

Mamet's Self-Parody: A Response to Maurice Charney*

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In his article, Maurice Charney asserts that, whatever else David Mamet may be doing in his plays—and in *Oleanna* and *Boston Marriage*, specifically—he parodies himself. That is, Mamet's work is persistently self-referential: at every of their own dramatic moments, his plays have Mamet and his work in mind and on the tongue, and with a skepticism which transforms them(selves) into caricatures. The metatheatrical scheme Charney thus identifies is almost too convoluted to describe, as we find ourselves looking at Mamet, looking at himself, looking back, and laughing. While Charney offers an attractive way of reading Mamet (and some kind of strategy is necessary), his argument that Mamet's object of parody is himself fails to be wholly persuasive. Mamet may, indeed, be "pushing the envelope" in order to see "how far he can go without audience and readers rising up in protest."¹ But even if this is *true*, it is not necessarily *parody*. At least, Charney's argument does not conclusively establish Mamet as his own subject. Certainly, Mamet's style is "overreaching" and "hyperbolic."² But if, as Charney avers, when we reach the end of *Oleanna*, we do not "believe in the ending," are we necessarily sucked into a "morass of self-parody"?³ Which is to say: are we necessarily sucked into a morass of Mamet's parody of *himself*?

Following Simon Dentith, we identify parody as the artistic transformation of a discrete source, a hypotext, so as to communicate a polemical or critical position, either with regard to the hypotext itself or towards the world (or both).⁴ This understanding of *parody* sucks

*Reference: Maurice Charney, "Parody—and Self-Parody in David Mamet," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 77-88.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney01312.htm>>.

critical theory into a catch-22. If we wish to identify Mamet's works as their own hypotexts, we must first find Mamet works which are not, already, as Charney says, *Mametesque*.

Nevertheless, Charney's introduction of *parody* to the discussion of Mamet, since *parody* is a distinctly metatextual device, productively redirects our consideration of the content and intent of Mamet's work. Even if we are uncertain whether Mamet takes a polemical or critical position against *himself*, certainly he critically and polemically considers the world. To the extent that his polemical and critical consideration of the world takes a metatheatrical form, his work implicitly critiques the activity of theatre, which is, after all, Mamet's own environment. Perhaps an effort to map the theatrical boundaries in Mamet's works, the lines between play and played, could identify a Mamet within the *Mametesque*.

A comprehensive map of this idea exceeds the space available here. Instead, I propose here to consider one specific element of one particular play, as an indication of the method which I am imagining, under Charney's inspiration. Charney himself is drawn to *Oleanna* as a representative text, and I have already made an attempt to identify its metatheatrical nature.⁵ Developing then, these two arguments, let me here consider in some detail one of the characters in this play, who might further substantiate Charney's approach to Mamet.

Can we characterize John as a parodical figure? Certainly, in Dentith's terms, John orients the play polemically towards higher education, and the degree to which his language and actions are grossly exaggerated, as Charney has noted, suggests that he is the transformation of a hypotext. John theorizes aloud, for instance, about choosing his profession:

When I found I loved to teach I swore that I would not become that cold, rigid automaton of an instructor which I had encountered as a child.

Now, I was not unconscious that it was given me to err upon the other side. And, so, I asked and *ask* myself if I engaged in heterodoxy, I will not say "gratuitously" for I do not care to posit orthodoxy as a given good—but, "to the detriment of, of my students."⁶

Surely, John is a parody of assistant professors at liberal arts colleges in the United States, who are on the cusp of tenure, and who have written a book. But this does not necessarily establish that John assists Mamet in parodying himself.

John is woefully incompetent as a teacher and as an interpreter of human behavior, as Richard Badenhausem has adequately shown.⁷ But besides his professional and interpersonal deficiencies, John is stupid to such a degree that he tempts us, the audience, to dismiss him as poorly written. Why, for instance, in the late twentieth century would anyone, let alone a college professor with several years of experience, not only invite a female student who has accused him of sexual misconduct to his office for a *private* meeting, but, then, having ended that meeting with the appearance of assault on the said student—an assault to which others are apparently witness—invite the same student *again* to his office for yet another *private* meeting? No one in John's place in the real world could possibly be that foolish. At the worst, John is a clumsy exaggeration of humanity. At best, he is a stylish parody of individuals which Mamet may have encountered in his own sorties through the halls of higher education. In either case, John is a metatheatrical character, who makes his own fictional existence explicit, and whose actions have significance only within the fictional world he inhabits.

What significance, then, does John's stupidity have within the world of this play? We derive the answer to this question, I think, from the airplane. The playwright calls special attention to John's aviation metaphor by focusing closely on a paper airplane passed between Carol and John while he speaks:

JOHN: A *pilot*. Flying a plane. The pilot is flying the plane. He thinks: Oh, my *God*, my mind's been drifting! Oh, my God! What kind of a cursed imbecile am I, that I, with this so precious cargo of *Life* in my charge, would allow my attention to wander. Why was I born? How deluded are those who put their trust in me, ... et cetera, so on, and he crashes the plane.⁸

In Mamet's film version, the same airplane reappears prominently in John's desk drawer when he declares to the phone, "Cost me my job?"

Fine. Then the job was not worth having," at which point he learns that Carol has accused him of rape and assault.⁹ If we read John's various expressions of distaste for higher education (not to mention his book which apparently regards higher education as a mechanism of oppression), his distrust of people holding his kind of authority, his eagerness to undermine the system in which he works, and the rhetorical gymnastics he does to mask his loathing for the material comforts which his job produces, beside the implications of his airplane speech (which Mamet's own film version, at least, regards as significant), we see quite clearly in John a metatheatrically tragic character. John, upon realizing he is not only what he despises but parodically so, does what is necessary. Oedipus gouges his own eyes out. John invites Carol to his office. Twice.

Once he confronts the possibility that he is an impostor, which may have happened even before the action of the play has begun, John assumes a place in which he is his own hypotext—the thing he transforms so as to emphasize certain (undesirable) characteristics. So, when John tells Carol that while confronting his tenure committee he has an urge to "puke [his] *badness* on the table," he may be speaking more truly than at any other time in the play.¹⁰ In fact, rather than suspecting Carol of setting John up, as many critics do, we might suspect that John has had his end in mind from the beginning—has, in fact, set himself up. John rejects himself once he confronts the possibility that he is an impostor, and Carol serves only as the "index of [his] badness [...]." ¹¹ John transforms himself. In this way, at least, Mamet's work parodies Mamet's work.

A final suggestion to complement Charney's helpful analysis of this play. Mamet claims to *believe* John. "If I didn't believe [the characters in *Oleanna*] the play wouldn't work as well."¹² Given Mamet's experience as a part of the higher education machine, at Goddard College, NYU, and Yale, among other places, we might speculate that Mamet not only believes John, but identifies with him and employs him as a parody of a world which Mamet distrusts. So much for higher education. But does Mamet believe (or identify with) John as far as John's

confessed self-loathing and his self-destructive ambitions? Is it possible that John is the index of the Mamet within the Mametesque?

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NOTES

¹Charney 87.

²Charney 81.

³Charney 82.

⁴See Simon Dentith, *Parody, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000). Dentith's first chapter nicely summarizes several seminal works on this subject, including Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Methuen, 1985) and Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests* (Omaha: U of Nebraska P, 1998).

⁵See David Mason, "The Classical American Tradition: Meta-Tragedy in *Oleanna*," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 13.3 (2001): 55-72.

⁶David Mamet, *Oleanna* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 43.

⁷Richard Badenhausen, "The Modern Academy Raging in the Dark: Misreading Mamet's Political Correctness in *Oleanna*," *College Literature* 25 (1998): 1-19.

⁸Mamet 18.

⁹*Oleanna*, dir. David Mamet, 1 hr. 30 min., MGM, 1994, DVD.

¹⁰Mamet 23.

¹¹Mamet 24.

¹²Geoffrey Norman and John Rezek, "David Mamet: A Candid Conversation with America's Foremost Dramatist about Tough Talk, TV Violence, Women and Why Government Shouldn't Fund the Arts," *Playboy* (April 1995): 52-53.