Staging Male Identity in the Plays of David Mamet and Sam Shepard

A Ph.D. Thesis

Submitted by

Magda Ibrahim Taher Abd El Hamid

To

The Department of English

Under the Supervision of

Prof. Mohamed Al Said Alkon
Professor of English Literature
Department of English
Faculty of Education
Ain Shams University

Dr. Maha Wafa’ee Ashmawi
Lecturer of English Literature
Department of English
Faculty of Education
Ain Shams University

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Abstract

This thesis pivots around the staging of male identity as it appears in the plays of Sam Shepard and David Mamet, with special focus on Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* and Mamet’s *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Exploring the thematic concern of staging male identity in Shepard and Mamet’s selected plays means that we identify all of the technical devices/theatrical strategies the two playwrights have used/exploited to convey their issue to us.

To identify the term ‘staging,’ the researcher argues that the various acts/performances of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts/performances, there would be no gender at all. Gender is a socio-cultural construct. In other words, the male performs activities of daily life as if he were an actor enacting a character on stage. Thus ‘staging’ in this context means the ‘performance or the enactment’ of the male identity. The notions of playing a role in real life and playing a role in drama are easily associated. Theatrical representation is generally recognized as being metaphorically relevant to the human experience of self-presentation. Theatrically staged masculinity, then, would seem to be a fruitful place that offers us a referent or reflection on how masculinity is constructed and problematized within American society.

To precisely examine the relationships among the different characters in the selected plays, the researcher tackled in each chapter one of Shepard’s plays with another one of Mamet’s. The thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. They are as follows:

**Chapter one** is a theoretical background. It tackles the titular term “staging” and its relation to the male identity. It also clarifies the relationship between gender
and performance and the different forces that affect masculinity in the American society.

**Chapter two**, entitled as “The Staging of Male Search for Identity,” deals with Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* and Mamet’s *American Buffalo*. It focuses on the staging of how the male characters in both plays are in continuous search/quest for their male identity.

**Chapter three**, entitled as “The Staging of Male Struggle for Identity,” deals with Shepard’s *Buried Child* and Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*. It investigates the staging of how the male characters destroy and victimize each other in order to create only one “top man” in control and authority.

These three chapters are followed by a **conclusion** in which the researcher's findings concerning the four plays in question are presented to the readers.

**Key Words:**

- Staging
- Male Identity
- Gender as Performance
Preface

This thesis pivots around the staging/enactment of male identity as it appears in the plays of Sam Shepard and David Mamet, two of our generally accepted leading American male playwrights. There will be a special focus on Shepard’s Curse of the Starving Class and Buried Child and Mamet’s American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross, with the aim to find out some similarities and some differences in tackling this issue in each playwright's plays. The study will consider how the question of male identity is staged/enacted by these men, and how their gender roles reflect and affect their male identity. Exploring the thematic concern of staging male identity in Shepard and Mamet’s selected plays means that we point out all of the technical devices/theatrical strategies the two playwrights have used/exploited to convey their issue to us. Often the playwright includes descriptions of characters, scenes, objects, meaning, language, space, time, and movement in stage directions and dialogue, which are very significant theatrical strategies to be explored.

Although most of the male characters discussed in this study have put their faith in a set idea of masculinity and manhood, most also suffer confusion and doubt because they feel unable to achieve or maintain that ideal manhood. Mamet's business men and Shepard's family men, while sharing some common beliefs about American masculinity, all structure their ideas of manhood by privileging different qualities and structures of masculinity. In short, although these characters tend to assume one definition, their multiple experiences, when set side by side, provide multiple perspectives on masculinity.
This thesis demonstrates that the idea of ‘man’ is in itself an ideological construct which has the effect of creating an ideologically motivated sense of unity among men. Since ideology is a system of representations-text, images, performances, and mythologies- that constitutes the necessary preconditions for all cultural practices, all social interactions. Thus identity exists as a performance in relation to culturally constructed sets of understood identities that occupy various positions of power or marginalization. So, to be a man is to perform the stereotyped masculine role as it is accepted in culture. This socio-culture predetermined performance/enactment is considered as oppressing, even to the privileged male characters.

The predicament of these male characters regarding manhood seems to be that in collapsing possibilities to solidify their identities, they actually cut off their ability to maintain any identity. Rather than an inherent, unchanging essence, masculinity seems to be in fact a construct which needs the mutability that these men fear. The American male of the twentieth century is undoubtedly met with a number of expectations and may be argued to be under a “double pressure”; he is expected to successfully manage his roles in both the public and private arenas. Not surprisingly, it appears that the private role as husband-father is premised on the role that man holds in the public sphere.

This thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one is a theoretical background which identifies the term ‘staging’ what does it mean “to stage/perform” the male identity in a dramatic text? What does the concept “gender as performance” mean? What are the theatrical strategies exploited in the implementation of this gender performance? To identify the term ‘staging,’ the researcher argues that the various acts/performances of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts/performances, there would be no gender at all.
Gender is a socio-cultural construct. Thus ‘staging’ in this context means the ‘performance or the enactment’ of the male identity. The use of the term "staging or performance" throughout this study claims that the interrelationship between theater and culture makes the study of gender- presentation in American theater relevant to an understanding of how gender is figured in the culture.

The notions of playing a role in real life and playing a role in drama are easily associated. Gender as performance would seem to be especially relevant to the genre of drama wherein performance is understood as the end result of most dramatic texts. Theatrical representation is generally recognized as being metaphorically relevant to the human experience of self-presentation.

Chapter two discusses the staging of male characters in both Shepard’s Curse of the Starving Class and Mamet’s American Buffalo and how they are in a continuous search/quest for their male identity.

Chapter Three clarifies the staging of male characters struggle for their male identity in both Shepard’s Buried Child and Mamet’s Glengarry Glen Ross. This chapter investigates how each one of them destroys and victimizes the others in order to be the only one in control and to have authority.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main ideas and results that the researcher has reached to after studying the staging of male identity and applying it to the four selected plays.
Chapter One
Chapter One

Theoretical Background

The title of this dissertation is “Staging Male Identity in the plays of David Mamet and Sam Shepard”. This study explores the issue of masculinity as it appears in the plays of the two leading male playwrights, focusing on the issue of the staging of male identity in these plays. This is done with the aim of finding out the similarities and the differences in tackling this issue in both Shepard’s Curse of the Starving Class and Buried Child and Mamet’s American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross.

Because of the complicated and problematic nature of this thematic concern, the researcher finds it important to deal with it from different perspectives. That is why the interdisciplinary approach is adopted in this study. This theoretical chapter is mainly concerned with the studying of male identity and how it is staged/enacted in these dramas. As the historic notion of masculinity and masculine practice has remained relatively static, while aspects of femininity and female gender have been investigated and expanded, there is a need to examine the roots of masculine practice as it develops through masculine performance.

I find it useful here to raise a number of relevant questions: What is a "man"? Is masculinity seen as innate or constructed? What are the dynamics which create the current cultural concept of masculinity? How are those concepts enforced? How do they limit the personal growth and fulfillment of men? What is the function of men’s power in attaining their identity? In changing our definitions of masculinity, can we retain anything
positive about the traditional performance or construct of maleness? What is needed to reconstruct/reform the male identity performance?

It is very important to identify the titular term ‘staging’: what does it mean “to stage/perform” the male identity in a dramatic text? What does the concept “gender as performance” mean? What are the theatrical strategies exploited in the implementation of this gender performance? What technical devices are used to have male identities staged? To identify the term ‘staging,’ the researcher argues that because there is neither an essence that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which it aspires, the various acts/performances of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts/performances, there would be no gender at all. Gender is a socio-cultural construct. In other words, the male performs activities of daily life as if he were an actor enacting a character on stage. Thus ‘staging’ in this context means the ‘performance or the enactment’ of the male identity. The use of the term "staging or performance" throughout this study claims that the interrelationship between theater and culture makes the study of gender-presentation in American theater relevant to an understanding of how gender is figured in the culture.

In his The Anthropology of performance, anthropologist Victor Turner explores connections between culture and performance, “demonstrating that rituals and ceremonies intrinsic to culture are much like acts of theater” (81). James Clifford's ethnographic study of the twentieth century, The Predicament of Culture focuses on how mutable such performances of cultural selves are. His study indicates that culture is hardly a stable enactment but one constantly being re-staged and improvised upon and that it is precisely the human ability to incorporate new elements into their culture, to re-script the players, as it were, that makes a culture more likely to survive (229). Theatrically staged masculinity, then, would
seem to be a fruitful place for connecting anthropological and psychological approaches to male gender, offering us a referent or reflection on how masculinity is constructed and problematized within the American society.

Judith Butler also reminds readers that the dramatic is how performers “materialize” a set of historical possibilities in and through their bodies on stage: “To do, to dramatize, and to reproduce” are “some of the elementary structures of embodiment” (521). For Thompson, “gender identity—or any other kind of identity—is not something that you have, but something that you do—or, at least, something that you have ‘only’ by doing it again and again and again” (132). The materialization of the body on the stage depends on presence—physical and discursive. Characters in a play do not exist until they appear onstage or are spoken of by others. Thompson continues saying: “this process of materialization of bodies—raced, gendered, classed, abled, disabled, and sexualized—is central to performativity” (133).

Bodies on stage, for Thompson, are always produced by and change through history. So actors always perform within a “set of proscribed historical conventions and directorial cues” for how the body ought to move, gesture, and articulate itself on stage (133). Butler extends the theatrical metaphor to gender: “Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (526). The production of gender—in time and space—is a repetitive enactment of stylized acts that are ongoing.
Butler defines gender as constituted in performance:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (519)

Elin Diamond (1996) explains Butler’s radical departure from both biology and constructionism: “Butler’s point is not that gender is just an act, but that gender is materially performative: it is real only to the extent that it is performed. Through repeated enactments, gender is “both a doing—a performance that puts conventional gender attributes into possibly disruptive play—and a thing done—a pre-existing oppressive category” (4–5). And Bordwell contends that the constitution of gender through repetitive corporeal acts in time “recognizes that we are born into and must operate within a network of power relations not of our own making” (375).

For Kapchan, performances “are patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment-whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities” (479). Insofar as performances are based upon repetitions, whether lines learned, gestures imitated, or discourses reiterated, they are the generic means of tradition making. Kapchan says that performance genres play an essential role in the mediation and creation of social communities, whether organized around bonds of “nationalism, ethnicity, class status, or gender” (Ibid). “To perform is to carry something into effect-whether it is
a story, an identity, an artistic artifact, a historical memory, or an ethnography ” (Abrahams 79).

Gender as performance would seem to be especially relevant to the genre of drama wherein performance is understood as the end result of most dramatic texts. Theatrical representation is generally recognized as being metaphorically relevant to the human experience of self-presentation. “From Shakespeare's 'All the world's a stage' to the military lingo that refers to theaters of operations in which soldiers enact battles, and even in the term gender human behavior is often linguistically tied to the site and act of theater and of performance ” (Kapchan 415).

The notions of playing a role in real life and playing a role in drama are easily associated. “Within the sexual politics of America, males can attain the highest positions of power and prestige; can become directors of their own dramas rather than always only actors” (Abrahams 81). However, this politics allows men control, on the whole, only if they perform an "acceptable" masculinity and are born into certain races and classes. Generally, the construct of traditional masculinity within their economic class or race limits what range of performances individual men are allowed if they hope to maintain their power. Based upon available information held in their knowledge, males actually perform that which they believe they are supposed to be. Self-determination is thus allowed only within the constraints of a narrow range of socially acceptable "selves." The enactment of a socially acceptable self occurs at great cost to the men forced to participate in the performance of masculinity, often limiting their ability to exhibit, value, or even to see other possibilities for themselves.

Exploring the thematic concern of staging male identity in Shepard and Mamet’s plays, or how the male characters in these plays perform their socially
acceptable masculine roles means that we point out all of the technical devices/theatrical strategies the two playwrights have used/exploited to convey their theme to us. Often the playwright includes descriptions of characters, scenes, objects, meaning, language, space, time, and movement in stage directions and dialogue, which are very significant theatrical strategies to be explored. These are the contributions of both text and the creative reader in their creative interaction, deriving in part from a few lines of stage directions, but primarily from within the body of the play where the identity and being of the characters must be discerned in what they do and say and the total existence and meaning of the play must be found. “To bring something of a playwright’s or director’s understanding of how plays work on an imagined audience in the circumstances of an imagined theatrical representation” (1 Meisel) of male identity, this is the task of the researcher.

Sam Shepard once remarked on evoking images in the theatre: "When you talk about images, an image can be seen without looking at anything…..You can see things that don’t appear on stage. .....The fantastic thing about theatre is that it can make something be seen that’s invisible and that's where my interest in theatre is…. that's the image… that I'm looking for” (Bigsby 175). His remark in many ways illuminates the objectives of the present investigation on the image of masculinity in contemporary American drama. The researcher attempts to identify the image of manhood by disclosing the unseen forces underlying the playwrights’ portrayals of men.

Also Mamet expresses his observations on the current conditions of society through the theater. People go to the theater to find the answers to the questions of life which are answered by the theatrical artist: "...it is love of the audience--of that which unites the actor and the house: a desire to share something which they