

is in power. Furthermore, the play critiques other supposedly ideal, apolitical entities such as humanism.

The first act concerns how Carol and John conceive of education and interpretation differently, then the second and third acts interpret the first (although all three are also interpretable). The play introduces the issue of problematic communication with the first words John speaks. The problem arises from the fact that meaning must be created through another's understanding and reception of one's words. In John's telephone call to his wife during the first moments of the play, he repeats phrases, such as "I didn't mean that," "I don't understand," and "I thought," to show that understanding is difficult because it relies upon different people (1). The discrepancy between the receiver's understanding and the speaker's intent suggest that the words one says are only part of the meaning the receiver compiles, and/or that the words cannot convey meaning effectively. Carol reads her professor's book and hears him speak, but she says to him, "the language, the 'things' that you say" do not make her understand (6). Furthermore, the characters interrupt each other mid-sentence and frequently do not ever finish their thoughts, a fact that suggests that one possible reason for the difficulty of successful communication between John and Carol is an unwillingness to listen.

John expresses awareness of the notion that people are subjective beings, locked in their own "selves" that limit their ability to listen, when he says to Carol, "we can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen we . . . through. . . the screen we create" (19). John makes this statement and simultaneously demonstrates its truth. At this time, John attempts to use his own experience as a reference point in his conversation with Carol, by relating stories of his youthful struggles and insecurities (20). Carol, however, sees him as being "personal" with her. Even the simplest starting point of conversation has different interpretations, demonstrating the act of conversing as complicated in the extreme. John's model of understanding, with its focus on the author, conflicts with Carol's model of

understanding, which focuses on the literal text (one step removed from the author of either words or deeds)³.

The university aptly demonstrates how communication relies upon and is influenced by power because it relies on books to instruct students to understand according to accepted codes. Carol's reading of John's book is "wrong" because it differs from the professor's intention. Throughout the play, having the dominant or accepted interpretation signifies not that every other person agrees with you, but that you have the most power. John's book exemplifies this scenario. In act one, Carol has read it but does not match John's understanding of it, and the problem is hers--she needs a passing grade. In act three, however, the power dynamic of the play has changed with the tenure committee's believing Carol's story. John has experienced the same events in act one as Carol (he has "read" the same "book") but his understanding does not match Carol's interpretation, and the problem is his--he needs to get tenure. The balance of power can influence interpretation because of the many possible meanings, which result from the gaps between author, text, and reader. Not only verbal language but also body language and other actions become "text" because people's actions are open to interpretation. The power to create meaning from language, to interpret, is aligned with the person holding the most power within the institution of the university. John, as the professor and author, thinks he knows or has the Interpretation, while Carol, as one subordinate within the system, sees meaning as questionable, with multiple possibilities.

With the investigation of how interpretation is influenced by politics and power relations, and the expansion of the idea of text from books to actions, other "givens" can be seen as defined by people with biases. The play may provoke questioning of accepted "givens" such as human beings and what constitutes knowledge, or humanism. In act two, after Carol says "good day" as a gesture of farewell and John responds "nice day today" in the way of small

³ Carol acts according to this model when she continually takes notes and refers to her notes. Indeed, the reviewers of the play employ John's author-focused model rather than Carol's text-focused one, a possible reason for their sympathy for John over Carol.

talk, he then espouses a theory of his: "it is the essence of all human communication. I say something conventional, you respond, and the information we exchange is not about the 'weather,' but that we both agree to converse. In effect, we agree that we are both human" (52-53). Language does not convey anything but shows a desire to connect, John decrees, taking his emphasis on the non-literal (charm, feelings, intention) to a new level, as well as emphasizing the position of the one who names, the interpreter. At this time he wants Carol to agree with his definition of "human," which is someone imperfect and therefore deserving of forgiveness. His definition results from his personal agenda, to have charges against him dropped. He wants Carol to think like he does with this agreement to converse, while she has no such requirement in her definition. Carol's literal model of interpretation causes dissent with this "good day" episode and also with her reading of act one. She focuses on the "facts" of their utterances: "can you deny [what you said]" she asks John (48). These two focuses of interpretation--the literal and the non-literal--go hand in hand with power positions: the dominant group needs people to agree with it good-naturedly, and not want to question the systems that create the hierarchy.

Although John defines concepts of Humanity through his dominant position of interpretation, he steps out of this position, it seems, by questioning the standard of traditional humanism and Western "reasonableness." This questioning results from his idealism--he finds that the practice, not the system, is flawed. He says he questions the university's structure where "I know and you do not," which he sees as "exploitation in the educational process" (53, 22). He undermines the educational process by which one affirms "humanism," but he remains in the dominant position and works within that system as a professor. Carol objects because his critique jars with her definition of education and its meaning in the "real" world when she says, "how can you say in a class. Say in a college class, that college education is prejudice[?]" (31). She pragmatically regards her degree as a way to "get on in the world" financially (12). For Carol, the goal of a degree is the ability to earn income, not humanism, because she observes how a degree functions in society. Because she sees the

university degree as a mark of privilege, she thinks the degree would not result from exploitation but from preparation for privilege through indoctrination, being taught one's worth.

John's idealism and partial critique of the university directly results from his empowered position of professor, emphasized through his references to his wife and family, their new house, and implied in his status as both man and professor. His professorship creates privileged status and material wealth. He cannot give up the power dynamic to which he objects in this model, or "take off the Artificial Stricture of 'Teacher,' and 'Student'" and speak to Carol as a friend in the first act (21). John is defined by his role of teacher; he will eventually grade Carol. To speak outside of the domain prescribed by this role makes Carol feel uncomfortable. If he removed the "strictures," he would have to relinquish his position of dominance. The repeated phone calls that concern his buying a house make it clear he has not relinquished his power, and implicitly increase the threat Carol will pose. He stands to lose political power to interpret and, as a result, entitlement to financial power to purchase and scholarly power to profess and know.

The link between power and speech is demonstrated when Carol and John reverse roles in terms of power in act three. At this time, Carol does the espousing because she now occupies the dominant position. She can more fully criticize the university system because she sees the link between power, interpretation, and speech, and perhaps more importantly, she started from a subordinate position. She received the privilege and right to interpret from the university's tenure committee, because she objected to John's abuse of power over students and women. By seeing John as abusing his power, Carol has, ironically, seized John's interpretation of education as exploitation, which she names "sexual harassment" and then "rape."

The word "rape" is one source of the audience's opposition to Carol, and, indeed, I struggled to look at it on a level less charged with connotations. This word shows how much baggage can be attached to a word, complicating matters of interpretation. As something that is open to interpretation, like the dialogue in the play, "rape" is typically perceived by, say, a

woman, but not by a man. In a court of law, where one speaks the truth, “rape” is still difficult to define--it relies on interpretation. Does the court recognize the account of the accuser or the defendant? This word presents in a microcosm the same struggle that the play depicts, as well as how language can oppress women, or anyone, for that matter.

In the play, Carol attempts to undo this oppression and, when powerful, dictates terms, just as John did. She tells him, “don’t call your wife ‘baby,’” and shows their similarity when in positions of power (79). Carol appropriates control over terms and language, insisting that John refer to her report not as “allegations” or “accusations” but as “facts” (62). She also challenges John’s use of advanced vocabulary, implying that it functions only as a tool of elitism meant to signify his power. When John says that a “paradigm” is “a model,” Carol asks “Then why can’t you use that word?” (45). Similar exchanges follow his use of “indictment” with Carol’s saying, “You will have to explain that word to me” and his use of “Transpire” with her saying “Happen? . . . Then say it. For Christ’s sake. Who the hell do you think that you are?” (63,66). Her control of language challenges John’s words and makes implicit assertions, such as: “happen” is a better word than “transpire” because it is likely to be understood by more people, and John’s use of this word reflects that he thinks he is better than others.

What gives John and Carol their power is a university committee, which provides a similarity between their dominant positions. The mark of Carol’s power comes from the Tenure committee’s belief in her story and its decision to punish John. Her version was deemed “the truth” from the conflicting accounts. The play presents the institution of the university as remaining powerful, and depicts the university shifting from supporting the professors, or the enfranchised, to the students, or the disenfranchised. As an institution that creates economic privilege by endorsing one group’s power to interpret, the university has not changed⁴.

⁴ The university has this power of creating the right interpretation because it has been entrusted by society (because of tradition and traditional views of education) with the power to teach the nation’s youth. This teaching, however, is

Again, John, the empowered, hides the link between power and dissemination of a way of interpreting when he creates an “ideal” or higher realm. He names and defines this realm when he moves the terms of discussion from the realm of power and the material to the realm of morals, he attempts to defend himself from the people challenging his position of power. The issue of “feelings” had been used by John in act one as a way to contain Carol and not listen. He responded to Carol’s statement “I’m stupid” by saying “I think you’re angry” (12). He translates her failing his class, not meeting the concrete “standard,” into something emotional or psychological, enacting power over her by appropriating the power to identify in doing so, as well as deflecting attention away from the fact that he created the standard, which reveals its subjectivity. The struggle between the two hinges on the different ways to view language and context; Carol’s literal focus contrasts with John’s focus on feelings. Later in act one, John further defines her anger as something abstract and universal: “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” (30). He takes the situation and removes it from its context, which results in his misreading it. Anger in this instance is an irrational response to an attack on one’s unreasoned belief. Later Carol expresses anger at his insistence on examining feelings, or of translating relations of power, such as grading and knowledge, into relations of feelings. She says “You ask me here. What do you want? You want to ‘charm’ me,” to name John’s action (64). In doing so, Carol expresses her unwillingness to let him use charm and politeness to achieve the ends he desires (for her to change her charges). Carol will not let John move the realm of discussion. She says to him, “you don’t understand? You’re angry? What has led you to this place? Not your sex, not your race. Not your class. YOUR OWN ACTIONS” (64). She will not let him erase his political motives under the guise of niceness. Because Carol’s literal-mindedness contrasts with John’s non-literal-mindedness, their conflict revolves around different ways to interpret

linked very much to power—who decides what to teach and what modes of interpretation to teach—implying that both John and Carol are right to see education as exploitative in some way.

not only language but also context. John defends his things by invoking the icon of scholar. I suggest that the sympathy he gains is from the feelings he expresses--his ignorance of doing any wrong and HIS appealing nature--rather than having something to lose, while Carol seems less feeling, and cold-hearted in the face of these appeals. The audience reacted to this dynamic of Carol and John's exchanges rather than to the actual struggle to interpret in which they engage. The first exchange has "feelings" at stake and the second, the material.

Discussion of feelings distracts attention away from the link between power and interpretation that Carol wishes to expose in John's view of education. At the same time, however, emotions cannot be ignored completely because they relate to power--the two are not separate. Carol asks, "Why do you hate me? . . . Because I have, you think, power over you. . . It is the power that you hate. So deeply that, that any atmosphere of free discussion is impossible. It's not 'unlikely.' It's impossible." (68-69). The emotions here are directly linked to power and hinder "real" communication. Carol ends at a point similar to John's when he says, "we can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen we create"--only, for Carol, what keeps people behind their screens is power.

While Carol speaks of power relations between people as hindering communication, she also speaks of models of self-determination, or power over oneself. She finds that the Western definition of self-determination, in which "YOUR OWN ACTIONS" decide how consequences occur, does not allow for one to be influenced by factors beyond one's control, such as the interpretation of one's actions (text) by others; it denies factors that do matter. According to this model, discrete and free subjects make choices and must live with the consequences. John believes in this model even though he resists the consequences of his actions with Carol in the first act. He finds that his own actions were interpreted in a "wrong" way that he did not intend, a fact that puts the possibility of complete self-determination in doubt. John and Carol's problems of communication arise from factors the model "denies": their sexual difference makes her wary of him being too personal, while their class difference causes problems of understanding the educational process. Carol further challenges this

objective Western model of self-determination by questioning John's definition of "human" not as a "given" but as part of a tradition when she says, "[if] I don't take your side, you question if I'm Human" (65). Her remark implies that John's anger comes from Carol's not acting in ways that his way of thinking prescribes for her. Western philosophers have defined "human" in a specific way, which sounds neutral but looks like a Reasonable man: "humanism" is not as objective as it claims to be, but defined by people in power (historically, white males) to serve their interests, to be able to claim privilege or greatness because of "standards" and to attach blame or condemnation for failing to meet these standards.

Although Carol's conception of actions and influence opposes John's, she recognizes that people do have choices. For her, these choices are influenced by a context of material concerns; they do not take place in some apolitical vacuum as a "true" test of ethics. She says to John in the third act, "you have an agenda, we have an agenda. I am not interested in your feelings or your motivation, but your actions. If you would like me to speak to the Tenure Committee, here is my list. You are a Free Person, you decide" (74). John's status as a "Free Person" at this point in time is put in doubt by the pressures he has delineated--financial responsibility to his wife and children collides with his own pride in his book, which is on the list of those to be suppressed. He does not see himself as "truly" having a choice because of his own biases--he cannot ban his own book--but this choice is as free as any, in which self-interest and politics play a role.

While John's conservative (entitled, capitalist, propertied, patriarchal, liberalist, freedom-of-speech-, individual-focused) position gives him an outlook that advocates self-reliance and self-determination, his own biases and material position lock him into behavior that puts the attainability of the ideal in doubt. He says in act one, "What do you want me to do? We are two people, all right? Both of whom have subscribed to . . . certain arbitrary . . ." he does not finish (10). He implies that they each have different perspectives that cannot be bridged unless they have the same constructs, or philosophies, further implying that there are factors in a person that are unchangeable. John undercuts not only his humanistic ideal of complete

self-determination by these remarks, but also the ideal of the university as a forum for the free exchange of ideas, making the exchange conditional or problematic. John reconciles this discrepancy by asserting faith in the rightness of his viewpoint by wishing to force others to change their constructs. If someone's opinions agree with his, John can exchange ideas freely with that person.

He and Carol, however, have different biases. She sees the links between power and learning and privilege, while John does not. Her "doubt" of the system is of its ideals: she knows that "someone chooses the books," or that they are not inherently great (74). John's doubt is not of the ideals but of their implementation: he says, "I see exploitation" in the educational process, but implies that he believes a non-exploitative professor can exist; and indeed, that he is such a man who teaches because, as he says, "I love it" (22, 35). What John objects to is falling short of the ideal, the imperfect implementation of humanism. Carol, on the other hand, sees how the system can never be perfect because she sees how the material will always influence actions, as with someone choosing the books (and therefore interpreting). She objects to John's insistence on striving for an impossible ideal.

The manifestation of their biases occurs in acts two and three as Carol and John struggle to interpret the "text" of the conversation in the previous act, Carol doing so literally, making references to specific comments, while John wants to interpret more loosely, with a focus on his own intention. The comments of the "text" exist as facts to substantiate or invalidate Carol's claim of harassment. John reads these same remarks to find a different truth. The law, as a consequence of reasonable thought, does not allow for more than one truth. The law does not serve reality effectively because it must choose a True version, just as "someone chooses the books," but maintain the illusion of having no chooser (74). John's character is not perfect; his remarks in act one can seem ominous expressions of his patriarchal privilege. When Carol says "but there are rules," he replies, "we can break them" and "there's no one here but you and me" (26, 27). Furthermore, in the final act Carol strongly defends herself from John's statement that his behavior was "devoid of sexual

content” by saying, “I say it was not. . . . IT’S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY” (70). Carol’s position of dominance in the third act does not bring her the understanding which she seeks from John; she gets it only from the committee. As with Carol’s trying to understand John’s book at the beginning of the play, understanding implies agreement. She and John have different “screens” through which to view the world, as John remarked earlier, and they have not disappeared, only the power relation between them has changed. The problem demonstrates a problem with how people interact with language. John “authored” his comments but cannot dictate how they are “read,” pointing to language’s fluidity of meaning and the impossibility of one “right” interpretation. The need for understanding, or being “right,” is necessary to substantiate one’s power over another person as well as express that power. The dominant culture attempts to create one meaning or interpretation by privileging the link to the author, making that interpretation “right”—with the added effect of empowering speakers and creating order.

The play’s conclusion shows the weakness of both the dominant and formerly dominant groups. Carol dictates the terms John may use, while John’s violence becomes ugly. His lifting the chair above his head reveals that the “privileged” position is not natural, but needs reinforcement to maintain. The play presents implicit critiques of feminists, frequently identified with Carol, or social reformers more generally, as not allowing for differences of opinion and shows that their behavior, when powerful, is exactly what they fought against. Even so, the play shows a professor dismissing Carol’s point of view too hastily because of economic motivation⁵. Neither character is triumphant, but rather the play ends with both characters being equally defeated.

David Mamet’s *Oleanna*, in its portrayal of John and Carol’s struggle to interpret their actions and words, resolves in a way that is open to interpretation as to who is “right” and exposes the relation between power and interpretation, education, humanism and language.

⁵Although John could be motivated by a fear of his reputation being destroyed, in the play he does make repeated cries lamenting the threat to his job that Carol’s accusations pose, and couches his self-defense in terms of (not) being an “ogre” or a “bogey-man.” The source of his distress differs from the mode he uses to undo his distress.

The characters struggle to interpret a scene and for control of each other's language. Once Carol makes her charge and raises the questions she does, words and ways of understanding them become problematic for John who wants them to be simple, pure and direct because they provide him with an arena in which he has status and confidence. John, in the face of the threat to both his power and beliefs, changes the area of discussion from education or events to feelings. If one changes the way one looks at a "character" in a play and considers them as dialogue and words rather than emotions, beings struggling to mature or make ethical choices, then one's conclusions about the play's sympathy will be more complex. The characters, through language, struggle for dominance, to be the namer, the interpreter, or the author. John might have a thread of the traditionally-sought kindness in his efforts to help Carol and provide for his family, but he also has pompous and autocratic moments, while Carol has a valid and worthy goal of "providing" for herself. This struggle mirrors the struggle in the media in which critics speaking from a conservative position object to the state of affairs in higher education. Sections two and three of this paper will discuss the implications of Oleanna's focus on interpretation and its relationship to power.

II. The Critical and Popular Reception of Oleanna: Listener's Politics Play a Role

By looking at the reaction of the audience to Mamet's play, the shift in power depicted in Oleanna went against the various audience's expectations of the way a university "should be run." The reviewers find the play a straightforward demonization of political correctness. They identify with John to see the play as depicting John's tragic fall rather than an questioning of the relation between power and language and interpretation. The viewers' interpretations, like those of John and Carol, reflect their politics and position in the power system of the dominant culture. A factor in the reviewer's opinion is the performance aspect of the play--perhaps the actors generated sympathy (or not) through their body language, mannerisms, or ways of speaking. Perhaps a performance with different actors and directors would generate more opinions like the one presented here. That question lies beyond the

scope of this thesis. This reading of the reception of the play considers several different audience groups: the “lay/popular” audience who went to see the play, the “reviewer” audience who also saw the play performed, and the “academic” audience who have ties to the university (a source of controversy in the play) and who may or may not have seen the play performed. I am part of this last group, and can access the first only through the second. The receptions of the different types of audiences, however, are informed by their perspective and culture--through the media’s negative portrayal of Political Correctness or an image of Mamet as a sexist pig. This section will examine the reviews to infer the different politics of the listener or spectator making the interpretation.

At the play’s conclusion, according to reviewers, audiences often cheered at John’s threatened violence. Reviewers reacted both to the play and to this reaction of the audience according to their political stance on multiculturalism, political correctness, and feminism. The audience’s cheers at John’s violence provided hard and fast proof for some reviewers that the play is sexist, privileging these responses and accepting them as True. Liberal feminists thus became outraged at their unsympathetic representation, and many viewers became hateful of multicultural attempts to ruin their lives and undo the systems in which they live.

Audience sympathy primarily rests with John because Carol’s accusations threaten not only traditional institutions such as patriarchy and professorship, but also traditional humanistic, or even Romantic, notions of the individual. The audiences of Oleanna frequently conflate Carol with Feminist, and the play supports this reading. Mamet leaves Carol’s “group” unlabeled, however, and while it could be feminist, it could also be a students’ rights group or any number of anti-establishment groups of protest on a college campus. The threat lies in the two features revealed about the group: its drive to reform and protest; and its conception as a group. The struggle for a liberal bourgeois spectator could be between the Individual, John, and the collective masses. John expresses faith in the individual in act one when he encourages Carol to think for herself by instructing her not to look at her notes, but use her own words as well as when he asserts that his job is to provoke her (27, 32).

According to his high regard for self-determination and faith in the individual, John has the opportunity to be a heroic protagonist or martyr in the face of Carol's accusations. He expresses hope in the final minutes of the play about the accusation against him: "I am not sure that it's not a blessing. It cost me my job? Fine. Then the job was not worth having" (77).

Mamet's opposition between the mysterious group and the Romantic individual sets up the audience to see John as either heroic or foolish according to their political views of sexual harassment or individualism. Carol's character may be either that of a dedicated reformer and member of a group or a "bitch" who takes the wrong stand, depending on one's political views concerning women. The play allows for these differing interpretations of the characters, and reviewers' opinions regarding issues of political correctness and multiculturalism influence the interpretation they derive. To an extent, the play's focus on the process of creating understanding, meaning, and interpretation highlights the fact that any interpretation is the creation of the audience. To see the play as having one interpretation is to read it as straightforward and not realize that you create the meaning and contribute to it.

The play's focus on how words can be defined and manipulated raises questions about the ability of language to enable communication. That the thing being interpreted is the first act implies that all language and action is "text" and therefore open to interpretation. The play seems to be less about the evils of political correctness than about how power and meaning are created by people: it is a process rather than something discovered in an object. As such, the characters are sites of conflict between language and power and meaning. To see them as positions in a power structure and system is one way to look at them, while a traditional way of looking would be to examine their sympathetic qualities. Mamet as a playwright, then, creates not a whole meaning but a partial one with his play; the audience must, and does, fill in the gaps, or ignore certain things to see the play in one definitive way.

Reviewers of Oleanna, however, do not realize their own role in the interpretation they make. The reviews fall into two broad categories: those who enjoy the play for artistic

reasons or those who dislike the play for its politics, finding the play either “anti P.C.” or anti-feminist. Because interpretation is not apolitical, the first group implicitly agrees with the politics of the play and the second group, by sympathizing with John, reveals their politics to be more traditional than conceived.

A prototypical review from the former group, which views culture from a privileged position, is that of John Lahr in the New Yorker. Although the play gives Carol several astute comments, such as those about art and Western humanism, Lahr exemplifies the overwhelming response of reviewers (and the audiences whom the reviewers observed) who sympathize with John. Lahr sees the play as “bring[ing] the audience up against the awful spoiling power of envy disguised as political ideology”: the same ideology that conservatives see practiced by Feminists trying to institute Women’s Studies departments (Lahr 121). Lahr’s use of the phrase “political ideology” as something only Carol has suggests that his “ideology,” or world-view, is apolitical. This quotation also reveals that Lahr’s ideology defines itself by the notion of objectivity, by standards that provide an ability to separate things into categories. Lahr’s belief in the objective implies a traditional mindset. Carol’s “bad” ideology is so because it is a disguise for people who are failures in the system trying to grab power against the rules; Lahr names it political. Implicitly, Lahr’s remark assumes that the white male is apolitical and that feminists’ outrage is neither justified nor real (they are just “angry” in the same way that John saw Carol as being distraught rather than making legitimate accusations). Lahr’s faith in the white male’s Reasonableness implies a traditional mindset. But if Carol is falsely ideological, what does she “gain” at the end of the play that would motivate her? Lahr tellingly misses the critique of language and humanist thought, and does not allow that John may have abused his power.

Lahr’s identification with John resonates throughout his article, showing discrepancies at times that reveal his bias. Lahr’s identification with John, a conservative, implies a traditional worldview. For example, Lahr finds that John was trying to help Carol “think like an adult,” but the play shows John trying to make Carol think like him. The difference is important: for Lahr,

adult has a specific definition that looks like himself, or John--a traditional white male. Any deviation is not an adult; but "normal adult" and "human" are defined and interpreted rather than found entities. Furthermore, the critic finds that John has "bona fide credentials," implying that he is entitled to power over Carol, who has "no powers of analysis" (121). He implicitly supports a standard of Reasonableness which she does not meet. This standard of Reasonableness allows for only one version of the truth: John's, in which Carol "trashes [his] life" (121). Lahr implies that the audience will sympathize with John, not Carol, because the play exposes the absolute, terrorizing and censorious ways of the political correctness movement. He writes that "Mamet puts the audience exactly where John sits," meaning against Carol and her opposition to traditional systems (124). Lahr explicitly identifies John as Mamet's mouthpiece: "John, like Mamet, is a self-styled provocateur; he holds to the antique notion that education should encourage thought" (123). Because of this link to the author's intention, Lahr views John as the unequivocal protagonist. Conveniently, John holds views about education that match Lahr's.

Lahr's positive review reveals that he accepts the notion that John is Mamet's mouthpiece and the things he finds Mamet/John represent: the professor's unfair troubles. Lahr's review promotes the values of the enfranchised. Lahr's reading of the play supports faith in Reasonableness, and his definition of human, but he couches his review in "objective" terms and describes its artistic merit. He repeatedly refers to Mamet's "great narrative gifts," and how the play "shows off his enormous skills as a writer" (121, 125). With the link between positive reviews and promotion of its values, while hiding the link in objective terms, Lahr's positive review in itself implies his political agreement with the play. Positive opinion's link to politics implies that another form of positive opinion, canonization, is also not objective at all.

By implicitly advancing the idea of objective (artistic) merit, Lahr echoes the ideas of conservative spokesperson Dinesh D'Souza who believes in liberal individualism (each person can have their own beliefs) and finds that political correctness is a "tyranny of the minority." D'Souza implicitly attacks minorities who do not "succeed," as he did by "working

his way up” as an immigrant from India, but want “special privileges” such as affirmative action. He names them “victims” for failing to assimilate into American culture and its system of objectivity and self-determination, in which individuals, not society, are responsible for their actions. D’Souza rejects feminist attempts to institute Women’s Studies departments because they are too “political,” implying that a traditional curriculum is not so. He fears for the future of the country because he thinks that if minorities are given concessions, then “standards” will disintegrate. If colleges are changing both their student body (and the future elite) and the “knowledge” that creates privilege, the current elite may lose its power. Implicitly, D’Souza’s attack on political correctness stems from fear, reflecting the threatened position of the privileged elite as well as deflecting questions away from the economic and political systems of society onto its culture instead, as Marc Silverstein will later suggest. D’Souza’s life experience of rising within the system allows him to believe in the efficacy of capitalism and liberal individualism with conviction and an inability to see the failings of these institutions. By sympathizing with John, who espouses sentiments similar to D’Souza’s about working his way to the top, Lahr implicitly matches the conservative politics of John and D’Souza.

Lahr and the audience that cheered at John’s holding a chair over his head at the end of the play are not the only people to interpret John as the intended protagonist of the play: feminist critics reach the same conclusion, but react with anger rather than support. Liberal feminists accept Lahr’s interpretation that the play portrays the tyranny that results from political correctness⁶. Ironically, their blindness to Carol’s positive traits and speeches in her own defense implies that they accept John’s world-view and politics, which are conservative and traditional, while the feminist movement purports to question these things⁷. Elaine Showalter, for example, views John’s position as endorsed by the author because she does not see an alternative to regarding him as the intended protagonist. She asserts, “Mamet has

⁶ Of course, there are numerous branches and types of feminisms within Feminism. I speak here of the one which Showalter and Solomon (and the media) seem to embrace: “Liberal” feminism. This branch comes under attack from radical and other feminists for the very adherence to traditional values that I discuss in this article.

⁷ It very well could be Mamet’s intention to expose this discrepancy, or to manipulate our response against Carol or what we profess to believe. Mamet’s intention is not my focus. This paper focuses on how the repeated interpretation matches and is informed by cultural norms.

always been a testosterone Kafka, a locker-room Beckett who loves poker, the National Rifle Association, Soldier of Fortune magazine, hunting and fishing” and accuses his work of venting racism, sexism and homophobic emotions (16, 17). With respect to Oleanna specifically, Showalter finds that Mamet does not “wrestle with the moral complexities of sexual harassment,” implying that her demand that he do so arises from her own politics, and from her definition of “wrestle”(17). She wants Mamet to show Carol’s perspective or make her more “reasonable” to make her more sympathetic, which is ironic because the play is more slippery in its endorsement of the characters than she allows. She finds the characters polarized, with sympathy inherently lying with John. She describes the audience as possessing one mind when, in act two, it responds to the previous scene as “not at all what we had supposed,” emphasizing the false nature of Carol’s story, the unity of audience members’ opinions, and the objectivity of the work being interpreted (16). While Showalter considers politics in her review and condemns the play for not expressing hers, she does so while assuming sympathy for John. She does not question whether or not the play endorses or criticizes John’s position because she considers the writer sexist.

It is my own theory that the play wrestles with the issue of gender along different lines and examines how power affects language and interpretation. Because the issue of gender depends upon and is inscribed by language, the relation of language to power and women is incredibly important and interesting. The concepts of gender and feminism, like those of humanism or education, have ties to politics. Woman frequently means, for example, a “white, professional upper-middle class woman.” The issue of gender, may therefore be subordinate to the issue of power--the whole debate about gender equality would like to question the discrepancy in power between men and women. If language creates power, or creating a dominant interpretation generates power, then the dynamics of this process shed light on the struggle for equality. The play raises questions of import to feminists: who has the power to “say,” how does Carol gets the power to “say,” and does getting power within an established system necessarily makes you censor others? The play, with its focus on power

and interpretation, suggests that for woman to gain equality they must control language and define terms such as “rape” and “sexism” (and “artistic merit”) for themselves.

While Showalter's view of what it means to “wrestle” with gender issues and her view of Mamet color her reading of the play, so does her view of reality. She makes an effort to separate Oleanna from the government's politics in her discussion of the play's political implications for feminists because the drama does not reflect reality as she sees it. She asserts that the link some reviewers made of the play to the Clarence Thomas hearings is neither a useful nor valid one because the trial ended with Thomas becoming a Supreme Court Justice, while John's scenario ends with his life in shambles. In the “real world” the woman accuser is not believed, while in Mamet's university, she is. The difference, to Showalter and others, is Mamet's paranoia. She objects to the overt link of Oleanna to politics because the play does not show a “realistic” outcome. As with the definition of “human,” the definition of “reality” reflects the beliefs of the person naming it. In spite of the play's ambiguity, Showalter persists in seeing John as the protagonist and seeing the “feminist mouthpiece,” Carol, as a demon. Showalter's view of the play examines gender issues at the expense of all other issues such as language and interpretation, and their relation to power.

In two reviews that also condemn the play because it offends the reviewer's politics, Alisa Solomon accuses Mamet of being paranoid and sexist. In her review, “Mametic Phallacy” she describes an interview in which Mamet was asked by a student if the play was “politically responsible.” Mamet later said in response, “I'm really scared for this country. America doesn't want a democracy.”⁸ Solomon interprets Mamet's remark as reflecting his liberalist views that differences of opinion--or an offensive play--should be allowed (104). This quotation suggests that Mamet implicitly views the notion of “political responsibility” as tied to power (i.e. not objective) and defined in a certain way which excludes or censors different perspectives, while the student asks if the play is potentially offensive or reflects politics

⁸ Solomon does not provide a citation for her source.

different from hers (which are sensitive, or “responsible”). Solomon finds that the play is not good because its author, and therefore the play, is sexist, and has politics that she does not want to see promoted. She sees the link between art’s acceptance and the promotion of its ideals and tries to manipulate it to her advantage. However, Solomon reacts, like Showalter, to a conservative, accepted interpretation of the play, expressing anger because she finds that it mocks the goals of feminism and undercuts their validity. She writes that the issues of “failed communication” in the play (which this paper has examined) do not reflect the “real inequity” between teacher and student, men and women (“He Said” 110). According to Showalter and Solomon, failed communication issues are less important than the oppression of women, while the two issues may actually be related.

The reviews of Showalter and Solomon enact feminist politics in their disapproval of the play’s alleged sexism. To react to Carol with fear by saying that she is completely unsympathetic and not “really” harassed because Mamet “is” a sexist reflects a patriarchal mindset of fearing women in power, or not allowing her, like John, to use power in questionable ways--another layer of irony evident in reading the reviewers’ responses to the play. Feminists look at issues of power along gender lines, and to speak generally, question the neutrality of white male/society--a view similar to Carol’s. The reviews of Solomon and Showalter, then, do not go far enough because they do not look at issues of power as related to language, particularly as it functions as a tool of women’s oppression in definitions of things such as “worker,” “mother,” the socially knowable, and indeed, gender difference itself. They do not question the values or way in which John gains sympathy: faith in the privilege entitled to heads of family and professors.⁹ These critics are not as different from John as they intend to be because they share his beliefs.

Comparison of Solomon and Lahr’s definitions of art will demonstrate the peculiar similarity of their politics underlying the different responses to the play. One of Solomon’s comments

⁹ John acts like and makes appeals to Carol as a head of his family. He invokes this position in a traditional way (i.e. not with a two-income household).

reveals her feminist politics and her investigation of how power relates to traditional definitions of art:

Roger Cornish can write a column in American Theatre complaining that our theatres are censorious p.c. institutions because none would dream of doing a play that questioned the existence of the Holocaust or that suggested that the poor deserve what they get. It doesn't strike him as relevant that the radical right spews its message across countless cable and radio stations. . . nor that there's an essential humanism to the artistic endeavor that might make such views antithetical to theatrical expression. 110 ("He Said," emphasis mine)

Her view of art hinges, interestingly, on the words "essential humanism," implying that this quality is found, not defined, yet her definition differs from the traditional one held by Lahr, for example, which identifies humanism in a specific way (a white male's self-determined pursuit of Reason). Solomon's "humanism" however, implies something different--a "deeper" connection to all humans, regarding their "inner natures" as fundamentally similar and sympathetic. "Humanism" here seems a prerequisite for the artist, privileging him or her as possessing a more "true" or "spiritual" nature. Lahr's humanism, and Art, involves reflections about society and true artistic skills. Both define art as elevated; the difference lies in the definition of who or what has the power to elevate. According to her definition, Solomon finds that Mamet does not have this artistic quality or produce elevated Art because the play does not make Carol sympathetic.

Marc Silverstein, an academic critic, reads Oleanna for its treatment of humanism as well. He finds that in the play, John falls short of the humanistic ideal of being disassociated from any "base" concerns. This ideal consists of spiritual vision and abstract greatness as a professor and knower. Silverstein interprets the play as not questioning these ideal qualities. He implies that John (and Mamet) believe in the possibility of being an intellectual who is removed from society, but (like D'Souza) lament the intrusion of politics into the pure realm of academia. Silverstein comes to different conclusions in the final paragraphs of his essay,

however, where he says that the play “suggests. . . we purchase such an ‘ideal’ society at the cost of the demonization and terroristic exclusion of those who identify themselves in terms of difference, who speak from the subject position of women rather than from the position of the disinterested ‘human’” (118). He concludes by saying, however, that “Oleanna can only perpetuate the very crisis of cultural fragmentation it seeks to address” (119). Silverstein denies that the questioning of this culture “in” crisis he draws from the play was actually evoked by the play itself and accepts that the audience will read it in one way.

Silverstein will not concede that the play allows (and possibly encourages) one to question traditional systems because he, like other critics, conflates Mamet with the male protagonist. Silverstein begins his article with a quotation from Mamet’s prose to support his article’s assertion that Mamet’s rhetoric echoes that of the New Right in the media (105). He accepts the play’s sexism because of the link he sees between Mamet and John. He explicitly makes John the mouthpiece of the author when he writes, “John’s comments encapsulate Mamet’s sense of the degeneration of American culture” (115). The relevance of Mamet’s opinion to the work is important to Silverstein, but his peers in academic circles, from New Critics (with their “intentional fallacy”) to poststructuralists (with their “death of the author”) would question its relevance. His focus on the author’s intention repeats the move made by Lahr, Solomon, and Showalter. The trend suggests that Mamet’s image (sexist and paranoid) has great purchase value. Silverstein and others rely on this intention and image in order to make their readings competitive in the review market, a fact that indicates a faith in the author’s ability to control how a work is read or, at least, to have the final say in the interpretation of the “text.” These critics may not consciously tie their work to the author in order to make their writings competitive, but our culture accepts and respects this link as a way of solving the problem of relativism, or of indeterminate meaning. As critics operating within this context, they enact cultural assumptions.

The reviews of David Mamet’s Oleanna demonstrate how the politics of the reviewer influence interpretation and show that interpretation relates to power: they re-present the

conflict of the play itself. Silverstein defines Mamet's intention the same way that Solomon, and Showalter do: all infer the playwright's ideology as similar to that of the New Right, and either like it or not because of this political view. Lahr tries to abstract the play from politics, condemning people who are spoiled by ideology. All four critics arrive at the same interpretation of the play because they see Mamet as a macho, anti-"P.C." spokesman who creates the meaning they see in the play. The insistence on interpreting Carol as unsympathetic in the extreme reflects the depth to which traditional modes of interpretation that sympathize with and create dominant culture run. These groups rely on the very faith in The Speaker to dictate the interpretation of their words and actions, a faith that the play questions. The play that supposedly condemns the political correctness and feminist movements for hindering freedom of speech provides, in its reviews, support for the "P.C." theory of interpretation as an act of power, and of meaning as derived from not the speaker but the reviewer.

III. Implications of Oleanna's Critical Reception: Culture Creates Patterns of Interpretation

This section will examine how politics and interpretation are not only connected in reviews of Oleanna, but also in (American) culture in general. The naming of terms, as demonstrated in Oleanna, is a move of interpretation and tied to power. The dominant group's interpretation will be the "right" one of many. The media creates support for traditional viewpoints and idealism to suppress the link between politics and interpretation. The media, as an arm of dominant culture, has control of language and therefore the terms available for use and for thought. Specifically, the writings of Allan Bloom and other conservatives in the media not only generate hostility for the "political correctness" movement, but also dictate the terms in which the conflict may be discussed. The terms occupy an abstract, philosophical realm that does not acknowledge the link between politics and itself or the way privilege is defined. In other words, the politics inferred from Lahr may not be his explicit ones--as with the cases of Solomon and Showalter, there may be a split between "intended," acknowledged politics and

those received and interpreted by me: this scenario, again, repeats the situation of Oleanna. This split arises from the nature of the written word as being interpreted by another and from the media and dominant interests' shifting discussion of issues of class and ideology (in Oleanna or the university) onto issues of craftsmanship and elevated, universal subject matter (of the "soul"). While dominant culture dictates the ways things can be seen and understood through its shaping of language, it consciously and consistently asserts the freedom of the subject to think and choose and interpret, another way of hiding the link between power and language. By making individuals, language, or education "transcendent," dominant culture limits the individual's ability to question these "ideals."

The case of Oleanna and its reception demonstrates how people speaking from dominant positions in culture inform and direct understanding. The debate in the public media and university system about the relation of art to power puts the conservatives, who see art as telling a universal truth, in conflict with many contemporary theorists who look at art's historical nature and posit the indeterminacy of its meaning. In the play, Carol expresses this theoretical position when she puts the inherent greatness of John's "charm" and "stories" in doubt. She says "you sit there, and you tell me stories. About your house, about all the private schools, and about privilege, and how you are entitled" (64). She shows his success and privilege as not absolute, but arising from the telling of stories that are right for political reasons. She criticizes John for not acknowledging the fact that this privilege informs his stories, and his interpretations, which are the "right" ones in the classroom. She also exposes the hypocrisy of the enfranchised, such as John, who assert the existence of that which is absolute, or transcendent, but act within a system of capitalism in which every man is very much for himself, aggressive and selfish. John's stories about his childhood and his professed belief in Humanistic ideals contrast with his anger at and violence toward Carol at the play's conclusion.

John's status as a professor allows him to evaluate the interpretations of students and assign value to them in the same way that the reviewer forms evaluations of artistic

greatness. Both figures choose the books and have power (both as a prerequisite for professing or reviewing and as a consequence of these activities). The reviewer's feedback leads to the development of the canon and/or popular success. The critic's implicit duty, one might say, is to create public taste. As a result, criticism becomes important as "the only way of validating [a] specialized and selective category [of literature]. It [is] at once a discrimination of the authentic 'great' or 'major' works . . . and a practical realization and communication of the 'major' values" held by the dominant culture, according to Raymond Williams (51). The critic not only chooses the "great works" and makes them great but also implicitly chooses the values that Art promotes. Feminist critics see this link and resist the macho values Mamet supposedly promotes for this reason. The transmission of values through art has its politics via the person making the review and naming it Art, but the desire to hide these politics comes from a desire to elevate art out of the material--it comes from idealism.

The importance of keeping society separate from the transcendent soul, and indeed insistence on such a soul, reflects a feature of history noted by Williams, which he locates at the beginning of the eighteenth century when the Romantics separated and put in opposition the terms "civilization" and "culture." They made the former refer to "artificial" and "superficial" external needs, and the latter to "human," "inner," and spiritual needs, which they associated with "religion, art, the family, and personal life" (14). The separation of these terms, an idealist move, creates and reflects a tension between the individual and society, that results in privileging both the individual and the expression of his or her feelings in culture and art as more perfect than the material because it is free from the burdens and demands of economics and politics. In addition, this separation of the "inner" from the "outer" world defines the individual in certain ways, promoting values while limiting what questions can be asked about each "world." Thus, society, which demands that Art must be interpreted to yield "truth," or a view of reality, implicitly always defines the ways in which it can be "read." The traditions of reviewing and liberalism (expressed by dominant culture striving to continue its position of

power) prescribed that Mamet's work be read as sexist and realistic (when in fact, the characters may be more representative of linguistic or power positions than psychological beings.)

Education, also put into the realm of the "apolitical" and "ideal" came under attack in the 1980s with the "Political Correctness" debates because it began to challenge this separation of ideal and material realms, and began asking questions different from those allowed by the dominant culture. Condemning the recent "politicization" of the university, conservative critics tend to express concern about "high" things such as the morals and values of our students and citizens, not about the potential change in their economic privilege. For example, Allan Bloom, in his book-length lamentation on the state of affairs in academia, The Closing of the American Mind, speaks of the "impoverished souls" of today's university students. He finds that students possess a form of relativism that doubts the achievements of the United States and its superiority, exemplified in their support of affirmative action, feminism, and Marxism. Bloom finds that the former undoes the use of necessary standards and gives special privileges, altering an otherwise equal competition, and that the latter, by questioning the sexism or class bias of classic texts draws attention to the "wrong" issues. In contrast, Bloom believes in the fairness of capitalism and liberal individualism, the infallibility of European philosophers, and the existence of The Truth. The move to express outrage about the university not in terms of measurable consequences but in such vague discussions of the student's "soul" and "standards" deflects attention from the politics of the university and models of education onto the realm of "ideal" or "artistic" culture. By doing so, it limits discussion by dictating what questions can be asked. Bloom reacts to links between politics and the university with horror but does not explain what danger they present. Implicitly, the philosophy Bloom does not embrace (multiculturalism, feminism, etc.) becomes not a rival but morally deficient (something that "impoverishes" souls). The same relegation of a position that contradicts the dominant interpretation to an excluded place occurs in Oleanna. John,

who does not agree with Carol's interpretation, names her a "vicious little bitch" and implicitly questions her humanity when he asks, "don't you have feelings?" (79, 65).

The moral crisis of which Bloom speaks arises, according to Mark Silverstein, from the neoconservative media's displacement of questions concerning the legitimacy of our capitalist welfare state. This displacement directs the focus from "economics and politics onto the domain of culture." The conflict is not about who has power in the university, but about the "ideals" that are being tainted. The media then demonizes what they see as the dominant culture's (via the educational system) promotion of "feminism, homosexuality, multiculturalism, the politicization of the academy . . . and the postmodern interrogation of totalizing categories." This account of the university is then contrasted with "family values," nationalism, and a "revalorization of capitalism" through the advocacy of vigorous competition and entrepreneurship (104, 105). This displacement allows for the world's problems to coexist with the ideal without questioning the systems in which we live. These systems have given Bloom and John their livelihood, and they, like D'Souza, having succeeded, cannot imagine why others cannot. This displacement uses prescribed ways of thinking to accept the systems as ideal and the reality as less than ideal.

This partial- or un-questioning attitude places a blind emphasis on tradition for support and does not attempt to rethink the systems themselves. Bloom frequently invokes the "ancients" and the Founding Fathers as absolute authorities on everything from friendship to liberalism to democracy in his work. He especially likes Plato for his notion of the "psyche" as a student's mind open and able to access the eternal truth. Another result of Bloom's un-questioning attitude is his definition of the eternal truth, which is, of course, unspecified, but which has to do with Art and traditional philosophy. For Bloom, reading the Great Books to take in "Knowledge" will literally save the souls of America's students. But the Great Books are defined not by a divine hand but by cultural authorities--professors like John or Bloom himself. Saved souls, then, are those who agree with Bloom. He creates the terms of this scenario, yet relegates any one who does not agree with him to a position of spiritual impoverishment.

John acts the same way when he tries to keep the terms of his discussion with Carol focused on feelings. Both Bloom and John are in power, and maintain and express their position by dictating the terms of conversation, thought, and interpretation. The media forum in which reviewers of Oleanna operated had its terms dictated by Bloom and others: Lahr or Solomon may not consider themselves conservative, but their reviews indicate such bias.

Bloom even determines the terms of his opposition. Those disagreeing with him give Bloom support for his “theory” by demonstrating how their minds are “closed” by being too open. Reviewers either challenge or support Bloom’s philosophical beliefs but both camps keep the discussion at an abstract level: they discuss the problem of pluralism and democracy, or the tension between the values of the privileged educated “philosophers,” their cheap imitators, who are “the intellectuals,” and the uneducated masses. Bloom’s book anticipates the response of these professors who do not engage with Bloom’s terms, and instead say that he is sexist, elitist, and classist, in its very combativeness. Bloom boldly asserts “the latest enemy of the classic texts is feminism” and that, while the country has minds too “open” to condemn other cultures for barbarism, Bloom will boldly do so, as when he defends prejudice (65). Bloom’s tone throughout the book seems to express an arrogance that is self-aware and takes pleasure in itself. By exaggerating the strength of his opponent (all students agree with Feminism and affirmative action) he can assume a more dramatic, dire tone and claim the stakes are high. He assumes the role of a straight-talker, not afraid to believe in things that are not “cool,” which lends him appeal as more “honest” and less concerned with politics than his opponents.

Bloom demonstrates how he does not question his Eurocentric beliefs as well as his autocratic, response-dictating teaching style when he describes how he interacts with his students. He writes, “If I pose the routine questions designed to confute them and make them think, such as ‘If you had been a British administrator in India, would you have let the natives under your governance burn the widow at the funeral of a man who had died?’, they either remain silent or reply that the British should never have been there in the first place” (26,

emphasis mine). To his yes or no question, the students, like Carol in Mamet's university, give neither pre-authorized response, but instead refuse to engage in Bloom's terms. When Bloom refers to questioning values, he refers to those of other people, not his own. He works with the Socratic tradition as he understands it, with the goal of arriving at his Answers. In this respect, Bloom reveals his similarity to John and other neoconservatives. Bloom's way of viewing people's opinions, like the question he posed to the students, has two simple categories: right (agrees) and wrong (does not). Bloom does not argue for his points, he only emphatically asserts his rightness in making them.

Bloom demonstrates, in the classroom scene he describes, the position of power in the university he occupies as a professor, thereby contradicting his argument for the system's transcendence. The idea of a professor "making a student think" described by Bloom implies that the educational process involves force or indoctrination. John makes a similar statement when he says that he must make his students "angry" in the classroom. Bloom and John justify this force as necessary to awaken the students out of a passive state because, in anger, they become active. That they need to awaken students implies that the teaching process involves a professor professing and the student as an empty vessel that simply receives knowledge. When the student responds in an unique individual way (Carol, for example), they are wrong. If the student disagrees with the narrowly defined options, they have not "learned" the material correctly. Bloom and John epitomize the conservative position that considers itself right and therefore justified in using force while ironically implying that education can be a free exchange of ideas.

Bloom, like John, considers himself right and occupies a powerful position. As a result, he, like John, can only partially question the system. To examine it more thoroughly would possibly undo some concepts that give meaning and significance (and validation of one's power) to life. Bloom expresses self-awareness of this refusal to take away beliefs, which he identifies as prejudices. He implies that questioning of nation, religion, and other aspects of "ideal" dominant culture would be acceptable if there were something to fill the gap. He writes

that “prejudices, strong prejudices are visions about the way things are. . . error is indeed the enemy, but it also points to the truth” to support his belief in giving students prejudices or beliefs (43). He regards questioning or exposing the constructed nature of these systems as nihilism, to which he has a ready (negative) response. With his awareness of his “prejudices” as not absolute but subject to question, Bloom shows that he chooses to keep them in place for some end. This end seems to be a literal-mindedness that needs written answers to certain “tough” questions to maintain order, or have the literal “answer” if nothing else. Bloom does not encourage individual interpretation with this reliance on tradition, but rather the submission and acceptance of The interpretation, made so by dominant interests.

The American people made Bloom’s work a bestseller, revealing the appeal of Bloom’s message to his fellow citizens and mirroring the public’s sympathy for John in Mamet’s Oleanna. Bloom and John’s stance of upholding ideals and criticizing practice reconciles America’s flaws with its “perfect” institutions. The message apparently has great appeal: the United States is inherently the greatest nation but falls short of its own ideals when “our” teens are on the brink of disaster (unlike the teens in some unspecified good-old-days). This vision sees America as always already the best and falling short of the “best.” The sense of greatness has a duality--it is both in the process of being achieved and actually an achieved state; this duality allows Bloom to label our present situation as both perfect and imperfect, allowing him to question society and decry its imperfection while not questioning the systems of society, instead speaking of their perfection.

Bloom’s vision of America, while popular and persuasive, remains in tension with the book’s popularity and America’s vision of itself as represented in the media and demanded implicitly by capitalism and industry. The book asserts the inadequacy of the nation’s minds in a self-consciously intellectual discussion of philosophy. By its very popularity, the book seems to contradict Bloom’s message (but may support it: if no one read the book, their purchase of it expresses a support of his ideal. Bloom only needs his ideal [buying his book] to be the best, not for the reality [reading the book] to be so). Bloom’s way of accepting the

duality of perfect ideals and imperfect practice possesses wide acceptance. An offshoot of this duality is the coexistence of what Bloom would like--a nation of scholars who have a sense of common culture (ideology) and knowledge of the human heart--and what America promotes and encourages--the very rock music, technology, and pragmatism that Bloom dislikes. The juxtaposition of the two views exposes a dualism in this country in which both are demanded; the systems of capitalism and liberalism demanding self-determination and selfishness and the systems of Christianity and Humanism demanding moral behavior. Carol and John each enact states of awareness of this hypocrisy, Carol pointing toward it in her comments ("you tell me about you family and how you are entitled" and "can you deny [what you did]") and John (and Bloom) not (by not seeing that he could have done anything wrong).

Another split that occurs is between Bloom's prescribed way of seeing the world and terms of discussion and that of his opponents: they see each other but not themselves as having political and economic motivations in their discussion of politics and education. Defenders of Bloom all too willingly cite his critics as giving Bloom negative reviews because they do not like him as a person, or disagree with his school of philosophy, or have to criticize him to keep their jobs. Thus, Bloom's camp admits and implies that they all operate in a political environment, in which they compete with each other for dominance while denying any political motivations for themselves whatsoever. Through their own words, they put themselves on a "higher" level, and hide the fact that they have done so; they give themselves credentials that seem objective. Reviewers of the play read Mamet's politics (anti-politically correct) but do not acknowledge their own; this reader/writer had to infer them.

Michael Bérubé, one of the academic left's defenders, makes a move like that of his opponent, Bloom, in his Village Voice article "Public Image Limited," by naming the conservative's self-interest as a motivating factor in the P.C. debates while not naming his own. Neither side will admit that it is not only defending its beliefs, but also the livelihood and

economic position of its spokesmen.¹⁰ As Bloom benefits from traditional systems remaining in place, Bérubé benefits from publishing, a must in his field, and gaining support for his perspective (Bérubé's position, presumably, is not threatened by the changing student body and curricula).¹¹ Directly stating that one has a material stake in the outcome of this "abstract" debate, however, would not only sound strange but also offensive to both audiences because our society so repeatedly represses and covers this link. The apparent separation of one's beliefs from one's economics and politics has become second nature,¹² but the necessity of their harmonious relationship, as seen in John's inability to question the educational system too much, shows that the link exists. Marxist attempts to identify class-consciousness, or link one's identity to one's job or way of earning a living, gain more validity in this light, and seem to be an alternative way to reconcile one's desire for the ideal with an awareness of flaws and material concerns.

Indeed, the conservatives seem to agree with multiculturalists and radical education theorists of today who see the university as a political arena. Marc Silverstein makes note of an interesting comment by Roger Kimball, a spokesperson of the New Right who wrote a book similar to Bloom's entitled Tenured Radicals. Kimball sees "the university's function as disseminating 'the idea of common culture, the idea that despite our many differences, we hold in common an intellectual, artistic, and moral legacy'" (Silverstein 106). Silverstein adds that such a view of education "describes the university as a site of cultural transmission" and reveals how "the New Right regards it as a site of cultural and ideological production," or what Kimball refers to as a "moral legacy" (106). The fight between these two groups begins from the assumption that college does shape the ideologies of its students, when perhaps it is only one influence of many. The fight, however, is not so much between a political and apolitical university, but between what politics are being disseminated to tomorrow's leaders: the

¹⁰ John demonstrates and mentions the link between job and interpretation in Oleanna, but he also frequently changes the terms from economics to emotions.

¹¹ I, in a way similar to Bérubé, also critique the university even as I occupy a space within it.

¹² Those who make their living by their thoughts--reviewers and professors--would seem to conflate their job and beliefs, however, it is not seemly to say, for example, "I am arguing against multiculturalism because I feel my elite status is in jeopardy."

“conservative” one of faith in the ability to transcend conditions of our world, or the “radical” one that regards everything as political; between having standards by which to judge and evaluate art and people and recognizing that such standards are constructed in particular ways; between belief in absolute self-determination and belief that our decisions take place in specific material and historical moments and conditions.

Carol and John enact this struggle in Oleanna. In the play, John takes the conservative position and Carol the reforming one, while the play criticizes both. Their struggle to interpret actions and words in the university setting reflect the current struggle for power. The debate’s sense of urgency implies that both groups truly believe in the efficacy of the university as a site of transmission, or that what one promotes is actually what the students receive, that perhaps, as Bloom asserts, it shapes their “souls.” Clearly, the stakes are high--they are the future of our children and the country.

Jonathan Culler’s essay “Beyond Interpretation” ends by saying, “it is through interpretation that teachers attempt to transmit cultural values” (329). One need only look at the reviews of Mamet’s play as well as the play itself to support Culler’s remark. Interpretation not only reveals the politics and values of the interpreter but also transmits these values to its recipients and perpetuates accepted modes of interpretation. Oleanna may reveal a contradiction in the politics of some liberal Feminists--a traditionalism in their supposedly anti-establishment views; however, it can do more. While mine is only one interpretation, motivated by a material configuration (me) with its own political biases, I present it as one which positions the play as a catalyst for change if, by its confrontational nature, it leads people to ask different questions about the author’s ability to control language, or about the hidden ties between power, language and education, or the ways cultural and traditional ways of understanding interpretation--possibly “against” one’s intended way of seeing. The play and its reception demonstrate that, although ideas questioning the merit of the author’s intent have purchase value in academic (and popular) circles, the temptation to believe that the author can control the meaning of his or her words is strong--but not impossible to be

overcome! As a work of art that takes interpretation as its subject, Oleanna allows for the possibility of asking new questions about interpretation and objectivity.

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