

PC on Stage

Carol Iannone

Given the nature of political correctness, we might find ourselves surprised at first to realize how little it has been made the subject of theatrical treatment. As an official version of reality with no tolerance for opposing views, PC would seem an ideal subject for that particularly American subgenre of play that pits the individual against social or institutional conformity, examples of which might include *The Children's Hour*, *The Crucible*, and *Inherit the Wind*. Plays continue to emerge that insist on the importance of individual conscience and freedom of thought against outside pressure, but this pressure is usually seen to arise from sources which have by now become rather predictable—the military, for example, as in the recent play made into a film, *A Few Good Men*. Thus what at first may have seemed surprising is not so after all. The real hero is not the individual per se, it seems, but the individual who somehow embodies what are taken to be progressive or enlightened ideals in the face of entrenched traditions or authoritarian bureaucracies. The typical PC tale does not quite fit this mold.

Be that as it may, the past few years *have* produced at least a couple of plays that lend insight into the nature of political correctness and its peculiarity as an aesthetic subject. A.R. Gurney's witty, likable *Another Antigone* was produced in 1988 at New York City's highly respected off-off-Broadway house Playwrights Horizons. Gurney writes about academic life as something of an insider—he was teaching in the English department at Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the time—and his play is an often canny commentary on many of the lamentable developments in the contemporary university. Although the play was written before the phenomenon of political correctness was specifically named, anyone seeing it now might be hard put to avoid seeing the connection. David Mamet's biting, bitter *Oleanna* is still running as of this writing at New York City's off-Broadway Orpheum Theatre, having opened in October of 1992. Mamet writes as an interested outsider and his play displays some awkwardness about the feel of academic life but miraculously manages to render a startlingly prescient picture in spite of that.

In *Another Antigone*,¹ Henry Harper is a professor of classics at a top tier college who refuses to accept student Judy Miller's attempt to fulfill her paper requirement in his Greek tragedy course with "another *Antigone*," i.e., an updated version of the play making a contemporary point, in her case, opposition to the arms race. Judy asks to be given credit at least for originality but Henry counters with a list of still other *Antigone*'s that have been submitted

Carol Iannone teaches at the Gallatin Division of New York University, New York, NY 10003.

to him (unavailingly) during his career: one on the McCarthy hearings, one on the civil rights movement by a black student, and two or three on Vietnam. Henry is professorially polite in the manner of the old school—he addresses his students as Mr. and Miss—and while coolly affable and not unkind, is firm and direct in a manner reminiscent of another academic era. “You have taken one of the world’s great plays, and reduced it to a juvenile polemic on current events,” he bluntly asserts to Judy. Undeterred, Judy announces her intention to mount the play and do it so well as to wrest an A from the reluctant professor.

Gurney is pitching Henry’s straightforwardly authoritarian, pre-sixties professionalism versus the (albeit sometimes inconsistent) egalitarianism of today, in which students have grown accustomed to being pleased and catered to, their creativity encouraged and applauded. (Certainly, the school has already established precedent in granting grades for “creative” projects: one student received partial credit in geology for skiing down Mt. Washington, we learn; another passed her chemistry lab by cooking a crabmeat casserole.) Indeed, as the offspring of professional parents, Judy represents that large highly privileged segment of today’s student generation which has had every advantage the upper-middle class can offer—in her case, Westport and Andover and Europe, not to mention “creative camps and Internships and my Special Summer Projects.” Such students feel—“what is that word?” comments Henry later—entitled. Or maybe they’re just, as Judy herself half-admits, “spoiled.” (The husband of one of my colleagues calls this phenomenon “Montessori’s revenge.”) A straight-A student and only the second Jewish woman to be accepted into a special Morgan Guaranty Trust training program after graduation, Judy has already impressed her future employers with “my leadership qualities, my creativity, and my personal sense of commitment.” As if to drive home the point, Diana Eberhart, former teacher turned weary dean—after, as Henry puts it, “all that chatter about the need for more women at the administrative level”—must intervene, as deans must ever do nowadays, it seems. Judy’s activities in rehearsing her play have aroused a lot of interest and Diana hopes to get Henry to grant her “a B for effort.”

Gradually, we realize that Gurney has cleverly created “another *Antigone*” of his own, one which will prove as full of clashes and conflicts, ironies and misunderstandings as Sophocles’, although never losing its essentially light and witty tone until toward its unhappy close. While Henry does evidence some of the unbending conviction of his original, it’s hard not to admire this modern Creon, even while recognizing him as an anachronism. “A student takes your course, becomes inspired by an old play, writes a modern version,” Diana ventures hopefully, but Henry counters: “And demonstrates thereby that she knows nothing about Sophocles, nothing about the Greeks, nothing about tragedy.” And, it would appear, Henry is right. Reminded by a classmate that *Antigone* dies in the end, Judy retorts, “That’s the old version. Mine ends

happily ever after." Another aspect of Judy's new and improved version: "In Sophocles, all [Antigone] wants to do is bury one dead brother," but "in mine, she sees everyone in the *world* as her brother, and she's fighting to keep them all *alive*."

Regarding the excitement over Judy's play, Henry is scornful: "It will stir up a lot of cheap liberal guilt and a lot of fake liberal piety and a lot of easy liberal anger." And again, it would seem that Henry knows whereof he speaks. "And to protect this prison, this fortress America, this so-called way of life," orates Judy's Antigone,

we arm ourselves with weapons which, if they're used, could ten times over destroy the world, blot out the past, and turn the future into a desolate blank. Are we so sure we're right? Is life in these United States so great? Would the homeless hordes on the streets of New York agree? Would the hungry blacks in the South? Would the migrant workers breaking their backs to feed us go along with it. Oh God [...] this might be a terrible thing to say, but I don't think our country is worth dying for anymore. The world at large is worth dying for, not us.

Furthermore, to his credit, Henry believes in his vocation as a teacher. "I am a classical scholar," he insists during one beleaguered moment, "I trained at Harvard. I have written three good books. I know a great deal, and I have to teach what I know." Henry also believes he has a mission to temper America's "happy ending" optimism (represented by the super-determined Judy) with a sense of tragedy. "Tragedy means the universe is unjust and unfair," Henry instructs Diana. "It means we are hedged about by darkness, doom, and death. It means the good, the just, the well-intentioned don't always *win*, Diana. That's what tragedy means." Whether or not we agree with Henry's view of tragedy, we can appreciate his seriousness about his subject. But like many who feel what they hold dear threatened, Henry stiffens perhaps more than necessary and becomes unbending and not a little overwrought. "If I gave her a grade for that nonsense, Diana, it would make the whole course meaningless," he insists at another point. "It would make *me* meaningless." But in putting the stakes so high, in making the situation a matter of such crucial personal meaning, Henry sets himself up for a fall.

Henry's emotional remoteness and stubbornness have already apparently affected his personal life—his wife has left him and his children are not much in touch, no doubt making more desperate his commitment to his vocation. But additionally, Henry has an intellectual fixation that is leading to his downfall. Certain remarks that he makes in his classes have aroused a pattern of complaints from some Jewish students. He elaborates in his lectures on the Hebraic/Hellenic, Jerusalem/Athens dichotomy in Western culture, always preferring Athens, contrasting, for example, "the awesome view" of the human being in the Greeks with "the rather abject and quarrelsome view of man emerging in the Old Testament." Henry admits to Diana that he's "never

really understood the Old Testament anyway. All that brooding, internal self-laceration. And the sense of a special contract with God. The sense of being chosen. The sense of sure salvation somewhere on down the line." In addition, sometimes, outside of class, Henry makes people uncomfortable, delivering a diatribe against the domination of Israel in American foreign policy, for example; or telling a joke, funny when told to him by a Jewish colleague, somehow not so funny when relayed by Henry at a meeting. And he is given, we see, to private musings about Jewish behavior. (Gurney fans will recognize in Henry another of the playwright's semi-aristocratic New England Wasps encountering a constantly changing culture.)

To many students, Henry's remarks are dismissible exaggerations and generalizations, and Diana insists that Henry is not anti-Semitic, but is instead "a passionate teacher and scholar, whose lectures are loaded with extravagant analogies which are occasionally misinterpreted by sensitive Jewish students." Nevertheless, she cautions him:

Henry: This is a free country [...] But there is one thing [...] you may not do. You may *not* be insensitive about the Jews. That is taboo. The twentieth century is still with us, Henry. We live in the shadow of the Holocaust. Remember that, please. And be warned.

Those at all familiar with today's academy might begin to wonder at this point if it's not only the special nature of anti-Semitism that is being examined here, but the special sensitivity that has come to surround blacks and a few other groups as well.

Ironically, however, anti-Semitism had not even occurred to Judy, a secularized young Jew, until, that is, Diana mentions it to her, hopefully trying to clear the air to satisfy the administration. Diana is no villain, but, as an administrator of an increasingly polarized modern campus, must arbitrate among so many interests that she winds up making things worse. Once the thought has been planted in her busy brain, Judy becomes seized with the idea that anti-Semitism is behind her trouble with Henry. She remembers that her "grandmother says you have to watch out for that sort of thing at all times [...] I mean, maybe I'm so assimilated into white-bread middle-class America that it passed me right by." She becomes a kind of progressive Jewish activist as she begins to rethink her situation in terms of the historic suffering of the Jews and their traditional role as the scourge of entrenched power structures. She begins to rewrite her play, recasting Antigone as a Jew, making it, as Diana tells Henry, "more and more about being Jewish and more and more about you."

Gurney grants us a glimpse into some of the possible sources of Judy's readiness to crusade. As a privileged young woman on the verge of adulthood, Judy is beginning to doubt the efficacy of the life she feels she has been prepped for, and as a young *woman* she is doubly disillusioned: "All us women

now killing ourselves to do those things that a lot of men decided not to do twenty years ago," she laments to Diana, and she now sees her Wall Street-based future as an empty life of briefcases, lunches, dinners, co-ops, health clubs, weekends at the Vineyard, and vacations in France. Her new project, her new cause, her new identity as a "Jew" has given her life new meaning, she feels. She thinks of her play as "the first vaguely unselfish idea I've ever had in my life," and, ironically, "this place, this institution—in which my family has invested at least seventy thousand dollars—won't give me credit for it."

Actually, prompted by Diana and chastened by hearing of the complaints about him, Henry has reluctantly agreed to a C. But this amounts to very little, because Judy will not accept such a low grade for what she sees as a major effort. On top of all this the provost is taking advantage of low preregistration figures to cancel a number of humanities courses for next fall, Henry's among them. Between the pattern of complaints of anti-Semitism and the *Antigone* affair, Henry has become problematic. The provost's plan is to grant Henry a long desired leave with pay to spend time abroad among the ancient ruins, and then to ease him out with a generous retirement package. Doesn't sound too bad but, unfortunately, at this lonely point in his life Henry wants most desperately to continue to teach.

Not surprisingly, the administration reveals confusion, if not duplicity, in handling the situation. The Academic Grievance Committee will not grant Judy's request for a good grade because to do so officially would violate a professor's right to his own standards. But meanwhile the provost has suggested that Judy register her production under "Special Projects" and take an A from a young new professor who has eagerly offered to grant it. Henry is broken enough by this time to have upped his compromise offer to a B, at great cost to his self-respect. But the provost's suggestion has the effect of making him completely redundant; by this administrative sleight of hand, Judy can choose if she wishes to finish the course with an A regardless of any decision on his part.

So incensed is Henry at this clear undermining of his authority that his somewhat unfocused and generalized attitudes about Jews and Jerusalem boil over in anger and humiliation into a genuinely anti-Semitic remark. When Judy tells him that the eager new professor's name is Birnbaum, he spits out bitterly, "The Chosen People always choose to intrude." Just prior to this point, he and Judy had actually reached an agreement, and Judy was ready to accept the B from him out of respect rather than take the A with the other professor. But with this outburst Henry alienates her utterly and loses whatever help she was going to render him in getting some new enlistees for his courses from her production company. Henry will soon be giving the final lecture of his career, on tragedy, having learned about it from the inside.

Judy's boyfriend, Dave Appleton, has tried to intercede for her with Henry, and in the process, has grown to like and admire him; in fact he now wants to

switch his major to classics in order to work closely with the professor. Dave tries to bring Judy back to reality, but by now she is charged with the special nature of Jewish suffering, and has become “another Antigone.” For her, Henry is a proven “bigot,” an “anti-Semite.” Dave tries to toss off Henry’s “Chosen People” remark as a generalization, or a “crack.” “So he made a crack,” Dave retorts. “So what? People make ethnic digs all the time in this country. We all get it in the neck—the Poles, the Italians, now the Wasps.” But for Judy, “The Jews are different!”

Judy has begun to display more than a little of the first Antigone’s singlemindedness, without having nearly as just a cause. Just before Henry’s last class, which Dave wants to attend, Judy gives him an ultimatum: “It’s him or me, Dave.” Dave resists this manipulation and starts off for Henry’s class. Furious, Judy calls after him, “Then it’s true, what my grandmother said! You people always turn your back when the chips are down!” Gurney has caught the unmistakable gist of politicization: once the ideological lenses have been fitted, everything falls into place, everything contrary becomes additional evidence of injustice, everyone who doesn’t “get it” is an enemy.

Gurney does not demonize Judy; she has her moments of self-reproach and self-awareness, but not enough to see through what she is doing. If Judy does have a gripe, it is with an educational establishment that has failed to convey to her any overriding purpose to her many years in school; or with an adult world that has flattered her to the point of maturity without imparting to her a sense of proportion, a sense of tragedy, if you will. Even Judy’s plaint against the country, which starts out pretty much as liberal boilerplate, seems to escalate moment by moment to the point of total disillusionment with our society. Thus, we can extrapolate from the play, the posture of outraged grievance typical of PC is perpetually fed by various free-floating human discontents, which can now be packaged in conveniently provided containers. Likewise, if Judy is no demon, Henry is not without fault. An all important grain of truth is contained in her charges against him, and this too seems part of the point we in our present PC context can take from the play: the PC mentality will seldom be without *something* to prey on, given the human condition since the Garden of Eden, especially if fairness and proportion and rules of evidence are discarded.

By contrast to this more complex picture, the play within the play that is Judy’s *Antigone*, of which we get only snippets, is obviously a version of that subgenre of American theatre referred to at the outset of this article, the clearcut contest between the innocent underdog—possessed with broadly progressive human values and a sense of wounded justice—pitched against oppressive institutionalized authority. But the irony is that it’s *Henry* who is struggling for what he truly believes in, and Judy who is hysterically manufacturing her cause. Henry’s, however, is not the popular, progressive, righteous-

ness-making side. After all, what is one flawed, pompous, stuffy, traditional professor against an entire historically persecuted group?

But how out of touch is the PC scenario with life! Despite her victories (her production earns a special award at graduation), Judy at play's end is disappointed, disillusioned, even desolated, because, of course, her real discontents have not been addressed. Moreover, the play makes clear, it is the professor who is the actual victim of the affair, "tragic flaws" notwithstanding. Henry's attitudes are a little discomfiting, his remark disturbing, but in a less politicized atmosphere, these would probably not be sufficient to end his career. His devotion to his subject, his high standards, his inspiring Dave with wanting to study classics, all suggest that Henry has much to offer as a teacher, low enrollments notwithstanding, but in the debased university of today, he has become a liability.

Basically a well made play, *Another Antigone* does have some flaws of its own. As much as Gurney makes it all percolate, he cannot fully dispel the mild aura of disbelief that hangs over the idea of anti-Semitism causing this much of a flap on a campus today. Also, the play is perhaps too pat, for example, in the way Judy is tipped off to the possibility of anti-Semitism by a meddling dean; and perhaps too literary, for example, in the way it coyly reflects and refracts the ancient play so perfectly. And, given the explosive nature of the subject matter, Gurney is perhaps a bit too polite in giving what we now call PC the dignity of a tragic dimension. In this above all, *Oleanna* is a far cry from *Another Antigone*. For A.R. Gurney, PC may have the potential to be tragic; for David Mamet, it's prompted by sheer viciousness.

*Oleanna*² (the oblique title comes from a folk song and refers to a kind of utopia) is similar to *Another Antigone* in that it too portrays a young female student taking action against a male professor. Other similarities will emerge, but in many ways the two plays are exact opposites and the differences important and instructive. To begin with, the school in *Oleanna* is clearly not top tier but a less selective institution. Carol in *Oleanna* is not of the privileged classes like Judy, but apparently a first generation attendee of college, and far from being a straight-A student, is struggling to stay afloat. John is not an old school professor like Henry but a child of the transformed university itself, who took a somewhat erratic path to teaching and whose professorial style is loose, personal, charismatic, student-friendly, or so he thinks. The subject matter he teaches is not the pure, straightforward, and traditional classics, but a rather vague, squishy, and putatively iconoclastic kind of educational theory, full of "precepts" and "concepts." While Henry is at the twilight of his career, John is at the peak of his, closing in on tenure, and while Henry's personal life has shut down, John is for the first time looking forward to middle-class comfort: with the promise of tenure he is in the process of buying a house for his family and transferring his son to private school. Furthermore, the idea for Carol's crusade does not begin with a bumbling dean but in some sort of

deliberately politicized campus consciousness raising "Group." And the grievance at issue is not the age-old problem of anti-Semitism but the relatively new one of sexual harassment, as it has been recently, and ominously, defined; or, shall we say, as it has been left ominously undefined.

Like *Another Antigone*, *Oleanna* opens with student and professor in conference. But Carol has dropped by unannounced just as John was leaving for another engagement, and their already awkward and stumbling communication (badly rendered by the playwright) is constantly interrupted by phone calls from his wife or his realtor pressuring him to leave for his appointment or preoccupying him with details on the closing of the house. Carol is failing John's class and feeling very insecure about her abilities to do college work. "I don't understand," "What does it mean," "WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT," are her constant, frustrated refrains. Asking that words be defined, needing even simple statements explained, taking notes on everything and understanding nothing, she presents a portrait of helpless but demanding ignorance. "Teach me, teach me," she pleads. She seems to have no powers of analysis, no capacity to make connections. "I think that the ideas contained in this work express the author's feelings in a way that he intended, based on his results," John reads from her paper.

Initially a bit abrupt, John is soon going, Mamet wants to make clear, far, far above and beyond the call of duty. He sympathizes, empathizes, understands, explains, exhorts, encourages, comforts, consoles. Deliberately anti-authoritarian and egalitarian, he breaks down what he characterizes as the "Artificial Strictures" between "Teacher" and "Student." The frequent phone calls from his wife automatically let Carol in on a lot of what's happening in his life and he doesn't mind letting her see that he too has problems and preoccupations. In addition, he shares with her his own past scholastic trials: "I hated school," he confides. "I hated teachers. I hated everyone who was in the position of a 'boss' because I *knew*—I didn't *think*, mind you, I *knew* I was going to fail." He invites her to be skeptical: "The tests, you see, which you encounter, in school, in college, in life, were designed, in the most part for idiots. *By* idiots. There is no need to fail at them. They are not a test of your worth. They are a test of your ability to retain and spout back misinformation. Of *course* you fail them. They're *nonsense*." At one point she is a bit overcome by emotion and he puts his arm around her to reassure her. Warming to the challenge of teaching her, he proposes to give her an automatic A if she will come for a few sessions with him. "Why would you do this for me," she wonders; "I like you," he responds.

While Judy of *Another Antigone* is quite recognizable as a student of today, Carol is an exaggeration, betraying somewhat Mamet's relative unfamiliarity with academia. "I come from a different social [...] a different economic" background, she stumblingly explains. Nevertheless, her character does suggest, if awkwardly, inconsistently, and in broad strokes, the needy, under-

skilled, underprepared student who goes to college nowadays because it has become the thing to do, or the presumed ticket to success, or, as John himself critically explains, a "right."

Mamet does better in making John believable as a certain kind of younger professor—more than a touch of arrogance and ego behind all the energy, accommodation, improvisation, and innovativeness. Some aspects of John's behavior ring false, however; for example, his use of certain highly unlikely and uncharacteristic phrases is practically a textbook set-up for PC censure. Sounding perhaps more like a professor of Henry's generation, John refers to the Tenure Committee, on which sits one female, as "Good Men and True," and to public school taxes as "The White Man's Burden." Mamet could probably have done without these false notes, because there is enough in John's behavior to feed Carol's later charges anyway.

For, while it would seem that Mamet wants us to see John as generally helpful and certainly well-meaning, a highly consequential subtext, partly intentional, partly probably not, begins operating in the first scene. John's easy iconoclasm, his diffidence about the importance of higher education, his charisma and love of performance, his personalism, his willingness, even eagerness, to reveal his own experiences, to feel the student's pain, to bend the rules, to scorn the institutional strictures—all earmarks of the post-fifties professorial style—actually enable Carol, as outrageous as she becomes, to have some real grievance. His rather cynical attitude toward higher education—he has characterized it as "prolonged hazing" and "virtual warehousing of the young"—is disconcerting to someone who wants so desperately to succeed in school, or thinks she does, "to *do* something," "to *know* something," "to get on in the world." When she asks him, "if education is so *bad*, why do you do it," John does not evince Henry's firm sense of calling ("I know a great deal, and I have to teach what I know."), but replies instead with the seemingly more modest but actually more self-serving, "Because I love it," as if his enthusiasm should suffice. Carol will also note something many a conservative critic of academic liberalism has pointed out: disdain for the establishment notwithstanding, John is willing to play by the rules in order to attain the comfort and security of tenure. None of this is sufficient justification for what Carol does to John, but all of it makes the play more complex, and quite riveting, almost Shavian in its ability to allow stature to the villain.

Scene Two opens with a difference. Carol has brought formal charges against John to the Tenure Committee, and he has asked her to come to his office because he is, frankly, "shocked" and "hurt." (Such a meeting may well be unlikely in the midst of a real life harassment case, but it may also be Mamet's way of enforcing how spurious are Carol's charges in any real, rather than political, sense, since she consents to be alone with John again.) "What have I done to you?" he asks in utter bewilderment, for, with the help of her "Group," Carol has blatantly twisted everything we have just witnessed in

Scene One into a crime; her “Report” to the Committee is a veritable Hitchcock scenario in which innocent, casual remarks and gestures have been made to seem blameworthy, and even John’s efforts and offers to help have been reduced to a crude sexual come-on. John refers to the report:

I find that I am sexist. That I am *elitist*. I’m not sure I know what that means, other than it’s a derogatory word, meaning “bad.” That I...That I insist on wasting time, in nonprescribed, in self-aggrandizing and theatrical *diversions* from the prescribed *text* [...] moved to *embrace* said student [...] that I told you how I’d asked you to my room because I quote like you [...] “He said he ‘liked’ me. That he ‘liked being with me.’ He’d let me write my examination paper over, if I could come back oftener to see him in his office [...] He told me he had problems with his wife; and that he wanted to take off the artificial stricture of Teacher and Student. He put his arm around me [...] He told me that if I would stay alone with him in his office, he would change my grade to an A.”

In some ways true to character, to the self-flagellating side that often accompanies narcissism, John is ready to admit fault—in his effort to avoid being the “cold, rigid automaton of an instructor which I had encountered as a child,” he may have gone too far in the direction of the “aspect of *performance*.” And he offers a lengthy apologia for his decision to pursue tenure despite his reservations about the educational process. John hopes to resolve the problem before it goes any further, but Carol is beyond reach. Like Judy, though even more so, Carol has been in many ways transformed, energized, enlarged, through her new understanding of her reality and is now possessed of a language that gives her a sense of control. (To overlook John’s “Good Men and True” characterization of the partially female Tenure Committee, for example, would be “to countenance continuation of that method of thought.”) She sees his mildness, disbelief, and continued sympathy as simple ploys to get her to retract, and his confession of fault only fans the flames of her fury. While he pleads for a restoration of the human dimension, and like a true and decent liberal, tries to reason, to “understand,” she thoroughly and completely politicizes every detail of the entire situation, aided by half-truths, untruths, grains of truth, distortions, exaggerations, inconsistencies, and blind spots. “You feel yourself empowered,” she accuses him,

To *strut*. To *posture*. To “perform.” [...] You love the Power. To *deviate*. To *invent*, to transgress...to *transgress* whatever norms have been established for us [...] And you pick those things which you feel *advance* you: publication, *tenure* [...] And you perform those steps [...] But to the aspirations of your students. Of *hardworking students*, who come here [...] you *mock* us. You call education “hazing,” and from your so-protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion as a *joke*, and our hopes and efforts with it. Then you sit there and say “what have I done?”

Recognizing how fevered she has become, John struggles to regain some sense of proportion, to defuse, to depoliticize the situation, trying to impress upon

her “that we’re just human,” “that sometimes we’re *imperfect* [...] I don’t think we can proceed until we accept that each of us is human.” But to no avail. Carol is determined to follow the procedure of formal complaint and proceeds to depart. In desperation, realizing that she is leaving with the gap between them wider than ever, John tries to restrain her. She shouts for help. End of Scene Two.

In Scene Three, Mamet goes for broke. Having set things up with some patience and complexity, he now molds *Oleanna* into the kind of American play referred to before—the pure contest between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, but with the roles reversed: the real victim is now the supposed oppressor; the real oppressor is the supposed victim. While Gurney does this more elliptically, using the device of Judy’s *Antigone*, Mamet does it straight on.

The Scene Three Carol is even more the Robespierre than before, a full-blooded, full-bodied intellectual terrorist. It has to be said that *Oleanna* plays better than it reads; skillful actors like William H. Macy and Rebecca Pidgeon, Mamet’s wife, who played the roles in the New York production, can make the play sing, while a cold reading of the words on the page can make it seem heavy, crude, and outlandish. Some critics have noted the incongruity of Carol’s emergence as a smoldering radical from her previously stammering, insecure self. In his defense we can note that Mamet has tried to establish some continuity—even in Scene One Carol shows an occasional flash of imperiousness. Moreover, and more important, he is not attempting absolute realism here, but a kind of stylized paradigmatic naturalism. And, in truth, anyone who has read some of the tales from the PC crypt, or who read in a recent *New Yorker* article on Leonard Jeffries of timid, insecure black studies students at City College snapping to life when the class discussion turned to the white conspiracy against the black race, will not be too terribly surprised at Carol’s metamorphosis.

Carol has won her case and John, far from getting tenure, is to be discharged. John has not been home for two days; he has been staying at a hotel trying to think things through. Now he has asked her to his office to discuss what has happened and, against the advice of “the court officers,” Carol has come. Still the long-suffering liberal, John begins by announcing that he “cannot help but feel you are owed an apology.” As before, his deference cuts no ice with Carol, who is even more merciless than before now that she is the victor. (If he refers to the “accusations,” she snaps, “Excuse me, but those are not accusations. They have been *proved*. They are facts.” If he says “alleged,” she interrupts, “No. I cannot allow that. I cannot allow that. Nothing is alleged. Everything is proved.”) At one point he protests that his laying his hand on her shoulder had been devoid of sexual content, and Carol lashes back: “I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT. Don’t you begin to *see*...? Don’t you begin to understand? IT’S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY.” In the kind

of reversal foreseen by critics of democracy like Plato and of American democracy in particular by Melville, the student becomes the master, instructing, demanding, badgering, and browbeating her charge. Sounding like Barbra Streisand, John murmurs something about “feelings,” but Carol is way beyond the kind of pity and sympathy and empathy he is asking for because of the moral superiority afforded her by her new position. She has, she claims, “a responsibility” to this “institution. To the *students*. To my *group*.”

Carol’s rhetoric is now more clearly than ever a mixture of politics and *ressentiment*. John tells her he is to be dismissed. “Do you know what you’ve worked for?” she snaps back. “*Power*. For *power*. Do you understand? [...] You worked twenty years for the right to *insult* me. And you feel entitled to be *paid* for it. Your Home. Your Wife...Your sweet ‘deposit’ on your house...”

He stammers, half in agreement, saying he might learn, not quite admitting guilt, but trying hard to see her point. But Carol grows more outrageous by the minute, presenting him now with a demand from her Group to agree to ban a list of books, his own included, from use in his classes, in exchange for a withdrawal of the charges. “Someone chooses the books. If you can choose them, others can. What are you, ‘God’?” Broken and dazed, poor John finally sees a line he cannot fudge; he begins to fight back and regain some stature. “No I’m sorry,” he says firmly, “I have a *responsibility*...to *myself*...to my *son*, to my *profession* [...] You’re *dangerous*, you’re *wrong* and it’s my *job*...to say no to you [...] You want to ban my book? Go to *hell*, and they can do whatever they want to me.”

Just at this point of slight upturn, John’s lawyer calls to inform him that Carol is also pursuing *criminal* charges of battery and attempted rape for the way John tried to keep her from leaving his office at the close of Scene Two. Stunned, he quietly asks her to go but the phone rings again. In the course of the ensuing rather clipped conversation with his wife, John calls her “Baby” a couple of times. “Don’t call your wife baby,” Carol instructs as she starts to go. “What?” John asks in amazement. “Don’t call your wife baby,” Carol shoots back. “You heard what I said.” This at last is the camel’s back. Like Henry, John explodes into real misdoing, although far more destructively. He beats her, knocking her to the ground and shouting curses, all of which becomes further proof for Carol of the correctness of her new view of reality.

If *Oleanna* is not as well made as *Another Antigone*, it is more powerful in its dramatic effect. By showing how all the abstract and high-sounding rhetoric of the oppressed focuses on a specific human being, or “white male,” Mamet brings home the ugly reality. Moreover, taking PC to its logical extreme, he compels recognition of how serious a plague it really is—not just an occasional chill in an otherwise healthy academic, scholarly, and intellectual organism, but a cancer eating away at the core. At base, its demands are fed from bottomless reserves of personal frustration, envy, inadequacy, and selfishness. Those who try to accommodate what may appear to be its rational surface will

soon find themselves sucked into the well of irrationality beneath. Taken together the two plays illustrate this. Henry is traditional and unbending, so there's a problem; but John is non-traditional and quite bending, and there's still a problem. Judy is a sterling student, Carol is a failing student, etc.

But the plays are about more than the way individual dissatisfactions can fasten upon hapless and inevitably flawed individual professors. Both plays suggest that the spiritual void in our society can lead to the politicization of reality, whether to escape upper-middle-class guilt or lower-middle-class insecurity. Moreover, both plays point up the way in which the liberalized university itself seems to invite PC attacks, *Oleanna* of course more so than *Another Antigone*. At a point late in Scene Three Carol tells John: "You think that I'm full of hatred [...] You think I am a frightened, repressed, confused, I don't know, abandoned young thing of some doubtful sexuality, who wants, power and revenge." John is willing enough at this point to drop any facade: "Yes. I do," he responds. Ironically, this gains her approval: "I feel that that is the first moment which you've treated me with respect. For you told me the truth." Whether Mamet intended it or not, this exchange manages to convey the thought that all of John's fussing over Carol has been taken as a kind of insult and, more generally, that students can sense when they're being flattered and pampered, and may even at certain points see the excessive attention accorded them today as a con. (Likewise, Judy is unhappy at the end of *Another Antigone* not because she lost her cause, but because she *won*.)

At another point Carol seems to be showing disgust at the perennially openminded (in Allan Bloom's sense), terminally contentless, chronically skeptical mode of intellection typical of today. She takes out his book:

And your book? You think you're going to show me some "light"? You "*maverick*." Outside of tradition. No, no, (*She reads from the book's liner notes.*) "*of that fine tradition of inquiry. Of Polite skepticism*"...and you say you believe in free intellectual discourse. YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING. YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING AT ALL.

Maybe not a lot should be made of this, but on stage it registers as a palpable hit for Carol, and almost makes sensible for a moment her belief that his position is based on pure "power" and "privilege." (*Another Antigone* has something of a parallel moment when Dean Diana, trying to explain to a group of students why they should still be required to study such an "impractical" subject as Greek tragedy, can only say, "It deals with the best...It exists. It is there.") And to John's steady and dignified reply to Carol's challenge—"I believe in freedom of thought," it might occur to us to say, That is well, and we do too, but is there any bottom line, any positive dimension to your thought? Are there any truths, values, principles, ideas, you are positing, explicating, defending, or are you only interested in the procedural freedoms that allow you to say and do whatever you want?

Perhaps these are the kinds of questions that the academy has left unanswered for far too long. This is not to say that the failure to answer these questions justifies PC, which has to be fought as an evil in itself and not rationalized. Nevertheless, while they remain unanswered, and PC flourishes, we can at least be grateful that two thoughtful and gifted playwrights have brought these profound problems to light so dramatically.

Notes

1. A.R. Gurney, *Another Antigone* (Garden City, N.Y.: The Fireside Theatre, 1988). Copyright 1985 as an unpublished dramatic composition.
2. David Mamet, *Oleanna* (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1992). First Vintage Books edition, May 1993.

SIXTEENTH ANNUAL

Southeast Regional Meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature

Belhaven College - March 24-26, 1994

The conference will be hosted by Belhaven College, where *Carol Iannone*, who is vice-president of the National Association of Scholars and who teaches in the Gallatin Division of New York University, will speak on the concept(s) of redemption in literature. Papers related to her topic are especially encouraged, though also welcome are submissions of eight to ten pages on any aspect of the relationship between Christianity and literature.

Two copies of manuscripts with SASE should be sent by
January 10, 1994 to:

LAURA BARGE
Department of English
Belhaven College
1500 Peachtree St.
Jackson, MS 39202.