Introduction

Once upon a time, long, long ago, masculinity seemed unproblematic, but all that changed with the Copernican Revolution called feminism. Feminists challenged the belief that the world revolves around the phallus. Femininity and masculinity exist in a structural relation. By calling our gender order into question, feminism forced men to examine what was once taken for granted: the meaning of manhood. This questioning of our gender cosmos led to confusion and anxiety. Confusion and anxiety create malaise. They also create opportunities for change and growth. Collectively and individually we continue to struggle with gender. "Gender," declared Judith Butler, "will not go away."[1]

Current usage employs the word "sex" to refer to a biological designation – male or female. Gender refers to the cultural norms a specific society attributes to a biological sex. Society takes a biological sex and kneads it into a gender: masculinity or femininity. Enormous historical and cross-cultural evidence shows that culture shapes gender. In my lifetime, women have changed what it means to be a woman.

Some people believe that gender is an unmediated expression of biological sex. But the relationship between biological sex and social gender is complicated and murky. Conflating the two into a single category creates intellectual bedlam. Therefore, when I refer to "masculinity," I mean gender, a human construct. No universal masculinity or femininity exists. "Rather, economic, demographic, and ideational factors came together within specific societies to determine which rights, powers, privileges, and personalities women and men would possess."[2]

Mamet, the poet laureate of macho, has delved deeply into masculinity. For anyone interested in men as an object of inquiry, Mamet's works are invaluable. Beyond their literary and theatrical power, they provide a rich

vein of sociological and psychological information about men. Mamet's works ponder masculinity, laying bare the malaise of American men.

When I speak of masculinity, I refer to hegemonic American masculinity. The term, borrowed from Gramsci's political writings, gained currency in men's studies thanks to sociologist R. W. Connell. There are many different ways to embody masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant ideal. Although no single man incarnates this ideal, it wields great force in shaping social practices, practices that organize power relations between men and women and among men. According to Connell, the hegemonic ideal is a "fantasy." A specific fantasy achieves hegemony because society falls under its spell. Hegemony requires broad consensus. It also provokes protest.[3]

What is the American fantasy? Who embodies our hegemonic norm? Erving Goffman summed it up this way:

> [T]here is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports … Any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself – during moments at least – as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.[4]

Even though fifty years have passed since Goffman formulated his tart definition, it still holds. Each year I discuss this passage with my students, and each year, to my surprise, they concur with an occasional quibble.

One must not, however, think of hegemonic masculinity as a character type. Connell defines the hegemonic function as "configurations of practice generated in particular situations." How a man performs masculinity, therefore, depends on a specific context, not on a masculine essence.[5]

Masculinity is not always and everywhere the same. In a class I taught on cop action films, a Viennese student said that to perform American masculinity, "all you have to do is dress in dirty jeans and spit in the street." Everyone laughed; no one disagreed. Masculinity has a history, a sociology, a psychology, and an anthropology. We can trace its evolution. Most Americans take their current model of manhood as natural, but it is neither natural nor inevitable. A new paradigm of tough masculinity emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, and it found a seductive icon in the cowboy. I call this new paradigm American macho, and it is historically specific. Where did it come from? Why did Americans discard the model of the British gentleman they had inherited from England?

Spitting in the street did not always signify American manhood. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson had more in common with British aristocrats than with Buffalo Bill. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, genteel patriarchs held sway, dressed in jabots and *demi-bateaux*. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the cowboy had booted the genteel patriarchs into the trash bin of history. Why did Americans need the myth of the cowboy, and what does he have to do with Darwinian capitalism? My first chapter explores the historic and economic factors that forged the *Homo americanus*. The frontier and the Age of Enterprise converged in Chicago, where Mamet grew up. His plays and films dramatize the consequences of this convergence for American macho.

Mamet came of age in the 1950s. World War II had disrupted traditional gender arrangements. Men went off to fight; women went off to work. The heroic efforts of both were needed to win. After the war, the country set about demobilizing men and redomesticating women. On the surface the traditional gender order returned, but underneath confusion and conflict bubbled and hissed, blowing the lid off society in the 1960s. In the 1950s, the cowboy dominated American screens, big and small. In Hollywood and on television the cowboy rode herd on the anxieties of American men, who sought comfort in an old-fashioned icon that had nothing to do with contemporary life.

The cowboy reassured American men that they were still men: tall, strong, dominant. The cowboy seemed to embody an eternal masculine mystique. But celluloid cowboys, tricked out in theatrical ten-gallon hats and well-worn chaps, inadvertently drew attention to the performativity of gender. Masculinity is a script men act out, and performing masculinity drives Mamet's men. One cannot understand Mamet's ambivalence towards his male characters without understanding his paradoxical relation to the myths of American macho, explored in Chapter 2.

Little boys do not enter the world thinking of themselves as big men. Little boys begin life identifying with their mother. What role does the mother play in the construction of masculinity? How do little boys acquire a male identity? What happens to the primary identification with the mother? The family is the cauldron of gender and gender conflict. Feminist rereadings of Freud have shed new light on this conflict, and Mamet has written autobiographical plays that stage these conflicts. Chapter 3 looks at the contradictions inherent in constructing a male identity.

After the age of five, peers replace the family as the most important agent in gender socialization. Chapter 4 explores the boy culture. Mamet's

plays showcase this culture, illustrating how boys learn the code of masculinity from other boys. His plays also dramatize the difficulty men have leaving the boy culture. American macho infantilizes men, trapping them in a never-never land of guyhood. Why do American men find it difficult to grow up? Mamet's plays help explain why men put off adulthood as long as possible.

The Gordian knot of gender is difficult to untie. Understanding it requires an interdisciplinary approach. Consequently, this study uses the insights of anthropology, sociology, psychology, feminist theory, sociolinguistics, and history to provide a context for reading Mamet's texts and productions.[6]

In some circles, Mamet enjoys the reputation of a hog-headed misogynist. Certainly, many of his men are blow-hard chauvinists. But no intelligent reader takes the words of an imaginary character for those of the implied author. The meaning of a play arises from a complex design. Only a moron would believe that Iago or Iacchimo speak for Shakespeare. The *Glengarry Glen Ross* gang put money in their purse by lying and swindling and stealing. Even though we may sympathize with them, no one can read the play as a defense of theft. The production of meaning "is not exclusively … positioned … among the characters engaging in dialogue … The primary site where meaning is engendered … is between the audience and the characters in dialogue."[7] When buying real estate or reading plays, therefore, *caveat emptor*. In the real world, where Mamet wields considerable influence in theatre and film, he puts women into positions of power. People who stigmatize him as a woman-hater ignore the man who empowers women.

On a personal note, my favorite memory of Mamet comes from a sunny afternoon in late spring when he, Felicity Huffman, Mary McCann, and Rebecca Pidgeon were working on *Boston Marriage* at the American Repertory Theater. Mamet wrote the play for the three women on demand. Good friends, the actresses wanted to work together. To oblige, Mamet came up with a late Victorian comedy of manners about a female couple, their maid, and an emerald necklace. He called it an homage to Oscar Wilde. "I should put *Boston Marriage* out under a pseudonym," Mamet mused, "to see if anybody identifies me as the author."

For some reason, the babysitter did not show up at the Mamet home one morning. David arrived late to rehearsal, papoose attached to hip. As he directed, he gently rocked his son back and forth. During the breaks, he sang lullabies to him. Contrary to his image, Mamet is a gentleman – kind, thoughtful, magnanimous. He is the only male director I have worked

with who has never screamed during rehearsals. And he is an excellent babysitter.

Mamet is also the zoologist of American macho. His zoo contains a pack of crooks and con men, thugs and thespians, playboys and killjoys. But no matter how varied his male animals may be, all Mamet's plays explore why American men perform masculinity the way they do. Mamet's relationship to American macho is complex. He questions it and laughs, celebrates it and criticizes.

1

Enter the cowboy

Every myth has a history.
Roland Barthes,
Mythologies

Chicago ain't no sissy town!
Hinky Dink Kenna

Artist and impresario Augustin Daly packed up his New York actors, shipped them across the Atlantic to London, and on May 29, 1888, raised the curtain on his over-upholstered, red-damask production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the first time Americans had performed a full-length play by Shakespeare in the poet's home. The impudence of the scheme did not stop the countrymen of Barnum, Houdini, and Ziegfeld.

Impudence conquered. Even *Punch* admitted "the Americans had surpassed English troupes past and present."[1] London critics hailed Ada Rehan: "if a better Katherine than Miss Ada Rehan has trod the boards we have not seen her."[2] Similarly, they praised John Drew's Petruchio as "that consummate virtuoso in wife-taming, who always showed the gallant gentleman peeping roguishly from behind the mask of the bullying, whip-cracking slave-driver."

In Paris, French critics also raved about Rehan as "a comedienne of grace." Drew, however, was frowned on: "The treating of a rich, beautiful, elegant and virtuous young woman … like a wild animal does not cause merriment with our nation." Drew's "whip-cracking slave-driver" repulsed the French, who sneered about rough Anglo-Saxon humor. The English found Drew ideal; the French, savage.

Curiouser and curiouser, American reviews found Drew too weak to tame his fiery shrew. Rehan's Katherine – "a blaze of terra cotta brocade" – bowled

him off the stage: "His Petruchio has not sufficient force and vivacity," one reviewer complained, noting that Drew's "drawing room suavity" undermined the "audacity" needed for Petruchio. Booth Tarkington lamented, "John Drew would play *Simon Legree* into a misunderstood gentleman," and another critic, mixing venom with froth, called Drew "one of the most popular young lady actors of New York."[3]

If Drew's Petruchio had been reviewed a century earlier in 1787, the year Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* opened, Americans might have found him more to their liking. *The Contrast*, the first major American comedy, uncloaks manhood as a site of cultural anxiety. No longer subjects of the British Crown, Americans struggled to concoct a new breed of men, men worthy of the democratic ideals of a young republic.[4]

The Contrast holds Colonel Manly up as a model to emulate. Although Tyler plays Manly off against the Anglophile Dimple van Dumpling, Manly is no more American in his manhood than Dimple. The British stage also mocked aristocratic fops like Dumpling. Manly, cast in the mold of a gentleman, lives in the New World, but he is not a new man. He rides, hunts, and deals like any country squire. Manly also speaks the polished, Augustan cadences of the mother country's elite.[5] Despite Tyler's attempts to draw a new paradigm for American men, Manly, albeit a patriot, does not declare independence from English modes of manhood.[6]

By the end of the nineteenth century, when Drew performed Petruchio, the cult of the gentleman – a legacy from England – had lost its dominance. Everywhere one looks one sees the erosion of the gentleman culture: in literature, arts, popular culture, and politics. A new paradigm of manhood had made the gentleman effete. The word "masculine" marks linguistically this historic shift in what it meant to be an American man. Earlier in the century, the word "manly," with connotations of gentility and virtue, evoked the ideal, but, during the second half of the century, the gentleman gave way to the cowboy. The rough frontiersman booted out the genteel patriarch.

In the courtship scene from *Our Town*, the archetypal American play about the archetypal small town at the turn of the twentieth century, Emily confronts George with his failure as a man. Emily defines manhood in moral terms and believes a real man will struggle to act virtuously.[7] Her version of manhood harkens back to the genteel patriarchs, who dominated New England before the Civil War.

EMILY: I don't like the whole change that's come over you in the last year. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings, but I've got to – tell the truth and shame

the devil … George, it's a fact, you've got awful conceited and stuck-up … I'm sorry if it hurts your feelings … but I can't be sorry I said it.

GEORGE: I … I'm glad you said it, Emily. I never thought that such a thing was happening to me. I guess it's hard for a fella not to have faults creep into his character.

EMILY: I always expect a man to be perfect and I think he should be.

GEORGE: Oh … I don't think it's possible to be perfect, Emily.

EMILY: Well, my *father* is, and as far as I can see *your* father is. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be, too …

GEORGE: Emily, I'm glad you spoke to me about that … that fault in my character.[8]

The genteel patriarch, the American version of the British gentleman, prized self-control, high-mindedness, moral rectitude – *noblesse oblige*. But when Emily reprimands George for his lack of "character," her ideals of manhood no longer held much sway outside Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. By July 7, 1904, the day Emily brings up George's "character faults," the language she used was beginning to sound quaint.

When talking about historical shifts, however, one must bear in mind Sedgwick's sage observation that one historical model is never completely superseded by a subsequent one; traces of the previous model persist, and in any period an "unrationalized coexistence" of conflicting models holds. Nonetheless, between 1880 and 1917, American men were vigorously and consciously reshaping manhood, and the word gaining currency to express the new, tough values they strove to embody was "masculinity."[9]

What brought about this shift from "manhood" to "masculinity," and what exactly was the new American man? Gender reflects social norms and values; it exists in and through a specific culture. As society changes, masculinity changes, pushed and pulled by the dynamics of history. The American concept of masculinity was historically determined and actively constructed. The way men experience and perform gender responds to their context, and sweeping economic and social changes were transforming America from a rural society into an urban one, from a small republic into a vast empire. In 1860, America had no big business, no national market. Rockefeller and Vanderbilt, Carnegie and Westinghouse, Singer and Swift set about to change all that. The velocity of the economic transformation caught everyone off guard. The years between 1870 and 1900 saw America's industrial output increase by 500 percent. Men hardly had time to catch their breath let alone understand the economic forces disrupting their lives. In the process, a new definition of manhood rose to hegemony. I call it

American macho. The gallantry of George Washington and Colonel Manly mutated into the war whoops of Theodore Roosevelt and Tarzan: The bull-moose president and the ape man, dancing "the fierce, mad, intoxicating revel of the Dum-Dum."[10]

By the end of the century, traditional manhood – the genteel patriarch – was under siege, and a rough, frontier-inspired masculinity took its place. The ten-gallon macho attitude assuaged anxiety over castration, exemplified by Teddy Roosevelt's "self-fashioning," to borrow Stephen Greenblatt's term. Roosevelt accomplished his self-willed transformation from sissy into big-stick bully by hunting buffalo in the Dakota Badlands. Ironically, the frontier was already fading into memory; America was becoming an industrial powerhouse lorded over by robber barons. Nostalgically, Roosevelt turned to the cowboy to reinvigorate American manhood.[11]

About the same time Roosevelt was promulgating his version of American macho, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). Although politics and economics are Turner's principal concerns, here and there he sketches in a portrait of the new American man:

> The wilderness masters the colonists … It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin … [H]e shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion … [H]ere is a new product that is American.[12]

The new product – "rugged" and "energetic," "strong" and "independent" – gauged manhood by conquest. Conquering the wilderness defined the frontiersman. "Practical" rather than intellectual, the new American man – "coarse" by European standards – scorned the gentleman culture. "Art, literature, refinement … all had to give way to this Titanic labor. Energy, incessant activity, became the lot of this new American … 'No admittance here, except on business' " (67). The wilderness came to define what was unique about America and Americans. The savage land was a crucible of hard men; the clash with untamed nature turned effete Europeans into he-men. The frontier offered the possibility of remasculinization. The frontier, "a military training school" (41), gave Americans biceps. Thus triumphed a physical, anti-intellectual model of masculinity: American macho.

The image of the ideal man did not change overnight; the evolution from genteel patriarch to American macho took its time. During his presidency (1829–1837), Andrew Jackson fought patriarchs, merchants, and bankers. "It

is to be regretted," he said, "that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes … to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful." He defended the common man and his right to participate in America's government and prosperity. Nevertheless, this champion of the people was not the rough-and-ready backwoodsman of legend. He was a country squire with manners and breeding. He lived the life of a gentleman on his Tennessee plantation, raising thoroughbred horses. The shift to a new ideal of manhood did not come until later. But come it did, and by century's end a tough masculinity had risen to hegemony, and American macho still holds us in thrall.[13]

American literature frets over masculinity; Mamet works within a major tradition. Nowhere in European literature does masculine anxiety assert itself with the nagging insistence it does here. This obsession ripples through our culture: in canonical novels from Cooper and Melville through Twain and Hemingway to Mailer; in cowboy films, war films, sport films, gangster films, film noir, superhero adventures, and *Looney Tunes*. In the theatre, one must position Mamet in a constellation of playwrights who train the spotlight on masculinity: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, Edward Albee, José Piñero, Amiri Baraka, Jason Miller, David Rabe, Sam Shepard, August Wilson, and Tony Kushner among others.[14]

An important key to unlocking the gate to Mamet's world, therefore, is the specific historical and cultural construction of masculinity he dramatizes: American macho. His characters embody it with high-strung urgency. Anger and violence, muscles and machismo – the masculinity that coalesced at the end of the nineteenth century resonates throughout Mamet. American macho not only shapes our attitude towards gender, it also shaped a large swath of our greatest literature. Tough masculinity dominates the Mamet canon, and he owns up to his infatuation with tough guys. Speaking of actors Sterling Hayden and Gene Hackman, Mamet writes, "They are not 'sensitive'; they are not antiheroes; they are, to use a historic term, 'he-men.' How refreshing." He also told Ben Brantley, "I always loved gangster films because they were very virile. They're about a guy who wants something and would do anything to get it."[15]

A good place to examine the historical drift away from genteel manhood to American macho is Chicago, Mamet's hometown, where his sense of masculinity was forged.[16] One cannot understand Mamet without understanding the bare-knuckle poetry of Chicago. Mamet's men perform their masculinity according to the code of American macho. This hard masculinity