

## Strange Stage Fellows? Arthur Miller and Harold Pinter

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In many respects researching the scholarship on parallels and shared dramatic visions between Arthur Miller and Harold Pinter is an unpromising venture. While their joint trip to Turkey in 1985 on behalf of PEN's support of oppressed Kurds is widely discussed, comparative studies on the two master dramatists are hard to come by.<sup>2</sup> By the time Martin Esslin more or less inducted Pinter into the Theatre of the Absurd, initially in 1961 as one of a dozen emerging "proselytes" and subsequently as England's premiere absurdist, a case for parallels between Pinter's early works and Miller's social dramas seemed rather farfetched. In his essay "Writing for the Theatre" (1962) Pinter himself issued stern warnings against "the writer who puts forward his concern" and the dramatic character who "alarmingly" presents "a convincing argument or information as to his past experiences, his present behavior, or his aspirations" (xi, ix). With these two cautions alone Pinter all but disposes of three Kellers, two Proctors, and at least one Loman.

Critics and scholars followed suit. Critical comparisons to be found between Pinter and Miller traditionally take the form of quick jabs aimed at Miller's chin. Bernard Dukore asserts that Pinter's first rush of successes made "plays like Miller's *All My Sons*" seem "laborious and trite" (28). Compared to Pinter's dramas, writes Kimball King, "exposition and dialogue... in Arthur Miller seem either contrived or turgid or both" (243). Billington suggests that Pinter's first full-length play, *The Birthday Party* (1961), derives from the same dramatic political protest tradition of such plays as *The Crucible* but engages such concerns in an "infinitely greater political and philosophical complexity" (17). Writing in 1967 Walter Kerr, not mentioning Miller by name, praises

Pinter at the expense of the unnamed 800-pound Brooklyn-born social realist in the room:

(Pinter's innovations originate) in theatrical tradition (but)...

we have lately lived so long under... the play built of bricks to

shore up a thesis, the play dominated by a writer's logic...which

has wearied for some time. (41-42)

NPR theater critic Bob Mondello echoes Kerr's sentiments but Mondello names names:

"We were seeing Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller plays... theater (that is) all about articulating everything. (Pinter) was doing this weird theater of... all the things you didn't know about the characters" (2008).

A few comparative assessments of Miller and Pinter offer contrary responses to the prevailing sense that Pinter's work functionally archives Miller's *oeuvre*. C. W. E. (Christopher) Bigsby, implicitly acknowledging the entrenched critical divide between the two playwrights, finds in Miller's *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1977) "a metaphysical anxiety... that moves Miller closer to Beckett and Pinter than ever before" (*Critical Introduction*, 237). Writing in *The Pinter Review* Thomas P. Adler argues that the enigmatic pauses in the speech of Pinter's characters, traditionally posed as antithetical to the prolific self-declarations of Miller's characters, may actually align in both authors' insistence that the language on the stage must articulate the political reality before them: "Paradoxically, Miller and Pinter themselves refuse withdrawal from uttering political statements so that their stage hero(in)es [*sic*] embrace silence as the only way to be heard effectively" (8).

Writing in 1999 Hans Osterwalder makes a straightforward case for artistic kinship between Miller and Pinter, asserting that the two playwrights share fundamental

views of the human narrative to such an extent that further examination of their similarities as dramatists is warranted:

For both (Pinter and Miller) the family has been  
an overriding concern in their entire *oeuvre*...

The fundamental question underlying all of Miller's  
plays is 'How can a man make of the outside world  
a home?' (Miller, *Essays*, 73). In a slightly altered  
fashion this existential need also underlies most  
of Pinter's plays. (319)

Although Osterwalder focuses on two 1993 plays, Miller's *The Last Yankee* and Pinter's *Moonlight*, he takes on a larger mission than that of comparing two relatively lesser known works. He contends that the "proverbially Pinteresque pattern... of an intruder threatening the brittle security of the characters' home" (31) can be transposed with fruitful results onto readings of Miller's plays (presumably *All My Sons* and *The Price* among others). Osterwalder also asserts that a key factor connecting the social evolution of the modern American family to that of the modern British family is the influence of urban industrialization on family dynamics and, furthermore, that plays by both Pinter and Miller illuminate this broad theme (325).

More recently Ann C. Hall's striking comparison between Miller's *Broken Glass* and Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* offers a bold challenge to "conventional wisdom" regarding comparisons between Miller and Pinter. Hall explores how the two authors represent Holocaust experiences,

by using time in non-realistic ways, methods that not

only dissolve the years between the historical event and the present but also dissolve the traditional dramatic distinctions used to describe (Miller and Pinter's) works. (1)

Like Osterwalder, Hall is concerned with far more than a comparison of two plays. Hall's essay argues for a serious reconsideration of some all-too-staid assumptions about Miller, Pinter, their approaches to "historical time," and their shared power to "challenge and disturb" (3).

We find inspiration in Hall and Osterwalder's call to explore comparisons between Miller and Pinter beyond the familiar binaries of realism vs. anti-realism, pre-Beckett vs. post-Beckett sensibilities, or for that matter the Theatre of the Absurd vs. practically everything else. The child of a Miller syllabus and a Pinter syllabus, our pursuit of a Miller/Pinter comparison pointed us toward plays that commonly appear on class reading lists. We found a case in point with two elderly patriarchs whose respective disfigured pasts collide with an uncertain present on the occasion of a son's disruptive return to the family home: Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*, 1949) and Max (*The Homecoming*, 1965). Direct comparisons between *Salesman* and *Homecoming* are all but non-existent in searchable critical literature on either play, although Bigsby notes that both authors were criticized for failing to provide Willy or Max with suitably Jewish identities (*Arthur Miller*, 337-38).

*Salesman's* Willy and *Homecoming's* Max bring more than questions of ethnic identity to a critical comparison. Both Willy and Max carom back and forth between self-declarative performances of hyper-masculinity and pedestrian fixations with low-rung realities of urban life. From this perspective, our abbreviated comparison of Willy

and Max focuses upon the two men's destabilizing efforts to define themselves via a discourse of ancestral patriarchal empowerment evident in both plays.

Willy presents himself in the fullness of patriarchal performance during the iconic "they know me... in New England" flashback in Act 1. Comfortably at home after a business trip, Willy regally summons his eager sons to attend his tale of manly triumph won on the road:

... they know me, boys, they know me up and down in

New England. The finest people... 'Willy Loman is here!'

That's all they have to know, and I go right through." (Pg. 169, 171)

Simultaneously assuming the role of bard and hero of the poet's tale, Willy performs an almost learned, if certainly intuitive, classic male conquest narrative: authoritative recounting of the patriarch's legend, earned deference from male rivals, far-reaching reputation, and territorial conquest. Willy even embraces the patriarchal mandate to mentor his sons-in-waiting for their eventual ascendancy to leadership: "And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us... be liked and you will never want." (171).

Willy's overreaching declaration of fatherly heroics in the "New England" flashback prefigures a startlingly analogous speech delivered by Max to one of his sons in the opening of *The Homecoming*. Retired widower Max, 70, lives with two of his sons (Lenny, 30s and Joey, mid-20s) and his brother Sam, 63, in their London family house. The play opens on Max and Lenny bickering, presumably on an ongoing basis, over mundanities of shared living space: in this case, first dibs on reading and clipping the daily newspaper. Lenny's disdain for his father is ominously comic and brutal, i.e.

Pinteresque: “Why don’t you shut up, you daft prat?” (23). An income-generating street hustler, Lenny presents a direct challenge to Max’s household authority. Defending himself from his son’s rebukes, Max regales Lenny with a male conquest recitation of his own in the classic mode of Willy’s “They Know Me” speech. Recalling his hooligan youth as Beta male warrior to his now deceased Alpha companion MacGregor (“Mac”), Max wields epic patriarchal history against Lenny’s taunts:

We were two of the worst hated men in the  
West End of London. I tell you, I still got the scars. We’d walk  
into a place, the whole room’d stand up, they’d make way to  
let us pass” (24).

With this heroic tale Max seeks to gain the upper hand in the quarrel and legitimize his authority over the contested domestic property. Like Willy, Max effusively spins his conquest story, touching artfully on the essential characteristics of the genre: recounting the ancestral legend, earning deference from male rivals, celebrating one’s fame, gloating over conquered territory. Even though Max fails to extinguish Lenny’s derision, the ancestral legend for which Max serves as both bard and hero consecrates in his own mind a rightful if ultimately short-lived command of his all-male household.

It is significant that Max frames his legacy in the context of his youthful friendship with the aforementioned deceased street tyrant MacGregor (Mac), an older quasi-ancestral figure who makes no appearance during the play. In so doing, Max readily brings to mind Willy’s recurring invocations of deceased older brother Ben. Conjured up by Willy at particularly vulnerable moments, Ben’s appearances serve (and ultimately ill-serve) Willy in much the same way that Mac’s legend beguiles Max: a legendary

ancestral father figure shores up each man's weakening hold on his patriarchal stature and legitimacy. However, notwithstanding the masculine "cred" their memories inject into Willy and Max's bravado, Ben and Mac in real life were irredeemably corrupt men. Loyal to nothing but their own interests, they functioned as toxic agents inside the mythologies their younger acolytes created around them.

Mac's betrayal of Max, although hinted at throughout *The Homecoming*, is revealed in a burst of new information during the final scene. Max and Lenny are incompetently negotiating with visiting daughter-in-law Ruth to have her remain with the family as maid and consort. Suddenly Max's brother Sam drops dead, revealing with his last breath that Mac had carried on affairs with Max's late wife, Jessie. Apparently Mac had exploited Max's loyalty to gain access to Max's house, cuckold Max with Jessie, and employ Sam, a professional chauffeur, as driver and confidant. Initially, Max brushes off Sam's devastating revelation, muttering "diseased imagination" as he stands over his brother's lifeless body (94). Yet moments later Max falls to his knees as Ruth wordlessly seizes control of the negotiations regarding her position in the family. The revelation of Mac's treachery drains Max of all remaining pretensions to patriarchal authority or power. The play ends with Max and sons Lenny and Joey fawning submissively over a regally seated Ruth, who has now assumed financial and political rule of the household.

As with Max and Mac, Willy's ancestral idol Ben figures prominently in Willy's undoing. The "Ben's visit" scene in Act 1 reveals Ben Loman to be an amoral bully and profiteer, especially when Ben casually puts young Biff on the ground, cane to the boy's eye, and utters the iconic warning "never fight fair with a stranger, boy" (183). Notwithstanding the naked display of brutality toward his favorite son (signaled

meaningfully by Linda's "cold[ly], frightened" response to Ben at that moment) Willy, like Max, is oblivious to the unmistakable corruption that has rotted out the myth he has built around his hero. Late in Act II, Miller further punishes Willy for his blind faith in this corrupt mythology. In delirium after Biff breaks down and cries to him, Willy seems to mistake a half-dreamed conversation with Ben about diamond hunting in the jungle for Ben's approval of Willy's scheme to kill himself for life insurance: "A perfect proposition all around" (244-245). Ecstatic at Ben's apparent support for "the perfect proposition," Willy drives off to his death: happier if more cataclysmically wrong than he has ever been about anything.

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The literature on Willy Loman's various forms of disconnectedness is as extensive as any critical thread we have on *Salesman*: his "wrong dreams," his distinctly unlikable pursuit of being "well liked," the unbearable wounds to his dignity, etc. Advances in gender studies predictably found their way to Willy, whose clichéd sense of American masculine privilege can come off as almost cartoonish to some younger readers. But comparative studies of authors, especially pairs of authors who seem ill-suited for comparison, allow us to slip a proverbial new lens into an older frame in the hope that something unexpected and useful might appear. We found that to be the case when comparing *Death of a Salesman* and *The Homecoming*, two plays that as professor and student we had studied separately across the chasm of different courses, oppositional dramatic styles, and disparate critical histories. Nevertheless, we found ourselves drawn to the observation that Willy and Max each confers upon himself an ancestral patriarchal legend that is completely at odds with the actual conditions of his life. Willy and Max

share a disconnectedness between their heroic legends and the brutally humdrum present that demands truth on its own terms. Ultimately at plays' end Willy and Max have each fathered little more than their own demise.

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#### Notes

Note 1. *Harold Pinter Review* managing editor Ann C. Hall is pleased to alert AMJ readers and society members to the *Review* submissions page:

<http://www.editorialmanager.com/hpr/default.aspx>

Note 2. The numerous accounts of Miller and Pinter's 1985 trip to Turkey on behalf of PEN include Arthur Miller's *Timebends: A Life*, 1987, p. 259; Thomas P. Adler's "The Embrace of Silence: Pinter, Miller, and the Response to Power," *The Pinter Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 4-9; Jo Glanville, "Beyond Bars: 50 Years of the PEN Writers in Prison Committee," *Index on Censorship*, 2010, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 30-38; and Jeffrey Meyers, "Turkish Delight," *The Antioch Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, Spring 2008, pp. 392-94.

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