

# Carnivalization of the Business World: "The New Woman" in Three Plays by David Mamet

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To Mamet the business world, where his most successful and provocative plays are set, appears to be a quintessentially American site. It is into this congenial space that he projects all his worries, concerns and criticism about an America that is portrayed as falling apart. In the context of business Mamet can address nearly all the themes he has been haunted by: the decline of American values, the decay of American idealism, the prevalence of corruption and venality in business, the degradation of the business ethic into deception and betrayal, the loss of the American Dream and of the frontier spirit, urban alienation, the communication breakdown between people, the conflicting and discordant relationship between men and women, women's place and roles in the shifting ambience of gender expectations. The plays immersed in the world of business (hence "business plays"<sup>1</sup>) include *American Buffalo* (1976), which established Mamet as a leading dramatist; the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983); *Speed-the-Plow* (1987), revealing the corrupt world of the Hollywood film industry; *House of Games*<sup>2</sup> (1987), echoing *American Buffalo* in the sense that in both plays business is equated with crime; and *Oleanna* (1992), set in the world of higher education, which is depicted as "a service industry, the intellectual handmaiden of American business" (Watt 1094).

All these plays, apparently, address the dehumanizing effects of the cut-throat business competition on the American male identity and, concomitantly, the radically changing constituting factors of masculinity. The business world is characteristically represented as the space for enacting and asserting masculinity, due to, as Carla J. McDonough proposes, the displacement of the frontier mythology central to the shaping of the American male identity, to the realm of business (71). Further, she notes that "the idea of masculine space in Mamet's work is always made dependent on the destruction or exclusion of female subjectivity in order to glorify male independence or strength" (71-72). True to this pattern, in the two early plays, in *Buffalo* and *Glengarry* only off-stage female characters appear, and the phallogentricity of this world is reinforced by "the language of contempt, hatred, and dehumanization that is insistently allied to matching attitudes toward women" (Jacobs 107). By contrast, in *Speed*, *House* and *Oleanna* women are cast as main protagonists trying to find their own spaces in a male-dominated world, and inescapably, their spaces clash with those of the male characters, who seek to assert and maintain their dominant positions there.

On first consideration, there may not be anything new in this treatment of the ancient-old antagonism between men and women, or in illustrating again the subordinate position and "the secondary status of woman," which is claimed to be uni-

versal, "a pan-cultural fact," irrespective of the social order or the cultural and political circumstances (Ortner 16). However, it would be fallacious to claim that the subject-matter of *Speed*, *House* and *Oleanna* could be reduced to a mere battle of the sexes, which, according to the general, stereotypical belief, is confined to the private spheres of life. The female characters' space-creating and the male characters' space-maintaining efforts in the public spheres of life as presented in these three plays have far more serious implications, and can be traced back to crucial changes in the socio-political and cultural conditions, as a result of which women now gain access to territories formerly forbidden to them. It must be noted though that Mamet is not concerned with describing the circumstances leading up to the present situation; he merely diagnoses rifts and gaps in male-female relationships in the realm of business.

Owing to the fact that while the degrading and contemptuous treatment of absent women characters in *Buffalo* and *Glengarry* has been extensively dealt with by critics,<sup>3</sup> the portrayal of on-stage women characters in *Speed*, *House* and *Oleanna* has been given scant attention, the present study will be devoted to these latter three business plays. Yet the critical view that women and the values conventionally associated with femininity impart weakness and failure to the business world, and thereby women seriously threaten it, is also valid for the three plays to be studied here (Zeifman 124-25, McDonough 87).

Labeling *Oleanna* as a "business play" needs some clarification here. Allegedly, the notion of "business" is incompatible with higher education but this doubt can be dispersed when considering Carol's motivation for studying at a university. She is clearly involved in a business transaction in that she is planning to make herself marketable. Stephen Watt's claim that Carol is a "woman of her era, she seeks knowledge not from some thirst for enlightenment or as a part of individual betterment, but to qualify for credentials so that, as she says, she might get on in the world" adequately describes her (1094). Though this is a legitimate aim that may equally motivate any human being. The problem she confronts there is much more significant, and it can also be "translated" into business terminology: she does not get good value for her money. In other words, she follows the rules, yet she fails, so the system that takes her money in tuition cannot "guarantee" her education, and it means that the system must be breaking down (Watt 1094-95). It can thus be safely assumed that higher education is clearly viewed as an extension of business.

The assumption that in *Speed*, *House* and *Oleanna* Mamet captures a fundamental shift in women's socially and culturally coded gender roles, and thereby he creates a new type figure that I will term, after Simone de Beauvoir, "the new woman," provides a valuable point of departure in understanding the highly ambivalent and contradictory concept of women that emerges in these works.

Subsequently, this study will focus on revealing and analyzing the conditions that prompt the transformations the female characters undergo in the plays selected, and also on describing the distinct gender attributes acquired as a result of this process. The Bakhtinian concept of carnival and some of its categories as explicated by Bakhtin in his seminal work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) will be applied for the study of the plays.

Furthermore, I propose that these three works mark a new phase in the portrayal of women not only in the Mametian oeuvre but also in late twentieth-century American drama. Unlike in the earlier plays by Mamet, these female characters are

neither excluded nor marginalized; they are granted due presence throughout the plays. These women are positioned in the context of the business world traditionally viewed as the sanctuary of men and, closely related to this, they appear as fully autonomous, independent human beings, entirely removed from their domestic environment. As opposed to this, in mainstream American drama women are conventionally presented in their kinship status, that is, as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters.

At first sight the conditions described above seem to be sufficient to treat the female characters on an equal basis with their male counterparts. However, the initial power arrangement in the plays is structured according to the binary oppositions associated with patriarchy—such as superior/inferior and masculine/feminine—thus men are invested with authority and power, while women are relegated to inferior positions. Curiously, however, by the end of the plays the hierarchical relations are reversed, and the female characters gain power over their male counterparts. Though the actual means the female characters use to obtain dominance vary, there is a clearly identifiable pattern by which they succeed in subverting the original patriarchal order. Paradoxically, by adopting and emulating male behaviour, values and discourse, not only are they able to reverse the order but also to lay bare the corrupt and the debased value system in the realm of business. In other words, the female characters initiate a carnivalization process that undermines the phallogentricity of this world, as well as the male myths underpinning the capitalist social order.

The subversion and reversal of the existing order is achieved by “the new woman,” who in an attempt to obtain moral, social and cultural recognition in the male-dominated world, slips out of her old, culturally and socially sanctioned roles and acquires new ones that enable her to work for her own goals. These characteristics of the female protagonists in the select plays evoke Beauvoir’s concept of “the new woman” as she envisaged it nearly half a century ago:

We must not believe, certainly, that a change in woman’s economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear. (10)

I find that the women characters in the three plays have reached a stage in their evolution that corresponds to the description spelled out by Beauvoir: the new woman “must shed her old skin and cut her new clothes” (10), that is, she must deconstruct her old and construct her new gendered identity. Beauvoir does not explicitly define what multiple factors actually affect the appearance of “the new woman,” yet she states that the transformation of woman is bound to happen under cultural compulsion. The three plays by Mamet testify that in the course of “the cutting the new clothes” phase the women characters are continually thwarted in their endeavors, which makes them realize that the misuse and abuse of male power hinder them in pursuing and achieving their goals. Led by this realization, the women characters revolt, and eventually, subvert the existing hierarchy. In accordance with the Bakhtinian carnival the initial order is restored in *Speed*, where after a temporary “carnival kingdom” the female protagonist, Karen, is pushed back to her subordinated position. By contrast, in *House* and *Oleanna* the women characters, Dr. Ford

and Carol respectively, are able to confirm their newly gained empowerment and assume not only their former oppressors' discourse and value system but also their dominant positions. Apparently, this change departs from the carnival concept, however, I believe, it reinforces the inherent feature of carnival as Bakhtin's words illuminate it: "All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (*Problems* 11).

Before a detailed discussion of the female characters, I will look at the two-directional pattern evolving in the plays. The figure below schematically demonstrates the hierarchical relations between men and women at the beginning of the plays, with the male characters in the dominant and the female protagonists in subordinate positions. Thus in the course of the plays, this order is completely reversed. Accordingly, the woman psychologist shifts into the role of the con man (*House of Games*), the secretary assumes the role of the boss (*Speed-the-Plow*), while the woman student shifts into the role of the professor and vice versa (*Oleanna*):

## HOUSE OF GAMES

Mike  
CON MANDr. Ford  
PSYCHOLOGIST

## SPEED-THE-PLOW

Bob  
BOSSKaren  
SECRETARY

## OLEANNA

John  
PROFESSORCarol  
STUDENT

Strictly speaking, the role shifts exemplify that the production of new gender roles and relations boils down to a struggle for empowerment and dominance. Cultural anthropologist Arthur Brittan offers a view pertinent to my understanding of the mechanics of gender construction: "At any given moment, gender will reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not" (114-15).

Mamet manipulates the shape of the respective plots to underscore shifts in female empowerment in the following manner. The highly successful and ambitious psychologist, Dr. Margaret Ford, in *House* enters the male world of confidence tricksters with the intention to write a book on the psyche of the con men. However, while "doing business" with them, she is badly cheated and humiliated, which eventually prompts her to a violent act to gain power and control over the male world. In *Speed*, Karen works in a Hollywood studio as a temporary secretary with the unconcealed intention to find a job there which would involve "the making decisions" [sic] (44). She succeeds in obtaining power over her boss by using her sexual charms, but she is not able to attain her final goal. Carol in *Oleanna* studies for a university degree in order to ensure her social advancement but she does not receive the necessary education nor the expected help from her professor. Therefore she destroys his career by charging him with sexual harassment, which has rather tenuous grounds.

The plays thus revolve around the issue of power, and inevitably the shifts in power between the female and male characters in them precipitate changes in the female characters' gender attributes, thus the study of the power relations between them provides a point of entry into the plays.

The significance of the correlation between women's access to power in particular socio-political circumstances and the gender attributes produced and shaped in that given context can be illuminated when considering this fact from a historical perspective. Alice Kessler-Harris notes:

because women have in the past normally participated in the structure of power through men—fathers, husbands, and employers—... they have been discouraged from competing in the marketplace, from striving for their own success. They may have instead been called upon to provide support and to nurture men who are engaged in the upward struggle. (228)

The opportunity for women "to strive for their own success," that is, for their own American Dream, arrives when they appear on the job front. As David Potter points out, "the city was the frontier for American women and the business office was what gave them economic independence and the opportunity to follow a course of their own" (213).

The relevance of work, also in the sense of working for a degree (as in Carol's case), is crucial in my approach to the Mamet plays. It is work that serves as an occasion for carnival both spatially and temporally. In the medieval carnivals "the square" was the central place for people of all ranks to meet, whereas its time was linked to "moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 9). In the plays, work has a double function: it provides the actual physical context for the encounter of the male and female characters, and it is work again that enables them to enter into a new kind of relationship. With one exception in *Speed* all scenes in the three plays are located outside the domestic environment: a pool-room, streets, a hotel in *House*; the office of the film producer in *Speed*; and the university professor's office in *Oleanna*. The "moment of crisis" corresponds to women appearing at work, where the new relationship between men and women is not determined by familial ties. Instead a complex interplay of other forces affecting human relationships—such as trust, friendship, loyalty, cooperation, sexual attraction—come to the foreground.

Entering the business world, the women characters are explicit about their endeavors. On the face of it, their legitimate aims are acknowledged by the "superior caste." This constitutes a stage that I will qualify as "crowning." The act of crowning is a decisive moment in carnival since it involves the oppressors handing over some symbols of authority to the oppressed. By definition, crowning is ambivalent as it

already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start....—the symbols of authority that are handed over to the newly crowned king...—all become ambivalent and acquire a veneer of joyful relativity. (Bakhtin, *Problems* 124)<sup>4</sup>

Thus, by rule, crowning represents another form of wielding power, therefore it is termed as “mock crowning.”

Moments of crowning, that is, the “handing over some symbols of authority,” can be isolated both in the discourse and the acts of the male characters in the plays. When Ford in *House* enters the poolroom, the sanctuary of the male world, she is addressed by Mike, the leading con man in a rude, obscene language: “What the fuck is it?” (13). Apparently, she is treated as a “buddy,” which will be reinforced by Mike asking her to join a card game to identify a cheat. Her “crowning” is complete when she is allowed not only to observe but also to participate in an operation of the confidence tricksters. Though Karen in *Speed* is merely a temporary secretary working for a production manager in a Hollywood studio, she is entrusted with the important task of reading and reporting back on a film-script to her boss. Unlike Ford, Karen is fully aware of her being manipulated, and she acts accordingly. Carol in *Oleanna* is “crowned” when John, the professor, urged by his selfish need for affirmation and acknowledgement by the student, breaks down the barrier between them: “I’m talking to you the way I wish that someone had talked to me. I don’t know how to do it, other than to be personal...” (19). He also adds, “If we’re going to take off the Artificial Stricture, of ‘Teacher,’ and ‘Student,’ why should my problems be any more a mystery than your own?” (21).

Having been crowned, the women characters gradually adapt themselves to the new empowered position. There is a definite equalizing tendency surfacing in each play, which triggers changes and shifts in the women’s gender roles. I find that two categories, namely “the free and familiar contact among people,” and “a new mode of interrelationship between individuals” (123) proposed by Bakhtin to describe the carnival can be applied to examine this stage. According to the first one “all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people” is dissolved (123). The second category is explained as follows:

The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of non-carnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. (123)

In the equalizing phase Ford adapts herself to the male world and watches the con men’s moves with undisguised interest. All throughout her encounters with Mike, she is in the firm belief that she is the analyst observing the analysts’ operation. At the same time, her confrontation with Mike triggers a series of changes and revelations in her. First she comes to the conclusion that her work as a psychologist is a sham. Referring to one of her patients, a murderess, Ford says: “I know why she is in the hospital, she’s sick. The question is what am *I* doing here. It’s a sham, it’s a con game. There is nothing I can do to help, and there is nothing I can learn from her to help others avoid her mistakes” (*House* 30). There are further signs giving away a sense of insecurity in her regarding not only her profession but also her own identity. In a “Freudian” slip of the tongue in a conversation with her friend, Maria, Ford explains:

- FORD. That poor girl, all her life my father tells her she's a  
whore, so all her life she seeks out...
- MARIA. "My father..." (30)

This foreshadows her being made a whore by Mike, which is also part of the confidence game, or, in the con man's perception, of the "business transaction" she is involved in. Gradually, she begins to slip from the role of the analyst into that of the analysand, though she is not aware of this process. In fact, the real analyst and psychologist is Mike, who has shrewdly planned and calculated every move of hers only to cheat her out of her money. Ironically, in the equalizing stage, when Ford cooperates with the con men, she turns into their accomplice, and is made into a thief and even a murderess.

Unlike Ford, Karen is fully aware of the "confidence game" going on between Bob, her boss, and herself. Consequently, she follows the script faithfully and is ready to play the role of a subservient, dumb, naive but sexy woman in order to give a sense of importance to the men in the office. However, all her moves are geared towards breaking out of this role to achieve her own aim, a better position in the film industry. Instinctively, or maybe consciously, she accepts her status as a "commodity," the theoretical underpinnings of which can be illustrated by Luce Irigaray's claim that: "Marx' analysis of the commodity as the basic form of capitalist wealth can... be understood as an interpretation of the status of woman in so-called patriarchal societies" (qtd. in Moi 141). When she is offered by Bob to read the script of a film, she knows that it is her sexual charms that are actually important to her boss. However, with utmost skill, she is able to make use of this situation for her own benefit. Moi's comments on Irigaray's analogy are illuminating: "her [woman's] value resides not in her own being but in some transcendental standard of equivalence (money, the phallus)" (141). So in Bob's home, where he is free of the institutional power, Karen is, apparently, treated as a human being: she is allowed to elaborate on her views and ideas concerning the theme of the book, and also on the mission of Bob's new job, "you were put here to make stories people need to see. To make them less afraid" (*Speed* 59). McDonough notes that "Karen begins to move from sexual object to acting, thinking subject as she seeks to convince Gould the book he has asked her to give a 'courtesy read' should be made into a film" (93). As a result, Karen gradually slips from the role of the seduced to that of the seducer, and eventually to that of the "boss."

Paradoxically, the double nature of the American Dream, which is claimed to have two contrasting elements, namely materialism and idealism (Flibbert 106), is captured in Karen's discourse and acts. She is motivated by material rewards as well as idealism: she wants a secure job and also acts as the redeemer of people's soul. Karen argues that "[our life is ending. These are the Dark Ages. They aren't to come, the Dark Ages—they are now]" (*Speed* 49). People can be saved only if the novel *The Bridge* is filmed so that they can understand "radiation has been sent to us by God. To change us" (48). This is a re-definition, a re-interpretation of the American Dream in the novel within the drama. As the land of promise has not brought spiritual salvation to the people of America, neither has the New Jerusalem come yet, now radiation is sent to change them. The paradox lies in the fact that the redeemer role is exploited to achieve self-serving goals, thus, it is doomed to failure.

The equalizing phase in *Oleanna* differs from the previous two in length as well as in the lack of explicit role shifts. While in *House* the equalizing phase takes up nearly the whole play, in *Speed* it is restricted to act 2, and in *Oleanna* it is limited to the second half of act 2. A similar tendency of decrease occurs in the variety and the number of the locales, as well as in the eventfulness of the plot. A fairly rapid change of scenes packed with actions in *House* is in a stark contrast with the two different settings (Bob's office and home) with hardly any action in *Speed*, and with merely one setting (John's office) and virtually no plot in *Oleanna*. Owing to the radical reduction of these elements of drama in *Oleanna* the verbal fight between the professor and his student gains prominence.

Having been crowned, Carol can experience a dramatic dismantling of the socio-hierarchical inequality between the professor and herself. This is both unexpected and rather surprising in the given institutional setting, which puts constraints on both parties' discourses, gestures, and acts. The professor violates all the rules: he treats Carol as a personal friend to whom he talks about the inefficiency of education, the copulation habits of the rich and the poor, and intimacies of his marriage. When Carol cries out in utter confusion: "You tell me I'm intelligent, and then you tell me I should not be *here*, what do you want with me? What does it mean? Who should I listen to... (*The professor goes over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder*)" (*Oleanna* 36). Astonished by this ambiguous gesture Carol will interpret it as a sexual advance.

In accordance with the second Bakhtinian category the professor's behavior, gestures, and discourse "are freed from authority of all hierarchical position," however, Carol is completely lost and rather surprised in this situation. The only change she is going through is her becoming alert and self-aware of what is happening to her, therefore, as a conscientious student, she makes notes of the professor's words, which will form the basis of her charges brought against him.

Carnival, by its intrinsic nature, is an "authorized transgression" (Hutcheon 51). Therefore crowning is inevitably followed by decrowning, which is also an important symbolic event. Bakhtin explains the ritual as follows:

regal vestments are stripped off the decrowned king, the other symbols of authority are taken away, he is ridiculed and beaten. All the symbolic aspects of this ceremonial decrowning acquire a second and positive level of meaning—it is not naked, absolute negation and destruction (absolute negation, like absolute affirmation, is unknown to carnival). Moreover, precisely in this ritual of decrowning does there emerge with special clarity the carnival pathos of shifts and renewals, the image of constructive death. (125)

Strictly speaking, only Ford and Karen undergo "stripping off their regal vestments," which leads to their greater awareness and self-recognition. In Ford's case "the constructive death" will entail her inner and outer metamorphosis, though accompanied by a violent act of murder. Karen is ridiculed and learns a lesson but she is not able to renew herself. Paradoxically, Carol being beaten by the professor at the end of the play strengthens her empowered position, and also affirms her belief that "John's after-the-fact physical battering of her body justifies all that she has previously done to him" (Ryan 401), thus I will term this stage "quasi-decrowning."

Ford's decrowning follows the carnival pattern. Having been badly humiliated, and having been conned out of her money, she is pushed out of the world of the confidence tricksters, as she is useless to them either as a fellow "con-man" or as a woman. She gets rid of objects reminding her of this world: Mike's pocket-knife she stole from him after their lovemaking, her blouse splashed with the blood of the policeman she apparently murdered, and a file on Billy Hahn, her analysand, on the cover of which it says "Compulsive succeeds in establishing a situation where he is out of control" (59). The acute irony is that this observation now aptly describes Ford in her present state. Having committed a mock-theft and a mock-murder, though it will dawn on her only later, she is also qualified as "a compulsive gambler" (11). The fact that she has been exploited both morally and sexually becomes clear to her when she happens to overhear a conversation between two con men:

MIKE. The broad's an addict.... The bitch is a born thief.

....

MIKE. We showed her some Old style... Some Dinosaur con men. Years from now, they'll have to go to a museum, see in frame like this.

MR DEAN. [you] Took her money, and screwed her, too.

MIKE. A small price to pay. (62)

Having experienced the misuse and abuse of male power, Ford has to renew herself, which, curiously, means physically annihilating Mike. In their final confrontation Ford demonstrates that she has completely mastered all the techniques of deception from him. She deludes him into believing that she is ready to wholly offer herself to him, both her money and her sex. True to the tradition of confidence game, she builds trust in her victim, thereby she gains power over him. When she shoots him, she echoes Mike's words that justify crime: "I can't help it— 'I'm out of control'" (69). Ford adopts Mike's discourse, rehearses his acts and strategies, so restoring and renovating her identity are completed. Adopting Mike's innermost psyche, Ford transforms into a "woman-con man." Paradoxically, her inner metamorphosis is accompanied by a definitely feminine change in her outer appearance. In the closing scene she appears not only as a highly successful author of a book written on confidence tricksters, but also as an attractive woman wearing a flowery patterned summer dress. The label she has given to Mike, "Unbeatable Gambler... who doles out punishment" (59) appropriately describes her at the end.

Karen in *Speed* manages to convince her boss, Bob, to film the novel *The Bridge* that would bring spiritual salvation for both Bob and the people in America, and also, material gains and presumably, a job for Karen. But as she has ruined the original business deal between Bob and his life-time friend, Charlie, she is destined to lose this battle. Nonetheless, the immediate cause of Karen's decrowning is her confession that she would not have slept with Bob if he hadn't approved of "green-lighting" the radiation film. So ironically, it is not the condemnation of the means she has used to achieve her aim that results in her downfall but her straightforwardness and sincerity about revealing her true motives. When giving reasons for Karen's momentarily inverting the patriarchal structure, Ann C. Hall argues: "In this world..., women are not permitted any flaws. Gould [Bob] wants a saint. In order to have an opinion, in order to make any changes or even to think about making them,

Karen must be pure" (157). As opposed to this remark, I suggest that in order to have an opinion in the male-dominated world the women characters have to fully adopt male strategies of deception. Karen has not become a perfect "con man" yet, as she has retained some of her naivete and sincerity, which are out of place in the male-dominated business world. Therefore she is not yet able to subvert the male oppression, however, she creates disruption in the life of her male counterpart (Hall 157).

In light of the fact that *Oleanna* displays drastic reductions in terms of plot, setting and number of characters as well as the equalizing state between the Carol and John, it is conspicuous that the "crowned" Carol can wield her newly gained power uninterrupted, and what is more, she can even sustain it. Also, her "decrowning" is unsuccessful. Unlike the former two characters, Carol is not solitary in her fight against patriarchy. She is backed up by an invisible and rather mysterious support group which has adopted the ideology of political correctness invading the Academia at the beginning of the 1990s. Apparently, they effectively intrude into every facet of the university life in order to gain complete control over it. Thus the corrupt Tenure Committee, clearly under the group's influence, seems to accept the charges against the professor without any hesitation. By acquiring the group's "lingo" with fascinating speed Carol assumes the role of an instructor, and thereby she completes her role-change. Paradoxically, the very words Carol uses to explain to John his motivations for work, equally apply to her since she has understood that she can get ahead only if she obtains power: "Do you know what you have *worked* for? *Power*. For *power*" (64). Depicting a salient feature of power, Carol accuses John: "You want unlimited power" (66). Again, the acute irony is that these words adequately express the invisible group's intentions to control public as well as private life at the university: they plan to ban certain books from courses, and through Carol, using her as a kind of "medium," they can intrude into John's personal life. She does not let him call his wife "baby" on the phone, which prompts him to violence. The "quasi-decrowning" stage is condensed into this final moment with Carol reacting: "Yes. That's right. (*She looks away from him, and lowers her head. To herself:*)... yes. That's right" (80). Though these last words by Carol, as Steven Ryan notes, "leave no room for comfortable conclusions," her "constructive death" phase brings her the revelation of "the legitimacy or morality of her own tactics" (401).

Mamet raises a handful of disturbing issues in the play, which are summed up by Watt as follows:

What constitutes sexual harassment? Can power be given away and yet retained? Can—or how can—language remain a viable means of human interaction in a period of enormous social and economic flux? Does the exercise of power inevitably lead to abuses no matter who controls the levers of authority? Are women and men doomed to remain adversaries constantly battling for supremacy? (1095)

Though these questions are not answered, I assume that in light of the carnival model emphasizing the "gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (Bakhtin 11), the final state in *Oleanna* precipitates its reversal. Michel Foucault's understanding of power also dovetails to the Bakhtinian "Where there is power, there is

resistance... and these points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network" (95).

By adopting certain basic male "values" such as deception, venality, hypocrisy, violence, transgression of rules and laws, which appear to be necessary requirements in the realm of business, "the new woman" is able to wield power, and also to hold a mirror to the male world. The image is certainly much disliked by them. "The new woman" is at a transitory stage since "disguised as a man she feels herself as ill at ease in her flesh as in her masculine garb" (Beauvoir 10).

Though this study has been concerned only with Mamet's plays with strong female protagonists in them, I suggest that a three-stage pattern evolves in the presentation of women characters in his oeuvre: from entirely eliminating female characters in most of the early plays through portraying them in stereotypical roles to describing them as autonomous women gaining supremacy over men in the plays studied here. Though I would not agree with David Richards' somewhat biased formulation concerning the trajectory Mamet's women have taken, namely that they have turned "from wimp to warrior," I think he is right in claiming that "Carol marks the end of an era" (2). Now the puzzling question is whether the future holds more fights or negotiations between men and women in the public and private spheres of life. Mamet leaves the solution to us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The category of "business plays" I propose is more inclusive than the "men-at-work" label Carla J. McDonough introduces for *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Spee-the-Plow* in her book *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Since the text of the film script of *House of Games* is used in this study, for the sake of convenience I will refer to it as a "play."

<sup>3</sup> cf. David Radavich's "Man Among Men: David Mamet's Homosocial Order" (1991); Hersh Zeifman's "Phallus in Wonderland: Machismo and Business in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*" (1992); Chapter 1 in Robert Vorlicky's *Act Like a Man* (1995); Chapter 4 in Carla J. McDonough's *Staging Masculinity* (1997).

<sup>4</sup> All the subsequent quotations relating to the carnival categories will be taken from Bakhtin's book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

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