

Fictionalizing Harassment: Failure of Academia in David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992)

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My paper points out some of the most basic failures of American education and the long term effects of the damage it does to young people through David Mamet's play *Oleanna* (1992). Mamet uses the education system as a vehicle for his perennial subject, what he calls "human interactions", there is ironic desire for both power and understanding human relationships.

I would like to begin with the premise that sexual harassment poses a real and significant threat to intellectual freedom on campus. As most of us know, sex discrimination is illegal in employment and education as a result of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments. The courts have established sexual harassment as a form of prohibited sex discrimination. Though victims and perpetrators may be of any gender and sexual orientation, harassment is most frequently directed at women, often with the intent or result of discouraging their participation in a work or educational environment.

Guidelines developed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1980 define sexual harassment as "Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting the individual; or

such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment" ("Academic Freedom" 64). Further, the guidelines for an educational environment state that "Sexual harassment consists of verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, imposed on the basis of sex,...that denies, limits, provides different , or conditions the provision of aid, benefits, services or treatment protected under Title IX" (Dziech and Weiner 10)

Beyond the legal considerations, those of us who work in higher education and have an interest in intellectual freedom should have a concern with reducing the incidence of sexual harassment on campus. The student forced to drop a class, change minors, even leave college to avoid a harasser clearly experiences a restriction of her or his intellectual freedom.

I will also assert that a false allegation of sexual harassment against a faculty member could pose a threat to the intellectual and academic freedom of the accused individual. If an institution handles accusations without regard to due process or if an administration attempts to stifle use of controversial material in the classroom out of fear of harassment charges, the academic freedom of all instructors at the college could be weakened. Let me return to these concerns after a look at a fictional representation of the issues.

David Mamet's play *Oleanna* was promoted and criticized as a play about sexual harassment in the academy. In *Oleanna* the Pulitzer Prize winning author of the desk, waiting to speak to him. The telephone conversations along with several later calls that interrupt the scene concern a difficult real estate transaction. On the verge of receiving tenure, John is attempting to buy a house. Carol has arrived without an appointment to seek some help in passing John's class, which apparently has something to do with educational theory. Almost belligerently stupid, Carol insists repeatedly that despite her best efforts, she does not understand. In a characteristic short monologue she says,

Nobody *tells* me anything. And I *sit* there... in the corner. In the *back*. And everybody's talking about "this" all the time. And "concepts" and "precepts" and, and, and, and, and, WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? And I read your book. And they said, "Fine, go in that class." Because you talked about responsibility to the young. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS AND I'M FAILING.... (Mamet 1100).

Having crossed unspecified social and economic barriers to get to college, Carol seems to be especially troubled by John's cynical view of education. His perspective is demonstrated in phrases from his lecture and his book such as "the curse of modern education" and "virtual warehousing of the young" (1099). Self-absorbed and pedantic, John, nevertheless, makes an effort to help Carol. He decides to "take off the artificial stricture of 'teacher' and 'student'", confessing his earlier experiences of feeling stupid and failing (Mamet 1102). He even offers to start the course over for her, with a promise of an "A" for a final grade. During a final phone call, John learns that the earlier calls were really attempts to lure him to a surprise party. He can no longer delay his departure and the student/teacher conference ends abruptly.

In the second scene the relationship between student and professor has been radically altered. Carol has filed a complaint against John with the tenure committee, apparently alleging sexual harassment. John has called Carol in to discuss the report from the tenure committee. The report cites several examples of his allegedly inappropriate behaviour, including putting his arm around Carol, discussion of problems with his wife, saying he liked Carol and would let her write her paper over if she came back to see him more often, telling her that he wanted to take off the artificial stricture of teacher and student, and so on. All of this was behaviour that looked fairly harmless when we viewed it during the first scene. John declares that he is shocked and hurt. He attempts to find out how he can make amends in order to keep Carol from testifying at the tenure committee meeting. Carol, herself, has been transformed. In the first scene she is insecure, even self-loathing, and unable to understand many of the words John uses. In the second she is suddenly self-possessed, and able to employ an impressive vocabulary herself. Perhaps some of this new strength comes from the backing of a mysterious "group" she mentions in passing. Carol starts to leave the office before John has been able to convince her to settle her complaint informally. John restrains her. The scene ends (Mamet1111) with Carol shouting, "Let me go. Let me go. Would somebody help me? Would somebody help me please...?"

Carol and John meet one more time in the third and final scene. As a result of Carol's complaint John has been denied tenure. He's going to lose his job, his new house, and, as he has not gone home for two days, perhaps even his marriage. He has called Carol in to offer an apology. He makes reference to her "accusations" but she insists that he see them as proven facts judged to be true by

the tenure committee (Mamet 1112). She wants John to understand why he is wrong. Carol also lets John know that her group is willing to withdraw the complaint if he meets certain conditions. John rejects the offer when he sees that the group's list of banned books includes his own text. The scene escalates further when it also becomes clear that Carol has accused him of rape. When John learns of the new charge, he asks her to leave. In a final blow that pushes John past the breaking point, Carol tells John not to call his wife "baby." John grabs Carol and begins to beat her. He calls her names and knocks her to the floor. He picks up a chair, as if to smash over her head, then apparently realizing what he's doing, lowers the chair and says "well". Carol responds, "Yes. That's right...yes. That's right" (Mamet 1116).

The problem with *Oleanna* is that it is not really, or not primarily, about sexual harassment at all, but rather about false allegations. Or, perhaps more accurately, about exaggerated or distorted claims of harassment, for John actually has said or done many of the things in Carol's report, though in slightly different context. The work obscures the issue of sexual harassment by suggesting that sexual harassment is really a ploy of militant feminists to disempower and destroy white, middle-class, male academics. Mamet makes the power of the accuser and the perceived threat of an unanticipated accusation seem overwhelming by loading the play against the female student. The audience cannot maintain sympathy for the character as her claims grow preposterous, culminating in the assertion that by pressing against her to detain her, John had raped her. In the end when John started to beat Carol, several people actually cheered the assault. As Elaine Showalter has pointed out in one critique, Mamet "has written a polarizing play about a false allegation of sexual harassment, and that would be fair enough – false allegations of harassment, rape and child abuse indeed occur – if he were not claiming to present a balanced Rashomon-like case."

A balanced approach might deal with the ambiguity of the topic, different interpretations of actions, or conflicting opinions about what constitutes harassment. The very nature of sexual harassment makes guilt impossible to determine in some cases when it is one person's word against another's. The general hype surrounding the play was that it presented a tough issue with no "right side." Advertisements featured silhouettes of a man and a woman, each with a target on their chest. Two playbill covers were printed and distributed – one with the targeted woman. Ad copy read, "which ever side you choose, you're wrong". Yet, while neither character is

particularly admirable, the play does take sides. Playing to the fears of the audience, the work seems to argue that the real issue of sexual harassment is that an unsubstantiated charge could ruin the career and life of an absolutely innocent individual.

As sexual harassment has historically functioned as an impediment to women seeking access to education or certain employment opportunities, legal and other restrictions on harassing behaviour logically have the effect of making the university and other arenas more readily hospitable to women. The drastic transformation of Carol, from confused and helpless student to angry woman with an agenda, reads as an hysterical response to the increased access and power of women in higher education, and to their demand for fair treatment. Mamet imagines the academic world as a zero sum game, with any gain for women, resulting in a loss for men.

My concern is that Mamet's view of the issue is extending beyond the fictional realm. There is a troubling tendency to see sexual harassment as a problem of ridiculous charges, which can needlessly damage reputations and restrict the free speech and other rights of academics. I hope that we can have the good sense not to throw out the baby with the bath water. It is irresponsible for those of us involved in higher education to simply consider the problem of harassment *passé*, to take a position of solidarity with all accused academicians, to treat the issue of harassment as a joke, or to raise the cry of "academic freedom" as a way to avoid a difficult issue. Carol mocks the academic freedom defense and it is clear that if we seriously want to defend the idea of academic freedom, we must invoke it responsibly, knowing what it is and is not.

Despite its problems, the dramatization does suggest some possible action to reduce the anxiety provoked by the topic of sexual harassment. John's behaviour, for example, suggests that greater awareness of appropriate professional demeanor could reduce the chances of any complaint being filed. John compounds his mistakes by his behaviour *AFTER* a complaint has been filed against him. Ignoring common sense he meets two more times alone, behind closed doors with the student. He physically blocks her exit on one occasion and lets his frustration erupt in violence on the next. With good advice about how to handle a complaint, it seems likely he could have avoided such a tragic change in fortune.

Carol's escalating charges bring up an even more serious issue. Aggressive advocates of feminism and political correctness do a disservice to the issue by

forwarding exaggerated claims or making too much of minor incidents. This discredits the seriousness of the issue. Carol loses any support from the audience when she equates a minor episode with rape and when she uses the powder of having her accusations believed to push the group's censorship agenda. The pressing of extreme or ridiculous cases poses a real danger to progress in enforcement of sexual harassment policies, and by extension to the maintenance of fair academic opportunities for women.

Further, the wide gulf between Carol and John, while theatrically effective, suggests much more could be done to alleviate the problem. Here are a few suggestions:

First, those of us with experience with institutional investigations of complaints may see a need to re-examine campus policies on harassment to make sure there are adequate provisions for due process and fair treatment for both accuser and accused. We need to make sure we do not decide individually or as an institution that an accuser is always wrong or always right. We should recognize the difficulty of harassment cases and realize that the truth and accuracy of a reported incident can't always be established. Sometimes it will not be in the best interest of a student to pursue a complaint even though harassment has occurred. We should attempt to put more emphasis on informal resolution of harassment situations. Whenever possible an individual should be given the opportunity to correct inappropriate behaviour.

In addition, education of the campus community, especially potential harassers is important. Greater awareness of the power disparity in the student/teacher relationship could prevent many difficulties. Professors need to understand that behaviour and remarks that might be appropriate in another context — such as asking someone out on a date — might not be acceptable when conferring with a student during office hours. More open discussion of standards of professional interaction with students should be encouraged.

This should reduce fear of capricious attacks and allegations. It seems clear that only a small percentage of faculty are guilty of sexual harassment. The rest, who interact with students in an ethical, legal, and professional manner do not need to feel constantly vulnerable to attack. Likewise, it would be sensible to concentrate enforcement efforts on the most serious violations of sexual harassment policy. Jokes in poor taste and occasional offensive remarks are best addressed through

education, the evolution of social norms, and informal efforts, such as calling colleagues to task on such behaviour.

We also need to realize that sexual harassment is not an issue that can be “solved” once and then forgotten. We need to pay more attention to the gray areas, where we don’t have consensus as to whether a particular series of actions constitutes harassment. We need to do the difficult work of re-examining what is and is not appropriate to the student/ professor relationship.

Finally, it is important to educate the academic community and the public about academic freedom and censorship issues, in order to prevent unreasonable enforcement of sexual harassment policies for the purpose of restricting classroom speech. Essential to this effort is institutional support for the use of controversial material germane to the subject matter. Carol’s efforts to dictate class content and reading list, clearly violate John’s academic freedom and are an abuse of a campus sexual harassment policy. Academic freedom will suffer if institutions encourage faculty members to avoid certain topics due to sexual content, etc. so as to not risk any chance of a hassle or remote possibility of a sexual harassment complaint. It may be necessary to stand up against frivolous charges aimed at restricting valid and appropriate classroom speech. It might not always be easy to sort out, but protection from sexual harassment and protection of academic freedom can coexist. After all, protecting students from harassment is not the same as protecting them from discomforting ideas. Just because the effort won’t be easy, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make the attempt.

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