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‘Operating on life, not in it’:[1] Gender and Relationships in the Plays of Harold Pinter

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Introducing a radio production of Harold Pinter’s *A Night Out* in late 1960, its producer Donald McWhinney said of the young author, ‘something like a bombshell has hit the London theatre’.[2] That summer, Pinter’s second full-length stage drama, *The Caretaker*, had become the toast of the West End, with its run was extended to over 100 performances. By the end of the year, it was clear that Pinter was one of the hottest new names in the performing arts, and that nascent reputation was quickly to be consolidated by a string of television dramas and film releases in the early years of the decade. The 1960s and 1970s were to represent the height of Pinter’s creative activity and form the period in which his most well-known works for the stage and screen were written, from *The Caretaker* (1959) to *Betrayal* (1978), from *The Servant* (1963) to *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1980).[3] Pinter was adopted by the Royal Shakespeare Company as their chief contemporary playwright in the mid-1960s, and followed Peter Hall from that organisation to the National Theatre in the 1970s, as an associate director. He became and remained a household name, an adjective, a short-hand for the menace hidden in daily small-talk. By 1980, his life and career had taken different turns. He married his second wife, Antonia Fraser, in that year and his play-writing would soon be reconfigured to address directly political concerns with *Precisely* (1983), *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Party Time* (1991). This shift to political writing is often observed as the most notable transformation in his career. I argue, though, that the transition in Pinter’s approach to domestic and intimate relationships in the 1960s and 1970s, and the changing attitudes to gender thereby revealed, are worthy of much greater attention than they have so far received.

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[1] Harold Pinter, *The Dwarfs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 79.

[2] Donald McWhinney, introducing Harold Pinter, *A Night Out*, BBC Home Service, 8 November 1960, 8:15pm. This broadcast was a repeat of the original 1 March 1960 broadcast.

[3] In dating works, I am using the date of composition, rather than of publication or first performance, to give a clear chronology of the works’ position in Pinter’s biography.

A commonplace critical periodisation of Pinter's works would have his early plays, closing with *The Homecoming* (1964), categorised as 'comedies of menace' and much of the output that followed in the late 1960s and 1970s—from *Landscape* (1968) to *A Kind of Alaska* (1982)—considered his 'memory plays' due to their emphasis on dramatizing how the past invades or affects the present. However, running through all of his plays from these two artificial periods are some other very distinct, consistent concerns. These plays nearly always address marriage or hold male/female relationships at the heart of the narrative. In addition, they focus on the bond between men and the male impulse to form meaningful relationships within or across family units. The disintegration and betrayal of the purpose and integrity that might achieve these goals also form a chief component. A repeated plot device is that of a single woman enjoying intimate relations with more than one man. This is the dramatic engine in different ways of *The Collection* (1961), *The Lover* (1962), *The Homecoming* (1964), *Silence* (1968) and *Betrayal* (1978) and forms part of the background to *Tea Party* (1964), *The Basement* (1966), *Night* (1969), *Old Times* (1970) and *Monologue* (1972). The structure even informed Pinter's interest in the some of the novels he would adapt for film, with *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1966) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1980) all manifesting such relationships. James Joyce's play *Exiles*, which Pinter directed for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1970, is also centred around the liberal notion that a married woman might be free to explore her passions for her husband's best friend. One could be forgiven for thinking that the configuration was something of a Pinter obsession.

Here, I want to consider how Pinter's dramatisation of domestic and intimate relationships in his plays of the 1960s and 1970s—particularly via multi-partite entanglements—reveals an increasingly nuanced understanding of gender. To illuminate this evolution, I trace and theorise the impact that Pinter's extra-marital affair with the British journalist and broadcaster Joan Bakewell had on his work, particularly *Betrayal*, the play he based upon their relationship. Pinter's own emotional experience is tangentially captured in a number of his plays from these two decades, and this accompanies a perceptional shift in his writing: an overt transition from wry, often dark, observation

of domestic and intimate behaviours to more concerned reflection on those behaviours and their emotional impact. This transition operates along an axis of what Pinter described as a distinction between operating 'on' things and operating 'in' things. The distinction was first articulated in his only novel, *The Dwarfs* (1952-55), a semi-autobiographical work that explores the friendship of a small group of three men and one woman. The woman, Virginia, is the girlfriend of one of the men, Pete, and later the lover of another, Mark. In his biography of Pinter, Michael Billington describes the novel as 'an attempt to pin down the final break-up of the lost Eden of Pinter's Hackney youth' and notes that the three male characters in the work are clearly based on Pinter himself (Mark), and his Hackney friends Ron Percival (Pete) and Mick Goldstein (Len).[4] The character of Virginia is based on Jennifer Mortimer, the only long-standing female member of the Hackney group. The adversarial bond between Ron/Pete and Harold/Mark is tested in the novel, and the phrase that Percival once used to challenge Pinter in real life is deployed: Pete berates Mark for 'operating on life and not in it'[5]—for behaving with cynicism and detachment, that is. The phrase memorably recurs some ten years later in *The Homecoming* (1964). Lenny has encouraged his brother Teddy's wife, Ruth, to stay with his family in England, and ostensibly agree to act as a sex-worker, rather than return with Teddy to America. As the family tensions unfold, Teddy tries to patronise Lenny in an (ineffective) put-down, and in so doing presents the two attitudes to life—detachment and immersion—as in need of conscious balance:

> It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to *see.*[6]

The rebuke is further spelled out by Teddy as he explains that he himself operates 'on' things, a cool observer of behaviour, while Lenny operates 'in' things, lost to circumstances. But this cool

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[4] Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 58.
[5] Pinter, *The Dwarfs*, p. 79.
[6] Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*, in *Plays 3* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 69-70.

detachment is hardly projected as a virtue by Pinter, as it causes Teddy to walk away from his wife rather than concede defeat to his brother.

That the in/on distinction appears twice in a decade in his oeuvre indicates the ongoing importance it had for Pinter. To adopt its terms, we might consider his early male characters as operating 'in' the masculine discourses that they normalise, project and protect and his later protagonists as aware of or awakening to those discourses and so operating 'on' them to counter or adjust them. The playwright's parallel attitudinal development was captured in an anecdote he related in a Radio 4 interview in 1990. In it, he recalled the reprimand his friends gave him as a young man for taking one of their girlfriends for a summer walk along the river Lea. Two of them took him for a bus ride to Victoria Park, all the while saying nothing:

> They walked me in silence right into the middle of the park, turned and left me there. I saw them walk away and I felt absolutely desolated. I can't think of a more powerful chastisement really. They had no need to say anything and didn't. That was my humiliation and I realised I had betrayed the whole group of friends, not only one friend, but the idea of friendship and that was not going to be tolerated by them. I don't think I've recovered since.[7]

The anecdote is telling in that, while it foregrounds the high currency of the code of behaviour between male friends and the concept of betrayal that such a code entails, it also exposes a proprietorial attitude to women among those men. In his early writing, Pinter first manifests an interest in addressing the tensions between these attitudes in *The Dwarfs*: in that final show-down between Mark and Pete, Mark reminds Pete of his former girlfriend: 'You exist, but just remember that so does she, in her own right.'[8] This acknowledgement of the agency of women within male environments or groups, including ownership of sexual expression and appetite, occurs more and more overtly in Pinter's work in the 1960s. This happens firstly (and in ways that did not yet escape cliché) by presenting female sexuality as distant, unknowable and even alarming. In *Night School* (1960), for example, the character Walter, released from prison, finds his aunts have rented out his

[7] Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 60.
[8] Pinter, *The Dwarfs*, p. 178.

room to a young female teacher, Sally. He employs his underground connections to have her checked out, eventually discovering that she earns a living as a nightclub hostess. He effectively exposes her dual life but does not gain any command over her (though he does regain his room). Sally's independence and dual existence are tantalising to Walter, but also threatening, as is evidenced by his inability to accept both aspects of her life into his domestic arrangements. Pinter develops this simple representation of female agency as threat, moving away from what might be described as a male perspective toward something which Elizabeth Sakellaridou defines as an androgynous authorial view in *The Homecoming* (1964).[9] Beyond that play, he ultimately reaches a position where being 'in' an emotional situation is a space for growth, rather than a position of weakness. This development enables greater emotional depth in his writing as it progresses, and results in a movement from plays which invite audiences to observe characters' behaviour with some detachment and enjoy gender discourses as a source of humour and narrative conflict to plays in which they are encouraged to question those discourses through appreciating emotional dilemmas and the social and cultural contexts which give rise to them. Pinter recognised a shift of this kind in relation to his political writing, when he acknowledged in a 1985 interview that he had earlier articulated a kind of 'detached contempt' for political engagement, and that this was a matter of retrospective shame.[10] I propose that his work evolves from that detached observation of and even contempt for characters and human behaviour in the 1960s to something more engaged in human emotional predicaments in the 1970s, which itself would evolve into that political sensitivity in the 1980s.

Pinter, married to Vivien Merchant since 1956, declared to Joan Bakewell his strong attraction to her at a party in the summer of 1960. Just under two years later, in March 1962, he took her hand on a park bench in Regent's Park and she accepted the gesture—the start of a relationship that would last seven years. Bakewell captures a version of this moment in her radio play *Keeping in Touch* (2017), a fictionalised account of their affair written in direct response to *Betrayal* (revealed in 1996

[9] Elizabeth Sakellaridou, *Pinter's Female Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 14-15.
[10] 'A Play and its Politics: A Conversation between Harold Pinter and Nicholas Hern', Harold Pinter, *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1985), 5-24: p.12.

to have had its basis in their relationship). The scene is important in Bakewell's drama because it establishes quickly that the two people falling in love are not unhappy in their marriages to others, something which is uncertain (or even irrelevant) in *Betrayal*. In her autobiography, *The Centre of the Bed* (2003), Bakewell makes the case for her own circumstances:

> [Harold and Vivien's] concepts of what it is to be a man and to be a woman were very similar. Isn't that so in most marriages? And this was a strong one. Impregnable, I believed, like my own: the rock of certainty from which I could venture out and explore other possibilities.[11]

During the arc of Pinter and Bakewell's relationship, from 1962 to 1969, Pinter's output was, as noted, focussed primarily on various arrangements of male/female relationships. Before his relationship with Bakewell, most female characters in his plays were rather two-dimensional, positioned in either overtly maternal roles—often archetypically smothering in their attentions—or as primarily sexual beings that merely serve the narrative as lures or foils to the male characters. *Night School* (1960) and *The Collection* (1961) are typical of this latter characteristic, with female characters that say little but lead the men on lengthy journeys of uncertainty and insecurity, while in *A Night Out* (1959) men simply treat women as either maternal or sexual. A key feature of Pinter's early works such as these is that, in order to attain a position of security and accommodate their own emotional needs, male characters construct and impose narratives on their partners. They nonetheless find themselves in positions of crippling uncertainty. At the end of *The Collection*, James behaves in just this way in order to have the final say on his wife Stella's supposed one-night stand with a stranger:

> James: You didn't do anything, did you? (*Pause*) He wasn't in your room. You just talked about it in the lounge. (*Pause*) That's the truth, isn't it? (*Pause*) You just sat and talked about what you would do if you went to your room. That's what you did. (*Pause*) Didn't you? (*Pause*) That's the truth… isn't it?

[11] Joan Bakewell, *The Centre of the Bed* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), p. 145.

Stella looks at him, neither confirming nor denying.[12] (1996, 145)

Stella's silence has its own ineffable power but the fact of her not speaking serves to centre attention on James's desires and insecurities. In other words, this is not a dramatic moment which illuminates the meaningful operations of a relationship, but rather the absence of any connection between husband and wife, and the breakdown of conventional gendered patterns of reassurance.

By contrast, Pinter's first new piece of writing after his relationship with Bakewell had begun explores the domestic and sexual interaction between a man and a woman in much more complex ways. The television drama *The Lover* (1962) is a humorous account of a well-off married couple who have established a role-play game whereby the husband, Richard, leaves for work in the morning, only to return in the afternoon in character as 'Max', his wife Sarah's 'lover'. As the play concludes, they seek to reconcile the two roles they perform in their lives and to combine the domestic, pragmatic and loving experience of their day-to-day existence with the spontaneous, libidinous experiences they share as their sexual alter egos. Notably, Richard is the first of Pinter's male dramatic characters to express some awareness and appreciation of female agency; the first, character that is, to demonstrate some consciousness of the discourses shaping gender roles and representation. This accompanies a transition from a detached indulgence in sexual play to a balanced negotiation of a more multi-faceted relationship within which the couple no longer need to divorce desire from quotidian subjectivity. More importantly, in the role of Sarah, Pinter wrote his first lead female role that could express sexual agency and reject the simplistic dichotomy between domesticity and sexuality that women characters in his earlier plays either adopt or contend with unsuccessfully. Elizabeth Sakellaridou first noted this, commenting that by 'rejecting the separate roles of wife and whore, which Richard had assigned to her, Sarah takes up that of mistress, which combines the traits of both'.[13] Thus Sarah 'appears to

[12] Harold Pinter, *The Collection*, *Plays 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 145.
[13] Sakellaridou, *Pinter's Female Portraits*, p. 101.

believe in the wholeness of her personality'.[14] Compared to Richard, Sakellaridou continues, 'Sarah is bolder in questioning obsolete social forms'.[15]

While we might theorize that the changing approach to gender in *The Lover* is a product of a compulsion to reconcile variegated emotional needs in its author, in itself it allows no firm evidence of the kind of link between life and work that *The Dwarfs* so palpably offers or *Betrayal* was to declare. Pinter's ongoing output from 1963 does nonetheless collectively suggest that there was a working-through of a germane pool of such emotional realities from the perspective of dual relationships. This was an attempt to identify and address what we today might term 'toxic masculinity'—a by-product of patriarchal models which seeks to structure, narrate and control femininity and which limits and damages men in the process. In a short piece of prose, *Tea Party* (1963), quickly adapted for the stage, Pinter considered the emotional risks of extra-marital affairs and the threat posed to personal integrity by jealousy. The male character, Disson, like Richard in *The Lover*, cannot disengage his workplace identity from his sexual and emotional needs, and this eventually leads to an aggravated psychosomatic condition resulting in blindness. In his work in 1963 on the screenplay of Penelope Mortimer's semi-autobiographical novel *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962), Pinter adopted a progression of the argument, introduced into the masculine world of *The Dwarfs*, that a woman's individuality ought not to be defined by or in relation to men. It is noteworthy that in opting to adapt a novel by a woman about a woman restricted by the demands of men, most notably by her unfaithful, self-serving husband, Pinter sought to espouse or respect a female perspective. Steven Gale argues that, in his adaptation, Pinter clearly avoids the novel's symbolic registers and 'by shifting the emphasis away from the metaphysical' focuses 'more narrowly on an especially modern problem': 'that women are not important in a man's world'.[16] In *The Homecoming*, Pinter finally hands the transactional control to the female character, Ruth, who is able both to absorb and shrug off the projections of desire and mastery of the noisy men in her husband's family,

[14] Ibid., p. 101.
[15] Ibid., p. 102.
[16] Steven Gale, *Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), p. 129.

demeaning them in the process as they unblinkingly pursue their ambition to profit personally and financially from her sexuality. The play's last scene offers the perfect reckoning to that toxic masculinity, with Ruth assuming control of the family of men, adopting the position of the homecoming matriarch. All the male characters' tools of manipulation and negotiation are turned against them or rendered exhausted or ineffectual.

In his biography of Pinter, Michael Billington wrote of the dramas of the early 1960s and the playwright's parallel relationships: 'you inevitably wonder how much […] he is subconsciously exploring his own marital tension through drama'.[17] Regardless of whether and to what end Pinter was unpacking or even critiquing his own behaviour or impulses in these plays, it is clear that a significant body of work accumulated during the years of his relationship with Bakewell that asks a series of similar questions about the means by which men and women make demands on one another. The figure of the woman who has simultaneous relationships with more than one man is employed over and over as a means of considering those questions. With *The Homecoming*, Pinter seems to bring these series of investigations to some sort of conclusion, but the transition so far had been in terms of the female character, evolving from Sarah in *The Lover* to Ruth in *The Homecoming*. What Pinter had not developed in these investigations was the emotional integrity of the male characters. If anything, there had been something of a disintegration of male self-awareness, from Richard in *The Lover* expressing some limited understanding of his wife's emotional needs, to the hard-nosed, self-interested characters of *The Homecoming,* with only Ruth's husband exhibiting distance, control and self-awareness, but deploying them simply to deny his feelings and walk away from his wife. The toxicity of *The Homecoming* household is exposed and critiqued, but there is no issue from it, simply a presentation of that poison, which continues to fuel the play's controversial reputation.[18] In this respect, the play represented something of a dead end. If he were to continue writing about

[17] Billington, *Harold Pinter*, p. 133.

[18] The play contributed to a reputation that the Royal Shakespeare Company was gaining for the presentation of contemporary 'dirt plays'—as they were referred to in *Daily Telegraph* on 25 August 1964 by Emile Littler, who resigned as a governor of the RSC on account of such choices—following the productions of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* in 1964 and David Rudkin's *Afore Night Come* in 1962 (see John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 154).

relationships without going over the same ground, Pinter needed to enter and consider the realities of the emotional needs of both sexes, to shift from operating 'on' to operating 'in' the psychology of gender representation.

The material did not flow easily after *The Homecoming*, confirming in some way its status as a threshold text in his oeuvre.[19] As his fame and demands on his time increased, and caused the kinds of inabilities to connect with Bakewell that are captured in scene 3 of *Betrayal*, where Emma and Jerry agree they can find no time to meet each other, his work becomes sparser, and the mood between the couples in the short pieces that followed—*Landscape* (1967) (for which Bakewell suggested the title) and *Silence* (1968)—becomes more retrospective, more regretful. Beth and Ellen in these plays are both afforded more articulate, more sensitive recollections of romantic encounters in their younger years than the comparatively brutish or simplistic male characters. These are the first examples of the 'memory plays', given the manner in which recollection and the choices of the past weigh heavily on the characters' present existences. More than half of spoken text in *Landscape* is recollection, and in *Silence* the ages of the characters (and therefore those of any actors cast) reflect the younger versions of themselves, who interact with one another in key scenes, but who nonetheless mostly speak from a position of more aged reflection in isolated present stagnation within 'three areas'.[20] Pinter's work had always been troubled by the unverifiability of the past, but inserting this into the present of a relationship in these 'memory plays' now links that disturbing absence to the ultimate unknowability of two people for each other. The focus has shifted from aspects of control and negotiation within relationships to a sterile landscape in which partners do not communicate and memories offer outlets for fantasy or invite regrets into the present moment. This allowed Pinter to return yet again to questions of infidelity or partner-sharing, but now from a retrospective position, allowing an audience to infer a damaging fault that has poisoned a relationship: *Landscape* captures the emotional fallout from a probable

[19] Pinter first complained in 1968 about the difficulty of the creative process. In his 1969 acceptance speech for the German Shakespeare Prize, he publicly admitted that 'at the moment I am writing nothing and can write nothing. I don't know why. It's a very bad feeling' (Pinter, *Plays 3*, p. 12).
[20] Pinter, *Plays 3*, p. 190.

infidelity and a certain withdrawal from intimacy between husband and wife. If the man that Beth recalls in her reveries is her husband, Duff (whom she never acknowledges in the present moment on stage), then he was once more sensitive and considerate than the crude outpourings of her onstage partner indicate. But hints of a possible relationship or flirtations with the man for whom they once kept house nudge at the corners of her recollections, and the play closes in a stalemate of regret and contradictory memories or fantasies of sexual enactment. The tone is of something lost that cannot be re-captured.

As something of an antidote to his decreased motivation to write, Pinter turned to creative collaboration with others through directing. In 1970, he established Shield Productions, a new West End management partnership, with David Mercer, Christopher Morahan, Jimmy Wax and Terence Baker. His production of James Joyce's only play *Exiles* for Shield in the winter of that year must certainly have contributed to Pinter's long-term creative preoccupation with complex sexual interractions. Significantly, the play examines the right of a woman to enjoy emotional, intellectual and sexual attention from two men. One key affinity between *Exiles* and Pinter's work that Katherine Worth notes is that '[k]nowing and wanting to know lead into "not knowing"' in both, in that one person's interrogation of his partner for detail of her emotional life, especially that shared with another, is the root cause of the deterioration or fracturing of their own relationship.[21] In this phase of Pinter's career, such 'not knowing' manifests a temporal dimension in the form of what happened between people in the past. When Pinter told Mel Gussow in a 1971 interview that he considered that 'the past is not past, that it never was past. It's present'[22]—deliberately or unconsciously echoing Robert's words from *Exiles*: 'the past is not past. It is present here now'[23]—he was clearly assimilating Joyce's fascination with the malleability of memory and the impact of the remembered or narrated past on the present moment. Pinter's writing flowed again under the force of this new inspiration, and he sat down to draft his fourth full-length play, *Old Times*, as *Exiles* began its run at

[21] Katharine Worth, 'Joyce via Pinter', *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* (London: G. Bell, 1973), 46-54: p. 51.
[22] Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Harold Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 38.
[23] James Joyce, *Exiles* (London: First Four Square, 1962), p. 108.

the Mermaid Theatre. This new play involved interactions between two women and a man that were structured around the strategic ability to conjure, negotiate and re-write each other's pasts:

> There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place.[24]

This is the fertile soil of the so-called 'memory plays', and in *Old Times* specifically it is used to excavate and render hollow the masculine certainties of the play's only male character, Deeley. He and his wife Kate have invited her old flat-mate Anna round for a meal and a reminiscence, and Deeley slowly finds himself marginalised in both the present moment and in the past. His attempt to impose an identity on Anna backfires as the two women eventually write him out of their joint history, painting him as pathetically needy or as a former object of female desire who might be shared and rejected. Anna generates doubt in Deeley about his recollections of her, and then builds on this to claim possession of Kate through her discussion of their shared past, causing Deeley eventually to collapse devastated. His only recourse is to attempt to re-enact one of the women's recollections, lying on his wife's lap before the play's final tableau. The transition in the representation of the male characters between *Landscape* and *Old Times* is figured in terms of a loss of narrative authority. They increasingly find themselves lost, no longer able to shape their partners' identities and their relationship arrangements, in need of new defining structures to prop up their emotional needs. No longer operating 'on' things, they are lost utterly 'in' them, but without the control needed to derive expressive value from that immersion.

If there is any momentum or purpose in the new presentation of a masculinity in search of safe emotional harbour, it becomes background noise to Pinter's explorations of the potential for integrity in friendship in his next two all-male plays, *Monologue* (1972) and *No Man's Land* (1974). Both these works nonetheless contribute to the ongoing transformation in representations of masculinity in that they persist in anatomizing the bond between men. However, it is only with

[24] Pinter, *Plays 3*, pp. 269-70.

Betrayal (1978) that Pinter reconciles into some form of balance the forces of detachment and immersion—his impulse to operate both 'on' and 'in' experience—that have characterised his work to this point, and the play can be seen as an endpoint in his aesthetic concern with the representation of relationships. *Betrayal*, famously, runs with a backward chronology: it opens with the latest event in the timeline of its narrative, after the end of Jerry and Emma's affair, and the final scene is the moment of his first declaration of love for her at a party seven years earlier. This reverse story-telling means that the audience knows the outcomes of emotional impulses and decisions in advance of the characters, facilitating a certain suspension of moral judgement. The play nonetheless contains some intense moments of emotional discharge—albeit often tightly repressed or displaced by the characters—affording the audience an involved, empathetic experience.

In *The Centre of the Bed*, Bakewell maps real events and details onto scenes in *Betrayal*, qualifies which aspects have been fictionalised, but recognises that the play is not to be understood simply as a documentary of the beginning, blossoming and demise of their seven-year relationship. In her own play, *Keeping in Touch*, originally written quickly in indignant response to the *Betrayal* manuscript that Pinter had sent her in 1978 and re-drafted for broadcast in 2017, she offers her account of the genesis and development of the relationship. Her female character, Rachel, for instance, manifests more control over the decision to enter into the sexual aspect of the relationship than Pinter ever considered dramatising. The title of *Betrayal* is one that Bakewell initially found hurtful and judgemental, and she requested that he change it; for its part, *Keeping in Touch* explores what 'betrayal' within marriage might actually mean. One particular scene addresses this question directly, as Tom articulates the view that they are only guilty of 'infidelity in the head' and Rachel finally accepts that she has entered an affair, but one at that stage without sexual intimacy:[25]

Rachel: I've not deliberately lied

Tom: There's a fine distinction

Rachel: But one that should be made

[25] Joan Bakewell, *Keeping in Touch*, BBC Radio 4, 22 April 2017, 3:45pm (broadcast), 12m3s.

Tom: By who Rachel? By you and me? But what about David? You can't be faithful and unfaithful at the same time.

Rachel: I can try. We're trying, aren't we? That way we can live life as we want it.[26]

Here Bakewell has her dramatic counterpart argue for a have-one's-cake-and-eat-it emotional situation that pervades Pinter's work in the 1960s and 1970s. There is also, as in his work, a sense that the characters are attempting to pursue the possibility of merging two emotional realities and suppressing the conflicting or disruptive potential of doing so. In Pinter's case, I have characterised this elsewhere as the attempt to construct the 'impossible family'[27]—an emotional drive to forge a single unit from two distinct groupings containing close male or female bonds—and in *Betrayal* that impulse is marked keenly by the repeated motif of Jerry's recollection of picking Emma's daughter up in his kitchen and throwing her in the air and catching her: effectively fusing the two families in a reverie of wish-fulfilment.[28]

The issue of betrayal in *Betrayal* is not focussed directly or uniquely on the extramarital affair. Indeed, in the play almost every mentioned character has affairs; this is presented as the default position. Hence, Pinter deliberately moves the focus away from betrayal in marriage. As if to underline the shift, scene five shows Robert and Emma mulling over the theme of a novel: Robert believes it to be betrayal, but Emma does not.[29] Overtly referring to the play's title and at the same time questioning its relevance, the scene calls the audience to attention (the revelation of Robert's recently acquired knowledge of his wife's and friend's affair is about to be staged) whilst suggesting matters are not morally straightforward. In scene two of the play, after the opening in which Jerry and Emma have their first meeting in two years, Jerry confronts his friend Robert with his fresh knowledge that Robert had known all along of Jerry's affair with his wife. The primary or foundational betrayal of the play is, therefore, one of a code between men.

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[26] Ibid., 14m38s.
[27] Mark Taylor-Batty, *The Theatre of Harold Pinter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 128-58.
[28] Bakewell clarifies that this reference is grounded in a real moment: Pinter threw her daughter Harriet into the air in the Pinters' Kew home on the occasion of their son's birthday (*The Centre of the Bed*, p. 144).
[29] Harold Pinter, *Betrayal*, *Plays 4* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 63.

Jerry—[…] why didn't you tell me?

Pause.

Robert—Tell you what?

Jerry—That you knew. You bastard.

Robert—Oh, don't call me a bastard, Jerry.

Pause.

Jerry—What are we going to do?[30]

In *The Centre of the Bed*, Bakewell recalls how, after the end of their relationship (at a meeting she recognises as corresponding with the first scene of *Betrayal*), she revealed to Pinter that her husband had learned of their affair in its very first months. She recounts that, upon learning this, Pinter called Michael Bakewell and insisted on meeting him. It 'was implied some explanation was due' and 'Harold suggested that Michael, the conventionally wronged husband, was in some way to blame for having kept secret his knowledge of our affair'.[31] If we accept its truth, this biographical detail illuminates what Pinter might have been seeking to investigate or observe in *Betrayal* in relation to the developing potential for self-awareness of his male characters. It seems unlikely that between his own conversation with Michael Bakewell in 1970 and his drafting of the play in 1978, Pinter would not have had the capacity to recognise something of the emotionally obtuse nature of that earlier instinctive response of his, that impulse to ascribe blame of a kind to the 'wronged husband'. In *Betrayal*, the scene plays out to draw the audience's attention to Jerry's insensitive accusation, and, if they are shocked or surprised, this is neatly sidelined by the two men's return to more mundane conversations about work, reading and family holiday plans. By shifting the titular focus early on in the play onto a betrayal between men—a disloyalty to an unspoken code and assumed privileges between them—Pinter identifies this as subject to dysfunction and as over-important in the context of understanding that integrity to self is the basis for success in relationships. While charting the downfall of Jerry and Robert through their own self-absorption and inability to provide for one

[30] Ibid., pp. 31-2.
[31] Bakewell, *The Centre of the Bed*, p. 217.

another emotionally, Pinter constructs an opposite ascendency towards a creative ideal for Emma, who moves through relationships with publisher (Robert) to agent (Jerry) to author (Casey) to release in her ownership of an art gallery and professional independence capped by divorce.[32] The play's final scene, with Emma in her cocktail dress entering her bedroom to brush her hair, emphasises how far she has moved from the uncomplicated image of trophy wife.

The transition in considering the codes of loyalty within the male 'church'[33] from the plays of the 1960s to this point in 1978 is profound: that scene between Jerry and Robert, and the astonishing act of blame it contains, sets in motion an exposure of the overriding male desire for homosociality, distinct and quarantined from the intimacy and love of a relationship with a woman. But rather than this behaviour being somehow represented as sacrosanct, vital and healthy—as in Pinter's early work—it is here critiqued by being foregrounded against an accumulated waste of emotional opportunity, and women now are not the collateral damage, but the survivors of male failure, the narrators of their own identities. We see the relationships between the men and between them and Emma deteriorate over the seven years that the play's nine scenes represent. This is highlighted by the structural technique of starting the story at the end, as it enables Pinter to make us more acutely aware of the lost opportunities and betrayals of self that are charted. If gender representations and the discourses that construct and maintain them were once a source of humour and narrative conflict in his writing, and exposed as toxic in his process of purging them, in later Pinter the issue is no longer foregrounded, admitting a complexity that moves beyond conventional stereotypes. Attributing worth to emotional experience creates a more balanced approach to the challenges of human exchanges. Operating 'in' things is no longer the weaker position, but an ambition, a task, an objective that is subject to petty human failures but ultimately of value.

[32] Katherine Burkman, 'Harold Pinter's Betrayal: Life Before Death—and After', *Theatre Journal* 34 (December 1982), p.515.
[33] Pinter, *The Dwarfs*, p. 55.