

## New Mythologies: Mamet, Shepard and the American Stage\*

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It is one of those entertaining paradoxes of contemporary Western culture that the myths of America, and by this we mean largely those of the United States of America, are both less substantial and infinitely better known than the myths of Europe. The Lone Ranger is a more evocative figure in our world of screen images than the figure of that other lone ranger, Odysseus. Where, notably, the myth of Oedipus has a wide currency, it is in some respects coincident with the figure of Dr. Freud, almost *honoris causa*, American and, like the profile of Einstein, already absorbed into the imagination of Hollywood. The mythic resonance of Oedipus has been transformed and absorbed into a mythic figure of the contemporary diviner of riddles: the therapist.

The student of contemporary cinema can, however, point to an uneasy relationship between that medium and the mythic world of Classical drama and legend, while noting the operation of the mythopoeic imagination in a veritable cinémathèque of post-Arthurian inter-galactic knights, and robotic law-makers of the science-fiction world. It is natural that the reflective spaces of the European mind should be paralleled in the prophetic visions of the Hollywood fantasy. The mental function in either removes the location of thought and identity from present time to the *illud tempus* of myth.<sup>1</sup> Past and future<sup>2</sup> are common in addressing the memory in removal from the present.<sup>3</sup>

American writing is nonetheless heir to its own European heritage as in the classical sources which inspire, say, Updike in *The Centaur* or O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. We notice, however, that here, as

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\*Reference: John Russell Brown, "The Woods, the West, and Icarus's Mother: Myth in the Contemporary American Theatre," *Connotations* 5.2-3 (1995/96): 339-54.

in Shepard's *Icarus' Mother*, the myth lies buried, or supplies an armature on which the structures of the work can be developed: important to the imagination of the maker but less articulate in the response of reader or spectator.

Exploring myth in contemporary American drama, John Russell Brown draws our attention on the dramatists' location of experience in cultural space. Starting from the standpoint of composition he moves to the contextualisation of dramatic thought, concentrating on the spaces of imagination and the poetic need to invest these with significance. In so doing he alerts us to a question of space and theatrical response which I hope to develop briefly here, perhaps with closer attention to the adaptation of myth and mythology to the actor's effort of engagement with dramatic material. John Brown's consideration of the mythopoeic impulse in particularly Mamet and Shepard invites further thought on the way in which these two dramatists understand the epistemology of performance, and the remarkable way in which they use actors in the negotiation of knowledge in the time and space of performance. In either case the power of the symbolic memory as entertained by the actor is acutely felt, but never assumed as a natural expectation of the dramatist. The scenes, tales and the speculation of the memory are laid bare for the constructs they are, and the writing ruthlessly obliges the actor to entertain a series of symbolic images which are vital to the location of the performance in imaginative space, but which are never dependable as putative "facts."<sup>4</sup>

In this it will be necessary to recognise the widespread and varied understanding of "myth" as a term and, in considering its effect in performance, bear in mind what kind of mental function it addresses in narrative, dramatic or graphic representation. We will need, I suspect, to reflect the distinctions which the French school has debated between myth as structured thought and mythology as a process which operates in the interstices of that structuring. This is particularly important if we are to make clear which experiences are culturally secured by the shared structures of myth, and which are evidence of the desperation of minds in search of symbols to place in the increasingly desert terrain of Western imaginative space.

John Russell Brown develops his initial argument on the relationship of mythic and present experience by references to the juxtaposition in Renaissance painting of daily life and a mythic world of idealised expression and sensual freedom. At the same time we should note that painting is a medium in which the essentially narrative character of myth is diminished. The power and the freedom that Brown sees in these images is drawn from their location in a mythic past, which as he points out, lies outside the framework of ideas which governs the operations of Church or State. The freedom that is enjoyed is one of escape from specificity into the generalisations of passion and sensuality. Less expansive is the way in which these compound images mythologise the political realities of the present.

The effect may be seen in Seventeenth-century France, systematically applied over half a century to the creation of the mythologised Louis XIV in the picture-house of Versailles.<sup>5</sup> Here the motive for a flight from the everyday is one which any modern movie mogul would recognise. In the images of Mignard, Rigaud and Le Brun, Louis is placed in the mythic spaces of the idealised world of classical mythology: as Neptune, Hercules or famously, Apollo; or in the mythologised Christian imagination as his saintly forebear St. Louis, or even dangerously portrayed as Christ the Good Shepherd.<sup>6</sup> He is seen languorous among the wood-nymphs bearing the faces of his family, while the royal mistresses are to be found elsewhere in the Arcadian groves.

None of this representation goes further than an invocation of myth to dignify the given historical narrative of the king's achievements, or the appropriation of a mythologising symbol where narrative cannot be comfortably adduced. Thus the emblem of the mythologised Louis becomes not only the specific image of the sun, or the chariot of Apollo, but also the generalised costume and armour of Ancient Rome which idealises the monarch, conferring the aura of significance indwelling in the image, freezing omnipotence unquestioningly in a moment of distant time and in the fields of mythic battles and triumphs.<sup>7</sup>

In the modern age the function of painting and sculpture in the creation of the shared experience of images is largely assumed by photography and cinematography. In considering the place of myth in American drama, we can hardly advance without reference to the vitality of the

screen image and the problems of its "mythic" status. Notably the cinema is unhappy with the realisation of ancient myth (works such as Pasolini's *Edipo Re* (1967) or *Medea* (1969) are very rare), for it is technically ill at ease with the *illud tempus* of myth and accommodates best the natural landscape in which the camera is free to roam, unconstrained by the narrative structures and the significant focuses of myth.<sup>8</sup> The camera is artful in the choice of images and the ordering of the visual imagination. It is not, as is the drama, mindful, affording direct experience of the specific enactment, but is powerful in the generalising function of myth-making, returning again and again to its own leit-motifs. The lens is in a technological relationship with space, either designed or naturally occurring, and if it is capable of supplying objects in the world of fantasy, these are mythic in the sense that the ikon is mythic, or any construct that lives in the imagination. The consequences of an art of industrialised screen images is considerable in the modern world, and particularly so for the pioneering civilisation which has played the principal role in the dissemination of those images.

As Lévi-Strauss argues, the myth structures and embeds experience allowing its transmission and the negotiation of the mindful narrative of a collective life.<sup>9</sup> The screen has created a global tribe without there being a global experience: we are left with a process without a purpose. This is keenly felt in much contemporary American theatre.<sup>10</sup>

The "realism" of much contemporary United States drama is an amalgam of a stylistic tradition in naturalism, reinforced by the parallel evolution of drama in the cinema, and linked with philosophical and cultural preoccupations in a society coming to terms with both its own material success and the simplicity of the moral and metaphysical propositions on which that success is grounded. John Brown's examples from Mamet demonstrate this most effectively, and make clear the role played by myth, or what I will conclude is a nostalgia for myth, in destabilising the materialist environment. The search in *American Buffalo* for meanings which lie beyond explicit monetary values expresses both dramatically and culturally the need to create and locate experience outside the real time and place of social and economic living. The coin, the American Buffalo, is both fabulous, with a worth vastly exceeding its face value, and in itself, like the English penny-black postage stamp,

a symbol of the values which are tradable, and only tradable in cash. The emblem is of an animal, as Brown puts it, "a magnificent indigenous creature once common in the West" (345), and we can concur with his observation that this symbol allows the mind to move into areas of "mythic" experience outside the references of the material junk of contemporary mercantile life which litters the stage and occludes the minds of the characters.

If one may take Brown's insights further, I believe that we see the functionality of myth being exploited in Mamet to degrade the symbol rather than exploit it as a true cultural referent. As *myth* the American Buffalo has a dubious resonance. There is a clear ambivalence in the quasi-historical emblem of a beast which was slaughtered in the name of industrialisation of space, and the building of the rail-road, as there is again in the use of the prairie image of the cowboy campfire. Rather than liberate thought, the mythic process is truncated and the signification of the prairie hunter is left undeveloped, or necessarily unquestioned. Freedom is not embedded here in a mythic form, but is encapsulated in the slogan of the politician, the empty phrases and definitions of the enterprise society. There is no American Prometheus here.

The lesson of *American Buffalo* is that there are images but no narratives. The emblem can denote an aspiration or a nostalgia but it cannot structure the negotiated experience in time. It cannot examine action and consequence, and it cannot in any sense account for man's experience of himself in space and time, and fulfil the need for expression that the Homerically-named Teach inchoately seeks. As John Brown notes

the old myth does not hold out any longer; for him it is a hopeless confrontation, as Teach knows to his own loss. (346)

We recognise in Mamet's use of the emblem a controlled engagement with a metaphysical world which lies agonisingly beyond the capacity of the characters to embrace within the structures of living which dominate the play. The mythic enlargement of the image shows the tension between the mythologising desire and the poverty of the idea as Teach tries to develop it.

Mamet's myth is like those of Miller's Willy Loman where the conjured image of Uncle Ben, an amalgam of frontiersman and salesman, gives form to the American Dream which guides and torments the hero. The myth is at the same time delusional. This is crucial. *Death of A Salesmen* has a profundity which comes from the recognition that myth emanates from the "raw" experience of the world to which it gives an effective form: a transformation of experience into a modified experiential structure which is not discursive in character. The use of myth to camouflage the invasive material face of reality abuses the mythopoeic impulse and creates the violent tensions of both *Death of a Salesman* and *American Buffalo*. Both contain a desperate search for substantial myths and are subverted by a mythology recycling the clichés of American materialism.

This struggle is patent in *The Woods*, where Professor Brown analyses the discovery in the natural environment of the fragments and images which constitute the mythic imagination. We might note further how Mamet is fully aware of the mythologising impulse as a structuring of mind around which he can weave his suggestive performance acts, while the myths that will eventually bind together and explain the collective experience are illusive, and possibly deranged. Where John Brown sees the impulse to create myths which then break down, we may also see the imaginative space occupied by delusion and images of fear which stalk the mythic recesses of the mind. Mamet draws on a patchwork of images and narrative ideas which lie close to a surface iconography of urban America. The stories of the war and the psychotic imagination of messages transmitted to false teeth, join with images of the bear in the woods (a favourite cliché of Republican electioneering). The writer supplies his actor with the outline of an image which he can fashion only with extraordinary difficulty, and the reason is twofold. Firstly the image will not respond to the investment of passion that the actor is called on to make, and secondly the narrative is interrupted by a stream of assertions which block the smooth construction of any mythic scheme with the desperate affirmation, "I know."

He speaks a human language Ruth. I know. He has these thoughts and they are trapped inside his mouth. His jaws cannot move. He has thoughts and

feelings. BUT HE CANNOT SPEAK. If only he could speak. If only he could say the thing he wants.

RUTH: What does he want?

NICK: I DO NOT KNOW.

RUTH: No! (She hits him. Pause.)

NICK: It smells like fish up here. (She hits him again.)

[. . .]

RUTH: You stop this.

NICK: I do not want to die. Oh, God. I do not want to die. I am insane. Am I insane?<sup>11</sup>

The question translates the deep fear which haunts this remarkable short play: the profound anxiety as to the life of the mind and the security of the landscapes within which it constructs its reality. Mamet engages his actors not so much in a mythic world, but in the dangerous and destabilising discovery of the need for that world. Thus the roles require the anatomising of the mental functions which invest the personality at the moment of performance. Thus one might go further than John Brown's synoptic view of myth operating in American drama at a level of the poetic imagination looking elsewhere for the equivalent of the classical myth:

When another new world began to establish itself in North America, artists found it was less easy to use memories of the ancient, "classical" world; the necessary books and learning were not generally available, and the physical remains of that civilisation were outside the bounds of most people's mental journeys. Artists had to find some other place in which their imaginations could be at ease and live with heroes and exemplars that would suit their own dissatisfaction and aspirations. (342)

The play addresses the functions of mind when the myth-making imagination is at work, but where we would agree with John Brown that Mamet shows the filling of the void with stories, we would have to add that the play explores the problem of a private mythology being scarcely myth. Are delusional states mythic? The images of Martians or Vikings are common, but only insofar as they are clichés, and what is their role in anchoring a collective vision or experience? John Brown notes this function of stories in the co-ordination of the two lovers in their embryonic society, but it is also a broken function, I suggest, not

because the stories that Nick recounts and to which he is prey cannot be shared, but because his drive is towards knowledge and the examination and subversion of his own mental world. His anguish at the picture of the bear he creates is connected to a recognition of the blocked expression of the sexually aroused but isolated beast which calls on him. The beast has human language, Nick *knows*, has

thoughts and they are trapped inside his mouth. His jaws cannot move. He has thoughts and feelings, BUT HE CANNOT SPEAK. If only he could speak. If only he could say the thing he wants. (58)

The mythic world of the play emerges in indistinct and primeval forms from the poetic imagination of the author, but intimately related to the physical medium for which he writes, for this epiphany is a part of the projected struggle of performance. The beast that Nick has dreamt, and which he tries to express now in speech, is the image of the struggle of the actor to identify "the thing he wants" and to release "the thoughts . . . trapped in his mouth."

The images are unresolved in the act of performance, being fleetingly sketched, and then questioned by the actors at the very moment of creation. The matrix is rich and suggestive: the surface of the lake bounding an inverse world of life, remembered in the fish which scented Ruth's hands with a smell redolent of her own body; the bracelet in her story which was lost falling beneath the waters of the lake, and recollected in the present which she makes to Nick; his story of the soldier trapped in a hole, then his own dream of a hole in which he is held, smelling of fish. The stories told by Nick and Ruth are to a degree connected but they are distressingly remote from the American spaces of the play. European in origin, they are inherited from parents or grandparents, and describe European characters, both possibly delusional. European, too, is the curious rectification of the image of the bear, first a bear in the forest, then in dream, then "European brown bears."

Any critical construction of these fragments can do no more than note the references, which are once or twice removed from the characters, and which fail notably to explain their experience. On the other hand these are the dreams and fantasies which disturb them. We may further



note that the resolution of *The Woods* is achieved with one completed image present on the stage and narrated in the old European fairy story of the Babes in the Wood. Nick and Ruth are both on the floor, she holding him

NICK: Are you all right?

RUTH: Yes.

NICK: Are you cold?

RUTH: No. They lay down. (*Pause.*) He put his arms around her. (*Pause.*) They lay down in the forest and they put their arms around each other. In the dark. And fell asleep.

NICK: Go on. (*Pause.*)

RUTH: What?

NICK: Go on.

RUTH: (*To self.*) Go on . . .

NICK: Yes. (*Pause.*)

RUTH: The next day . . . .

*The lights fade.* (60-61)

A past is empty which cannot be sustained and structured by any present investment in shared experience. Mamet brilliantly dramatises the civilisation which lives beneath the empty skies of its own devastation. Deprived of the narratives and the mythic past in which the people may collectively locate itself, it engages nevertheless in the struggle to mythologise its experience. The achievement of coherence, as John Brown points out is tenuous:

. . . myth-making starts playfully, and even comically, as Ruth does her best to fill the sky with heroes [. . .]

Nick and Ruth cannot share each other's stories for long: practicalities and differences intrude. However, Nick has been to these woods many times before and has developed for himself more frightening, less ordinary myths, inaccessible to other persons. (343)

The coherence of the microcosmic society represented by the two actors on the stage is figured in Ruth's simple tale of the isolated seagull who would drive others off, but then finally coupled.

He let this one guy stay up there a minute.

NICK: Tell me.

RUTH: They flew off. (7)

However, the sharing of the image is abortive, lost in incomprehension. The tale itself is without sequence or conclusion. A distant phenomenon is fleetingly viewed, an outcome is suggested but the narrative tails off into an open sky of speculation.

In Mamet's treatment of this and other scraps of narrative, the significance which underlies all mythic systems is absent, or at best disabled. The prospect of achievement is bound to the ephemeral nature of the dramatic process itself in which the significance of actions is always prospective and temporary, rather than determinate and conclusive. Mamet's remarkably "empty" texts supply the forms for the search, rather than the discourse of the discovery. Together the actors attempt to invest their circumstances with a meaning which can be negotiated in the real time of performance. There is an inbuilt struggle to find patterns in the mythic past which will explain and anchor a present without form. In a manner strongly reminiscent of the yet more abstract dramatic world of Beckett, the performers are set on stage to achieve the impossible: to invest the patterns of life with meaning.

This may explain the uneasy closure of the play in which its initial image of union is revisited and temporarily secured in the gesture of comfort in which Ruth enfolds her fellow at the conclusion of the play. Her cradling of Nick and the union of the couple is quasi-ritualised in the telling of an old bed-time story: the Babes in the Wood. This is achieved in the face of a tormented examination of what it is that animates the imagination. Here in the woods something is possible; back there in the city all is laid waste.

NICK: I need time. Do you hear me? I need time. Down in the city everything is vicious. I need time to be up here. (Pause.) Everything is filthy down there. You know that. I come up here, I see things. (57)

The fragmentary images translate the anxieties of Western society, and its inability to complete the narratives which might confirm its uncertain self-confidence. One is tempted to enquire if Mamet is not engaging in a perennially dramatic practice here, whereby the dramatic restlessly interrogates the narrative.

In the work of Sam Shepard an early preoccupation with cinema and rock-and-roll colours the dramatist's imagination, and the plays are peopled with mythic or quasi-mythic figures. Professor Brown's analysis of the impact of Shepard's myth-making stirs further thoughts of how, as with Mamet, the dramatist conceives a possible mythic world and stages the struggle to reach it, rather than retail pedantically the desiccated receipts of classical learning, as might have been the case with the Icarus figure in *Icarus' Mother*:

Shepard has not used the myth in a pedantic way, setting it down as he might have found it in books or paintings. In his play, a new Icarus is present with the excitement and flush of discovery, not incidental to the dramatist's purpose, but seemingly rather to direct it. (350)

The purpose of the dramatist is indeed closely wedded to this use of the mythic landscape of the play, and it is comparable to what we have observed in the work of Mamet. The creative strength of Shepard is tied to his awareness of mythology as a function rather than a particular and convenient metaphorical context. One may see in the first collection, *Five Plays*, how Shepard charts the spaces of the actors' imagination with a freedom and daring which was near baffling to his first directors. The plays are rather like *études* in which the young dramatist plays the materiality of the stage against the visionary capacity of the performance: the bathtub in *Chicago* or the bed in *Red Cross* act less as settings than apparatus for the support of the performer while the mental spaces of the performance are created and inhabited.

The painful example of *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* showed the problem of a drama which in no way attempted a literal representation of on and offstage spatial relationships. The predominant naturalism of acting technique was quite inadequate to deal with a mythologising impulse, as were equally inappropriate the rational inner truths of expressionistic staging. The difficulty which attended the first performance was the result of a director's attempt to deal with a "diffuse dialogue" and "strange fragments." The record of the disagreement between the director Sydney Schubert Walter and the dramatist shows the former's difficulty

in accepting the capacity of the script to locate the play in the theatrical space.

Before rehearsals began I made the following decisions independent of the author:

1. I would use a less severe set, one offering possibilities for more dynamic staging.
2. I would ignore the author's stage directions to work for a more casual, naturalistic quality in the opening scenes.
3. As the script became more concentrated on language, as the characters approached a stasis, I would use the actors in an expressionistic way, so that they conveyed, vocally and physically, the tensions that I felt lay beneath the words.

When Mr. Shepard arrived and rehearsals began, I discovered that all these ideas were unacceptable to him. I had chosen to counter the qualities of the script with the qualities of the production; he wished the production to underline the qualities of the script.<sup>12</sup>

*Fourteen Hundred Thousand* was a problem for a theatre where the answer to the location of the action lay in the measurable landscapes of naturalistic staging, or the equally probable dream worlds of expressionism in the playing. Avant-garde as it was, the play nonetheless required a simpler acceptance of the function of the dramatic text in notating action, even and perhaps especially where the text locates the operations of mind in spaces remote from the materiality of stage and set. Mr. Walter's desire to compensate for a certain slippage of the action was unfortunate.

Tom is finishing the construction of a large bookcase which Ed has begun but will not complete. It stands on an otherwise featureless white box-set furnished with a single door of entrance. The bookcase is to house the fourteen hundred thousand books which Tom's wife Donna has collected. Ed proposes they go to a cabin away from the city, and gradually the focus of the action turns from the activity which dominates the set, to this imagined location in the woods:

DONNA: Comfortable and homey, I imagine. Somehow I see it lost in the woods and nobody living even there.

ED: Really?

DONNA: Yes. And somehow it maintains itself all year round. Somehow it adapts itself to every change in the weather and turns on its own lights at night. It even flushes its own toilet and makes its own little bed. There's no footprints around it at all. Just buried one quarter of the way in snow, and smoke coming out of the chimney. Just sitting there in a small clearing about half a mile from a frozen lake. A Christmas house.

ED: There's no lake at all and I haven't built the chimney yet. (57)

Meanwhile Mom and Pop toil up offstage flights of steps to the room, bringing in armfuls of books, but progressively becoming diverted from the task, first to the picture of the trip that might be made to the cabin, and then to the contents of the books, which include an account of the city of the future. The tensions between the characters are explored through the slippage of the focus from the set and the task in hand to remote spaces affording mental scenes which are strange and disturbing: Donna sees her husband too frightened to leave his bed, in the dark, craving a bed-time story, paralysed and welded to his sheets by accumulated faeces and urine; Ed sees them all, in perhaps a glimpse of the scene of Shepard's later *Action*, in the cabin after the first snow, sitting down to a special dinner. Ed explains that he cannot stay to complete the bookcase, and must go away to the cabin, while Mom and Pop read obsessively from one of the books a compulsive and detailed account of the "linear city" of the future which will criss-cross the continent enclosing "the country" within a grid of progressively smaller squares:

MOM: Each city no more than ten miles from the next city.

POP: Forming ten-mile squares.

MOM: Desert cities and jungle cities where cities have never been.

POP: Ocean cities and sky cities and cities underground.

MOM: Joining country to country and hemisphere to hemisphere.

POP: Forming five-mile squares in between. (*The stage is bare by this time, the other actors are off-stage but still humming the tune [White Christmas], MOM and POP still face front.*)

MOM: Elevated cities suspended under vacuum air.

POP: Forming two-mile squares in between . . . . (67)

Shepard manipulates the mythologising need within the tensions of contemporary American culture. The myths of the outdoors can, like

those of Mamet, link cliché and emblem in the act of myth-making: the myth itself is insecure and in *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* it is countered by the nightmare landscape of the coming urban obliteration of the natural world.

These experiments would lead later to a drama centred in more evidently integrated roles, but where the search for the location of mental life is always at issue. From the strange quartet of *Action* isolated in their cabin in the woods, to the uneasy household which is marooned in the snowy landscape of *A Lie of the Mind*, the performances require a search for the spaces of myth and imagination.

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Neither Shepard nor Mamet creates a completed world of myth. On the other hand the very absence of the sustained narrative of classic myth is a source of the vigour of these two playwrights, who employ the fundamental elements of the dramatic medium to engender a struggle for the reference points which explain both the dramatic experience and thereafter the cultural space which is shared between actor and audience. Both express powerfully the American need to mythologise an experience which remains, in reality or in nostalgia, close to the land and to the natural landscape. Their plays are concerned with mythologies, structures which are capable of articulating experience, given shared cultural references, but which are as like to break down under the burden of significance they are required to bear. The hypertrophy of a society whose material success engenders the capacity to destroy the land is felt in the dramatic action which characteristically creates and anatomises its own meanings, but is driven paradoxically to confront and dissolve its nascent mythologies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I refer to the formulation adopted by Mircea Eliade in his pioneering work. See *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (London: Collins, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Nonetheless there is a key distinction to be noted between the reflective narratives of past time in which the structure of lived experience may be elaborated, and narratives in future time which are aspirational or minatory in character.

<sup>3</sup>The organisers of the *Connotations* symposium in 1995 wisely set no restriction on the interpretation of the term "myth" nor did they adopt any special terminology for debate.

<sup>4</sup>One might recall an earlier dramatist, Shakespeare, whose actor-hero Hamlet reflects on the fallen skies of a culture and directs the audience's attention to the dramatic process.

<sup>5</sup>For a lively account see Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>A notable *historical* identification is found in painting and in drama with Alexander the Great. The latter medium proved too uncomfortable for the royal propagandists. Racine's *Alexandre* was seen as a reference to the brilliant young king, whereas his *Britannicus* aroused suspicions of an unintended comparison between Louis and the Emperor Nero. Racine later gave up drama in favour of a post as historiographer royal.

<sup>7</sup>The shorthand references to the Classical world recall the amusing example given by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1978) of the Roman haircut in Hollywood's treatment of *Julius Caesar*.

<sup>8</sup>A parallel discomfort is evident in the treatment of Christian "myth" even where this has to believers a literal and historical status. The accuracy of the cinema image has an unwelcome ability to tie the events to a familiar and even banal context and topography. Pasolini is again unusual in his *Gospel According to St. Matthew*.

<sup>9</sup>See G. Charbonnier, tr. John and Doreen Weightman, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) 43-56.

<sup>10</sup>The power of the ikon is felt in a good deal of contemporary drama both from the United States and elsewhere. Kopit's *Indians* is an example. The universal penetration of the ikon is important to the use made by Terry Johnson in his *Insignificance* or *Waving/Drowning* where key American images are employed. The conjunction of Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, Joe di Maggio, and Senator Joseph McCarthy in *Insignificance* is telling.

One may reflect on the mythological power of the image when the figure of Senator McCarthy is used in the contemporary (1997) television advertisement of a Danish (and therefore, presumably, un-American) lager beer.

<sup>11</sup>David Mamet, *The Woods* (New York: Samuel French, 1979) 58.

<sup>12</sup>Sam Shepard, *Five Plays* (London: Faber, 1969) 48.