Something More: Pinter's Women on Stage

Ever since Harold Pinter's first theatrical work, *The Room* in 1956, there has been recurring debate amongst contemporary theatre practitioners, audiences and scholars regarding his dramatic portrayals of women. But what is it about these women that has continued to fascinate us and how might we reflect on their significance today, ten years after Pinter's death?

In Pinter scholarship, some early critical works questioned his plays' gender politics. Alrene Sykes's *Harold Pinter* (1970), for example, asked '[d]oes Pinter say anything more about women than that they are mothers, wives, and whores? Not, I think, a great deal' (106), while Drew Milne's interpretation of *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) positioned the play in compliance with gendered structures of power. Other scholars, however, have looked favourably on Pinter's portrayal of women with seminal works such as Elizabeth Sakellaridou's *Pinter's Female Portraits* (1988) or Ann C. Hall's avowedly feminist, psychoanalytic readings in *'A Kind of Alaska': Women in the Plays of O'Neill, Pinter, and Shepard* (1993) advocating for Pinter's capacity to first make visible patriarchal systems of power, before going on to deconstruct or challenge them via his complex female characters. For theatre critic and Pinter biographer Michael Billington, Pinter's female characters – and Ruth in *The Homecoming* (1965) in particular – pose 'a feminist challenge to male despotism and the classification of women as either mothers or whores' (2009, 289-290).

The Homecoming is both a key text in Pinter's overall career and a frequent touchstone for scholars and theatre practitioners to think through questions of gender and power in his plays. Ruth, the play's only female character who enters into and seemingly detonates the patriarchal household of her husband Teddy, often serves as a kind of litmus test for female empowerment and sexual complexity in the face of fragile masculinity. Upon meeting Ruth, for example, Teddy's father Max describes her as a 'dirty tart' and 'stinking pox-ridden slut' (49). In spite of this initial hostility, Ruth remains coolly composed throughout and, in the play's final morally fraught moments, accepts Max and Teddy's brother Lenny's suggestion that she remain with them and work as a prostitute. Rather than balking at this suggestion, in fact, Ruth takes the opportunity to negotiate her own terms – her own three-bedroom flat, a new wardrobe – insisting that 'all aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalised the contract' (85). She is a character that appears to be simultaneously vulnerable to patriarchal oppression and objectification, and also self-determined, casting off the roles of wife and mother to embrace an opportunity for financial independence vis-à-vis her sexuality.

Pinter himself remarked on Ruth's desire for and ability to secure a life of her own. In an interview in 1967 – the same year *The Homecoming* received the Tony Award and New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play – he described how Ruth is 'misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family. But eventually she comes back at them with a whip. She says, "If you want to play this game I can play as well as you." She does not become a harlot. At the end of the play she's in possession of a certain kind of freedom.' (Billington, 291).

Of course, Ruth is by no means the only multifaceted female character in Pinter's canon. The origins of Ruth are evident in his earlier short works with characters such as Sally in *Night School* (1960), Stella in *The Collection* (1961) or Sarah in *The Lover* (1962). Each of these works presents women as sexually complex, ambiguous figures: Sally works as a teacher by day and a club hostess by night; Stella may or may not have been unfaithful to her husband, James; Sarah and her husband Richard engage in extended sexual role play. While these characters may not be as fully rounded as Ruth, for Mark Taylor-Batty they nevertheless 'offer intelligent challenges to the male figures and masculine narratives of gender' (2014, 66). Moreover, each of these works appeared on both television and radio, thereby reaching a far wider audience than Pinter's stage works and, arguably, enhancing their capacity to shape public perceptions of modern womanhood.

Indeed, as audiences and readers in 2018, one way in which we might reappraise Pinter's early female characters is to look back on the context in which he was writing. The 1960s and 1970s were arguably the most prolific decades in Pinter's career. They are also widely regarded as the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement and, broadly, Second Wave feminism. This coincided with widespread legislative change in the UK pertaining to women's reproductive and employment rights including the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961, the 1967 Abortion Act, ongoing strike action for equal pay and the 1975 Employment Protection Act. In 1963 – right at the intersection of Pinter's early works – American feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in which she claimed, '[w]e can no longer ignore that voice within women that says "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home"' (20).

Pinter's women, it seems, share that voice, that desire for something more. As well as resonating with Ruth's decision to leave her husband and children at the conclusion of *The Homecoming*, Friedan's declaration seems to echo Sarah's words to Richard in *The Lover*: 'You mustn't worry about…wives, husbands, things like that. It's silly. It's really silly' (171). Crucially in the context of Pinter's writing, the apparent disavowal of traditional marital roles or the desire for 'more' remains unspecified. Throughout his career, Pinter famously – or perhaps infamously – refused to offer clarification for his characters' actions or desires. In so doing, his female characters – like all his characters – remain elusive and it is perhaps this very elusiveness that continues to captivate our attention. Just as it did in the 1960 and 70s, the context in which these works are revived will continue to inflect how these complex and compelling women are staged, received and interpreted.

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