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Pinter’s game of betrayal

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In the near twenty years since *Betrayal* was written[1] the play has become something of a classic, made accessible to ever-increasing audiences by the film version with the superb Patricia Hodge, Ben Kingsley and Jeremy Irons.[2] Although many excellent analyses of *Betrayal* appeared soon after the play was first produced, we have today gained enough distance from it to justify its re-evaluation. Now that the initial excitement about the daring time-reversal of its plot has settled down, the artistic contours of the work can be seen more clearly: the supremacy of its abstract shape over its narrative content, its position on the relevance of time to memory, its dispassionate, ironic tone, and its deliberate avoidance of a moral stance. The chronological reversal is instrumental to this general shake-up of the dramatic form and style. The characters’ incessant search for meaning is shared by the reader/spectator but is deflected, through the sophisticated formal shaping elements employed by Pinter, from the ethical to the aesthetic sphere. In this paper, I will analyze the play as an experiment in abstraction, a presentation of human relationships in terms of game sequences, and a post-modern, aesthetic and ironic treatment of what used to belong to religion and ethics.

The first thing to notice about *Betrayal* is its title: a rather startling abstract noun that appears without either a definite or an indefinite article. This lack is especially noticeable in the context of many other Pinter titles that carry the definite article, such as *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Collection*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming*, as well as *A Slight Ache*, with its indefinite article. The omission of the article indicates that the topic is the idea of betrayal, its generalized or abstracted structure, and not the story of one particular instance of betrayal. Even such a basic analysis of the title already directs our attention to the relation between the style of the play and modern trends in art, such as abstract and conceptual painting. Although the development of the events and the dialogue is highly naturalistic, the subordination of the various plot elements to a governing abstract idea and its expression as pure form may be seen as moving towards abstraction and conceptualization.

The title refers to the betrayal of love and friendship rather than the betrayal of one’s country, but both senses of the word point to its inherently negative emotive and ethical connotations in our society. As often with Pinter, the immediate inferences about the value-laden word in the title are questioned by the action of the play.[3] For example, the assumption aroused by the opening scene of *The Homecoming*, that the title refers to Teddy’s return, is shaken by a growing awareness that it is Ruth who has come home and, furthermore, by the sustained onslaught on the accepted idea of what constitutes a home. Other deceptively simple titles, such as *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, or *The Caretaker*, are equally subverted in the plays.

Betrayal involves three characters in a romantic tangle. In his presentation of this romantic triangle, Pinter is interested, as the title indicates, not so much in the love affair as in its complementary betrayal. He thus shifts the focus from the new love to the betrayal of the old love, from romanticism to disillusion. The romantic triangle is obviously a hackneyed theme, but Pinter’s variations on it, in *Betrayal* as in some of his other plays, are highly innovative. As Martin Esslin puts it, “Pinter presents us with a symphonic structure of variations on the

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1 All quotations from: Harold Pinter, *Betrayal* (London: Methuen, 1978).

2 Directed by David Jones, 1983.

3 “Pinter’s titles are direction-pointers into the heart of his polyvalence.” Ruby Cohn, “The economy of *Betrayal*,” in *Harold Pinter: A casebook*, ed. by Lois Gordon (New York: Garland, 1990), p. 15.

theme of betrayal that, ultimately, becomes an inquiry into the inextricable web of lies that constitutes the social relationships."[4]

Most notable among Pinter's other treatments of the theme are *Old Times*, *The Lover*, *Landscape* and *Silence*. In each of these he succeeds in dazzling us with a totally novel point of view. In *Old Times* the traditional ratio of male to female is reversed, so that there is only one man and two women, and the sexual battle is waged between the man and one of the women over the possession of the other woman. In *The Lover*, Pinter fools the audience through building up its expectations towards the dramatic entrance of the lover and through the stratagem of listing three characters, one of whom turns out to be no more than the milkman. The romantic triangle is here a sexual phantasy, a game that saves the protagonists' dull marriage from breaking up. Both *Landscape* and *Silence* take place in the realms of memory, as intertwined stream-of-consciousness monologues, from which we are left to piece for ourselves some fragmented "objective" narrative of a romantic triangle. In *Landscape*, the two characters create a triangle with their deceased employer, apparently the woman's lover, whom each remembers separately. *Silence* recedes even further into the subjectivity of three different psyches, three different perceptions of what happened many years ago. Here Pinter uses the trick of listing the ages of the characters as "a girl in her twenties," "a man of forty," and "a man in his middle thirties," their age at the time of their romantic entanglement rather than their present old age, thus raising the question of the place of time within memory.

The relationship between time and memory takes on a different aspect in *Betrayal* through the playwright's initial decision to reverse the chronological order of events:

> When I realized the implications of the play, I knew there was only one way to go and that was backwards. The actual structure of the play seemed to dictate itself. You have two people in a pub and you wonder when they first met. Where was it? When I realized what was going on, this movement in time, I was very excited by it.[5]

This startling reversal of the progression of the plot as a function of time takes us back from the dissolution of both the love affair and the marriage in 1977 to Jerry's opening gambit of the betrayal, in Robert and Emma's bedroom, in 1968. Elin Diamond has brilliantly described this procedure as "a Hogarthian 'Rake's Progress' in reverse, a mocking indictment of marriage à la mode."[6]

By turning the conventional structure on its head, Pinter emphasizes what Eric Berne has called time-structuring and its programming.[7] Every scene in the play is clearly dated, and the characters must grow visibly younger from scene to scene. Linda Ben-Zvi has commented on Emma's appearance, in Peter Hall's original production, "moving through the vagaries of fashion and style — from long-skirted professional attire back to mini-skirted hostess dresses — just as she moves chronologically from traditional images of female forms of fulfillment to career and eventual divorce."[8]

The banality of the romantic triangle is turned inside out through the reversal of the normal plot sequence. The possibility of suspense seems to be ruled out, as the outcome is already known. Nevertheless, every new scene turns out to be unexpected because, although we know the outcome, we don't know what were the steps that led up to it. By the beginning of the play, everything we shall witness has already been, as it were, predetermined. The betrayal game has been concluded and all that remains is to watch the moves that brought about the result. This is arguably the most innovative aspect of Pinter's engagement with the theme of

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[4] Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 207.

[5] Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 51.

[6] Elin Diamond, *Pinter's Comic Play* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985), p. 201.

[7] See Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 16.

[8] Linda Ben-Zvi, "Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* : The patterns of banality," *Modern Drama*, 23 (1980), p. 235.

betrayal in the play. Although often dismissed as a mere gimmick, it is really a painstaking unravelling of the sequence of events that make up the betrayal and a deconstruction of its conceptual components.

The movement back in time may seem at first artificial because we have been conditioned by our experience as theatre-goers and readers of plays to view the dramatic plot as a function of the time axis. As time is unidirectional, so too is the plot. But from the perspective of memory, all stories are terminated processes viewed from the vantage point of the present, so that unfolding a series of events in reverse temporal order may be, experientially, the more natural procedure.

The reverse chronological order eliminates the memory-related discrepancies which abound in other plays concerned with memory. In *Old Times*, memory is completely subjectivized — "some things one remembers even though they may never have happened"[9] — and even turned into a strategic weapon. In *Betrayal* Pinter takes pains to establish a wholly objective point of view. The entire train of events is verified through the stratagem of the plot-in-reverse.[10] Enoch Brater detects in this procedure the influence of the filmic technique of the flashback: "the past has been subjected to an 'objective' point of view, a cinematic documentation."[11]

Instead of witholding information about the characters, as he usually does, here Pinter is generous with it, supplying details about their education, occupation, children, literary tastes, sports, etc. And yet, the characters remain enigmatic and unfathomable. By providing all the identity-data we might wish for, the playwright seems to be mocking his audience that had been complaining so much about the inscrutability of his characters, while at the same time demonstrating that the mystery of the human personality remains, for all that, unchanged.[12]

At first sight, it seems abundantly clear that the title *Betrayal* refers to Emma's being unfaithful to her husband Robert with Jerry. But an examination of the play reveals that all its characters, and not just Emma, are guilty of betrayal. The network of relations is finely crafted: Pinter juggles around his three *dramatis personae* in all possible arrangements of the triangle, each betrayer becoming, in his turn, the betrayed. With Emma, Jerry betrays his best friend, her husband; likewise, Jerry is hurt by what he sees as his betrayal by Robert, who did not disclose to him his knowledge that Jerry and Emma were having an affair. Emma herself has been unfaithful not only to her husband but also to her lover: this is revealed when she tells him she has become pregnant while he was away and that the father is Robert. Emma feels betrayed by both men because of the close friendship between them, which irritates her. She feels excluded by their relationship and tries to disrupt their games of squash and their bachelor lunches. Her anxiety is set in perspective when Robert says he should perhaps have had an affair with Jerry himself, implying a homosexual attraction for him.

Having worked out all possible combinations of betrayal within his triangle of characters, Pinter adds a few unseen characters that enable him to suggest further variations on the romantic triangle. Emma suggests that Jerry's wife Judith is having an affair and Robert has been betraying Emma with other women for years. More prominent are the figures of Casey and Spinks that haunt the play. Both are writers over whose literary merits Jerry and Robert squabble in their professional capacities as, respectively, literary agent and publisher. Casey, who has left his wife, is "writing a novel about a man who leaves his wife and three children and goes to live alone on the other side of London to write a novel about a man who leaves

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[9] Harold Pinter, *Old Times* (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 31–32.

[10] "In *Betrayal* Pinter provides what he refused to provide in earlier plays: verification." Bernard Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 115.

[11] Enoch Brater, "Cinematic fidelity and the forms of Pinter's *Betrayal*," in *Harold Pinter*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p. 111.

[12] See Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 93.

his wife and three children" (66) and so on, presumably, *ad infinitum*. Later he apparently becomes Emma's new lover. Spinks has written a book about betrayal, which Emma is reading in bed in the hotel room in Venice and which sparks off the conversation that brings about her confession of betrayal to Robert. The topic is thus generalized, ironized and turned upon itself.

The proliferation of triangular relationships undermines the exclusivity of the central dramatic betrayal that dominates the plot. The common shape, the very idea of betrayal, is distilled from its myriad appearances in the play. Abstracted in this manner, betrayal assumes the basic pattern of a game and the aesthetics of the play become a function of its dazzling kaleidoscopic permutations.

Despite its subject-matter, this is not an erotic play. The relationship between Emma and Jerry is basically a game with an elaborate system of rules set up by both sides.[13] These are especially necessary as there is in fact a double system of relations between them, as clandestine lovers and as, respectively, wife and best friend of Robert. Therefore, there are both external rules, about how to keep it secret, and internal rules, about what is permitted within. Even after the affair is over, Jerry corrects Emma when she asks about his son: "You remember the form. I ask about your husband, you ask about my wife" (15).

In fact, all the relations in the play assume the amusing shape of sophisticated social games and rituals, making the game logically precede the particular instance of its playing and disqualifying any originality in the behaviour of the characters. The game of squash played between the men serves as an icon for a whole set of male social games that evolve around it:

> I mean a game of squash isn't simply a game of squash, it's rather more than that. You see, first there's the game. And then there's the shower. And then there's the pint. And then there's lunch […]. You don't actually want a woman within a mile of the place, any of the places, really. (69)

Robert's outburst reveals the nature of the series of male rituals he is describing. They are clearly meant to exclude women from what is perceived as exclusive male terrain. At the same time, the attack discloses a defensive attitude, an attempt to distance women so as to get rid of their sexually threatening presence. Robert and Jerry have not played squash for a long time, it is implied, because Jerry has engaged instead in the betrayal game, and Robert's rather fierce speech is meant to win him back as a partner in the male game. The same disjunction between affair-with-wife and squash-with-husband appears in Robert's disclosure about Casey: "I believe he's having an affair with my wife. We haven't played squash for years, Casey and me. We used to have a damn good game." (43)

The occasion for Robert's misogynist speech is Jerry's dropping in for a drink in Scene Four. The conversation is conducted on a number of levels simultaneously and is replete with sexual overtones. All three play the traditional game of friendly chat while, at the same time, engaging in the game of hiding their complicity in and their knowledge of the betrayal (or rather, betrayals). And each watches the other's accomplishment in acting out his or her role. While Emma is putting Ned to sleep — and Ned is the baby conceived, as both men well know, while Jerry, the lover, was abroad — the two men launch into a verbal game of fatherly talk about the reasons for boy babies crying more than girl babies. Robert leads Jerry to give the banal answers that "boys are more anxious" about "leaving the womb and all that," then parries with the master stroke: "But what about girl babies? They leave the womb too" (63). This mock-serious conversation comes to an end with the conclusion that "it might have something to do with the difference between the sexes" (65), at which point Emma, having finished putting Ned to bed, enters. The seemingly trivial dialogue and the simplest of

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13 Although Almansi and Henderson have devoted their very valuable study of Pinter to the elucidation of his plays in terms of games, they seem strangely to be side-tracked by other issues in their discussion of *Betrayal* (pp. 92–94).

dramatic settings are thus manipulated by Pinter into a sophisticated game that discloses the real tensions and conflicts that are being played out beneath the placid surface.

Clearly, it is the subtext, suggestively worked into and in-between the words, that generates the excitement of this seemingly dull conversation. It is up to the actors to bring all this out. Pinter directs our attention to the importance of what does not get said in arguments about meaning, for example in the following interchange between Jerry and Emma:

> EMMA What do you mean by that?
> JERRY I don't *mean* anything by it.
> EMMA But what are you trying to say by saying that?
> JERRY Jesus. I'm not *trying* to say anything. I've said precisely what I wanted to say. (53)

This shift from the said to the unsaid is so strong that Pinter has found it necessary to disclaim that this is *always* the case: "I am not suggesting that no character in a play can ever say what in fact he means."[14]

It is in the nature of a romantic story to try to convince that there is something matchless about it that differentiates it from all other love stories, that it is about a unique passion. Pinter, however, has written "a completely unromantic account of infidelity,"[15] and he seems to accentuate the story's commonness, to the extent that there is even a sense of the characters falling into pre-scripted roles. The multiplication of unfaithfulness in the play not only generalizes but wilfully stereotypes and mocks it. Like Shakespeare's Demetrius and Lysander who can hardly be told apart, there is an insistence on the twin-like similarity between Robert and Jerry, with their parallel careers and families, and there is no attempt to build up a motivation for Emma's preference of the one over the other.

Not only has Pinter chosen to treat the *cliché* topic of betrayal, but he stresses its conventionality, its conformity to the basic outline shared by the various instances of betrayal supplied in the play. This is underlined in an ironically self-referential moment in the play, when Robert comments on Casey's new book: "Oh… not much more to say on that subject, really, is there?" and, when Emma inquires what he considers the subject to be, he responds: "Betrayal" (78).

The extraordinarily original effect is achieved paradoxically through the amplification of the commonness of betrayal. This ordinariness is established in the fictional world of the play along with an equanimity towards betrayal that is certainly not universally shared outside the perimeter of the play. Instead of presenting an internal, dramatic conflict between characters holding different values, Pinter makes the audience feel at odds with the characters. An extreme form of this familiar strategy is encountered in *The Homecoming*, where, among other instances, the *sang froid* exhibited by Teddy towards his wife's decision to abandon him and their children in order to stay with his family and become a prostitute clashes violently with the spectator's own sense of moral impropriety.

The charged emotional aspect of betrayal, the empathy one is traditionally led to cultivate for the betrayed protagonist, is here diffused in favour of a purely aesthetic response — which makes the reader/spectator wonder what has happened to the traditional moral censure attached to betrayal. As often in Pinter, the deliberate absence of a moral consciousness in the play clashes with our own habitual responses, creating a dissonance between them and the work, shaking us into a re-examination of our own moral codes and pre-conceptions.

The realization that everybody does it is amusing and urbane, characterizing a post-modern society in which the religious sin of fornication, the crime of adultery, or the dread of cuckolding and its fearful nemesis have been dissipated. Robert does not consider separating

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[14] Quoted in Katherine H. Burkman, *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual* (Ohio State University Press, 1971), p. 8.

[15] Peter Jenkins, "The Spectator" (25 Nov. 1978), p. 24; in *File on Pinter*, ed. by Malcolm Page (London: Methuen, 1993), p. 55.

from Emma after he finds out she is having an affair with Jerry but only four years later, when that relationship has practically and even formally come to an end. The impending divorce is not depicted as excessively traumatic for either Robert or Emma. Their acceptance of it without self-pity or a show of suffering precludes an emotional response on the part of the spectator, his compassion not being called for.[16] The characters do not engage the audience or draw it in. They leave us to admire the formal qualities of the play, its complex symmetrical moves, the perfection of its structure and the smoothness of its texture. We find ourselves outside that world, uninvolved spectators.

In the world of the play, betrayal has obviously lost its theological and moral edge. It has also lost its singular position within the double standard by which men and women are judged. The woman's betrayal is not regarded as different from that of the two men. Emma exemplifies a woman living in a society in which the liberation of women has become a *fait accompli*. Along with betrayal, fidelity in love or marriage has equally been dropped by the wayside. Nobody in the play seems to get particularly upset about it: sophisticated, Oxbridge graduates, upper middle-class, well-to-do and physically attractive, the characters accept betraying and being betrayed without too much fuss. The idea of betrayal, the word itself, has been drained of its affective power. Reduced to an abstracted pattern, betrayal appears to have lost its punch.

This lightness of touch contrasts with the traditional array of drama and literature that deals with the betrayal of love or marriage. Pinter's treatment of the topic seems oblivious to the seriousness of the threat to the well-being of both the individual and society that is brought out not only in tragedies, such as *Othello* or *Woyzeck*, but also in comedies, such as *Mandragola* or *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Even the male preoccupation with the identity of the father, Strindberg's obsessional interest that found its full expression in *The Father*, is here pointedly dealt with but dismissed in a matter-of-fact manner: Robert's paternal rights are guaranteed by Jerry's prolonged absence from the country around the time of conception.

Within the context of the emotional and social network of relationships established in the play, the diminished stature of betrayal and its casualness can be understood as a function of the general relaxation of these relationships and the easing of the individual's commitments. Betrayal and divorce are presented along with marriage, having children, going on vacation, playing squash or going out to a restaurant, as common landmarks in life's routine.

Passion itself, the great, overpowering emotion, has equally suffered diminution. In Martin Esslin's words, "far from being passionate involvements, elemental and irresistible, [these sexual relationships] seem casual and trivial."[17] Although there is sexual attraction in Emma's affair with Jerry, it is an affair that is subject to mundane considerations, such as finding sufficient time and comfortable quarters for it. When it is no longer convenient, the affair breaks up. Jerry's family and his business trips to America, the opening hours of Emma's Gallery and her shopping-sprees with her daughter Charlotte come first. Familial and domestic as well as professional considerations have replaced the tragic and operatic single-minded passion that once nourished infidelity. The lovers stay cool and act sensibly rather than impulsively. Theirs is a desire that is firmly under control, and it is perfectly played out, with enough financial resources to help it along. They are elegant, suave and clever, and it is only Robert's accidental coming upon Jerry's letter that brings about disclosure.

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[16] I totally disagree with Penelope Prentice's view, that "it is possible to feel sympathy, even deep compassion, for all the characters. If Jerry and Emma had not betrayed Robert, they might have betrayed their own deeper feelings." *The Pinter Ethic: The erotic aesthetic* (New York: Garland, 1994), p. 247. She also sees in the play an affirmation of friendship and love and suggests rather sentimentally that "While Jerry remains closer to a traditional seducer he is redeemed by the honesty of his love" (p. 248).

[17] Esslin, p. 214.

There is a measure of egocentricity in the lovers that acts as an antidote to love. Neither cares about the other enough to be really prepared to give up something of his or her way of life: the family, the work, the children. These middle-class institutions are internalized as supreme values and the love-affair is merely a side-kick for both parties, who do not invest emotionally too much in it. The multiple betrayals consolidate betrayal as yet another bourgeois institution, and in this context the affair is divested of any rebellious, heroic or glorified proportions, and ironized.

In *Betrayal* , the acceptance of infidelity is devoid of moral censure or even deep emotional hurt.[18] No longer objectionable, betrayal seems to infect and undermine the fabric of all human relations. The play reflects the diminished emotional and intellectual scale of reactions in a permissive society. The old religious and social restraints that gave rise to a sense of sin or guilt, and demanded punishment and atonement or condoned jealousy, outrage and revenge, have been replaced by a more civilized and urbane containment within the accepted norms of society. In this kind of educated, western, yuppie society, the idea of betrayal that forms the nucleus of the play has been refined into a self-conscious, contemporary society game, with the rules of the game taking up the place of the original strictures and laws.

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18 See Peter Hall who compares Pinter's "sudden descents into pain which are quickly over because of a healthy sense of the ridiculous" to Mozart. *Peter Hall's Diaries*, ed. by John Goodwin (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p. 382.