

Playing Language, Playing Fear in David Mamet's *The Cryptogram*

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Abstract

Das makes a study of David Mamet's play *The Cryptogram* (1995). She points out how the text explores the slippery linguistic code spoken by adults in the presence of children. The play's repetitive and often bland three-way dialogue creates a more pronounced distance between characters, many of whom can no longer decode even their own sentences.

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Roland Barthes began his essay *Mythologies* (1957) with a simple enough formulation: "'myth is a type of speech', a system of communication, a message. Building on this proposition, he went on to show that myth is a frozen speech, a speech that is forever held in suspension".¹ This leads to a curious paradox: for myth as speech cannot but be a two sided act, a product of mutual relationship between addresser and addressee, but as frozen speech which can block all interactions. In other words, myth is a kind of speech that tends to violate the basic criterion of speech, it is fundamentally self-contradictory. Thus though outwardly myth may appear to be self-generated, self-governed and a self-sufficient system, a system closed on itself, a 'totality' turning around a fixed and concealed centre, it is never stable; instead, it is radically decentred and irregular, fractured and fragmented. Myth tends to chalk out a domain where all signifiers have preassigned and fixed signifieds, where meaning can never be contested, where everything is forever settled; in that domain there is no contingent, a posteriori truth, all truth is necessary and a priori, beyond time and space; but that finality is never arrived at, for there are always gaps and ruptures to be found, slippages and contradictions. Since myth asserts absolute truth it can never acknowledge any point of reference outside of itself, but neither can it avoid slippages from outside. From this follows another paradox; myth proclaims eternal truths, but no myth is eternal; myth seeks to transcend the world of actual experience, and thereby transforms 'history' into 'nature'; 'social structures' into 'natural constructs' but both in form and content it has to continuously negotiate the changing reality, the world of phenomena.

Mamet is a writer who is interested in studying what man has become as a result of his social surroundings. His strength lies in his use of language; it is language that

1 Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Revised Edition), Malden and Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, p. 1119.

controls and finally structures many of his plays. In an interview he said, "... It's just words. One way to look at it is that the theatre is a study in stoicism you have to live in a world where you can do such a thing, and endeavour to train yourself to discount them".²

He has given narratives or plots a secondary role in the great majority of his works with a public eye on a dialogue instead and thereby shifting from a sort of Aristotelian philosophy that argues humans reveal themselves through their actions to one that argues humans reveal themselves through speech.

He expresses his debt to Stanislavski in an interview in 1976 *Village Voice*: "That's when I first learned the correlation between language and actions, that words create behaviour...".³ Stanislavski's method has helped him to understand and relay the fact that surface behaviour and language reflect psychological states. Mamet places this fact as the truer picture of the world based on naturalist methods in his plays rather than immersing psychological creations into a rationally comprehensible naturalist world. His play shows a true nature of the world depicted through a full naturalist method. For Mamet, understanding the chaos that language has created may lead us to understand the chaos apparent throughout our society in general. Fundamental means of perception and interpersonal contact must first be modified in order to reclaim and reshape the lost values in man. Bigsby notes that Mamet's "plays stand as a consistent critique of a country whose public myths he regards as destructive, and whose deep lack of communality he finds disturbing".⁴ For him, the fundamental psychological discomfort must first be addressed before social and rational concerns can be confronted. Language becomes the obvious instrument to address this psychological isolation and disintegration.

The centre of Mamet's language directly conflicts with the work of 30s naturalism. Odets, America's early master of American dialects wrote what Clurman calls "lyric afflatus which... is perhaps somewhat forced... but the overall effect is youthfully energetic and arousing".⁵ According to Jean Nathan, "Odets wrote some of the finest love scenes to be found in American drama. An all enveloping warmth, love in its broadest sense, is a constant in all Odets' writings, the very root of his talent".⁶ For Odets language unites; it harmonizes situations. Language acts like an ointment when the social construct is damaged. It can repair through its illustrative conventions. Mamet's view of language is quite different. He insists that language widens the gap at times when it fails to function as desired. It becomes an unintentional means of self-

2 Esther Harriot, *American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews*, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, MC. Farland and Company, Inc., 1998, p. 77.

3 William W. Demastes, *Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1988, p.69.

4 *Ibid*, p. 70.

5 *Ibid*, p. 71.

6 William W. Demastes, *Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre*, p. 71.

deceit when people fail to communicate and remain caged up in their own individual mind set up.

In order to dramatize isolation and alienation, Mamet utilizes detailed analysis of social interaction amongst very selective representative groups. A word which silently inscribes sound gives a confident expectation of communication. But the act of disturbing that language can lead to a serious consequence especially in the mind of a child as portrayed in his play, *The Cryptogram* (1995).

Freud believed that our dreams sometimes recapitulate a speech.⁷ This sounds true in Mamet's play *The Cryptogram* where the whole mechanism of the play surrounds around a kid (John) who cannot sleep. The kid cannot sleep because he knows something unbalanced that is happening in his household: "... I'm perfectly alone".⁸ The kid is led through a series of unilluminating answers by the adult world, particularly that world as represented by his mother. The causes of the tears are uncertain but his "blanket" seems to empower his hope of understanding. In Mamet's world, language aggravates human interaction, only superficially uniting isolated groups in their efforts to rationalize more significant failures.

The Cryptogram is a play of family isolation. Although the play at first appears to have little explicitly to do with magic, its odd reality and the inscrutable iconography suggested by its title reveal the play's centrality in Mamet's examination of the mysterious, unrevealed and intentionally "cloaked". Perhaps more than any other Mamet's plays, *The Cryptogram* abounds in totems, stage visuals that alternately assist and confound interpretation. Such form approaches: dramatic fetishism: object after object is verbally idolized. The slippers, the teapot, the blanket John wrapshimself in against the cold. Indeed, the play can be entitled *The Blanket*, a mysterious wrap associated with childhood and by its tear it reveals the fractured past.

The child protagonist in *The Cryptogram* is named John who introduces the totem when he returns from the attic "wrapped in a plaid blanket".⁹ In the subsequent conversation, past and present, guilt and discovery blend and overlap as if pieced inextricably together in an aged blanket:

John : I tore the blanket. I'm sorry.

Donny: You tore it?

John : (simultaneous with "tore"): I was opening the box.

I think there was a nail sticking out. I heard something rip ... [...]

Donny: No, it was torn years ago.

7 John Lahr, "David Mamet: The art of the theatre XI" *The Paris Review*, Vol.13, (Spring 1997), No. 14, p. 53.

8 David Mamet, *The Cryptogram*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 259.

9 *Ibid.*, p.25.

John : (simultaneously with "ago"): I didn't tear it?

Donny: No

John : I heard it rip.

Del : You may have heard it in your mind ...

John : ... but ...

Donny: No we tore that long ago.

Del : I think your mind is racing".¹⁰

The blanket seems to empower John's hope of understanding, of seeing clearly. Late in the play, after being deceived by his adult guardians, the boy's frustration is manifested in the loss of the blanket:

Donny: No one can help you. Do you understand? Finally,
each of us.

John : Where is the blanket?

Donny: I ... Each of us ...

John : ... I want the blanket.

Donny: Is alone.

John : ... the stadium blanket.

Donny: (simultaneous with 'stadium'): I've put it away [...]

John : You told me I could have the blanket.

Donny: Goodnight, John.

John: You told me I could have the blanket".¹¹

Up to the play's final moment, John remains adamant and increasingly assertive in desiring the blanket returned, as if he intuitively senses its totemic power in interpreting the world of betrayals around him. John is the ultimate victim and the mini-oracle that sees into the darkness that surrounds this ordinary family committing their lethally ordinary treacheries. *The Cryptogram* shares a peculiar tone, eerie and off-center. This is reflected in the dialogue, which in its repetitions and hesitations is far from realistic. The innocuous exchange seems prima-facie, little more than an affirmation of John's subservient, "effeminate" role in the relationship. Donny announces off-stage that she has "spilled the tea"¹² and further admits that she "broke the pot, I broke the tea pot".¹³ On the domestic level, the accident announces Donny's inadequacy as a traditional mother in the kitchen and suggests her fragile, fractured state.

Another intriguing symbol of *The Cryptogram* (1995) is that it is a children's book of prophetic wisdom. From the beginning of the play, Del acts as a substitute father to John and as a supernatural mentor. He continually encourages John to assign

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

¹¹ David Mamet, *The Cryptogram*, pp. 90-100.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

meaning to events and objects and teaches him a game to "sharpen your skills"¹⁴ of vivid recollection. The increasingly disquieting tone of *The Cryptogram* (1995), with its focus on prescience, ghosts and the unknown, lends extra suggestiveness to its almost mantric repetitions. "It's all such a mystery".¹⁵ Donny asserts, and a moment afterwards Del echoes her confusion: "Well, it's a mystery. The whole god damned thing".¹⁶ Only the recitation of the "book" seems to bring a ritualistic and verbal order to events:

Del : My blessings on your House.

John: That's what the Wizard said.

Del : That's right.

John: And mine on yours

Del : Until the whale shall speak.

John: Until the Moon shall Weep. Mother?

Donny: I don't remember it ...¹⁷

Donny has forgotten the book's incantations and the adults seem unable to conjure appropriate words without such knowledge. Significantly, the boy believes in the text's fantastical prophecies: "when we think of sickness, sickness is approaching, said the Wizard. Misfortune comes in three".¹⁸ John alone recognizes and assigns symbolic meaning to the events of the evening: the broken teapot, the torn blanket and to conclude the first scene, a note from his father that he seems to suddenly and magically produce: "...when did this get here ...?" Donny asks, confused. She reveals the letter's context, a third misfortune --- like the torn blanket, initiated in the past to close the act: "My husband's leaving me".¹⁹

As the play progresses, even Del is becoming increasingly inadequate to the visionary world. Shortly after John is given medicine to alleviate his fever - the condition of a "seer", Del's failure to offer a proper toast suggests a world of failed spells and potions: "And ... May the Spirit of Friendship ... (Pause). Oh, the hell with it. I mean, can't people just have a drink ... for the love of God".²⁰ Del's recognition appears to move roughly from a pantheistic to a Judeo-Christian deity, signifying his failure in the world of the Wizard's magic. In act two, his unintentionally ironic quoting of the Wizard, "My blessings on this house ..." is deflected by John with a salient question: "When is my father coming for me ...?".²¹ Immediately following this "denial" of Del's

14 *Ibid.*, p.32.

15 *Ibid.*, p.21.

16 *Ibid.*, p.24.

17 David Mamet, *The Cryptogram*, p.14.

18 *Ibid.*, p.29.

19 *Ibid.*, p.52.

20 *Ibid.*, p.61.

21 *Ibid.*, p.58.

privilege with the magical text, Del twice asks Donny to play cards is rebuffed and is unable to deliver a proper toast or incantation. He becomes powerless: "Well, I know I know I'm limited".²² What serves as a wonderfully appropriate explication of *The Cryptogram*, Mamet has further written of cards that they are a survival of our less rational, more frightful, more beautiful past. They commemorate a numerology based on thirteen rather than ten; they restate the mythological hierarchy of the Monarchy, of a state which recapitulates our infant understanding of the family-as - world.

The Cryptogram charts the failure of a father even as John struggles with a numerology/symbology unsuited for his age of ten. Another explanation for the relative lack of sexuality in *The Cryptogram* is the prominence of parent-child relationships, especially mother and child. In the play, John informs us early that he "couldn't sleep"²³ for consecutive nights, presumably because ghosts from the adult world haunt him. When he dozes briefly in the middle of the play, he awakes troubled and dislocated:

John (waking): What did they say? What?

Donny: Go to sleep, John.

John: I was going there. But you said to bring the, bring ... (Pause). Bring them the ... (Pause) I don't like it. I don't like it. No.²⁴

John's peculiar phrasing "I was going there" lends the feeling of a palpable, foreign place. When John appears later in the play, presumably having again awoken from restless sleep, his troubling interrogation of his mother suggests her as his primary ghost. "Are you dead? I heard you calling. I heard voices and I thought they were you." He continues, in the tone of a mystic-visionary, "And so I said, '... there's someone troubled'. I walked around. Did you hear walking? ... and so I went outside. I saw a candle. In the dark".²⁵

Mamet sees myth and drama and dream coming down to the same childhood issues - the terrors and pleasures of existence before we learned to repress and to filter and to abstract that into conscious perception. *The Cryptogram* bypasses reason and prompts deep, visceral feelings about the past which have a way of making the memory of the play implode in the imagination. The last words of *The Cryptogram* are less optimistic:

John: I can't fall asleep.

Del: That's up to you, now.

John: I hear voices. They're calling to me.
(Pause)

22 David Mamet, *The Cryptogram*, p.60.

23 *Ibid.*, p.3.

24 *Ibid.*, p.43.

25 *Ibid.*, p.75

Donny: Yes I'm sure they are.

John: They're calling me.

Del: Take the knife and go.

John: They're calling my name. (Pause)

Mother: They're calling my name.²⁶

Dismissed and abandoned by the adult world, and lacking the tools - the blanket that might comfort or decode an encrypted language of deceit and abandonment, John is offered a replacement totem. The father's knife, linked consistently with betrayal in the play, is a dubious emblem. John ascends the stairs a final time, led by the ghosts in his head towards the attic's arcane monsters and mysteries tied in boxes.

The *Cryptogram* ends enigmatically, potentially at the beginning of something more significant than what has preceded. Mamet leaves John on the verge of a personal blood-letting self-sacrifice. Even more common and frightening, is its bond of childhood that the boy will sever, setting loose adult knowledge of evil into the world. Language can never explain the world when it claims to do so. It does so only to claim its ambiguity. Once the explanation is fixed in a work, it immediately becomes an ambiguous product of the real. Language is a barrier between the urgencies of a tangible world and those of realities. The gap between act and word is a reproach and that between fact and word an irony. The disproportion between need and its expression is a constant reminder of the impossible project in which Mamet chooses to engage.

The language that Mamet's characters speak is littered with all kinds of linguistic antecedents suggestive of Jewish, Italian, Spanish and African-American origin. His technique attracts attention to his knack for incorporating the pace of city life into his dialogue. The world Mamet dramatizes is one in which every second counts, and where there may be danger around every corner. Brevity of expression becomes extremely important. His characters frequently leave out words they feel to be extraneous or redundant in their sentences. They have something that they wish to convey and they do so in as little time as possible. In *The Cryptogram*, the characters speak a language that accurately reflects the cultural abyss into which their country has fallen. They speak in codes which prove that they have become emotionally desiccated in their struggle to survive in a society that no longer coheres.

The characters are able to communicate only through public myths and a life lived according to the dictates of the mass media. There are only the vestigial traces of authentic communion between them. The characters no longer speak with a genuine voice that can impart what they most need to say. They take on false roles, converse in the superficial and second-rate style, and deny their true personalities in favor of an adopted, more socially acceptable myth. They seem to dissolve into what is expected

26 David Mamet, *The Cryptogram*, pp.100-101.

of them in their (adopted) social roles, but continue to feel the need for something more. It is as if the language they have plundered from already debased sources such as television soap operas and advertising jargon denies them the means of genuine communication. In his plays, Mamet has commented upon that "essential part of the American consciousness, which is the ability to suspend an ethical sense and adopt instead a popular, accepted mythology and use that to assuage your conscience like everyone else is doing".²⁷ Thus Mamet's characters constantly delude both themselves and those around them. It is easier for them to fall in love with the myths manufactured in their society than to fight them. The pressures of life are made less severe by such action. The myth offers them a plausible security but such relief is only temporary and trivial.

²⁷ Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language As Dramatic Action*, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1990, p.32.