"Historicity and Gender Politics in *The Winslow Boy*." *Screen Education*, Spring 2004, issue 36, pp. 119-123.

The Winslow Boy is David Mamet's sixth film as a director. Mamet's most distinguished theatrical texts, American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross and Speed-the-Plow, convey the now familiar criticism of American business ethics, epitomized by the endeavours of his protagonists 'to get something for nothing'. (1) Mamet pointedly reveals that his heroes' obsessive search for success and individuality has led to the abandonment of a sense of community and collective social goals. The American experience emerges as an overall context for Mamet's plays and films and a favourite topic of his essayistic prose. Mamet describes America as a 'wonderfully unhappy country ... which has never decided what is a crime and what is not', (2) a constant source of contradictions for his characters in their pursuit of spiritual fulfilment and sense of values.

Since his directorial debut, House of Games, Mamet has continued to explore the world of business machinations, concerned with the moral quandaries and ethical dilemmas of his characters. In many of his ensuing films, Things Change, The Spanish Prisoner and The Heist, the writer/director examines the business acumen of his heroes, placing his narratives against the backdrop of contemporary America. For those familiar with his plays and films, Mamet's decision to revisit the renowned Terence Rattigan play, The Winslow Boy, might seem highly inconsistent. Rattigan's play focuses on a legal case that shook Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century and seems outwardly unrelated to Mamet's favourite contexts. As Gemma Jones pointed out, '[K[nowing David only by reputation, I thought "how odd for him to take on this play"? I thought he was a sort of in-your-face contemporary American writer.' (3) When closely examined, Rattigan's play concentrates on the themes commonly found in Mamet's work; the quandary of moral and ethical choices, the quest for justice and the dilemmas of individual and collective spirit. More importantly for this analysis, it also continues a long line of ambiguous and intriguing female characters in Mamet's plays and films.

This text focuses on the central female protagonist of Rattigan's play, Catherine, a character who, in Mamet's screen adaptation, merges traditional and modern values. Catherine combines familial loyalty, first and foremost expressed towards her father, Arthur, with a strong urge for female emancipation, reflected in her active work in the suffrage movement.

The Case of George Archer-Shee

The Winslow Boy is based on the real-life story of the thirteen-year-old George Archer-Shee, a naval cadet at the Isle of Wight's Osbourne Naval College, who was accused of stealing a friend's postal order. Despite the young boy's protestations of innocence, he was expelled from the College. His father, Martin Archer-Shee, a Liverpool bank manager, convinced of his son's innocence, sought explanation from the Commander of the College and the Admiralty, but could not file suit as both institutions were under the King's protection. He resorted to a relentless pursuit of justice and legal action that would almost ruin his family. The case became one of the most widely debated events in Great Britain at the time.

Archer-Shee, a Catholic, appeared to be discriminated against on the basis of his religion. He asked a renowned barrister, Edward Carson, to represent his family. Carson lodged the Petition of Right with the Home Office and the Attorney General, hoping that, if it was finally approved by the King, he might be able to start the legal process. The following year, King Edward VII allowed the case to proceed, and on 26 July 1910, the trial began. Four days later, the Admiralty and the crown accepted George's claim of innocence. After a fiery political debate, the Archer-Shee family was paid the cost of the trial and the damages caused by the case. George Archer-Shee served in the First World War and was killed in action in Ypres in 1914. No formal letter of apology or withdrawal of charges was ever sent to his family. (4)

Rattigan's Dramaturgical Alterations

In his play, Terence Rattigan made a number of dramaturgical amendments to historical situations and personalities. Rattigan moved the events from 1908 to 1912-1914, and presented the case against the onset of the First World War. This way, he placed particular emphasis on the struggle for justice in a society deeply polarized along class and gender lines, ultimately marginalized by a superficial sense of patriotic duty. The playwright simultaneously ignored the religious angle to the case, rather focusing on the grim prospects and personal sacrifices of those determined to protect their honesty and integrity at any cost. He omits direct historical references, nevertheless his narrative resonates with the important cases of the era, from the Dreyfuss affair, to the political processes in post-war Europe. These cases exposed the widening gap between justice and right, which also imbues Rattigan's play. As Jeremy Northam points out, 'To me, it says that justice is something which is an everyday achievement, but right is a more absolute, abstract, more spiritual term.' (5)

Terence Rattigan transformed George's brother, a Conservative MP who had a decisive impact on the aftermath of the case, into a jovial Oxford student, Dickie Winslow. He also portrayed George's conservative sister, Catherine, as a suffragette, an interpretation embraced by Mamet in his screen version of the play.

The Suffrage Movement--Some Historical Facts

The suffragette debate is at the centre of social unrest in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. The suffrage movement was formed in 1865 in Manchester and largely appealed to middle-class women. Emmeline Pankhurst established the Woman's Franchise League in 1889, and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. The latter used militant methods of action--

arson, bombing, window smashing and attacks on churches--to achieve the women's political goals. On 'Black Friday,' Pankhurst led a group of activists into a protest. They confronted the police, and were brutally beaten and imprisoned. At the end of the demonstration, more than one hundred women were arrested on various charges. A number of other actions continued to mobilize the general public for the women's cause. Emily Davison threw herself in front of the King's horse in the 1913 Derby. The suffragette struggle was internationalized when a number of detained activists began hunger strikes in prisons across the country. With the beginning of the First World War, women's organizations abandoned the anti-government stance and joined the war effort. The role of women in the British economy and workplace became more prominent and was impossible to ignore in the years following the war. They were granted full voting rights in 1928.

Catherine: A Loyal Daughter and a Suffragette

Catherine (Rebeca Pidgeon) is almost thirty, an independent, intelligent and highly articulate woman who manages to transcend the limitations of marriage, profession, social status and economic dependency imposed on her gender. Dressed in masculine clothes, with short hair, without make-up or jewellery, she seems outwardly dry and colourless. We meet Catherine as she returns home from a church service and informs her parents, Grace and Arthur, that she invited her suitor, John Watherstone, for lunch. With The Social Good and The Social Evil under her arm, she unexcitingly declares that they are in love. Arthur points out that those in love should read Byron's poetry and Grace even questions the emotional state of the whole generation of modern girls.

Catherine reminds the audience of the overwhelming majority of female protagonists in Mamet's cinematic texts, a gallery of seemingly asexual loners, disturbed by the inadequacy of their emotional lives and the straitjacket of their social and professional roles. (6) Yet, this is merely an outward impression. Unlike the other female characters in Mamet's films, Catherine is not a workaholic (as is Dr Margaret Ford in House of Games), a militant driven by ideological goals (Chava in Homicide or Carol in Oleanna), or a flirting, calculated schemer (Susan in The Spanish Prisoner). She is a loyal daughter to her father and a devoted suffragette, passionately interested in daily politics and painfully aware of social injustice. Mamet intertwines these two seemingly contradictory facets of her character, pointing out that '[H]er quest for equality for women is congruent to the family's quest for justice for the boy'. (7)

Arthur Winslow's meeting with his daughter's prospective husband, John Waterstone, coincides with the unexpected return of his youngest son, Ronnie from Osbourne Naval College. As the family welcomes the engagement, drinking

Madeira in the Edwardian Drawing Room, Arthur finally discovers the reasons behind the boy's early dismissal from school. This event tarnishes the celebration and heralds the failure of Catherine's engagement.

From the onset of the narrative, Catherine displays the characteristics of an emancipated woman of her era. Hiding from her father, she secretly smokes, openly discusses family affairs and even kisses John in the backyard of the house. However, she simultaneously demonstrates support for family hierarchy by reproaching Ronnie for opening the letter addressed to their father.

Catherine immediately stands behind Arthur and his mission to clear the boy's name. Along with Desmond Curry, an uninspiring family friend, love-struck by her charms, Catherine keeps exploring possibilities for legal action. When Arthur decides to ask Sir Robert Morton, a lawyer renowned for his conservative views and indictment of Oscar Wilde and union leaders, to represent the family at Court, she decides to speak to him and visits his office, striding into an exclusively male domain populated by influential conservatives. Their first encounter is marked by a frugal exchange in which Catherine informs him about the circumstances of the case, yet, even during this brief meeting between the two, Mamet clearly indicates that the suffragette and the conservative lawyer display some interest in one another.

While the case gains momentum, it also takes its toll on family members. Arthur's health gradually deteriorates and Grace begins to feel the pressure of bad publicity. Their daughter, on the other hand, remains unmoved in her passionate pursuit of justice. When Arthur receives a letter in which John's father informs him that he will block the engagement if the case proceeds, he asks Catherine: 'Are we both mad? Should we drop the whole thing?' Catherine replies: 'I don't consider that a serious question.'

As the narrative progresses, Catherine's interest in Sir Robert Morton grows and Mamet gradually gives more prominence to her personal concerns. She observes the case from the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Lords and patiently follows the legal proceedings while Mamet reminds the audience of her personal sacrifices. When Arthur receives a letter from John's father, threatening to halt the engagement, the family is prompted into a new crisis. Speaking with Sir Robert Morton at his home, Arthur admits that he made a decision that affected all family members. He declares that '[T]he Winslow case is now closed.' Arthur's grim outlook is contrasted by a dynamic and, at moments, flirtatious conversation between Catherine and Sir Robert. Mamet portrays the two as ideological opponents united by a common cause, attracted by one another and engaged in an enticing game of words. Sir Robert observes the discrepancy between Catherine's political affiliations and her 'charming hat', exposing her

attempts to 'have the best of both worlds'. His remarks, albeit slightly cynical, reveal her longing for love, passion and warmth in hostile and claustrophobic surroundings. Catherine declares that she is not 'a militant,' engaged in violent forms of protest, but an 'Organising Secretary of West London's Branch of the Suffrage Association'. Mamet cautiously implies the closing of the gap between two distant worlds and hints at the possibility of love, but reminds the viewer that the emotional relationship between Catherine and Sir Robert is thwarted by their ideological allegiances.

The family's obsessive search for justice results in the granting of the Petition of Right at the House of Lords and the continuation of the legal proceedings. Catherine, who closely follows the case, remains determined to overturn the decision of the Naval College and clear her brother's name. When Sir Robert Morton asks her for further instructions, she responds: 'Aren't they already on the petition? Doesn't it say Let Right Be Done?'

The deterioration of Catherine's relationship with John, instigated by the legal case, is also drawn to a close. The last meeting between the two appears only outwardly as an attempt to save Catherine's marriage. Visiting John at the army barracks, Catherine, who sports dark sunglasses and a tie, speaks in a sharp, uncompromising manner. She describes John's father's letter as 'blackmail' and an 'empty threat'. John tries to justify his stance by his father's threat to cut off his allowance but Catherine coldly responds: 'I've heard it said that two can live as cheaply as one.' Without bitterness or cynicism, Catherine declares that she loves him and would like to become his wife. When, parting, John presents her with yet another ultimatum, demanding that the family drop the case. She agrees expressionlessly, losing all hope and interest. Mamet leaves it to the viewer to determine whether Catherine's attitude stems from an aversion to the conformity she once fondly expected or from her newly discovered fascination with Sir Robert Morton.

With the conclusion of the case inevitably approaching, the family is confronted by the personal cost of their unrelenting quest. Arthur and Catherine contemplate the family's prospects, when Catherine, reflecting on her political struggle, admits: 'Father, I've been a fool.' Arthur, somewhat confused, replies: 'I've never heard you say that before.' Nevertheless, a moment later, when they reconsider their actions in the 'hopeless cause' of defending justice, Catherine calmly asserts: 'We both knew what we were doing and we were right to do it.'

Catherine acknowledges that her future is vague and uncertain and largely depends on her marriage and family prospects. When Desmond proposes to her, she reacts pragmatically, taking time to make a decision. Her astonished father suggests that it is 'better to live and die an old maid than marry

Desmond'. Catherine replies that she is faced with a simple choice, either to marry Desmond or continue to serve 'a hopeless cause'. Desmond's proposal remains unanswered. Instead, the director focuses on the last encounter between Catherine and Sir Robert Morton, following the victory in the Winslow case. Mamet's characters recognize the personal sacrifices undertaken during the legal proceedings. However, their beliefs still seem to impede on the possibility of any future relationship. When Catherine disapproves of his concealing of emotions, Sir Robert pointedly remarks that 'emotions cloud the issue' and when challenged to explain his tears at the end of the process, he asserts that he wept because 'right had been done', adding 'It is easy to do justice. Hard to do right'. The two part with his expectation to see her again at the gallery of the House of Commons. Catherine responds: 'Yes, Sir Robert. In the House of Commons, one day. But not at the Gallery. Across the floor, one day.'

Mamet's screen version of Catherine is ambiguous and intriguing. Emphasizing her fervent belief in women's liberation, the director defines her as a woman of courage and integrity, well ahead of her time. Her sense of loyalty and adherence to traditional family values, epitomized in the unselfish search for truth, only underscore this impression. The blend of these two seemingly contradictory facets of her personality sets her apart from the other female characters in Mamet's plays and films and makes her more lifelike and believable. As the film progresses, the viewer sees Catherine's struggle as a passionate, convincingly humane attempt to maintain integrity, rather than strive for abstract notions of morality, justice and honour. Catherine's ardent belief and dedication to the right cause reflect the questions that Mamet singled out as the core of Rattigan's play and his film: 'What have you won when you have won? What is the cost of holding a principle?' (8)

Endnotes

(1) Mamet in conversation with C. W. E. Bigsby, cited in C. W. E Bigsby, David Mamet, Methuen, London, 1985, p.111.

(2) South Bank Show, 20. 3. 1985, cited in Anne Dean, David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Rutherford, 1990, p.87.

(3) http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/ winslowboy/theproduction/thefilm, p.3.

(4) http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/win-slowboy/synopsis.html

(5) http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/ winslowboy/theproduction/thefilm, p.3.

(6) Dennis Carroll, 'Recent Mamet Films: 'Business' Versus Communion' in David Mamet: A Casebook, Leslie Kane (ed.), Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1992, p.181.

(7) http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/ winslowboy/theproduction/thefilm, p.2.

(8) ibid., p.4.

Boris Trbic is a Melbourne writer and film reviewer.