

# Metamimesis in Harold Pinter's *Old Times*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Pinter's *Old Times* (1971) to show how Pinter's theatre, like his political thought, reveals the mimetic spell working on the audience of a play even when they are fully under its influence. A distinction between theatre as a strictly mimetic practice and theatre as a means to clarify the role mimesis plays in social life more generally—what I call *metamimetic* theatre—becomes crucial to understanding not just the political stance Pinter lays out in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, but the treatment of power in his artistic work as well. In fleshing out the concept of metamimesis as it operates within *Old Times*, I draw on the mimetic theory of René Girard and on recent Pinter scholarship to identify a set of attributes exemplifying Pinter's metamimetic technique, including radical uncertainty with respect to character motivation, triangular power dynamics, and the use of characters embodying connective difference. The metamimetic aspect of Pinter's work underscores its ongoing relevance to a contemporary world made dangerous by the intensifying mimetic competition of social media.

## KEYWORDS

mimesis, Girard, triangular desire, power

## Enacting Metamimesis

In his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Harold Pinter decries the “hundreds of thousands of deaths” caused by the theatrical power of U.S. foreign policy. In a crucial passage, Pinter highlights how U.S. authorities direct publics across the Americas to identify with autocrats and to denounce socialists. He argues that U.S. military support for the Contras in Nicaragua would ensure that “neighboring countries would ask the same questions and do the same

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20 thing.” Through the Contras’ performance as “freedom fighters,” the anticapitalist Sandinistas would be discredited as people to identify with and imitate. In other words, the United States was waging a war of mimetic dominance. This awareness of mimesis as a potent political force is present throughout Pinter’s speech, in which he portrays the power elites’ capacity to make publics desire what they desire and to ignore the atrocities that support those desires. This article examines Pinter’s *Old Times* (1971) to show how Pinter’s theatre, like his political analysis, reveals to an audience what a mimetic spell is doing even as they are fully under its influence.

Pinter’s plays, I argue, are *metamimetic*, by which I mean they draw the audience’s attention to the way mimesis operates in everyday social interactions as both a foundation of identity and a mechanism of domination. Pinter engages the role of mimesis in theatre at the close of his Nobel speech, stating that a writer can either look into the mirror and describe the illusory reflection there, or “smash the mirror . . . for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.” Is the author here denouncing theatre’s mimetic spell, thereby dismissing his entire creative output? In part, this is precisely what Pinter is doing, but the speech also sheds light on where Pinter’s work as a theatre artist—a fabricator of mimetic dramas—connects in a direct way with his actual politics. A distinction between theatre as a strictly mimetic practice and theatre as a means to show us the mirror and then smash it—what I call metamimetic theatre—becomes crucial to understanding not just the political stance Pinter lays out in his Nobel speech, but the political dimension of his artistic work as well. In Pinter’s dramas the politics of domination often arrives in intimate settings in which the imitative mechanisms of desire and identification that govern us in daily life are pulled out of the shadows into center stage. We ignore these powerful mechanisms at our peril; doing so leaves us vulnerable to the kind of political manipulation Pinter indicts in his Nobel speech.

A three-character, two-act play *Old Times* takes place in a house in the English countryside where a married couple (Kate and Deeley) dine with an old friend and roommate from Kate’s premarried life in London (Anna), who is visiting from abroad. Making sense of the politics implicit in the interactions of these three characters requires theoretical perspectives on the role mimesis plays in the maintenance of normative identity. Consistent with René Girard’s theory of imitative or “mimetic” desire, Pinter depicts people who “do not know what to desire” (“Violence and Religion” 1). In order to find out, to paraphrase Girard, they watch the people they admire, and *imitate* their desires, thereby becoming competitive rivals locked into a contest for dominance. People *imitate each other*, according to Girard, in order to maintain a sense of being *unique* individuals, and in *Old Times* Pinter dramatizes the power dynamics of this paradoxical, elusive, and predatory relational mode. In this metamimetic fashion,

*Old Times* points toward the political dimensions of mimetic desire. Doing so brings Pinter's audiences to the "other side" of the mirror where truth, in all its complexity, can be found. While critics such as David Savran have located Girard's mimetic theory operating at the core of *Old Times*, I take this a step further and show how Pinter provides the audience with a lived experience of how the mimetic process itself operates.

In fleshing out the concept of metamimesis as it functions within *Old Times*, I engage with more recent scholarship regarding Pinter's use of metatheatrical techniques in many of his plays, including recent essays by Saltz, Owens, Roof, and others. Three attributes of *Old Times* exemplify Pinter's metamimetic technique, including (1) radical uncertainty with respect to character motivation; (2) characters who deploy scenic devices—role play and reenactments—in their efforts to dominate others; and, finally, (3) the inclusion of a character—Ruth in *The Homecoming* and Rebecca in *Ashes to Ashes* join Kate of *Old Times* in this category—who is defined by connective difference rather than identity. All three of these metamimetic techniques run counter to the norms of dramatic realism, in which clear and consistent character motivation play a central role in driving the dramatic action, in which characters are revealed to the audience as they "truly" are, and in which conventional ideas of clearly bounded individual identities hold sway. Despite subverting all these norms, Pinter's plays nevertheless manage to maintain the "spell" of dramatic realism: a sense that the audience is witness to events separate from it in space and time, events governed by the normative causal laws supposedly encountered in "real" life outside the theatre.

### Using Uncertain Motivations in the Compositional Process

In the initial exchanges of *Old Times*, Pinter calibrates line by line a strong tension between what is known and what is unknown. The play opens with Kate's single utterance: "Dark." A pause ensues as the playwright waits for a second voice, the person Kate addresses, to respond. "Fat or thin?" replies Deeley, and already the stage event shifts toward concreteness and particularity. First, Deeley's cheeky directness suggests an intimate partnership with Kate. Second, his question points toward a third character, probably female, as the object of this exchange. We are already caught, in other words, within a relational triangle—two people enrolling a third in their relational dynamic. But while the basic dramatic situation soon becomes clear—Kate and Deeley host a dinner in their country house for Kate's former best friend and roommate Anna—the intentions of the characters remain shrouded in mystery.

The nature of the uncertainty in Pinter's work is a topic of debate. David Saltz, for example, argues that Pinter minimizes narrative uncertainty "by never

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asking us to assimilate the content of character's claims into the world the plays project" (230). It must be pointed out, however, that Pinter does not need to ask us to assimilate any such claims because we bring a powerful innate tendency to do so with us to our seats, a tendency Pinter can therefore both stimulate and frustrate continuously. A similar balancing act defines Pinter's own creative process from beginning to end—"You are out on your own," he underscores in his Nobel speech, "out on a limb." Uncertainty, in other words, is at work as Pinter composes his plays; he is always seeking to make sense of the words his characters autonomously speak.

In *Old Times*, the relational dynamic revolves around memory and the past, and this comes into view in the third line of dialogue. "Fuller than me, I think," Kate responds, this time without a pause. Even as this answer tells the audience more about Kate's relationship to Deeley, its speculative cast sustains the uncertainty. In a subtle way, Kate's reply also introduces themes of time and memory—Kate's "I think" indicates an experiential boundary foreclosing what she might know regarding "fat or thin?" The most obvious such boundary involves the passage of time and the vagaries of memory. Kate can't remember Anna's figure quite so well, especially as it might be today, in the present moment shared by the audience and Pinter's mimetic characters up on stage. After a second pause, as if the playwright is catching up to what the characters are doing, Deeley asks, "She was then?" The use of the past tense clarifies that Kate's uncertainty may, indeed, be linked to the passage of time. "I think so," replies Kate, in a line that deftly refuses to resolve the issue for the playwright, for the actor playing Deeley, or for the audience. While Kate *seems to be* answering Deeley's question in a spirit of good will, the brevity of her replies leaves open the possibility that she is dissembling. The audience is left pondering not just the question but also the reliability of Kate's memory, the degree of trust between her and Deeley, and the mirror-like nature of the world these characters occupy.

Deeley's interest in how Kate and Anna were in those "old times" is infused with just enough prurience to underscore his ongoing sexual interest in his wife. And his interest has an edge of gendered anxiety as well—in Pinter's plays the masculine is often eager, if not desperate, to fix the feminine within a clear, epistemic map. Like many of Pinter's male characters, Deeley wants to *know*. The audience, also wanting liberation from an oppressive *aporia*, is quick to imitate his desire.

As the initial dialogue in *Old Times* proceeds Deeley and Kate joust with each other about what happened all those years ago, and the specific mimetic dynamics of that time gradually reassert themselves over the course of the evening. Anna, we are now told, once borrowed a pair of Kate's underpants. This titillating detail has all the hallmarks of the erotically loaded images that recur

in Pinter's plays, helping him structure the dramatic scenario. The dialogue between Kate and Deeley now reaches an intriguing turn:

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**DEELEY:** I'll be watching you.

**KATE:** Me, why?

**DEELEY:** To see if she's the same person.

**KATE:** You think you'll find that out through me?

Deeley here makes explicit the metamimetic nature of the situation—he will be watching Kate, *as if she were performing on a stage*. Kate's response is to answer this question with another. By so doing Kate suggests that if Deeley believes she will reveal anything in her reaction to Anna, he might be disappointed. But in a subtle way she also questions the premise that Deeley must resort to such secondhand measures, implying he may enjoy a more direct source of knowledge about her old friend Anna. Kate's question thus points toward the possibility that Deeley is also dissembling. She has opened a window, as it were, to let some of the uncertainty Deeley has dispelled back into the room.

It would be hard to overstate how unusual Pinter's work is in the central role uncertainty plays across the board. A commonplace of theatre practice, for example, is that an audience is drawn in, not because a character is especially virtuous or appealing, but because the audience can read their intention—the desire motivating their actions. This “reading”—modeling a character's intention in order to predict the action as it moves forward—involves the passive mimesis of identification. “Were I this character, in this situation,” the audience member says to herself, “I too would take that action.” In his unique approach to playwriting, Pinter throws a complicating wrench into this mechanism of identification. While each line in Pinter is fully motivated within its immediate context, clarity regarding intention remains ambiguous or obscure.

Pinter's use of uncertain intentionality is equally unusual from a directorial and performative point of view. From Stanislavsky forward, actors and directors are trained to search out intention as a key to the performance of character. Locating intention—what the character wants or desires on a conscious or subconscious level—the actor then inhabits the character as she enacts that intention. Working with actors in a Pinter play, a director quickly encounters not a dearth but rather a superabundance of strong intentions. In *Old Times*, for example, Deeley wants to retain his hold over Kate and protect her from Anna, but he is also clearly drawn to Anna himself. Anna wants to rekindle her primary bond with Kate and to rescue her from Deeley, but she is also erotically interested in Deeley. The purpose of a typical rehearsal process is to arrive at the *correct* interpretation of who wants what, and who ends up “winning.” Rehearsing *Streetcar Named Desire*, there are only a limited number of possible

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intentions that fit the exchanges between the characters. Not so with *Old Times*. The action can be read in a number of plausible ways: Anna has come with the intention of leaving with Deeley. Or she has come with the intention of leaving with Kate. No, it is Deeley who intends to leave with Anna, who may, or may not, be an ex-lover. The audience, along with the actors performing these roles, are suspended in a kind of interpretive superposition. Kate's desires remain especially obscure.

At this point in *Old Times*, we note various symmetries. Steeped in the basic human experience of uncertainty or not knowing, Deeley's questions and Kate's tentative responses align them with the predominant state of mind of an author beginning to venture forth across the blank page, and of an actor attempting to locate motivation in order to ground her performance. This aporia also defines the state of mind of an audience member observing a play as it begins, wanting to dispel the darkness and locate a coherent mapping of this shadowy world. Author, performers, and audience are all aligned in a search for truth within a world of mirrors. Girard's mimetic theory helps us see how an audience's participation in this search itself is mimetic—the audience member *identifies* first with one character, then with another, taking on his or her desire as the contest moves forward, waiting for the “winner” to emerge.

Pinter's work provides audiences with a lived experience of these unnerving linkages, showing the gnawing anxiety about identity driving social and political interactions at every scale. By infusing his characters with a radical uncertainty transmitted directly from his own creative process, Pinter binds his audience to the dramatic action as it unfolds, thereby mitigating the displeasure—the anxiety and frustration—typically triggered by uncertainty and ambiguity in a representational narrative. The audience is drawn in and repelled in equal measure, and, as a result, stays steady in its orbit, riveted by what unfolds onstage, but uneasy and wary at the same time. The hermeneutics Saltz locates in Pinter's work thus enforces a radical, not a minimal, uncertainty, precisely to draw attention to the power dynamics of mimetic desire in the “real” world of the audience.

Unlike what audiences encounter in a work of dramatic realism, radical uncertainty defines *Old Times* from beginning to end. This aporia is not a flaw of Pinter's compositional technique, or something he seeks to resolve for the audience; uncertainty regarding the true motivations of his characters—what they truly want—is what Pinter labors to retain. The mimetic faculties of the audience have been engaged, but in *Old Times* these faculties are denied the clarity that makes a representational drama so satisfying. Even before Anna speaks, Pinter has already drawn the unrequited desire of the audience to identify mimetically while observing a dramatic performance into view.

What becomes visible here is Pinter's embrace of the radical potentiality of the stage to take on innumerable intentions, a space that can be configured and reconfigured to represent any place and any time. Pinter's mobilization of this radical potentiality helps account for the ghostliness Craig Owens locates in Pinter's plays, a quality linked to their "out of joint" treatment of temporality. The connection Owens draws between the uncertainty of Pinter's plays and Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" at the core of sovereign order is well taken. I would go further, however, and argue that Pinter's work shows the stage to be *an exceptional space of mimesis*. Indeed, the *mimetic* and the *exceptional* qualities of the stage are arguably so inextricably linked as to be two aspects of the same thing. The concepts of Girard and Agamben begin to intersect around the insecurity of personal identity on the one hand, and of state power on the other. The legal order of the state and the boundedness of individual identity become analogous to each other across different scales. Just as the state must enter an extralegal domain of complete fluidity (i.e., uncertainty) in order to secure the foundations for its own sovereign power, so too do individuals draw from a paradoxical groundlessness of uncertain desire in order to lay claim to a fixed identity.

### Showing Triangular Desire at Work in Domination

When Anna is revealed, turning from her place at the window, she performs a long sense-memory reminiscence about the time she and Kate lived together in their London flat twenty years prior. Her entrance underscores how in *Old Times* the dramatic action is all retroaction, reconnecting us to the looking forwardness of youth. Full of nostalgia and whimsy familiar to anyone over the age of thirty, she recounts busy workdays and then:

... the night to come, and goodness knows what excitement in store, I mean the sheer expectation of it all, the looking-forwardness of it all, and so poor, but to be poor and young, and a girl, in London then. ...

The long, breathless passage closes with the question of whether that world of excitement and tumult still exists. The question elicits Deeley's dry response, "We rarely get to London." Coffee and brandy are served, and after an uncomfortable silence, we move into a second stage of *Old Times* rooted in mimetic competition. As Savran notes, "By 'remembering' old times, the characters manipulate each other, create the play's action (its present) and play out the dynamics of triangular desire" (43). Given the central role uncertainty plays in the individual psyches of Pinter's characters, as sketched out above, it is important to trace exactly how the double mediation of mimetic desire enrolls them in agendas of domination.

The arrival of Anna has triggered a mimetic crisis in Kate and Deeley's relationship, activating the power dynamics Pinter is drawn to. Many of Pinter's plays are structured around similar triangles—including *The Caretaker* (a man and his two sons), *The Homecoming* (a woman, her husband, and his family), and *Betrayal* (a woman and two men), all the way through *Ashes to Ashes* (a woman and a man split in two)—and triangular, or “mimetic” desire, in which someone else's desire is copied, is a key to understanding the metamimetic dynamic that drives them. In sharp contrast to the seamless and transparent mimetic spectacle of dramatic realism, everything in *Old Times* now points toward the problematic link between mimesis and domination.

As the first act proceeds, Deeley and Anna question each other about their lives, probing for weakness. The duplicitous formality of English mores collides here with the equally powerful British commitment to impeccable honesty. As if by a tidal force, the conversation is drawn back into the past. Deeley announces that he wishes “he had known you both then,” a statement that elicits from Anna a bland “Do you?” Deeley then pours more brandy for himself, Pinter calling attention to the red flag that has been thrown—Deeley is dissembling, and so is Anna. What we are watching in both cases, in other words, is a performance within a performance. As for Kate, it remains unclear to what degree she is aware of the duplicity of her two dinner partners or is also performing a nonchalance she does not feel. As Kate hangs back, Deeley and Anna seek to dominate each other not by controlling the past, but by controlling *the story of the past*: how it is *represented* through mimetic stratagems that are all about grounding a dominant identity in the present.

The political aspect of Pinter's work depends on this kind of metatheatricality, which serves to illuminate the role mimetic desire covertly plays in the maintenance of social identity per se. This is the metamimetic dimension of the work. When Pinter's characters perform for each other on stage, there is indeed a meta effect that includes the witnessing audience, but this effect attaches to a diegetic moment notable for how it is already steeped in the powerful spell of mimesis. The ubiquity of mimesis within the construction of characters up on stage is mirrored by the operations of mimetic identification at work in each member of the audience. In his Nobel speech, for example, Pinter lacerates Americans for routinely cosigning the government's diegetic assertions of sovereign power rather than look beyond the spellbinding image of virtue that confronts us in the mirror. This echoing makes trouble for the otherwise astute distinction Craig Owens draws between diegesis and mimesis within the “villainy of the present” operating in Pinter's domestic dramas (38). Pinter's overtly menacing characters—McCann in *The Birthday Party*, Lenny in *The Homecoming*—perform domination not to eliminate a diegetic past, but rather to establish a nihilism that extends across all domains of temporality.



These characters seek, in effect, to weaponize the radical uncertainty Pinter has tapped in order to compose his plays. And this same aporia also undergirds the mimetic, and hence insecure, identities performed by members of the audience in their diegetic world.

Pinter's process of following "what I see on the paper in front of me—one sentence after another" creates a sense in *Old Times* of the text emerging from a kind of dreaming-forward, as when Anna announces that she lives on a volcanic island. "I've been there," Deeley says, and the action moves on. Only later is this volcanic island named—it is Sicily, and the city she lives outside of is Taormina. We must consider the likelihood that Pinter wrote the line about volcanic island before knowing the actual location—Sicily came later, Pinter following where his unconscious, not-knowing mind had already led.

The question of Deeley's possible presence in both these women's lives returns when he and Anna begin to recite show tunes by Cole Porter and similar composers. The fact that they remember exactly the same songs suggests, but does not firmly establish, a covert former bond. The musical interlude ends with Deeley recounting his memory of first meeting Kate at a screening of the film *Odd Man Out* by the director Carol Reed, the film's title fixing the precise nature of his anxiety. Deeley recalls seeing two women as he entered the movie theatre, one of them stroking her own breasts. The detail stands out—could the two women have been Kate and Anna? Given his comments in the Nobel speech, we sense Pinter at his writing desk was engaged with a version of this same question.

The centrality of *mimesis* in the world of *Old Times* comes home when Anna speaks about the unreliability of memory: "There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place." It is as if *mimesis* has commandeered the stage and increasingly claims to be in charge of the real here. Anna then recounts a mysterious episode in which she awoke one night to find a man sobbing in Kate's arms across the room. In the dark, this man came and stood over Anna, then left the apartment. But then, sometime later in the night, he returned to lie again across Kate's lap. Immediately, we wonder if this man might be Deeley, and given Pinter's statements about his writing process, we understand that the playwright himself is also wondering about this image, his curiosity drawing him further into the scenario he is writing. The disturbing, dreamlike power of the image of the sobbing man suggests we will encounter it again, as we do at the end of the play.

Kate now intervenes, confronting Anna with the observation, "You talk of me as if I were dead." Anna and Deeley both refute this accusation, which applies to Deeley as well as to Anna. The exchange closes with Deeley's account of the thought process that led him, back when he was a student, to "saddle himself with a slip of a girl," that is, Kate. Anna once again leaps in to take us back to

her life in London with Kate, and their mutual love of art. This long breathless monologue closes with an account of traveling by bus to some “totally obscure, some totally unfamiliar district” to see the film *Odd Man Out*. So it is true after all, we may think to ourselves—Deeley did in fact meet Kate at that film screening and Anna was there, displaced by their encounter. The sense of plot points falling into place is complicated, however, by Anna’s statement about false memories becoming true, and by the forward rush of the conversation.

The effect of these slowly emerging connections is vertiginous—it is almost as if these characters are competitively creating the past (and therefore the present and future too) as they go, in an elaborate mimetic game played in a present that is, finally, a void. Anna now talks directly about her new life in Sicily, where she lives in a villa high above Taormina. Deeley, it turns out, has spent time in Taormina during a professional project, and the audience might wonder in passing if perhaps he and Anna met during Deeley’s trip to the city, and are concealing this encounter from Kate. And yet only moments earlier, Deeley introduced himself as Orson Welles, an absurdity that serves to throw all his assertions into doubt. Once again, by withholding certainty Pinter only accents the stakes—what is it these characters are so desperate to conceal?

Having retained a crucial openness without disrupting any of the other conventions of dramatic realism, *Old Times* now approaches a moment of truth: Anna must answer Kate’s question about the people of Sicily. There is a silence, and it is filled with the crucial question of what, finally, is going on here. As if the capacities of the scene to flow further in the direction of droll evasion have been exhausted, Anna opens a whole new way to move forward in complete uncertainty. Instead of answering Kate’s question about whether she loves the Sicilian people, she moves directly into the past, saying, “Don’t let’s go out tonight, don’t let’s go anywhere tonight, let’s stay in.” The stage direction—“quietly”—and the invitation to seek refuge with each other suggest an aching vulnerability. And instead of rejecting this bid for intimate recall, Kate leaps right in, playing along: “Oh, I don’t know. We could go out.” As Hevesi puts it, the characters at this point have become “penetrated so much by the past that it ceases to exist on its own” (65). Deeley watches as the two women now perform versions of their former life together, as if the intervening decades had simply fallen away.

What is the difference, the audience is forced to consider, between this time-leaping performance, and what is “really” happening up on stage? In what way is this representation of a remembered interaction from twenty years ago distinguishable from the en-framing scenario? By extension, the privileged reality the audience occupies in the seats watching this play-within-a-play is also called into question, and the metamimetic implications of Pinter’s work begin to come into new focus. The two women continue their reenactment, Anna asking Kate if they should invite a man over—Charley perhaps, or McCabe?

Evidently this was common practice between Anna and Kate back in those old times. Before the audience's eyes, Deeley is being negated, erased as Kate's husband, and relegated to the domain the audience inhabits, just another passive bystander engaging in the representation via the passive mimesis of the spectator. Fraught with the uncanny, the scene points toward the episode of the sobbing man, as if Deeley had distinguished himself from his many rivals by the anguish this ritual of masculine erasure gave rise to.

To believe this reenactment has given Anna the upper hand in her contest with Deeley over Kate's affections would be to misconstrue the nature of mimetic desire, in which a subject desires an object "in imitation of a third party, a mediator whose desire for same object has given it value in the eyes of the subject" (Savran 41). In mimetic contests the object of desire is irrelevant—it is the *desiring itself* that motivates the mimetic behavior, the imitation. The desiring subject is imitated, and that imitation is always competitive, eliminative, and threatening. In *Old Times* the audience wants what Deeley wants (if only it could be understood), and then, a moment later, finds itself wanting what Anna wants, and so on. The contest in this hall of mirrors self-amplifies toward the link between mimetic competition and overt violence—Anna seeks to become Kate, thereby displacing her. And, odd as it may seem, Anna also seeks to displace Deeley, who is also filled with imitative desire with respect to Anna's bond with Kate. These interactions intensify as the first act closes, Pinter emphasizing the loss of humanity—"you talk of me as if I were dead"—on which mimetic desire stages its contests.

Kate's move, when confronted with Anna's mimetic embrace, is to step away, shifting from identity back into the open potentiality offstage, as if it were a purifying bath. Deeley, meanwhile, watches as if entranced. He has been sidelined by the women's temporal move back into the past. As Kate exits into the offstage, Anna turns to meet Deeley's gaze, and the lights fade bringing Act 1 to a close.

In dramatic realism, the intentions or desires of opposing characters clash against each other. Pinter's metamimetic technique focuses instead on the underlying condition of uncertainty driving mimetic competition. While Pinter's characters seem droll and composed, underneath they are deeply anxious, a strange extinction always threatening. Registering as a menacing presence always just offstage, this extinction is never named directly. This extinction actually *is* close by; it arises from the radical openness that is the root condition of the stage, and also of the creative process. Just as a modern painter might use the white surface of the canvas, Pinter uses the bare stage—so full of potentiality, i.e., pure difference—to create tension in his plays. This overabundant capacity of the open stage to fix meaning can also erase all distinctions, undermining the ground on which power erects its hierarchies—a space of exception refusing any claim of sovereign power.



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By now a three-part structure common to many of Pinter's plays has come into view, governing the metamimetic aspect of *Old Times*. The first stage involves quotidian exchanges between pairs of characters who withhold from each other, and from the audience, the motivational clarity that is typically established early in a realistic play. Seeking to resolve the uncertainty of their dramatic situation, these characters dispute with each other about an offstage or prior event. Seemingly random images—the taxi driving McGregor and Max's wife took around London in *The Homecoming*, the borrowed panties in *Old Times*, or the man on the train platform in *Ashes to Ashes* tearing babies from the arms of their screaming mothers—arise in these exchanges and are used by Pinter to structure the scenario as it moves forward. A second stage begins with the arrival of a third entity—Ruth and Teddy entering the house in *The Homecoming*, Anna turning from the window in *Old Times*—destabilizing the status quo. Both referee and provocateur, this third character brings the power dynamic into clearer focus. In a third and final stage, this stalemate is resolved when the offstage event that had been simply remembered or referred to is now directly reenacted. This reenactment takes place in a timeless present that also includes the audience. It is here, in this third stage, that Pinter's metamimetic feminine begins to register.

### Enacting Connective Difference

Kate has drifted in and out of the exchange between Deeley and Anna, her dreaminess commented on by both characters. Described repeatedly as ethereal and vague, unable to keep track of hours and days, Kate registers increasingly as different from her companions. Operating without a clearly defined identity, Kate is also the one character who exits into the offstage, leaving at the end of Act 1 to take her bath. As Judith Roof notes, the offstage in Pinter is a space of unseen causes that includes, but is not limited to, the presence of the audience (21). But, again, the effect here is not to accent the diegetic, but rather to point toward the open condition of pure potentiality, and the amplified uncertainty that potentiality brings in tow. The offstage in theatre can, in fact, be usefully described as a realm of *pure difference* that, from the perspective of identity, arrives as pure catastrophe: the space beyond the mirror.

In Pinter's body of work the characters Kate resembles most are Ruth from *The Homecoming* and Rebecca from *Ashes to Ashes*. Together they give form to what might be called Pinter's metamimetic feminine. These women undermine the hierarchies of power and domination grounding the identities of the other characters. They do so by tapping the unfixed world of theatrical space and time in order to occupy pure connective difference. Instead of death, hierarchy, and mimetic identity, they lay claim to Eros and life. In *Old Times*, Kate in effect calls attention to what Anna and Deeley are *in fact* doing, in stark contrast to



what they *say* they are doing. The hermeneutic engagement of the audience is abruptly interrupted by the central fact of mimetic competition as it erases the distinction between the stage and the “real” world inhabited by the audience, who identify first with one character, and then with the other, looking, again, for the “winner.”

Act 2 of *Old Times* commences in Deeley and Kate’s bedroom. Memory has taken material form, it would seem. Kate and Deeley’s bedroom is configured in the same way as the apartment Kate shared with Anna in London years ago: two beds across the room from each other. Kate is still offstage completing her bath. Entering to serve coffee, Deeley continues “to transform Anna into an object of desire” (Savran 49). Deeley now claims to have met Anna in the artist’s tavern we have heard about—the Wayfarers Tavern. Anna denies all this in a desultory way, but Deeley continues, describing an encounter at a party where he sat looking up the skirt of a woman on a couch across the room. The borrowed panties Pinter introduced in the first pages now return in one of those moments of magic so typical of Pinter’s plays. “Your black stockings were very black,” Deeley says, “because your thighs were so white.” This dream-like, fetishistic image has served to structure Pinter’s mimetic contest, the woman in question clearly being Anna. Deeley describes Anna being joined on the couch at that party long ago by a second woman—Kate, we presume. Deeley’s story ends in silence, Anna passively affirming the encounter. When their conversation resumes, Anna and Deeley now discuss Kate offstage in her bath. The invocation of Kate’s naked body immersing itself in the steaming water adds to the erotic tension. Deeley and Anna exchange observations about Kate’s bodily experience offstage, how she soaps herself, rinses and dries off, and so on. Both characters emphasize the cleanliness of Kate’s body after the bath, as if she were Aphrodite herself.

Kate now makes a triumphant return, exuding a long sigh of contentment as she crosses to the window. Kate’s sojourn into the offstage has completed her transformation into what Savran calls a “passive divinity” (46). Through her “utter unapproachability” she “ensures that neither rival can possess her and, at the same time, locks in the rivals, that is, guarantees the continuation of the triangle.” Deeley and Anna now alternately sing the lyrics of the same Gershwin song, “They Can’t Take That Away from Me.” The song is about the cherishing of memory, the two characters bonding in opposition now to Kate. Still avoiding epistemic closure and clarity, the evasive repartee resumes.

Once again, Anna and Kate retreat into the past, “Is Charley coming over?” If the first of these regressions left Kate wanting to bathe, this second one, initiated this time by Kate herself, makes explicit Anna’s mimetic—and therefore competitive—intention, which is to flee her own uncertain desire by becoming Kate. As stated above, Anna is not, in these enactments, laying claim to Kate as an

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object of desire. Rather, in returning to those “old times” she seeks a ground of shared experience from which a mimetic capture might be performed. “I want your desire” can look a lot like “I love you,” and Kate increasingly seems aware of this. As stated earlier, the contest at the heart of the play is not whether Deeley or Anna will possess Kate as the object of their desire. Rather, it is whether they will be able to extract from Kate the capacity to exist outside triangular desire.

At issue in the death imagery that closes the play are the violent implications of mimetic competition. Deeley initiates this final sequence, when he comments that Anna’s former relationship to Kate “sounds like the perfect marriage.” A short while later Deeley reveals his disgust: “Am I alone in beginning to find all this distasteful?” The subtext, the audience might think, will now become fully textual. And indeed, Deeley is on the attack, asking why he should waste his time listening to the long exchange of memories between the women. This leads Kate to intervene, “Why don’t you leave?” The pointedness of the question is quickly softened by more witty repartee. Anna quickly adopts a peacekeeping stance—“I came here not to disrupt but to celebrate,” she proclaims. Anna goes on to speak of how she “found” Kate, Pygmalion-like all those years ago, and how she never wanted anything but happiness for her friend. Deeley’s response is to put his cards on the table: “We’ve met before, Anna and I,” he tells Kate. His speech taking on the hip lingo of the day, Deeley describes Anna’s presence at the Wayfarers tavern, and how she wore Kate’s panties at that time, and acted shy like her friend too. And now, in a remarkable series of statements, Deeley describes the eliminatory aims of mimetic desire directly:

She was pretending to be you at the time . . . she said she was you, said little, so little. Maybe she was you. Maybe it was you, having coffee with me, saying little, so little.

Kate, for her part, is nonplussed by this confession, as if the truth were something she has known all along. She responds as if she were Anna, continuing the exchange of identities that is central to the play’s completion. “She found your face very sensitive, vulnerable,” Kate tells Deeley in a sequence that ends with, “she fell in love with you.” The image of the borrowed panties returns yet again, Anna confessing coldly that she remembers Deeley looking up her skirt at the party they attended all those years ago. And now Kate delivers a final verdict on the death-like nature of mimetic desire: “But I remember you,” she says to Anna, “I remember you dead.”

Kate brings the play to its close with a long monologue describing Anna lying dead in their old apartment with dirt on her face. The death here is the lifelessness of a borrowed identity. Kate uses images of dirt, death, and emptiness to address the travesty of mimetic desire, first with Anna and then with Deeley.

Kate describes how Anna imitated “my little trick, my little slow shy smile, my bend of the head, my half closing of the eyes that we knew so well.” Emotionally, Kate is describing the betrayal of truth/love inherent to mimetic competition, which “didn’t work,” but only called attention to an underlying lifelessness in Anna, splitting “the dirt at the sides of your mouth.” Having vanquished Anna, Kate now describes being with Deeley in Anna’s bed. She attempted to put dirt on his face, but he suggested “a wedding instead and a change of environment.” Kate now lowers the boom: “Neither mattered.” In the final lines of the play Kate brings us all around: “He asked me once, at about that time, who had slept in that bed before him. I told him no one. No one at all.” A mimetic identity, in other words, is an entirely empty one. The unnerving episode of the sobbing man returns, this time fully enacted. In silence, Deeley and Anna make brief bids to leave the room, only to then surrender to the underlying truth of their relationship. Anna returns to the bed she lay in that night years before. Deeley looks down at her briefly, then returns to Kate and lies sobbing across her lap.

Nothing has really changed in the relational dynamic set up long ago between these three characters. The mimetic dynamic of this triangle and its persistence across time are revealed to the audience all at once. Patronized by the other two as dreamy, elusive, indistinct, unable to track the striations of dates and times, Kate is the more real one here, precisely because of her alignment with pure difference, pure capacity. She inhabits the uncertainty the two others flee from into mimetic violence, and thus looms large before the audience on the other side of the mirror. Not looking to ground an identity, Kate exists closest to the authorial presence composing the play. And so a new triangle arises: Kate stands at one of its points, Deeley and Anna as a unit occupy another, and the audience a third point.

The problem Pinter solves with Kate’s final monologue is quite technical: how do you render or represent the operations of mimetic desire when all you have at your disposal are the mimetic devices of theatre? If mimetic competition is the source of domination as a relational mode, how do you critique it using the mimetic tools of dramatic realism? In *Old Times*, Pinter does this via Kate who, like his characters Ruth and Rebecca, completes a metamimetic, mirror-smashing agenda. Able to tolerate the groundlessness beneath identity, Kate provides the audience with a leap into the metamimetic, from where imitative desire can be critiqued and resisted. Whereas normative dramatic realism is rooted in passive mimesis and identification with protagonists, Pinter instead forces a metamimetic awareness of difference. In a Pinter play we finally cannot get lost in the desire or aversion of his characters by choosing sides. Rather, we experience how desire and aversion coemerge as two people interact in relation to the desire of a present or absent third. Pinter implicitly challenges his audiences to choose between the emptiness of mimetic desire on the one hand, and

### Metamimetic Scaling and the Political

It might seem that mimesis involves a peripheral part of us, but Girard suggests mimesis is the most consequential aspect of ourselves as social beings. To Girard, the central role mimesis plays arises from the ungrounded condition of human identity. Encountering uncertainty at the root of experience—specifically, we are never sure what we should want—we seek to anchor our identities by imitating the desire of others. This imitation of the desire of the other inevitably becomes competitive, and therefore a source of domination and violence. “Both models and imitators of the same desire inevitably desire the same object and become rivals,” Girard writes. “Their rival desires literally feed on one another: The imitator becomes the model of his model, and the model the imitator of his imitator” (“Violence and Religion” 1). This “double mediation” calls to mind the hall-of-mirrors, metamimetic experience of a Pinter play. Pinter is a Girardian playwright because his characters are not enacting any innate desire, but instead emerge from the uncertainty of Pinter’s creative process, taking on form in order to exit from this underlying uncertainty. Working metamimetically, Pinter keeps us within the experience of uncertainty that drives imitative desire. His metamimetic approach holds an audience precisely because it critiques an oppressive tension we are already intimately familiar with.

Pinter himself rejects the idea that he is representing truth or holding up a mirror to reality. “I don’t conceptualize in any way,” he says. “Once I’ve got the clues I follow them—that’s my job, really, to follow the clues.” The metamimetic is therefore a result of Pinter’s highly intuitive creative process. To call Pinter’s approach “antitheatrical” is to miss the centrality of theatrical—i.e., *mimetic*—performance to daily life. Pinter’s plays labor to make the relationships between mimesis, identity, and domination visible, thereby holding open another way forward. They exist to reveal something otherwise hidden: that we are continuously performing identities that have no firm ground. Our tacit participation in the operations of state domination is purchased by the fiction that our identities are fixed and permanent and continuous in time, rather than inherently ungrounded. Indeed, it is only by fully understanding the theatrical dimension of daily life that a true ethics, and thus a coherent politics, becomes possible.

The politics here—a *representational* politics—have become even more conspicuous since Pinter’s death, in large part because of the imitative dynamic fueling the spread of social media into every aspect of our lives. Weaponized in the 2016 U.S. presidential election by entities such as Cambridge Analytica, social media runs on mimetic competition. One can be skeptical, as I am, of the totalizing aspect of Girard’s theory and still believe his concept of mimetic desire needs to be taken seriously. Far from being an obscure sideshow in the



discourse of politics, mimesis emerges today as central. The low-grade mimetic competition of posting on Facebook and Instagram, both of which belong to a company recently rebranded as Meta, is driving the culture toward social division, and violence. Like other Pinter plays, *Old Times* positions us outside the mimetic mechanisms that increasingly dominate our social world. Through his metamimetic devices, Pinter arms his audiences with a direct, felt-sense awareness of how mimetic power operates beneath the surface of late-phase capitalist society, and shows how the politics of mimesis relate to the groundlessness of identity. Piercing the web of ignorance keeping us in the mimetic spell, his plays remain highly relevant to the task of creating a new and truly liberatory politics.

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