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FROM MENACE TO TORTURE: THE DEVELOPMENT
OF HAROLD PINTER'S POLITICAL DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

There is a degree of continuity between Pinter's "comedies of menace" and his overtly political plays. The chief difference between the two types of plays is one of focus: in the "comedies of menace" Pinter emphasises social pressures exerted on the nonconforming individual, whereas in the overtly political plays he focusses explicitly on State oppression of the dissident.

Pinter's passionate concern with politics has adversely affected his art, though there are signs of a return to form in his latest play, Party Time.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Pinter's seemingly abrupt switch to explicitly political drama in One for the Road took many of his critics by surprise. A sample of reviews reveals that the majority certainly saw the play as a distinct change in direction, but reactions to the "new" type of play were mixed. Elizabeth Sakellaridou was unmistakably enthusiastic. She rhapsodised, "A new Pinter emerges from the piece, a Pinter who has suddenly activated his political awareness, a Pinter 'agonistes' rising from the hopeless apathy of his more recent plays.... Is this new bent in Pinter's career a true metamorphosis of the dramatist into a committed writer and of his unclassified art into art militant?"¹ Michael Billington, reviewing One for the Road for The Guardian, also discerned "a decisive shift for Pinter from mysterious obliquity to political rage", but he expressed the opinion that "the generalised indictment of the steam-rollering State machine...makes for thinnish drama".²

Christopher Hudson, in The Standard, was likewise disparaging about One for the Road when it premiered in a double bill with a revival of "Victoria Station". He praised the latter for "the mood-changes, the laconic shuttle of dialogue, the sense that things of terrible significance are waiting to be said", and concluded with the accolade, "All this is vintage Pinter, and highly enjoyable". But his review of One for the Road commenced with the unequivocal, and I think damning, comparison, "One for the Road is not suggestive: it is declamatory".³ He suggested that the play "is a piece best suited to something like an Amnesty benefit". These comments, and his remark that the play's portrait of the civilised torturer is handled by a Pinter "full of righteous indignation", indicate his conviction that Pinter has abandoned artistic objectivity - a fatal deviation from "vintage Pinter", in Hudson's view.

Christopher Edwards, reviewing One for the Road a year later, was still reluctant to believe that Pinter had become "very political". He wrote scathingly, "It would be strange indeed to find Pinter in the company of the agit-prop crew of explicit denounciators, banner-wavers and cause-mongers". He continued, "Perhaps if pressed, [Pinter] would state a firm commitment for or against somebody, but [One for the Road] doesn't carry the question of [who he is getting at] much further".⁴

One of the few critics who expressed little surprise at the new, explicitly political play was Michael Coveney, writing for the Financial Times. As he explained in his column, "Pinter himself has acknowledged that it becomes increasingly impossible not to contemplate the political ugliness of the world".⁵ Coveney, however, did detect that "for the first time in a play of [Pinter]...the State, the regime or whatever, is a factor [in marking out] the distance between people". Taking my cue from Coveney, I argue in this thesis that it is only this precise focus on the political agencies of terror that is new in the Pinter of the 1980's.

But how understandable is it that, in 1984, so many critics reacted with surprise, disbelief and sometimes even with a sense of betrayal, to the first explicitly political play written by Pinter?⁶ Of course they would have been aware of Pinter's stated attitude to political drama when he was interviewed by Harry Thompson for the New Theatre Magazine in January, 1961. Thompson made the comment, "Among playwrights, Arnold Wesker has made the problem of political conscience very much his own". He then asked Pinter directly, "Do politics interest you?". Pinter replied:

I find most political thinking and terminology suspect, deficient. It seems to me a dramatist is entitled to portray the political confusion in a play if his characters naturally act in a political context, that is, if the political influences operating on them are more significant than any other consideration. But I object to the stage being used as a substitute for the soap box, where the author desires to make a direct statement at all costs, and forces his characters into

fixed and artificial postures in order to achieve this...I don't care for the didactic or moralistic theatre. In England I find this theatre, on the whole, sentimental and unconvincing.⁷

A month later, in an interview with Richard Findlater, Pinter affirmed, "No, I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social function".⁸ Six years later, in an interview with Lawrence Bensky, Pinter re-affirmed his apolitical stance. He stated categorically, "[P]olitically there's no question of my getting involved because the issues are by no means simple - to be a politician you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way".⁹ After an emphatic denial that it had ever occurred to him to express political opinions through his characters, he added, "Ultimately, politics do bore me... I distrust ideological statements of any kind".

But these professions of indifference to politics have not been substantiated in later years. In fact, Pinter's first unmistakably political statement was made publicly by the playwright in 1948, when at the age of 18 years he refused to do military service, even with the threat of a prison sentence hanging over him. Fifteen years later, Pinter was one of 48 playwrights who signed a public declaration that they would not permit their works to be performed in any South African theatre which discriminated against coloured people. (Wesker, of course, was another of the signatories). As a statement accompanying the declaration issued by the Anti-Apartheid movement in Britain pointed out:

A public stand taken on a matter of principle by a large number of significant individuals who are prepared to accept loss of contract with financial loss and non-performance which must be a serious frustration for a playwright...can never be regarded as a sterile gesture. It is an avowal of personal philosophy.¹⁰

In 1971, Pinter again revealed his political concern when he made the following (slightly incoherent) comments during an interview with Mel Gussow:

I'm very conscious of what's happening in the world. I'm not by any means blind or deaf to the world around me...No, no. Politicians just don't understand me. What, if you like, interests me, is the suffering for which they are responsible. It doesn't interest me - it horrifies me! (Pause) I mean, Jesus Christ. Well, you know, there's so much. What can one say? It's all so evident."¹¹

As we shall see, such committed statements become more and more frequent during the 1970's and 1980's. His post-1983 plays show a corresponding intensity of concentration on political concerns. In the early plays, however, we can now see (with hindsight) that there were hints of a political dimension, but so well camouflaged that often we missed them.

The principal aim of this study is to establish a degree of continuity between the early and recent plays. The second objective is to determine whether Pinter's passionate concern with political issues has adversely affected his art.