

Stylistic Self-Consciousness Versus Parody in David Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney*

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Defining parody as “a form of imitation for satirical purposes,” Maurice Charney in his essay “Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet” notes that it is an “acute, stylistic self-consciousness” such as Mamet’s that “makes parody, and especially self-parody, possible” (77, 78). Charney raises the fascinating question of whether in *Oleanna* and *Boston Marriage* in particular Mamet is parodying himself. Mamet’s “acute self-consciousness of style,” Charney argues, “involves elaborate and knowing parody, if not what we may call self-parody. Mamet is always and consistently Mаметesque” (81). I certainly would concur with Charney’s view of Mamet’s style. But I would also ask whether self-conscious style, while clearly containing the potential for self-parody, is always necessarily parodic? If not, at what point does self-conscious style become self-parody? And to what effect?

Of necessity, such questions as these pertain to the later works of writers, for self-parody cannot be recognized as such until a particular authorial style has become established. The above questions especially apply to *dramatists*, whose language is written to be spoken. Actors’ intonations, as Charney suggests, further underscore what is stylized in the spoken lines (81). In the later works of self-conscious stylists such as Mamet (or Pinter, also referenced by Charney) it can be quite difficult to distinguish between parody and the continuing use from play to play of a verbal style with which audiences and readers have become familiar and the characteristics of which critics have been at

*Reference: Maurice Charney, “Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet,” *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 77-87.

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some pains to identify. Charney identifies salient characteristics of Mamet's style: "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" (87). To these characteristics, I would add others (some of them mentioned by Charney elsewhere in his essay) drawn from four earlier plays—*Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Speed-The-Plow*: frequent use of expletives (the Mametesque characteristic *par excellence* in the popular view); emphasis placed on particular words (in italics) in lieu of explicit explanation of the idea behind them; emphasis on phatic communication represented by repetitions of words relating to saying, understanding, etc.; characters' talking around a subject while each asserts that he understands what the other is talking about; clichés; misogynistic remarks; one-sided phone conversations.

Throughout his work Mamet demonstrates an acute ear for various kinds of professional discourse. In his critiques of corporate America (in plays such as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*), he walks a fine line between the kind of habitual stylization of dialogue (the style we have come to call Mametesque) that has allowed him to get at the corrupt power relations lying beneath various kinds of professional jargon and parody of the obliquities of such jargon. The result is dialogue that is comic as well as edgy, entertaining as well as subtly critical of its speaker, and, one can say, self-parodic as well as parodic. Through such parody Mamet is a moral satirist and cultural critic. Such parody, and indeed self-parody, serves Mamet well in *Oleanna*, but Mametesque style does not operate in the same way in the more problematic, and to my mind, not entirely successful *Boston Marriage*.

In *Oleanna* Mamet's stylistic quirks work, as they do in his earlier plays, to convey by implication his major themes. Just as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* take on American business, so *Oleanna* takes on higher education, addressing the damage that abuse of power, whether by the teacher or the student, can do to the educa-

tional process.¹ The play opens with a one-sided phone conversation in which John, a college professor, is talking to his wife about the house they are buying, ignoring a student, Carol, who waits for him to finish. Already the power relations between professor and student are established. (They will be reversed by the play's end.)

And what about the land. (*Pause*) The land. And what about the land. (*Pause*) What about it? (*Pause*) No. I don't understand. Well, yes. I'm I'm ... no, I'm sure it's signif ... I'm sure it's significant. (*Pause*) Because it's significant to mmmmmm ... did you call Jerry? (*Pause*) Because ... no, no, no, no, no. What did they say ... ? Did you speak to the *real* estate ... where *is* she ... ? Well, well, all right. Where are her notes? Where are the notes we took with her? (*Pause*) I thought you were? No. No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I just thought that I saw you, when we were there ... what ... ? I thought I saw you with a *pencil*. (1)²

The monologue contains pauses, repetitions, stammering, unfinished sentences, words whose italicization indicates the extra meaning they are being made to bear, and, for so short an extract, a large number of words referring to the process of communication itself and its uptake: "understand," "significant," "say," "speak," "mean," "thought." This one-sided phone conversation, a typical set piece, may seem at first glance to be there primarily to allow Mamet to play all of his stylistic tricks for the gratification of an audience composed of the cognoscenti, that is to be simply self-parodic. And certainly part of the pleasure that this monologue affords its audience is that of recognition of Mametesque style. But the monologue also introduces in subtle form two of the play's themes: power and its relation to the determination of meaning. John exercises power not only over Carol by ignoring her but also over his wife by badgering her with questions and implicitly accusing her of paying insufficient attention to the house-buying process: "Where are the notes we took with her? [...] I thought I saw you with a *pencil*." The repetition of what John "thought" his wife was doing and the italicized "*pencil*" determine the meaning of his wife's behavior, carrying the weight of John's accusation of her fecklessness, especially as we are unable to hear her side of the story.

In the passage immediately following the phone conversation, which Charney quotes (80), John determines Carol's meaning in a rather similar way, informing her that she does not really want to know what a "term of art" (from his phone conversation) means but that she is in his office to talk about something else: "Don't you think?" (3). This arrogant, repeated question asserts John's linguistic control over Carol's meaning, bringing her to apologize for her own question. Throughout their conversations it is clear that the one in the superior position determines not only his or her own meaning but also the meaning of the less powerful individual, effectively rendering that individual inarticulate. At the beginning Carol stammers: "Did ... did I ... did I say something wr ..." (3). At the end of the play, however, Carol is in a position to determine John's meaning (concerning his hand on her arm, for example), and it is he who becomes inarticulate: "... wait. Wait. Wait a moment" (61).

The inherent corruption of the relations between professor and student is especially apparent in Mamet's acute rendering of the dialogue between John and Carol in conference. Like the real estate jargon in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, their dialogue sounds realistic, to many of us perhaps almost embarrassingly so, though because of its artful stylization, the dialogue also comes across as parodic. Take the following passage, for example:

JOHN: No. I see what you , it ... (*He gestures to the papers.*) but your work ...
 CAROL: I'm just: I sit in class I . . . (*She holds up her notebook.*) I take notes ...
 JOHN (*simultaneously with "notes"*): Yes. I understand. What I am trying to
 tell you is that some, some basic . . .
 CAROL: ... I ...
 JOHN: ... one moment: some basic missed communi ...
 CAROL: I'm doing what I'm told. I bought your book, I read your ...
 JOHN: No, I'm sure you . . .
 CAROL: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's *difficult* for me. It's *difficult*
 ... (6)

John points to the poor quality of Carol's paper and her misunderstanding of the course. Carol insists that she is doing as she has been told (taking notes, buying John's book), implying that her obedience

to his requirements deserves a better grade than she has received. John asserts his authority to “*tell*” Carol something, the italics standing in both for his right to teach Carol and his frustration with her inability to understand. Carol implies a veiled criticism of John as a teacher in her repeated, italicized “*difficult.*” The dialogue in itself reflects the discourse of student-teacher relations, but because it possesses a kind of Pinteresque superrealism (the excessive stammering and repetition), it also has a parodic edge. Mamet parodies student-teacher exchanges just as he parodies the discourse of real estate in *Glengarry Glen Ross* or business in *American Buffalo* or male discourse about women in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* to expose the deficiencies of the systems in which the characters operate.

The following speech from *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for example, shows Mamet similarly manipulating real estate jargon to display satirically the underlying corruption of the play’s business relationships. Roma, the star salesman, speaking to Williamson, the office manager, stabs in the back the older salesman, Levene, for whom he has just expressed admiration and friendship:

ROMA: Williamson: listen to me: when the *leads* come in ... listen to me: when the *leads* come in I want my top two off the list. For *me*. My usual two. Anything you give *Levene* ... (107)³

Roma goes on to demand all of his own action and half of Levene’s. The speech contains Mamet’s characteristic repetitions, italicization, and words that refer explicitly to the act of communication that is taking place: the repeated command “listen” implies that Williamson, by “listening,” will also obey. The italicization of “*leads*” makes this word (used repeatedly throughout the play but never actually explained) bear the weight of all that is profitable about the real estate business and the means by which one makes that profit. The obsession of the salesmen with the “*leads*” makes all of them more or less Bergsonian jack-in-the-box figures. It is as if Roma cannot help betraying Levene. The parodic edge of the play’s professional discourse both entertains and enables Mamet’s satiric critique of American capitalist culture.

Curiously, despite Mamet's criticism of their corporate culture, the characters in his earlier plays are not only entertaining but also engaging. This is in part because Mamet's parody of various kinds of jargon is to an extent sympathetic even as it is critical. Thus Roma may be morally obnoxious, but he is excitingly vital as well. In this regard it is worth noting that Mamet himself once worked in a real estate office, enabling him to adopt both an insider's and an outsider's stance in writing *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The extended discussion of sympathetic parody that has taken place in the pages of *Connotations* is helpful here.⁴ For parody in many of Mamet's plays simultaneously satirizes and illuminates the appeal of what is being parodied. In *Oleanna*, however, Mamet's parody of academic discourse is not at all sympathetic; and John and Carol are not at all attractive. What makes watching and especially listening to them nonetheless entertaining, I would suggest, is the artistry or self-parody in Mamet's writing that Maurice Charney has identified. Mamet offers what might be described as a sympathetic parody of his own stylistic techniques, thereby engaging the audience aesthetically in the dialogue while leaving intact the play's satire and moral indignation. In *Oleanna*, then, Mamet engages productively in both parody and self-parody.

Boston Marriage, as Charney observes, parodies Restoration comedy of manners "as filtered through" Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (82). In this play, set in a Victorian drawing room, Mamet focuses, unusually, on three women: two lesbian ladies, Anna and Claire, who are engaged in sexual intrigues with offstage characters, and a comic maid. (The focus on women rather than men, commented on by Charney and a number of theatre reviewers, may in itself be construed as a form of self-parody, showing that Mamet has, somewhat mockingly, taken note of criticism of the misogyny of his earlier plays.) Some of the lines in *Boston Marriage* are quite witty in their own right, in the style of comedy of manners, to be sure, but they are not inherently parodic: "Why would he require a mistress if he had no wife?" (6); "Have you taken a vow of *arrogance*?" (26).⁵ Mamet does, however, draw attention to what is parodic in the dialogue of Anna

and Claire. Anna and Claire themselves (and sometimes Catherine, the maid) undercut each other's superficially poetic discourse by responding to it, as Charney notes, with lines like "... kiss my ass" (84). The jarring introduction of unexpected contemporary expletives and crudities into the otherwise pseudo-Victorian high-flown literary language certainly reminds the audience that they are watching a play by David Mamet, raising the question of whether the mockery belongs solely to the characters or whether Mamet is parodying himself. Charney finds this question unanswerable (84). I would venture to suggest that while such inappropriate interpolations deflate and send up what has just been said and that the expletives are certainly Mametesque, mocking comments that puncture high-flown sentences and point to the parodic nature of those sentences do not in themselves constitute parody, as Charney seems to suggest.

Though Charney defines parody concisely and accurately as "a form of imitation for satirical purposes" (77), he occasionally in relation to both *Hamlet* and *Boston Marriage* uses the term in a less precise way. Beginning his essay with reference to *Hamlet*, Charney describes as parody Hamlet's mocking comment on his attempt to work himself up into the passion he has just admired in the Player's lament for Hecuba ("Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"). "Why, what an ass am I!" Hamlet declares, going on to offer an incisive criticism of his outburst: "Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab" (2.2.557-58, 563-64). It is not the scathing comment that is parodic, as Charney suggests, but rather the "rodomontade" (78) itself that mimics conventional tragic speech. The line "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!" sounds like a more sophisticated parody of the kind of "tragic" lines that are held up to ridicule in Bottom's audition speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "The raging rocks / And shivering shocks / Shall break the locks / Of prison gates" (1.2.24-27).⁶ Hamlet's mocking comment points to the parodic quality of his earlier lines but is not itself parodic because it does not imitate what it mocks. I think that we should similarly

distinguish mocking commentary that points to parodic excess from parody *per se* in *Boston Marriage*.

At times, however, in *Boston Marriage* Mamet does seem to parody himself. The following speech is a good example. Anna is complaining of Claire's ingratitude in loving another young woman in light of Anna's own generosity:

I come into funds, I come into funds, and my FIRST THOUGHT, do you see? Is it for myself? It is for *you*. Do I expect thanks? I would be glad of mute appreciation. I receive nothing but the tale of your new rutting. (*Pause*) (15)

Here are the Mametesque repetitions, capitalization and italicization of significant words, comment on the process of communication itself ("do you see?"), combination of "overwrought literary style" (Charney 87)—"mute appreciation"—and vulgarity—"rutting"—, the pause. But in the context, at once Wildean and purely domestic, that Mamet has created in this play, such Mametesque self-parody seems to be self-indulgent, pointless, and even an irritating reminder of the kind of play that *Boston Marriage* is not.

In comparison with Mamet's earlier plays, *Boston Marriage* is shallow. There are no cultural depths to be plumbed or mocked beneath the glittering surface. As Charney comments, the whole play "seems parodic in tone" (84). In a play that is already so ostensibly a parody of (particularly Wildean) comedy of manners, Mametesque self-parody can have no purpose; it can only distract.

The difficulty in figuring out what to make of the play that Charney draws to our attention is reflected in the variety of responses offered by theatre critics. Reviewers of *Boston Marriage*, while acknowledging the same distinctive Mametesque techniques, had wildly divergent opinions of the play. John Simon, reviewing the American production of 2002 in *New York*, loathed "the leaden preciousness of the text," the "insults whose flowery and stiltedly archaizing language is periodically littered with today's grossest obscenities"; by contrast, John Lahr, reviewing the (apparently superior) London production of the previous year in *The New Yorker*, thoroughly enjoyed the way in which

“Mamet’s idiom swings between the archaic and the contemporary,” his ability “to employ and to parody” the play’s Victorian language.⁷ This extraordinary difference of opinion seems to derive in large measure from whether or not the reviewer recognized, or at least how he responded to, the play’s parody. In the end, Charney is willing to rest his case with an acknowledgement of Mametesque ambiguity: “He seems amused at having us on” (87). That may well be the case. But, as I have suggested above, I believe that there is a fundamental distinction to be drawn between Mamet’s plays, including *Oleanna*, in which parody serves as cultural critique, and *Boston Marriage*, which is itself a parody for the fun of it. I am grateful to Maurice Charney for raising such interesting and important questions that deal not only with how we understand the stylized plays of self-conscious dramatists such as Mamet but also with how we may value them.

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NOTES

¹For a full analysis of *Oleanna* in these terms see my “Sex, Power, and Pedagogy in Mamet’s *Oleanna* and Ionesco’s *The Lesson*,” *American Drama* 5.1 (Fall 1995): 36-50.

²David Mamet, *Oleanna* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

³David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (New York: Grove P, 1984).

⁴See *Connotations* 12.1, 12.2-3, 13.1-2, and 14.1-3.

⁵David Mamet, *Boston Marriage* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

⁶Quotations from *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).

⁷John Simon, “Good-bye, Prof. Chips,” *New York* 2 December 2002: 78. 21 August 2007. <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/theater/reviews/n_8045/>; John Lahr, “Lust Be a Lady,” *The New Yorker* 2 April 2001: 94. 21 August 2007 <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/04/02/010402crth_theatre>.