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The "Unmanning" Word: Language, Masculinity and Political Correctness in the Work of David Mamet and Philip Roth

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The most obvious parallel between the work of the American writers Philip Roth and David Mamet seems to be the amount of controversy that their texts have attracted over the years. Both have been accused of obscenity, for instance, and, more seriously, of misogyny. Roth has been labeled one of the "bad boys of contemporary American letters" (Jones and Nance 160), an author who "projects ... enormous rage and disappointment with womankind" in his work (Allen 96)). Mamet, meanwhile, has been termed "the playwright of oaths and testosterone" ("David Mamet on Trial at the Court of Feminism"). As these references to "letters," "oaths," "boys" and "testosterone" suggest, both writers share an interest in the relationship between language and masculinity. This is what I aim to address in this article. I wish to demonstrate the similarities between Roth and Mamet's treatment of this relationship, both in their early writing and in their more recent material. I focus on two works by each author, an early piece and a later piece: Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *Deception* (1990), and Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) and *Oleanna* (1992).

There are interesting affinities between both writers' sense of the ways in which language can be "unmanning." Language demeans and diminishes their heroes in various ways, and, ultimately, reveals them as socially inadequate males who can not sustain mature relationships with women. Initially, this relates to the manner by which characters diminish themselves through their use of language. However, in recent years Roth and Mamet's treatment of this issue has developed in response to the constraints of Political Correctness (PC) and the implications it has for the way we use language. PC, as I discuss below in greater detail, is informed by a belief that language should be censored. The pressure this imposes on Roth and Mamet's male heroes has an "unmanning" effect, as linguistic censorship transforms them, through anger and frustration, into dysfunctional males. Again this results in a breakdown in their relationships with women and their ability to function in a socially acceptable way. One aim of this article, then, is to illustrate this association between language and masculinity. I also intend to demonstrate how Roth and Mamet's recent work constitutes an implicit indictment of PC and reveals it as a pernicious and misguided phenomenon.

Roth's novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, is the story of Alex Portnoy, a Jewish male with an oppressive, "castrating" mother. Portnoy rebels against her mostly by indulging in acts of which she does not approve. Obscenity and masturbation become the primary ways in which Portnoy asserts his freedom. As he grows older, these forms of rebellion persist. His speech is littered with obscenity and sexist language, and his relationships with women are self-serving. Women are merely objects through whom he might vent his anger and, as Irving Buchan contends, "his sexuality is ... masturbatory sexuality employed to degrade, to revenge and to heap contempt on ... women" (103). Portnoy's impulse to degrade women is inextricably linked to his use of language. His obscenity reveals his sexual immaturity, and diminishes both the sex act it describes and the women he encounters. Indeed, Portnoy's reliance on "foul" language is meant to suggest a linguistic inadequacy that parallels his sexual inadequacy. As Robert Forray observes, the frustration born from Portnoy's "five-hundred-word New Jersey vocabulary" is linked inextricably to the lack of sexual fulfilment that degenerates ultimately into impotence (276).

For all his shortcomings, Portnoy is an engaging figure in some respects. His narrative is amusing and the other characters in the novel seem extremely bland by comparison. As the book progresses, however, a more sinister dimension to Portnoy is revealed. For instance, his attempt near the end to force himself on the young Jewish woman, Naomi, is extreme and unsettling. As several critics have noted, his narrative complaint becomes progressively less witty, and increasingly hysterical and vitriolic. (Note 1) Portnoy's both social and verbal inadequacy is shown most powerfully at the close of the book with him, unreformed and impotent, shouting "Up society's Ass" (Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 274). Finally, he abandons coherent language altogether, terminating his narrative with a howl. Despite his superficial attractions, then, we are meant to see Portnoy, and his obscenity and sexual aggression, as distasteful and self-defeating. Portnoy, as Marya Mannes suggests, is an "antihero" (39); he is offered as an indictment of the self-obsessed male whose immaturity precludes meaningful relationships with women. Ultimately, Portnoy is posited as the moral and emotional inferior to the females he meets.

There are interesting similarities between this story of inadequacy and alienation, and Mamet's treatment of a similar theme in his play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. This piece, first performed five years after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, is partly about the relationship between two men, Bernie and Danny. The former is seen to be trying to school the latter in the subject of sex. In his advice to Danny that "the way to get laid is to treat 'em like shit" (Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* 22), Bernie betrays a hostility to women akin to Portnoy's. As with Portnoy, Bernie's speech is pervaded by gratuitous obscenity. However, also like Portnoy, Bernie is an attractive character in a number of respects: his language, though hostile and misogynist, is colorful and entertaining in its energy and comic exuberance. At the outset of the play he is a crude yet compelling character. The

sinister aspects of Bernie are developed when he begins to sabotage the love affair his friend has with a woman he meets, Debby. This relationship clearly has a potential and emotional substance that Bernie cannot comprehend. As he attempts to undermine this, Bernie becomes, to use David Skeele's words, "less funny and attractive and more dangerous and destructive" (16). As his relationship with Debby fails, Danny begins to emulate Bernie's misogyny and linguistic crudity. Bernie is thus the prime agent in Danny's decline and corruption, and, similar to Portnoy, is revealed finally as a sinister and destructive character.

Both Roth's novel and Mamet's play have been described by critics as obscene and misogynist. This is a naive view. Julius Novak, in his review of Mamet's play, is correct when he writes that it would be wrong to take "Bernie's fantastic crudities as the play's statement" (qtd. in Jones and Dykes 18). The same is true of Portnoy's neurotic *kvetching* in Roth's novel. For both characters, a dependency on obscenity is a compensation for the fact that their relationships are empty and meaningless. Sex has become an obscenity because it is divorced from any kind of valid emotional life. Both Roth and Mamet show how "foul" language becomes a kind of rhetoric of compensation that struggles to fill the void at the heart of their characters' lives. Both stories are at least partly about the way people use language to conceal or deny the truth about themselves. In these early works, then, both writers create stories that are critical of their male protagonists and that offer implicit indictments of their language. They demonstrate, in other words, how men can be "unmanned"—rendered socially dysfunctional males—by their own sexist speech.

In the years that followed the novel and the play, Roth and Mamet's works have examined a variety of issues. While Roth in his *Zuckerman* novels has been preoccupied with the processes and consequences of fiction-making, Mamet's best work has addressed, among other things, the morality of the business ethic, the psychology of games, and the consequences of ethnic heritage. However, the theme of language and masculinity is one that both writers return to in an interesting way in the 1990s. In Roth's novel, *Deception*, and Mamet's play, *Oleanna*, the relationship between language and masculinity is re-examined from a different perspective. This time the emphasis is less on criticizing the language men use and more on defending their freedom of speech.

Before discussing these texts, it is worth engaging in what is surely the most significant cultural development of recent years for anyone interested in language and masculinity: the emergence of PC. As Alain Piette suggests, this is a phenomenon:

> which finds its roots in the liberal 1960s and 1970s, but is only now coming full swing at the beginning of the 1990s, rekindled after lying dormant in the Reagan-Bush years. (177)

PC has been associated in recent years with academic institutions, and debates about multiculturalism and the politics of gender. Specifically, it has been linked with the concerns of peripheral and minority groups who have become increasingly vocal in their demands for equal rights. To this end they advocate eliminating from our language any words that might be considered discriminating or insulting. As Roger Bechtel writes:

> The real heat of the controversy emanates from attempts of activists to place restrictions on certain language and behaviour within the academic community. The language they would prohibit is that which they would define as racist, sexist, elitist, and homophobic, to name only the most representative categories. The crux of their argument is that such speech constitutes harassment … One of the practical upshots of this movement has been the institution of speech codes on some campuses. Such codes typically prohibit derogatory references to "race, sex, sexual orientation, or disability," categorizing such language as "hate speech"... [and] mandate punishment for perpetrators ... [which] ranges from a reprimand to expulsion or dismissal. (30-31)

The sentiment that informs PC is generally laudable, given that it is fuelled by a desire to promote genuine egalitarianism and multiculturalism. However, as I suggested above, one of the consequences of PC is linguistic censorship and this is what is controversial for many Americans. Inhibiting freedom of speech goes against the First Amendment of the Constitution. It is this aspect of PC that both Roth and Mamet confront in their work of the early 1990s.

Roth's novel, *Deception*, presents a series of conversations between a Jewish-American novelist named Philip and a number of other people. These include his wife, various friends from behind the Iron Curtain and a woman with whom he is apparently having a clandestine affair. The conversations are related in the form of pure dialogue. They are arranged in the form of dramatic narrative but without the characters' names preceding speech. It is impossible for the reader to determine which of the conversations are supposed to be "real" and which are figments of Philip's imagination. Indeed, one of the novel's themes is the relationship between reality and fiction, and the extent to which this is always ambiguous. For instance, when Philip's wife discovers a notebook apparently containing his post-coital conversations with his mistress, he denies that they are real and claims the conversations are merely notes for a novel he is working on. Neither his wife nor the reader is in a position to determine the truth about this. Similarly, it is implied that the novel's hero, Philip, is at least a partial incarnation of Roth himself. Not only do they share a first name, but the text also makes numerous references to Roth's life and work that an informed reader will recognize as factual. Again, we can not know how much is fact and how much is fiction. Thus, we can never know to what extent we are being deceived by *Deception*, and part of the book's message seems to be that this is always the case whenever we encounter language and narrative.

Of all the dialogues that make up the novel, the one of primary interest is the conversation Philip has with an unnamed feminist critic. In this exchange, which supposedly takes place in a court of law, the critic accuses Philip of demeaning women in his work:

"Why do you publish books that cause women suffering? ..."

"Many people have read the work otherwise ..."

"Why do you depict women as shrews if not to malign them?"

"Why did Shakespeare?"

"You dare compare yourself to Shakespeare? ... Next you will be comparing yourself to Margaret Atwood and Alice Walker!" (Roth, *Deception* 114)

The feminist critic is a stereotype. She is presented as an ideologue who exhibits a bias toward particular ideas and texts. She asks him why, when he was working as a college professor, Philip felt justified in having sex with his students:

"How many times did you forcibly induce your students to fornicate with you?

"There was no need to exert force."

"Only because of the power to influence and control implicit in the relationship." (Roth, *Deception* 115)

She accuses him of demeaning women through language (in his work as a writer) and of abusing his power over them (in his role as a college professor). Throughout the exchange she is shown to be hostile and bigoted, while Philip presents a calm and "rational" argument. However, when it becomes clear that she will not be persuaded by his appeals to "reason," the episode takes a bizarre turn as Philip makes a pass at his detractor:

"Oh, you *are* a wonderful girl! You *are* clever! You are beautiful!"

"Your Honor, I must ask the court to instruct this *man* that I am not a 'girl'!"

"Come over here, prosecutor, would you please–"

"Your Honor, I *beg* you, the defendant is *blatantly*–"

"I want to ask your expert opinion about this–this–"

"Help, help, he's exploiting me, he's degrading me, he's attempting with this grotesque display of phallic–"

"You delicious, brilliant, lovely–"

"He's maligning me, Your Honour–in a court of law!"

"No, no, this is fucking, sweetheart–I'm fucking you in a court of law." (Roth, *Deception* 117)

It is implied, then, that Philip advances on the woman and begins to molest her. As he does so, he calls her "wonderful," "clever" and "beautiful," "delicious," "brilliant," and "lovely." She responds, significantly, not by complaining that he is molesting her, but by crying "He's maligning me, Your Honour." The dialogue ends

with Philip abandoning rational debate. He is frustrated because his appeals to "reason" fail to register on the "closed" mind of his antagonist. It is clear that Philip, at the end of the exchange, has become what his accuser suggests he is—an abuser of women. This is important, as will be seen below. But first how the language he uses becomes perverted needs to be noticed. Though Philip uses adjectives that are generally associated with praise ("wonderful," "clever," "beautiful," "delicious," "brilliant," "lovely"), she claims that he is "maligning" her. These words are interpreted as having opposite meanings to the ones they normally have. Therefore, just as the novel suggests that the relationship between fact and fiction is often difficult to determine, so, it suggests that at a more fundamental level, the meaning of words is often ambiguous. Meaning is never fixed. Yet, the feminist critic in *Deception* articulates a "PC rhetoric" which has ambitions to censor language and texts *based* on their meaning.

Some of Philip's conversations are with people from behind the Iron Curtain. There is an implicit parallel drawn in the book between the silence imposed by totalitarian regimes and the more insidious form of censorship Philip's feminist critic would enforce. They both proceed from the assumption that there is one, "right," way of looking at the world, or at the word: one ideology, one reading. It has been argued that PC has affinities with totalitarianism because, as Piette suggests, "it suffers no contradiction" (186). *Deception*, however, insists that, when it comes to language, everything is open to contradiction. Nothing is fixed because words and narrative always have the potential to deceive, to contradict. To attempt to censor words or novels based on their meaning can be seen as a totalitarian act, but it is also, in a sense, a pointless act because *meaning* can never be final or absolute. This has been demonstrated in the story with the words "wonderful," "clever" and "beautiful," "delicious," "brilliant" and "lovely". Meaning depends not merely on the language employed, but also on context and interpretation. Thus, while the feminist critic accuses him of writing sexist and degrading novels, Philip insists that "Many people have read the work otherwise." The implication is that novels, like words, are not in themselves sexist or degrading. Words are invariably polysemic; novels are always unfinished, dialogical and ambiguous.

Mamet deals with the same theme in a very similar way in his play *Oleanna*. A student, Carol, accuses her college professor, John, of sexual harassment after misinterpreting and misrepresenting some of his remarks to her. As the play progresses he finds that he is even facing charges of rape. Although there is certainly something unsavoury about the way John relishes his power over Carol, the accusations of sexual harassment, and particularly of rape, are clearly unfounded. Carol has internalized the discourse of PC and imbues John's offer to "help" her because he "likes" her with a meaning it does not have. As Christine Macleod indicates, Carol, in accusing John of rape, capitalizes "on her gender as a

source of specialist expertise and linguistic prerogative" (209). She manages to alter (or augment) the meaning of the word "rape" while John, "as the layman in this realm of discourse, [has] no power to gainsay whatever specific meaning she chooses to give it" (Macleod 209). As in Roth's novel, therefore, meaning depends on context and interpretation: out of context, John's words are incriminating, as were his actions when he "pressed [his] body into" Carol's. In the realm of Carol's "specialist" discourse, the definition of rape expands to encompass something that is not what most of us would understand the word to mean. However, Carol, like Philip's accuser in *Deception*, is also someone who would, presumably, like to censor words and texts *based* on their meaning. There is a certain language and literature that she, or her Group, would like to see banned from the University, including John's own book. But, again, the play demonstrates just how pointless is censoring words and texts based on meaning. Many, perhaps all, words are potentially derogatory and abusive. The audience have themselves witnessed John's innocent words turned against him; they have seen their meaning shift with context and interpretation. There is a sense in which Carol's kind of linguistic censorship assumes a fixity of meaning which the play itself reveals as erroneous. In other words, *Oleanna*, like *Deception*, demonstrates how flexible and fluid language is while, at the same time, presenting forces bent on reducing it and controlling it. This is the essence of the argument of both texts against PC censorship. The idea that we can restrict the way people use words assumes a naive view of language and how it functions in a social context. For Roth and Mamet linguistic censorship is incompatible with the whole nature and spirit of language.

Frustrated by the accusation of sexual harassment, and his inability to argue against it, John physically attacks Carol. Like Philip of *Deception*, he becomes the violent abuser of women he is accused of being. In both stories women, informed by the ideology of PC, strive to control the language of these male characters. As this inhibits the ability of the former to communicate, so it diminishes them as men. They become socially dysfunctional males. They use their physical power to subdue and silence their female antagonists and, in so doing, reveal their own social inadequacy just as Portnoy and Bernie do. These two articulate people—both writers and college professors—are shown to resort, ultimately, to the last recourse of the inarticulate precisely because they have been denied the use of language. But, again, it would be wrong to accuse either Roth or Mamet of misogyny here—neither story is either critical of, nor hostile toward women in general. Their invective is aimed, rather, at those, male or female, who would oppose freedom of speech. While we are meant to be critical of Portnoy and Bernie, we feel some sympathy for Philip and John. We are encouraged to share their frustration and see the injustice of their position. They are victims less, like Portnoy and Bernie, of their own inadequacy, and more of the external constraints imposed on them and their language.

Roth and Mamet are both writers who, early in their respective careers, offered critiques of the sexist language men use, and constructed characters who, as it were, condemned themselves out of their own mouths. Portnoy and Bernie become implicit indictments of the sexist male and of any language that degrades women. *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sexual Perversity* have both been condemned as sexist and obscene and one cannot help feeling that they are both works of which the PC lobby would disapprove. Thus, while Roth's early writing has been described as "vicious" (Norris 2), "nauseating" (Berridge unpaginated) and "misogynist" (Stout 72-75), Mamet has been termed a "verbal pornographer" (Dean 34). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that these two writers should, in the current political and cultural climate, feel it necessary to defend an individual's right to articulate ideas, even if that means using modes of expression that others find unacceptable. We might even go as far as to say that *Deception* and*Oleanna* offer a counter to critics who would attempt to censor or exclude a book like *Portnoy's Complaint* or a play like *Sexual Perversity* on the grounds of political incorrectness. The two authors' recent work defends freedoms of which they, as younger writers, enjoyed and took advantage.

At various stages in their careers Roth and Mamet have identified two significant ways in which language can be "unmanning." They have addressed the relationship between language and masculinity from the point-of-view of both linguistic excess and constraint. Portnoy and Bernie reveal and compound their inadequacy through their obscene and sexist language, while Philip and John are *rendered* inadequate as their innocent words are perverted and corrupted by forces intent on controlling the medium. Roth and Mamet reveal the potential consequences of PC by depicting heroes who are ultimately unable to function socially because their ability to express themselves is suppressed. Thus I have hopefully shown how language and masculinity are linked in the work of both writers. I have also demonstrated how Roth and Mamet's recent material offers a critique of PC and the assumptions that underpin it. Linguistic censorship assumes that language is fixed, that some words are inherently bad. As *Deception* and *Oleanna*demonstrate, it is a mistake to take such a reductive view of language. The meanings it generates are potentially manifold and the reductive ambitions of PC censorship are impossible to reconcile with this simple fact. This later writing, then, makes a strong case against linguistic censorship—and who better to make that case than Philip Roth and David Mamet? It is, after all, difficult to think of two writers who have explored language—its texture and possibilities—in a more provocative and entertaining way than these two.

Notes

1

A number of critics have argued that this loss of humour and energy towards the end is a major flaw in the novel. See, for instance, Pierre Michel who suggests that the end of the book is flat because, like Mark Twain at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, Roth simply runs out of comic ideas.

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