

How to Listen to Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney*

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At the end of his reading of *Boston Marriage*, Maurice Charney asks: “Is Mamet parodying himself?” (87). It’s a good question, in part because it’s more than a rhetorical one—as the uncertainty of Charney’s conclusion implies. What Charney *is* certain of is the texture of Mamet’s dialogue:

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. (87)

Most readers would be hard pressed to add to this cogent précis of Mamet’s language—language widely acknowledged as both idiosyncratic and forceful. From such plays as *The Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* through *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Romance*, and in films like *House of Games* and *The Spanish Prisoner*, Mamet’s language often strides front and center to take credit not as an extra or even a member of the supporting cast but as a primary character.

Not surprisingly, as a protagonist Mamet’s language is—like many of the characters who speak it—something of a trickster. Charney acknowledges this not only in his question about self-parody, but in his final paragraph’s hesitant phrases concerning Mamet and his style: “It seems to me ...”; “This may be teasing ...”; “He seems amused at having us on” (87). It may be that, even after his valuable survey, Charney isn’t sure how to take Mamet. But who could blame him?

*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>>.

How could we fault anyone, that is, for being tentative about these works? For Mamet himself makes it extremely difficult to know how to measure and judge what he writes.

Mamet does this in part by switching promiscuously between subjects and styles. Like a rebellious schoolboy, he refuses to accept the distinctions of place and position implied by elevated discourse. This, in fact, is a central conviction in his works: life is a game, no matter where it's played. Secondly, he knows how to pre-empt a conversation. In his impish pastiche *Wilson: A Consideration of the Sources*, for instance, he deftly inoculates himself against the flu of academic scrutiny by satirizing the exact kind of attention that the present essay is giving him. And the fact that, for better or worse, elements of his style have been adopted by a younger generation of writers means also that his language has become its admirers': not only a dialect but a commodity.

But what makes Mamet's recent work even more difficult to place than these things is the author's fascination with what we could call "linguistic costume drama." Mamet has always been interested in history, of course, but seems especially drawn to the period circumscribed by, at its beginning, the mythical Old West in the U. S. and, at its close, the 1933-34 World's Fair in his native city of Chicago. I give American bookends to this "Century of Progress" as a gesture to Mamet's nativism, but it should be pointed out that his interest in this period also embraces plays from England and the Continent. I am thinking of *The Voysey Inheritance* in particular; in 2005, Mamet published his adaptation of Harley Granville-Barker's script from exactly a century earlier. Before his nod to Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* in *Boston Marriage*, of course, Mamet had similarly adapted Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*. And to this group of revivals and homages one could add his film *The Winslow Boy*, an updating of the Terence Rattigan play and screenplay that dramatize a resonant social scandal of pre-WWI England.

What most of these plays and dramas have in common is not only the fact that they precede Mamet's versions by approximately a cen-

tury, but also (and this is of course part of their historical moment) the quality of being *well made*. When we think of the “well-made play” we perhaps most often think of charming drawing-room comedies whose plots work themselves out like the gears of an intricate, bejeweled watch, and whose climaxes occur “right on time” at the end of the action. Such playwrights as Victorien Sardou, Georges Feydeau, and Arthur Wing Pinero, to name only these, left a legacy of finely crafted comedies which masters of the form like Ernst Lubitsch and Preston Sturges would draw on for their hallmark contributions to American film comedy. Although his movies are better known, Sturges’s 1929 stage play, *Strictly Dishonorable*, is a delightful instance of the well-made play in an American vein. Its title is also a curtain-line response to a query concerning the nature of a young man’s romantic intentions. Like the well-made play generally, this two-word phrase gives us in miniature not only personality and situation, but an entire world-view.

It is worth dwelling on this genre here because Mamet’s respect for it tells us a great deal about what he values and, by extension, how we can listen to his works. When Mamet published a short book of lectures *On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (its subtitle), he called it *Three Uses of the Knife*. For Mamet, “Dramatic structure [...] is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information”—or, in a more familiar group of terms:

Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girls; act one, two, three. (73)

A crucial thing to realize about Mamet is that he is at heart a formalist, someone who treasures the shape and utility of well-made things. That this includes shotguns, cigars, and hunting-knives as well as sentences, poems, and plays is precisely the point: what matters is the craftsmanship that arranges working parts into an attractive, functional whole. Sometimes this whole is elegant, rising to the exquisite. Such quality, in Mamet’s eyes, is both the province of the artist and the artist’s gift to an audience.

To listen to Mamet's works means hearing his speakers engaged in functional dialogue that succeeds not in spite of unorthodox silences, repetitions, and awkward vocabulary, but because of them. Mamet writes collaborative speech even (perhaps especially) when his speakers engage in the most heated arguments. He seems always to have the greater whole in mind, with the apparent false starts and broken utterances of his dialogue actually working as pieces of a larger object. One could take *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for example. There an innocent conversation in a restaurant concludes, famously, with "Because you listened" (46). The resounding "click" we hear in Moss's line transforms everything heard before it, locking things firmly in place and convincing us even as it convinces Aaronow that their conversation has not been innocent at all.

In Mamet no conversations are innocent, of course. They are always crafted in such a way as to produce something: a laugh, an epigram, a cynical insight into the human condition. This craft has familiar contours, drawing on conventions of stage dialogue and on the rhythms of jokes and sales pitches. Earlier I pointed out how central the notion of "game" is to Mamet. And I would suggest here that to listen rightly to Mamet is to consider his dialogues athletic contests. A good comparison, in fact, would be to a tennis match. In Mamet's scenes, as in tennis, the game needs two to prosecute a point. Each point, in turn, has a beginning, middle, and end. Not every shot is a winner—nor should it be, if the game is being played properly. But the good shots put an opponent at clear disadvantage. In fact, the better a shot, the weaker the reply is likely to be. In Mamet, such temporary disadvantage is often signaled by fragmented or otherwise incomplete speech. For the audience, the joy of experiencing these exchanges comes not at the end or from the end but from the postponement of an exchange's end. Because that delay is drama.

Here is a sequence from *Boston Marriage*. Because it represents many of the stylistic features of Mamet's language and forms something like a complete play in and of itself, I reproduce it at length:

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.”

CLAIRE: And you, friend of my Youth ...

ANNA: ... what memory ...

CLAIRE: At the announcement ...

ANNA: Yes?

CLAIRE: At the announcement, grow if I do not mistake, *cold*. Can you say why?

ANNA: *Why?*

CLAIRE: Yes.

ANNA: I have redecorated our room in Chintz. In *Chintz*, a fabric I abhor, in your absence, do you see? To please you.

CLAIRE: In Chintz?

ANNA: You once expressed a preference for chintz.

CLAIRE: I

ANNA: For *Chintz*, which I have, oblivious to the verdict of the World, *fes-tooned* ...

CLAIRE: I ...

ANNA: 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*) Oh how lonely you make me feel. How small. For how can one cherish, nay, how can one respect one, however dear, however well formed, who acts so arbitrarily—so cruel? But yes, the engine of the world’s betrayal, is it not? And we are sentenced to strive with the world. (*Pause*)

CLAIRE: I’m sorry, what? (*Pause*) Did I miss anything? (*Pause*)

ANNA: I poured out my heart blood.

CLAIRE: Oh ... (*Pause*) I’ve forgotten what I was going to say.

ANNA: Say something *else*. (*Pause*)

CLAIRE: How *practical* you are.

ANNA: For what *is* speech?

CLAIRE: I had often thought, it is as the chirping of the birds, minus their laudable disinterestedness.

ANNA: Oh what a vast, oh what a vast and pointless shithole it all is.

CLAIRE: What would that be?

ANNA: Our lives. (14-15)

Like so many sequences in Mamet, this is talk about talk. One could note, for instance, the frequent references to speech as both practice and object: “saying [...] As you phrased it [...] midcareer [...] prating [...] announcement [...] announcement [...] say [...] expressed [...]

verdict [...] thanks [...] mute appreciation [...] tale [...] sentenced [...] poured out [...] say [...]. Say [...] speech [...] chirping [...].” So interested is Mamet in talk that his characters frequently speak of little else. As Anna asks, “For what *is* speech?” Not content to leave Anna’s shot unreturned, Claire defines speech in a manner that blends Aristotle and Veblen: “I had often thought, it is as the chirping of the birds, minus their laudable disinterestedness.”

The arch vocabulary here—part of what I have called “linguistic costume drama”—will bear more examination in a moment. But for now, we should notice that the back-and-forth in this sequence asks to be read as competitive collaboration. In this paradox—two who are playing the same game but looking for an advantage—we have the basis of drama and marriage alike. If Anna’s taunting prelude temporarily gives Claire an opportunity to dictate the pace of play, Anna’s understated replies—“... what memory ...”; “Yes?”; “*Why?*”—gradually work to help her resume control. Then Anna escalates her thoughts, growing them like hot-house flowers until they bloom into her 95-word speech beginning “I come into funds [...].” To continue the tennis analogy, it is as though she purposefully interrupts a measured baseline rally (the back-and-forth of their earlier lines) to carve under the ball, floating it high and short over the net as a drop shot—a daring maneuver that risks a great deal in hopes of ending the point then and there. Commentators often say that such a brazen shot provides a window into a player’s soul, revealing character—and surely it is no accident that this description is appropriate for sport and theater alike. With Anna’s decision, everything about the point seems to change. Like an athlete seizing the moment for a display of her virtuosity, Anna takes over the pace and plot of the game, temporarily drawing all eyes (and, in this case, ears) to her.

All, that is, save Claire’s, for she refuses to let Anna win the point. Mindful that every speaker needs an audience—not to speak, of course, but to take confidence from control—she withholds what Anna’s exhibition demands. Claire deflates and defeats her oppo-

ment's virtuosity by offering the most effective reply possible: "I'm sorry, what? (*Pause*) Did I miss anything? (*Pause*)."

To describe this conversation as being like a point played in tennis may seem merely to include Mamet's dialogue in a long history of stage repartee in the West, from Jonson and Wycherley through Wilde. The volleys of wit here, in *Boston Marriage*, and throughout Mamet's work indeed ask to be considered in that tradition. But membership in this club is not a small thing. For it asks us to think about Mamet outside a common story. The tendency in criticism concerned with plays of our era, for instance, has been to describe a decline of dialogue, strictly constructed. The conclusion of the sequence above ("Oh what a vast, oh what a vast and pointless shithole it all is. [...] Our lives.") points up a line of interpretation that, focusing on plays from at least Beckett through Pinter and Orton to Mamet, has been too ready to focus on the existential directions of obscenity and seeming *non sequitur*. Speech, from this point of view, is selfishness incarnate. When Tony Kushner set out to parody Mamet language through Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, for instance, he gave that character a snarling, obscene, and overwhelmingly self-concerned style of speech. Cohn barks language into telephone receivers and grows impatient when they talk back.

But what we see in Mamet's most recent work, I would offer, tells us something that contradicts Kushner's unflattering portrait, and reveals something important about Mamet's entire career: his scenes are much more eloquent than his characters' vocabulary and syntax—taken in isolation—would lead us to believe. Communication in his works occurs not in paired sentences but across many. Throughout his plays and screenplays, his characters labor to sustain the pace of the rhetorical game Mamet engages them in. The ellipses, repetitions, and artful obscenities in his scenes are the sounds of bodies striving in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual contests.

But if the notion of rhetorical contests helps us listen to Mamet, it leaves a final difficulty untouched. How are we to take the self-consciously "arch" dialogue in his plays? Charney has called this

“overwrought literary style” (87), and it is difficult to disagree with the characterization. This is especially the case where Mamet’s penchant for the era of Wilde and for what I have called linguistic costume drama leads him to adorn his dialogue with the veneer of historical speech. *Boston Marriage* is littered, for instance, with devastatingly high-register vocabulary, difficult words and phrases drawn from a literate age gone by. Just the sequence above offers “midcareer,” “festooned,” and “disinterestedness,” and these are hardly the most challenging words in the play. Anna’s self-important turn also elevates its register:

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*) Oh how lonely you make me feel. How small. For how can one cherish, nay, how can one respect one, however dear, however well formed, who acts so arbitrarily—so cruel? But yes, the engine of the world’s betrayal, is it not? And we are sentenced to strive with the world. (*Pause*) (15)

This speech moves from a long sentence (itself built on repetition) into short ones that then crescendo in another sustained query: “For how can one cherish, nay, how can one respect one, however dear, however well formed, who acts so arbitrarily—so cruel?” Anna’s register, it should be pointed out, benefits as much from formal rhythms (“how can one cherish [...] how can one respect”; “however dear, however well formed”; “so arbitrarily [...] so cruel”) as from what rightly seems, in context, arch vocabulary (“cherish,” “nay,” “arbitrarily”).

Mamet’s gleeful grafting of period diction (“I come into funds”) with a contemporary ethos (“the tale of your new rutting”) produces a hybrid that can be difficult to place. For when we listen to the characters speak in *Boston Marriage* we are in neither 1890s Boston (or London) nor 1990s Boston (where this play opened on June 4, 1999). Instead, we’re in a theater of the imagination and the body where artists of our time are clothing themselves partly in the costumes of another. In this speech we hear echoes of a verbal world we have lost, a world based in the book and in book reading. The friction between *what*

various Mamet characters say and *how* they say it thus makes up a conflict internal to the idea and practice of dialogue in his plays. It is as if Mamet, even as he writes meaningful conflicts on the level of plot, has in mind a metaphysical plane where the differences between book and voice, between then and now, play themselves out.

Listening to Mamet's plays involves hearing these two planes of conflict, in each of which a struggle for predominance depends on cooperation, on following rules that no one has the power to alter. That Mamet *likes* these rules, that he sees them as not hindrance but aid to the extension of art, is part of what I mean when I call him a formalist who both appreciates well-made things and strives constantly to hone his skills in such making. In the end, then, "parody" may not answer all of the questions posed by his plays (especially his recent ones). There *is* parody in the sense that we have a playwright and characters speaking language not their own, enjoying linguistic games that they did not invent. But I do not believe that Mamet regrets in any way the fact that these games were created by others. Nor do I think that he would like to (or believes one can) change their rules. As Mamet continues to clothe his characters' speech in historical costumes, in fact, he gives us reason to see his works as preservationist in nature.

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