DAVID MAMET’S ALTERED ETHICS:
FINDING FORGIVENESS, OR SOMETHING LIKE IT,
IN HOUSE OF GAMES, THE SPANISH PRISONER,
AND STATE AND MAIN

TODD F. DAVIS AND KENNETH WOMACK

In this essay, Davis and Womack explore ethical conceptions of forgiveness and empathy—especially in terms of their relationship to Levinasian alterity. Davis and Womack discuss David Mamet’s films as fora for discussing alterity and the evolving place of forgiveness in continental philosophy. They assert that the films provide us with a timely study of emotional violence that refuses a deontological ethics and underlines humankind’s enduring need for embracing a genuinely altered ethics.

I think that Movies, with few exceptions, have always been trash. I would like to aver that this trash has, historically, been better spirited but, on reflection, I cannot.
David Mamet, Make-Believe Town

When we speak about confidence games, we consider them almost entirely in terms of their artfulness, the cleverness with which their perpetrators succeed in the act of deception. We speak about con artistry as being “choreographed,” as something to be admired, as being the product of deft timing and intellectual skill. In his screenplays, David Mamet functions as the auteur behind many of contemporary cinema’s most intricately staged confidence games. Mamet asks his audience to revel in the well-timed sleight of hand, to set aside their ethical preconceptions in order to enjoy the mastery of his textual masquerade. In short, Mamet’s dramaturgy tempts us to lose ourselves in his films, to become conned along with his characters. As viewers of Mamet’s films ponder the implications of his con games—pulling back the veil, examining how the cloth was hung so deftly—the gravity of where these lies and deception take both his characters and audiences becomes clarified in terms of Mamet’s ethical intentions. Rather than being reduced to a simplistic moral code, Mamet’s ethical imperatives find their embodiment in his enduring interest in the mysterious nature of human
relationships.\textsuperscript{1} As Mamet astutely observes, a dramatic work that functions as pure didacticism or as a morality play whose sole purpose is to impart one-dimensional moral lessons about virtuous behavior simply cannot account for the rough edges of real life: “It might make a good tract,” he remarks, “it might make a good political platform, it might make a good speech. But it can’t be art” (quoted in Weber 2000: 136).

For a work of literary art to transcend didacticism, it must necessarily challenge its audience by asking them to engage in an experiential narrative event instead of rehearsing an existing canon of laws.\textsuperscript{2} For this reason, Mamet self-consciously strives for asymmetry and misdirection in his plays. While reminiscing in his memoir \textit{South of the Northeast Kingdom} about constructing stone walls at his home in rural Vermont, Mamet compares the act of building walls to his work as a writer: “My wall is falling, here and there, after twenty [years]. I did love building it. Here is an odd-shaped stone. Turn it this way or that, it will not square, set it aside, and now and then, by magic, its asymmetry completes an otherwise unbridgeable gap,” Mamet writes. “Perhaps all of us artists like to think of ourselves that way” (2002: 60). For Mamet, art’s complexity exists in its asymmetry, in its movement away from straight lines and towards the circuitous shapes that human existence inevitably takes. In his screenplays, Mamet illustrates his characters in the act of making complicated choices that will affect the direction of their lives. “Everyone from petty thieves to movie producers in Mamet’s canon,” Leslie Kane writes, “is judged by his or her behavior and viewed through the lens of ethical choice” (1999: 4). The complexity of these decisions ensures that such choices lack the clarity for which didactic or morality plays strive. In a Miltonic understanding of characterological free will, Mamet points out that “any of us has the capacity for atrocity—just as each of us has the capacity for heroism” (1996: 142). Hence, Mamet’s world—founded, as it is, upon a necessarily complicated textual ethics—exists somewhere in the

\textsuperscript{1} In \textit{South of the Northeast Kingdom}, Mamet remarks that “there are those human senses that we all acknowledge, but which we cannot quantify. The girl at the stoplight turns as she feels your gaze. No conscious effort can bring about this result; it is a survival of a primal, an occult, powerful part of life. Similarly, there is a mystery in the evanescent. It surfaces, certainly, at birth and death, but it is present regularly, intermittently, just beyond, and different from a conscious knowledge” (2002: xv-xvi).

\textsuperscript{2} As Myles Weber observes, “By appealing only to the rational mind, the ‘problem play’ fails to grip audience members at a deeper level of consciousness. At most, it instills in them a sense of superiority to those characters whose actions they recognize as morally repugnant” (2000: 136).