Connotations
Vol. 13.1-2 (2003/2004)

Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet

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Parody is a form of imitation for satirical purposes. The parodist ridicules or mocks the object of his parody. But the parodist usually has a sneaking affection for what he is parodying: an old style that has gone out of fashion, highly sentimental discourse, seemingly meaningless clichés that are an essential part of popular culture. The subject is complicated when the parodist seems to be parodying himself in an extravagant, hyperbolic, and overwrought way.

Surely this is true of Shakespeare's Hamlet when he scoffs at his own exaggerated and inflamed heroic style. The First Player has just broken off his histrionic speech about Hecuba, the "mobbled queen" (2.2.505). Hamlet, in the soliloquy that follows, reproaches himself that the player could get so agitated "But in a fiction, in a dream of passion" (2.2.554). The essential point is:

> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have? (2.2.561-64)

Hamlet then proceeds to work himself up to a grandiloquent climax that goes beyond the player's "dream of passion" to his own personal case for vengeance. The vaunting speech of revenge is focussed on Claudius the murderer:

> I should 'a' fatted all the region kites
> With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy villain!
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
> O, vengeance! (2.2.581-84)

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To the surprise of the audience (and probably of Hamlet too) he suddenly breaks off and comments disdainfully on his own overwrought style:

> Why, what an ass am I! Ay, sure, this is most brave,
> That I, the son of the dear murderèd,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
> A scullion! Fie upon't, foh! (2.2.585-90)

This is essentially parody, obviously self-parody, where Hamlet is mocking his own rodomontade. It is a very self-conscious comment on the appropriate style for "the son of a dear father murdered." "This is most brave"—"brave" is a word usually used by Shakespeare for showy and glistering apparel, as in the clothes that Caliban and his cohorts steal from Prospero in *The Tempest*. What is needed is not a "brave" style but one that is authentic and sincere.

David Mamet, an American dramatist and film maker born in Chicago in 1947, is not Shakespeare, but he too is preoccupied with matters of style. This acute, stylistic self-consciousness is what makes parody, and especially self-parody, possible. Mamet seems to be laughing at his own extravagance in such matters as macho boasting, an 'artful' use of dirty words, an avalanche of clichés with a menacing undertone, and a kind of meaningless repetition and inarticulateness with which only actors feel comfortable. Mamet began his career as an actor (as did Pinter, with whom he has many resemblances), so that he understands how insidious repetition can be handled by actors, who know how to register dramatic points.

We are helped in this discussion by David Ives's effective parody of Mamet in the short piece, *Speed-the-Play*, which is a takeoff on Mamet's *Speed the Plow* (1988). I saw *Speed-the-Play* when it was performed in an Off-Broadway theater in New York in 1998 as part of a collection of Ives's one-acts called *Mere Mortals*. The audience seemed to know Mamet well and laughed in all the right places, validating Ives's sense of what is parodiable in Mamet. The scene of the play is a

meeting hall in Chicago, with three men dressed in blue-collar garb and two women dressed as blue-collar babes. The Master of Ceremonies is a man, "but he is played by a woman in Mamet gear: a safari jacket, a baseball cap, a stubbly beard, and aviator glasses" (151). The MC enumerates the essence of Mamet's genius. First, he knows that Americans like speed. Second, he "knows that Americans don't like to pay for parking. They also don't give a shit about theatre" (151). Third, he "knows how Americans talk. Especially American men. He knows that when men go to the theatre, they want to hear familiar words, like 'asshole,' and 'jagoff'" (152). In conclusion, "David Mamet is the William Congreve of our time" (152).

Four plays are rapidly parodied: *American Buffalo*, *Oleanna*, *Speed-the-Plow*, and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. I will restrict my comments to *Oleanna*. The MC tells us that it is written in "his complex, Harry Jamesian style." There is a wordplay on Henry James, the novelist, and Harry James, the trumpet player and bandleader. Some of the things we pick up in less than two pages of text are that the characters in Mamet are inarticulate and their conversation—if you can call it that—doesn't make sense. This is the opening dialogue between John, the teacher, and Carol, the distraught student who has come to see him in his office:

JOHN So you…
CAROL I. I. I…
JOHN But.
CAROL When the…
JOHN *No. No. No.* You do *not*.

This is followed by a significant exchange:

CAROL But in your class, you—
JOHN Me like you.
CAROL But in your class you said—
JOHN No. No. No. I may have spoken, but I did not *say*…

The MC's final comment is: "I think that says it. She's wrong, he's right."

To work backwards, the short parody of *Oleanna* in *Speed-the-Play* is an excellent introduction to Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992). The play is a curious reworking of Ionesco's *The Lesson* (1951), in which the roles of inarticulate Professor and articulate student are rapidly and homicidally eroded. In Mamet, Carol the student becomes remarkably articulate by Act Three and lectures and browbeats the abashed Professor, who has lost everything including tenure and the deposit on his new house.

I would like to quote a fairly long piece from the opening engagement between John and Carol. John has been speaking on the telephone with his wife about a house they are trying to buy. He throws in the legal term "easement," and questions whether it is a "term of art" and "we are *bound* by it…" (2). Carol, the troubled student, immediately seizes on the expression "term of art":

CAROL (*Pause*) What is a "term of art"?
JOHN (*Pause*) I'm sorry …?
CAROL (*Pause*) What is a "term of art"?
JOHN Is that what you want to talk about?
CAROL … to talk about …?
JOHN Let's take the mysticism out of it, shall we? Carol? (*Pause*) Don't you think? I'll tell you: when you have some "thing." Which must be broached. (*Pause*) Don't you think …? (*Pause*)
CAROL … don't I think …?
JOHN Mmm?
CAROL … did I …?
JOHN … what?
CAROL Did … did I … did I say something wr…
JOHN (*Pause*) No. I'm sorry. No. You're right. I'm very sorry. I'm somewhat rushed. As you see. I'm sorry. You're right. (*Pause*) What is a "term of art"? It seems to mean a *term*, which has come, through its use, to mean something *more specific* than the words would, to someone *not acquainted* with them … indicate. That, I believe, is what a "term of art," would mean. (*Pause*)
CAROL You don't know what it means …?
JOHN I'm not sure that I know what it means. It's one of those things, perhaps you've had them, that, you look them up, or have someone explain them to you, and you say "aha," and, you immediately *forget* what … (2-4)

What do we gather from this blizzard of pauses, elisions (represented by three dots on the page), dashes, words in italics, repetitions, non sequitors, and incoherent discourse? It is a dialogue made for actors. Clearly we know immediately that John the Professor doesn't know what he is talking about. He is a pretentious windbag who hasn't any idea at all what "term of art" means and is trying to snow Carol. She is persistent, ragging, stubborn, irritating. She worries the preoccupied Professor, mutely accusing him of all the things that will become evident as the play progresses. We already sense her ominous power. The protagonists are both remarkably unsympathetic. The opening dialogue sounds like a parody of Pinter, especially in the excessive pauses and meaningless exchanges, but the dialogue is also very revealing about the characters. A lot of the meaning is expressed gesturally, both in sound and in movement (or lack of it). The characters are embarrassed and tentative. They size each other up. The many words in italics are cues to the actors for emphasis. Although they may have little or no meaning in themselves, they are expressed importantly. One of the salient features of Mamet's style is that he is entirely uncompromising. He pursues his dramatic points with a wild emphasis. It is overreaching, if not actually hyperbolical. This acute self-consciousness of style involves elaborate and knowing parody, if not what we may call self-parody. Mamet is always and consistently Mametesque.

It is interesting how dirty words—Mamet's trademark, stylistically—are withheld until the final, ambiguous climax. The empowered Carol's final demand that John subscribe to a list of proscribed books, including his own textbook, is the last straw that finally shakes him out of his professional style—rational, seemingly temperate but nevertheless patronizing—in which he has tried vainly to confront the angry and proto-feminist babble that Carol has been spouting. As Carol starts to leave the room, John grabs her and begins to beat her:

> JOHN You vicious little bitch. You think you can come in here with your political correctness and destroy my life? (*He knocks her to the floor*.)

After how I treated you…? You should be…*Rape you*…? Are you kidding me…?
(*He picks up a chair, raises it above his head, and advances on her*.)
I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little *cunt*….
(*She cowers on the floor below him. Pause. He looks down at her. He lowers the chair. He moves to his desk, and arranges the papers on it. Pause. He looks over at her*.)
…well…
(*Pause. She looks at him*.)
CAROL Yes. That's right.
(*She looks away from him and lowers her head. To herself*:)
…yes. That's right. END (79-80)

Here the word games end and John finally reaches Carol, the real Carol? Is this "right" because the discourse is right? Is calling Carol a "little *cunt*" at last acknowledging her personhood and her subjectivity? Do the unattractive protagonists finally admit that underneath it all they have a sexual attraction for each other and are falling madly in love? We are being transported magically to the surprise, farcical ending of Chekov's *The Brute*, subtitled *A Joke in One Act* (1888). It is all very melodramatic but supremely ambiguous. Do we, the audience and readers, believe in the ending, or is Mamet pulling our melodramatic leg? The inability to answer these questions is what sucks us, definitively, into the morass of self-parody.

Boston Marriage (1999) is a very different kind of play from *Oleanna*. First of all, it is much more literary. It is overtly a parody of Restoration comedy of manners as filtered through Oscar Wilde's enormously influential *Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which in itself has been much parodied, as in Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* (1969). Perhaps this is what David Ives meant when he called Mamet, in *Speed-the-Play*, "the William Congreve of our time." Mamet includes a specific Wilde signature word in the conversation of Anna and Claire, two lesbian ladies who are in a "Boston marriage," defined politely as an intimate friendship between two women often maintaining a household together. Claire asks her friend whether her male protector may withdraw his financial support:

CLAIRE Do you not find such a disposition trivial?
ANNA It is, as I understand the term, *Philosophy*. (*Pause*) How can philosophy be trivial? When have you known me to be trivial?
CLAIRE You once referred to the Crimean War as "just one of those Things." (37)

"Trivial" is the key word in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whose subtitle is: *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*.

Mamet, often accused of a macho disregard for women, turns the tables by making this a play about women, with many snide, anti-male comments. At the very beginning, Claire is astounded by the enormous emerald necklace Anna has received from her male patron:

CLAIRE Then you have lost your virtue…?
ANNA Yes.
CLAIRE Thank God.
ANNA A man gave it to me.
CLAIRE A man.
ANNA They do have such hopes for the mercantile.
CLAIRE And those hopes so rarely disappointed.
ANNA Well, we do love shiny things.
CLAIRE In unity with our sisters the Fish.
ANNA Men …
CLAIRE What can one do with them?
ANNA Just the One Thing.
CLAIRE Though, in your case, it seems to've been effective.
ANNA In like a Lion, out like a Lamb. (*Pause.*) (4)

These gender exchanges echo a theme exploited in Mamet's early play, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974). The dialogue is designed for skillful actors, who can dwell archly on such words as "A man" (Claire) and Anna's "Men …" The three dots representing elision are translated by the actors into significant pauses, as are the many specific indications for *Pause*. In addition, Mamet delights in printing significant words with initial capitals (as in German): for example, "Just the One Thing" or "In like a Lion, out like a Lamb." Presumably, the actors will know how to render capital J, O, T and L and L.

There is constant reference throughout the play to the typical gender characteristics of men and women. Mamet seems to be amusing himself with the high-flown, literary speech, larded with clichés, mostly spoken by Anna, that is undercut by either Claire or the Maid. Anna intones portentously:

> My protector will withdraw his stipend as my love, her love, and I shall starve, the hollow percussion of my purse, a descant to that of my broken heart. But once I was young and the world before me. And once men were other than the depraved swine time and experience have revealed them to be. Once the world was to me a magic place … I was a Little Girl, O, once … (33)

Anna's kitschy musings, with "Little Girl" in capitals, are rudely interrupted by the Maid:

> D'you mind if I work while you're talkin', miss? (*Pause.*) 'Ld it disturb you, like? You needn't think, like, that I'd evade yer privacy. (*Pause.*) Cause I can't, the life o'me, tell what the fuck yer on about. (*Pause.*) (33)

There are three significant pauses in this speech as Mamet slyly slips in a curse word. The play is full of them, coming at unexpected moments and generally designed to undercut poetic speech. When Claire says, parodying Anna, "What of your Bible now? What of Forbearance, meek and mild …," Anna answers curtly, preceded, of course, by three dots of elision: "… kiss my ass." Claire is inconsolable and begins to cry: "You have fucked my life into a cocked hat" (40).

Mamet obviously ridicules his characters' literary and poetic pretensions, but when the characters make fun of each other is this self-parody by Mamet, or does Mamet the playwright exist apart, protected from the doing of his characters? This is an unanswerable question because all of *Boston Marriage* seems parodic in tone. The characters are never what we—and Oscar Wilde—would call "serious." We might want to call it "arch" in order to avoid the question of parody. For example, in an exchange towards the end of the play, Anna and Claire play mercilessly on conventional definitions of motherhood:

ANNA […] May I ask you, do you never feel that you've missed something?
CLAIRE What would that be?
ANNA Motherhood.
CLAIRE Were I to say that the joys of conception, parturition, and lactation had been vouchsafed to me I would tell a lie.
ANNA Yes. But certain women profit from it.
CLAIRE In what way?
ANNA They, they have *children*.
CLAIRE Apart from that.
ANNA No, I take your point. (65)

Anna's coy emphasis on "*children*" in italics is delicious, and Mamet is clearly making fun of his middle-aged lesbians.

The play is full of sexual innuendo that could be coded either heterosexual or homosexual. For example, at the climactic ending, Anna and Claire embrace avidly. In the very last action of the play, the Maid holds up a muff and says:

MAID Miss, your friend's forgot her muff.
ANNA (*exiting*) No—nothing in life is certain. That remains to be seen. (*Exits*)
(*Curtain*) (82)

"Muff," as well as an item of apparel, is also a slang word for the female genitalia, so that the last words of the play are definitely ambiguous. The muff figures in the action toward the beginning of Act Two, when Anna says, seemingly absent-mindedly:

ANNA … is that my muff?
CLAIRE You gave it to me *years* ago. How Dare You … do you stoop to, to, to, to *attempt* to humble me, by calling up past favors?
ANNA No.
CLAIRE Then what was the import of your mention of the muff?
ANNA I was surprised it had come back in style.
CLAIRE God damn you to hell.
ANNA I suppose if one waits long enough …
CLAIRE You look like a plate of cold stew. (36)

The gift of the muff figures in the power relations between the older and the younger woman. Aside from its bitchy sexual connotations, the muff as a love token is an item of emotional exchange.

Boston Marriage is filled with epigrams in the style of Oscar Wilde, but they are tongue-in-cheek epigrams of a pseudo-proverbial nature. Mamet seems to be enjoying himself by writing quotable lines that are exceedingly brittle in style. For example, Claire asks whether Anna's protector has a wife, and Anna snaps back: "Why would he require a mistress if he had no wife?" (6). Or, more nonsensically, Anna says: "Well, there is a time for everything. (*Pause.*) Except, of course, those things one has not time for. And what is there to be done about *that*? (*Pause.*)" (17). Mamet uses the pauses cleverly in his printed text to control the timing and to give the reader some sense of the movement of the acted play.

Finally, the role of the Maid needs to be considered separately from the two women, since she is a farcical, lower-class character, not Irish as Anna pretends, someone off whom jokes can be bounced. For example, the Maid is in a quandary because she thinks she is pregnant:

ANNA Go, go, go, go away, you sad, immoral harlot.
MAID I don't know what to *do*.
CLAIRE Well, what would your Auld Granny say?
MAID I don't know.
CLAIRE Well, go home and ask her.
MAID She's dead.
CLAIRE She should have taken better care of herself.
MAID Waal, she lived a long life.
CLAIRE Oh, good.
MAID She was forty.
ANNA … Ah ha … (50)

This sounds like a music-hall routine. Like Margaret Dumont in the Marx Brothers' films, the maid is a perfectly straight man—or straight woman—for the ladies' witty remarks.

There is still a great deal to speak about in *Boston Marriage* as a parody, more than can possibly be included in this paper. One final stylistic issue is the meaningless and pointless babble designed to conceal what one really wants to say. This is parody used for a purely

histrionic purpose. There is an excellent example in Anna and Claire's conversation about the weather toward the beginning of the play:

> ANNA […] How do you find the weather? (*Pause.*) Do you not find it is fine?
> CLAIRE I find that it is *seasonable* …
> ANNA … yes …
> CLAIRE … for this time of *year*.
> ANNA Mmm.
> CLAIRE And that is as far as I'm prepared to commit myself. (*Pause.*) But I was saying …
> ANNA Yes, you were saying that you were "in love." As you phrased it. You were, in midcareer, as it were, prating of this "Love." (11)

What are we to make of the text that we are reading, for example, Anna's "Mmm" or her "… [dot, dot, dot] yes … [dot, dot, dot]"? The talk about the weather is clearly a blind to conceal talk about love. Mamet is an expert in the artful use of prototypical clichés.

Is Mamet parodying himself? There are certain stylistic tics in all of his works that occur both in serious and in ridiculous forms, things like the macho vaunting, the sudden bursts of slang and colloquial, the overwrought literary style, the excessive pauses, silences fraught with meaning (or with emptiness), endless repetition, fragmentary and unintelligible speech and syntax. None of this is accidental. It seems to me that the author is deliberately pushing the envelope and seeing how far he can go without audience and readers rising up in protest. This may be teasing, if not infuriating, but it is also bold and artful. Mamet the author is always there hovering over his plays and films, in his safari jacket, baseball cap, stubbly beard, and aviator glasses, carrying a large, phallic cigar, as David Ives describes his Master of Ceremonies in *Speed-the-Play*. He seems amused at having us on.

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