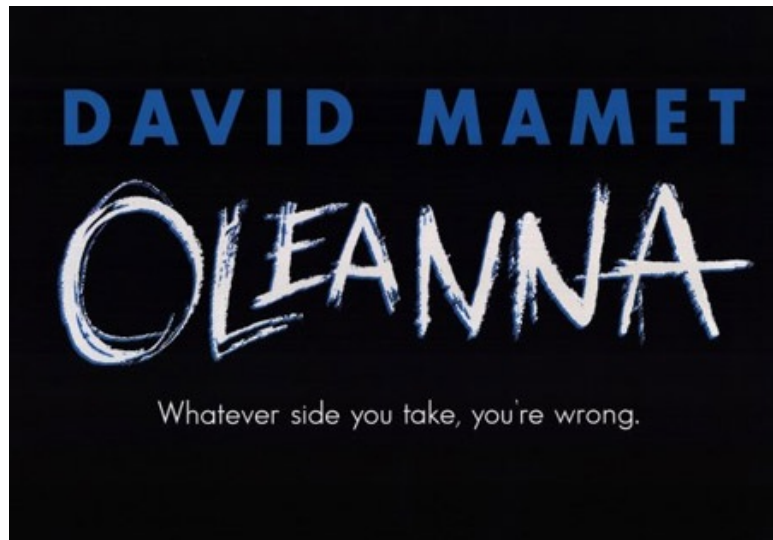


*Oh to be in Oleanna,  
That's where I'd like to be  
Than to be in Norway  
And bear the chains of slavery.*



*Oleanna is a Norwegian folk song that was translated into English and popularized by Pete Seeger. The song is a critique of Ole Bull's vision of a perfect society in America. Oleanna was actually the name of one of Ole Bull's settlements in the New Norway colony of Pennsylvania. His society failed, and all of the immigrants moved away since the dense forest made it hard to settle there. The lyrics concern the singer's desire to leave Norway and escape to Oleanna, a land where "wheat and corn just plant themselves / then grow a good four feet a day / while on your bed you rest yourself." [adapted from wikipedia]*

## **A Playgoer's Companion**



### **David Mamet**

David Mamet is a founding member of the Atlantic Theater Company. He first gained acclaim for a trio of off-Broadway plays in 1976, *The Duck Variations*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *American Buffalo*. Best known as a playwright, Mamet won a Pulitzer Prize and received a Tony nomination for *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), which received its first Broadway revival in the summer of 2005. He also received a Tony nomination for *Speed-the-Plow* (1988). As a screenwriter, he received Oscar nominations for *The Verdict* (1982) and *Wag the Dog* (1997).

Mamet's style of writing dialogue, marked by a cynical, street-smart edge, precisely crafted for effect, is so distinctive that it has come to be called Mamet speak. He often uses italics and quotation marks to highlight particular words and to draw attention to his characters' frequent manipulation and deceitful use of language. His characters frequently interrupt one another, their sentences trail off unfinished, and their dialogue overlaps. Mamet himself has criticized his (and other writers') tendency to write "pretty" at the expense of sound, logical plots.

When asked how he developed his style for writing dialogue, Mamet said, "In my family, in the days prior to television, we liked to while away the evenings by making ourselves miserable, based solely on our ability to speak the language viciously. That's probably where my ability was honed." [adapted from *A Companion to Twentieth-century American Drama* and wikipedia]

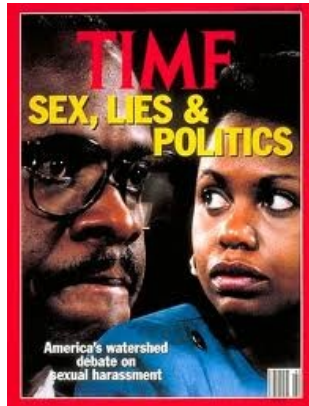


"It's not about sexual harassment. It's about power"  
- David Mamet

## Critical Reception

Critical response to *Oleanna* is sharply divided. One faction of critics censures Mamet for what they perceive to be a gross simplification of gender relations and harassment suits, while the other defends the play as an important and complex statement about the abuse of power in academic circles. During its debut production, many feminists charged that Mamet unfairly depicted women as manipulative, and protested that the characterization of Carol as devious alienated her from the audience.

Many also felt that the play exploited the deep social and political divisions created by the controversy over Anita Hill's charges of sexual harassment against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.. *New York Times* drama critic Frank Rich wrote: "*Oleanna* ... is an impassioned response to the Thomas hearings. As if ripped right from the typewriter, it could not be more direct in its technique or more incendiary in its ambitions.... *Oleanna* leaves us feeling much the way the Thomas hearings did: soiled and furious."



Although many expressed extreme dislike for the play's themes and characterization, most reviewers commended Mamet's use of language to signify power, pointing to John's mastery of language in the beginning of the play set against Carol's mumbling, followed later by John's incoherent sentence fragments and Carol's adept use of vocabulary. These commentators read *Oleanna* as an effective critique of the interplay of gender, power, and language in modern society.

Many people will see John as the victim of this story, but this wasn't the intention of writer David Mamet. We are led to question whether Carol's grievance is justified -- does she genuinely believe that John was at fault or is she just using political correctness as a weapon? You could see this play as praise for the ability of rules in a society to undermine authority and overturn privilege.

"David Mamet has raised outrage to an art form. . . . *Oleanna* is...a scorcher. The woods are burning, and all of us are being seared in the fire." - Boston *Globe*

## The Play

One of the most controversial plays of the 1990s, *Oleanna* provoked fierce debates about sexual harassment and gender politics. It focuses on the power struggle between a university professor and one of his female students who accuses him of sexual exploitation and, by doing so, spoils his chances of being accorded tenure.

"By evening's end, Mr. Mamet has at least entertained the possibility that there is less to John and more to Carol than the audience has previously supposed." – Frank Rich, *The New York Times*

"When *Oleanna* came out it caused a furore and seemed grossly sensationalist and sexist. It was described as a 'twisted little play' that was meant to provoke feminists."-- Geraldine Shipton, "The annihilation of triangular space in David Mamet's *Oleanna*"

**This document was researched by  
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