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DAVID MAMET'S WOMEN CHARACTERS: CONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

In an interview over a decade ago David Mamet observed: "[w]hat's missing from modern life is spirituality—the connection to the greater truths of the universe. What is missing is the feeling of knowing our place and a sense of belonging" (qtd. in Nuwer 10). Indeed, the loss of spirituality seems to pervade the totality of his dramatic output. Surfacing in his plays to varying degrees, the spiritual emptiness is a haunting presence in the characters' conversational dissonance, in their fragmented, disjointed, and incomplete utterances, as well as in the abusive language they use to conceal their innermost feelings.

The spiritual void "plaguing" Mamet's plays finds its most blatant manifestation in the "demythicized" way that women are treated and presented in his dramatic works. Typically, Mamet's "women characters are either absent or presented as natural disturbers of the male order" (Radavich 123). When women characters are on stage, it is the "language of contempt, hatred, and dehumanization that is insistently allied to matching attitudes toward women" (Jacobs 167). With reference to women, the male characters invariably use highly abusive words, ranging from slurs such as "bitches," "broads," and "inanimate objects" to "chicks" and "dykes." The stance that critics take of Mamet's female characters is far from being flattering either: Joan in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) is "cynical" (Richards 5); Karen in *Speed-the-Plow* (1987), Dr. Ford in *House of Games* (1987), and Carol in *Oleanna* (1992) are "manipulative, monochromatic

heroines" (qtd. in Mufson 11); Donny in *The Cryptogram* (1994) is labeled as "narcissistic" (Lahr 73).

Apparent even from the brief selection of comments cited above, Mamet's female protagonists have baffled male characters and critics alike. Whereas a large bulk of Mamet criticism has predominantly focused on the most obvious aspects and themes in Mamet's drama (the decline of American myths, the decay of American idealism, the prevalence of corruption and venality in business, the degradation of business ethic into deception and betrayal, the loss of American Dream and frontier spirit), the few critical inquiries devoting scant attention to his female characters have produced one-dimensional and somewhat distorted images of women. I contend that these reductive explanations stem from what has been unduly overlooked so far: Mamet's heroines defy usual character typologies. The conventional clichés, archetypical paradigms or other patterns of classification that allocate women the roles of mother-wife-lover, Magna Mater-Virgin-Seducer-Bitch, the virgin and the whore, lose their validity in Mamet's world. Essentially, the female protagonists in Mamet's plays undermine and debunk the stereotypical roles sanctioned to them by patriarchy. Disrupting and subverting male dominance and superiority, the women *carnivalize* the male-dominated world, whereby they expose its prejudices and corrupt practices, as well as oppose the patriarchal modes of the objectification of women and the negation of their subjectivity.

In an attempt to dispel some of the misconceptions about Mamet's women characters, in the present paper, I will highlight how Mamet is mapping the displacement of women's socially and culturally prescribed roles. I argue that M. M. Bakhtin's concept of "parodying doubles" (*Problems* 127)—a literary device whereby a leading hero has several doubles who parody him in various ways—can serve as an appropriate analytical tool to illuminate certain aspects of the representation of women in Mamet's plays Accordingly, the female characters assume the role of "parodying doubles" in the sense that they parody their male counterparts by emulating male role models and discourse, thus, the women characters expose the tenuous grounds that male phallocentric power is based on, and also lay bare corrupt patriarchal practices. In light of this assumption, it is precisely through

the women protagonists that Mamet actually offers a profound critical angle on an America that is falling apart.

With reference to a corpus of six plays and one screenplay by Mamet, I will demonstrate the "parodying double" role of the women characters. Based on a tendency of rendering the women characters with increasing subtlety over the past few years, Mamet's dramatic output lends itself to a division into periods. Thus, I distinguish three phases: the early plays in which the women are treated as objects of male desire; the second stage of the so called "business plays" with the appearance of a "new woman" who does not merely challenge but also subverts male dominance; and finally, "family plays" with women situated in a domestic environment. The three stages I propose come to full circle in terms of the sites where the women characters' lives unfold: there seems to be a movement from the private realm of life into the public and a shift back again to the private domain. Also, the three phases testify significant shifts in the author's gender focus.

The first phase extending from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s includes predominantly all-male cast plays such as *Lakeboat* (1970), *The Duck Variations* (1976), *A Life in the Theater* (1977), *American Buffalo* (1975), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983); also, plays where women appear only as sex objects of male desire as in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *The Woods* (1977) or are simply family members as in *Reunion* (1976).

Even in the early plays with women characters in them, *Chicago* and *The Woods*, the apparently stereotypical female protagonists debunk conventional sexual roles ascribed to them by patriarchal society. Through the subversion of a former male-centered sexual myth, "[t]he birthright priority whereby males rule females" (Millett 25), the women characters expose their traditional role as objects of male perception and desire. They revolt against being treated as sex objects by, ironically, objectifying their male counterparts. In *Chicago*, two woman characters act as the "parodying doubles" of Bernie, a loudmouth male chauvinist who keeps bragging about his sexual performance. A nameless off-stage woman character and Joan, one of the on-stage women protagonists, adopt male role models in their acts and discourse whereby they expose and challenge the male prerogative to sexually subordinate women. The objectification and

negation of *male* subjectivity is exemplified in the hasty sexual intercourse the *anonymous* woman has with Bernie. *She* brings it home to him that *he* is just as *unimportant* to her as she is to him. Joan, on the other hand, subverts the verbally abusive level of sexuality in her encounter with Bernie in a singles' bar. She refuses to act out the role of a sex object and to employ any subtle feminine strategies to stifle Bernie's sexual advances. Instead she tells him point blank: "I don't find you sexually attractive" (20). In *The Woods*, Ruth treats Nick as an object whom she tries to win and *buy* with her endless talk and gifts, whereas Nick, feeling trapped by her importuning him for commitment, turns mean, violent, and finally he rapes her.

In the second phase, which I date from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Mamet considerably departs from his pattern of marginalising women characters in his works. The novelty of portraying women in *House of Games*, *Speed-the-Plow*, and *Oleanna* lies in two facts: first, the women protagonists embody a new type of woman who challenges and even subverts male power and authority in public places of life; second, closely linked to the previous one, these characters act as autonomous human beings located outside their domestic environment. The unconventional portrayal of the women protagonists of these plays, however, engendered more debate than acclaim. These heroines' violence and arrogance toward their male counterparts as well as the seemingly ungrounded shifts in their acts and discourse created a huge stir and puzzlement at the time these plays were produced. Through the lense of the "parodying double" role of the women, however, the conflicting interpretations concerning the female protagonists' behavior can be conveniently resolved. Thus, their sudden metamorphosis—a most frequently attacked aspect—is nothing else but a hyperbolic emulation of certain sides of the male characters presented in the plays.

In fact, in "doing business" with their male counterparts, all the women characters mimick male practices. Human and business relations are equally built on and motivated by deception and betrayal. For instance, adopting strategies of cunning and betrayal, Karen, the secretary in Bobby Gould's Hollywood studio in *Speed*, *plows* her way to secure her position in the film industry. Yet, she employs

exactly the same modes of deception to get a job for herself as Gould has used to con *her* into believing that he needs *her* perceptive opinion about a new filmscript. Being fully aware of the fact that in patriarchal society "her value resides not in her own being but in some transcendental standard of equivalence (money, the phallus)" (Moi 141), Karen capitalizes on her "exchange value" and uses her sex to obtain the job. She deceives and manipulates Gould into believing that she acts out of pure love and with the intention of salving his soul. However, she attains merely a temporary victory over her male counterpart. Because she admits her real intention to Gould and his business associate, she is not yet allowed to enter the male world. Paradoxically, her *sincerety*, which lays bare the male protagonists' hypocrisy and corruption, prevents her from joining the male-dominated world.

Dr. Ford, the successful psychologist in *House*, while collecting material on the behavior of conmen, gets hoodwinked by them and becomes the victim of their confidence game played on her. She is made into a thief, a whore, and even a murderess. Realizing that she has been badly humiliated, Ford feels shattered and destroyed financially, professionally as well as spiritually. In order to restore and renovate her identity, she must take revenge on Mike, the leading con man. Having mastered his strategies of deception and congames, she gains back all her money. However, she can complete her final metamorphosis into a con-woman only by physically annihilating her "teacher."

Carol in *Oleanna* studies for a university degree in order to ensure her social advancement but she feels she does not receive the necessary education nor the expected help from her professor. Realizing that the professor's unlimited power allows him to break down every barrier and violate all the rules and laws at the university, Carol reports him to the Tenure Committee of the university and charges him with sexism, elitism, and racism. With this move, the hierarchical positions allocated to them by patriarchy and institutional restrictions reverse between them. The empowered student, then, employs the same strategies of wielding power as her teacher. Ironically, Carol turns out to be an excellent student who reiterates the professor's words and phrases, assumes his condescending and

arrogant attitude, and even her hunger for power is just as ravenous as the professor's. In exchange for withdrawing her accusations against the professor, she intends to ban all his books from the university curriculum, an unacceptable ultimatum for the professor. As a result he will be dismissed from his post.

Adopting the "parodying double" role, the women characters in the above plays succeed in subverting the initial hierarchical order that ascribes subordinated position to them in patriarchy. With the exception of Karen, who can only momentarily invert the patriarchal structure, dr. Ford and Carol are able to confirm their newly gained empowerment and assume not only their former oppressors' discourse and value system but also their dominant positions. "The new woman" gains power by embracing male values such as deception, venality, hypocrisy, violence, and transgression of rules and laws. Yet, she is at a transitory stage, the ambivalent nature of which can be elucidated by Simone de Beauvoir's note concerning this stage in the new woman's evolvement: "disguised as a man she feels herself as ill at ease in her flesh as in her masculine garb" (10).

Arguably, the comic aspect of parody, inherently present in the "parodying double" role, is gradually muffled and reduced almost to a minimum in the portrayal of Mamet's women characters, and especially in the family plays. Nevertheless, the shift in the nature of parody from loud to "reduced laughter" (Bakhtin 166) or bitter irony does not lessen either the importance or the legitimacy of the parodying double role of the women characters. As Bakhtin asserts, "reduced laughter in carnivalized literature by no means excludes the possibility of somber colors within a work" (166).

In the third phase, extending from the mid-1990s up to the present time (2002) two major works, *The Cryptogram* (1994), and *The Old Neighborhood* (1997)—comprising three short plays, *The Disappearence of the Jews*, *Jolly*, and *Deeny*—display thematic shifts from the public into the private realms of life. Family life becomes foregrounded and, following the conventions of the American family plays by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, the domestic setting is the locale where the characters' lives unfold and their relationships are played out. While the women protagonists in the canonical forefathers' family plays could retain their vigor as well

as their drive to keep their families together—with varying success, though (Amanda Wingfield in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Big Mamma in Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Kate Keller in Miller's *All My Sons*, Linda Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*)—in Mamet's plays mothers and wives appear to be both estranged from their families and dysfunctional.

In *The Cryptogram* the absent husband's alienation from his wife, Donny, and his ten-year-old son, Del, finds parallel in the wife's similar estrangement. Donny's acts and discourse in the play are best characterized by an oxymoronic combination: her *distanced presence*. Her first *offstage* appearance, marked by a crash (her breaking the teapot) evokes a dysfunctional and distanced mother and wife, who, as the play unfolds, turns out to be incapacitated to keep her family together. "Mamet's family den in *The Cryptogram*," as Martin Schaub claims, "has completely lost its function as a protective haven; his [Mamet's] protagonists are drifting and, quite literally, on the move" (327). The loss of the "protective haven" function of the living-room is a metonymical indicator of mothers' and wives' inability to sustain this vital function. Simultaneously, the radical transformations of conventional routines and the prevalence of uprooted patterns in the lives of families indicates the presence of a carnivalized world where the most protective familial setting is degraded into a transitory shelter.

The pattern of spiritual brokenness equally applies to *The Old Neighborhood*. The protagonist, the middle-aged Bobby Gould returns to the old neighborhood in a series of encounters with his past only to realize his depressing present overshadowed by a broken marriage and an impending divorce. Untypically for Mamet, both in *Jolly* and in *Deeny*, certain details about Bobby's past are narrated from the female characters' points of view: Jolly, Bobby's sister recalls her childhood grievances, while Deeny, Gould's first love, meanders about gardening, molecules, and her work only to conceal her agitated state of mind when confronting the man she once loved. The "parodying double" role of these two female characters departs from the former ones in the sense that they cease to function as "crooked mirrors" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 127) for their male counterparts: instead of reflecting, emulating, and even distorting unfavorable sides of their

male counterparts (violence, alienation, enstrangement), both Jolly and Deeny show role models and behavior (courage to face and overcome difficulties, reassurance, ability to build a dialogical relationship) that the male characters surrounding them can draw strength from. In other words, they dare to discard "the masculine garb" that seems to be an essential "outfit" when entering the male-dominated world.

The brief account of the portrayal of Mamet's female characters testifies that Mamet revises the male-conventional treatment of women in mainstream American drama: first, apart from the few family plays (*The Cryptogram*, *Jolly*) his heroines are located outside their domestic environment; second, by granting the women characters *subject positions,* Mamet disrupts one of the most powerful tendencies prevalent in American literature: a general disregard for women characters both in fiction and drama.[1] Concurrently, the women characters' parodying double role reveals one of the most disturbing aspects of contemporary American society: the arbitrariness of the demarcation lines between what is personal and commercial, that is, the infiltration of business mentality into the private realms of life. In Roudane's words: "in Mamet's world, art and culture, as with human relationships and the environments in which those tragicomic relationships come into view, are devalued, exchanged, compromised: fiscal capital replaces cultural and spiritual capital" (10).

Yet, by no means can it be suggested that Mamet's drama evokes an apocalyptic world suffused with total negation and disruption. On

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[1] The apparently misogynistic treatment of women in Mamet's works is neither an exclusively Mametian feature, nor is it bound to a specific genre or time. It appears to be an essential element that informs the historically defined "Americanness" of American literature: "American literature, more specifically, was typically a story about a would be autonomous self who revolts against a corrupt or stultifyingly conventional society—a society [...] characteristically associated with the women left behind" (Carton and Graff 8:327). As regards the mode of treating women characters in American drama, feminist critic Gayle Austin observes that the pattern has been set by canonical texts such as Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1947): "The overpowering impression the play leaves is that, for men, sex with women is empty, mothers and wives are necessary but ineffectual, and the most important thing is to bond successfully with other men. The problem is that this play has become a paradigm for what the 'serious American play' should be" (50).

the contrary, in some underlying terms, the affirmation of traditional values and a need for connection evolve in it. The presence of a carnivalized world with its radical transformations and uprooted patterns as described by Mamet posits the existence of another world, where values based on morality and humanity prevail.

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