



Supervisor's Review

Andrej Olah, "Power Struggle in David Mamet's Plays," MA thesis

The dissertation takes up a topic central to all Mamet's drama—the dynamics of power. Given the pervasiveness of this theme in Mamet's work, Andrej Olah's decision to focus his discussion upon a selection of important plays is a wise choice in limiting this rich field of enquiry. Olah further structures his analyses around characterisation, language and the portrayal of women in the selected plays. The introductory chapter provides a brief survey of Mamet's status within contemporary American drama and introduces a number of interpretations of his work. Olah's assertion (page 2) that Mamet's dramatisation of power struggle has been not been subjected to enough critical scrutiny seems belied by his secondary sources, most of which do address the issue in various ways. However, the thesis is well researched and Olah certainly engages with differing perspectives within Mamet scholarship and attempts to balance these against his own views of the plays. Weaker are the secondary materials drawn from outside critical work that refers to Mamet. These seem rather arbitrarily chosen—for instance the reference to Ernst Bloch—and at times the lack of an outside point of reference weakens the analysis. So for example the connections between the rudimentary forms of domination/subordination and patriarchal order remain assumed rather than interrogated. Similarly terms like capitalism, feminism, political correctness might have been qualified and contextualised better with some further critical / theoretical material.

The opening hypotheses that Mamet's dramatic world is a "man's world" is inherited but important, the secondary claim that in this world women characters function as a "check" on the male characters' behavior is one that is only partially supported by the analyses of the plays, but is a potentially provocative one. What remains in question ultimately is Mamet's attitude to this "man's world," to what extent he really is critiquing patriarchal or capitalist models of existence.

The thesis is successful in unraveling key aspects of power relations in each play. His attention to the plays is enthusiastic and detailed. However at times the discussion gets caught up in descriptive analysis without proposing a purposeful interpretation based on the analysis. In addition, as the thesis develops it becomes clear that each of the subcategories proposed in the introduction (character, language, the role of women) would be easily sustain much more investigation than space will allow, and each solicits differing theoretical consideration. As a result sometimes the proposed subcategories become submerged in meticulous close reading. Perhaps some use of headings would have helped in this respect.

Olah's discussion of the ways in which characters attempt to dominate each other, pseudo-father son relationships and the contradictory attitudes to business in the chapter devoted to *American Buffalo* is well wrought. The following chapter on *Glengarry Glen Ross*, although somewhat over extended, features a lucid analysis of the relationship between Williamson and Levene and goes on to discuss communication among the other characters. Here it becomes clear that it might have been more fruitful to discuss verbal and non verbal communication, rather than language. At least one secondary source notes the significance of silence or a refusal to converse in the play. This would, in particular, dovetail with some of the concluding claims about male characters resorting to violence to resolve communication impasses or to



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express frustration. Also touched upon but worthy of further development is the issue of nonstandard language—jargon, swearing etc.—and its function in jockeying for power.


The fourth chapter on *Oleanna* struggles to deal with the intersection of power and gender. The play is admittedly difficult and one that has elicited strong responses. There is a certain unease with critical interpretations of what Mamet is doing here. Olah grapples with some feminist readings of the play that suggest it is a “misogynist fantasy” or, more moderately, that it presents a “dishonest” argument (See Kellie Bean, Elaine Showalter and Carla J. McDonough cited on page 55 and following). The assertion that “However much feminism and political correctness is read into the play [...it is] based on power relations” (55-6) suggests a basic confusion concerning the basis of feminism or the discourse of political correctness. A possible area for further discussion at the defence would be whether it is viable to discuss power without reference to gender, class and so on. Chapter five is the most scant and descriptive. Including an analysis of these less discussed works is a valid choice (in particular with regard to Mamet’s use of female characters) but the absence of a critical framework is noticeable.

The concluding chapter brings into focus the main issues that have emerged throughout the thesis concerning the male-dominated world of the play and female character quite effectively and certainly more forcefully than is presented in the introduction.

Stylistically, the work is good, with minor slippages in register, word choice grammar and format.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “very good” / 2.

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