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| **FEATURE ARTICLE** | | | |
| **Chris Jackson is an Associate Professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She teaches writing, literature, and music history.**              **"**  Aside from a few times when the film **bops us over the head** with a distinction between rightness and justice, Mamet’s *The Winslow Boy* seems a **dark exercise** in abstraction.  **"**                            **"**  The law as an institution **mirrors** this imperfect world. Negotiations, plea bargains, appeals, and re-interpretations are not loose loopholes, but **evidence of the ongoing resilience of the law.** A too rigid code of behavior is its own dead-end trap. The **true hero** of this film is a responsive legal system.  **"** |  |  | **Mamet’s *The Winslow Boy*: Traps and Loopholes**  By Chris Jackson      Michael Asimow’s excellent reviews of *The Winslow Boy* and *The Castle* applaud the return of heroic lawyers and clients. To be sure, Arthur Winslow’s dogged attempt to restore his son’s reputation presents much to admire. Yet I wonder if rejoicing over *The Winslow Boy*’s profiles in personal heroism is premature. The film has garnered mixed reviews both from professional critics and those in the sticky seats. David Denby sees the film as "something created to overawe the servants" (*The New Yorker,* 17 May 1999). One filmgoer wrote online "Bring an alarm clock when you see this movie because [sic] you might not know when to wake up." (*The Winslow Boy*--*Entertainment Weekly Movie Review*, 15 May 1999).     Aside from a few times when the film bops us over the head with a distinction between rightness and justice, Mamet’s *The Winslow Boy* seems a dark exercise in abstraction. Many viewers may nod off, seeking escape. However, escape from untenable roles and situations seems to be what this film is mostly about. Underneath heroic intentions lie the ambiguous missteps and miscommunications that bedevil human endeavors. A garden gate flapping in the rain first presages that the Winslows’ privileged, hermetic existence is now open to the world. Thereafter, the film is peppered with images of enclosure or escape. Almost every major character in *The Winslow Boy* shows a conflict between being trapped in a restrictive social role and trying to wriggle out.     The scene in which Sir Robert Morton (Jeremy Northam) interrogates Ronnie (Guy Edwards) about the alleged theft of the postal order further highlights this potent subtext. After a *klieg* light interrogation of Ronnie, Sir Robert agrees to take the case: *The boy is plainly innocent.* Later, Sir Robert tells Catherine (Rebecca Pidgeon) that his questions held a trap and a loophole to test the boy. Ronnie did not step into the trap, a dead-end, or slip through the loophole, an escape hatch, as a guilty person would.     Ironically, Ronnie is the only character who fails to exercise those human options.     Ronnie’s father, Arthur Winslow (Nigel Hawthorne), has long ago made peace with his trap of the upper-class banker’s world. He tells his older son, the black sheep Dickie, *I am no gambler*. Arthur’s life runs on economics, numbers, and averages, yet he must ask John, the son-in-law hopeful, for a coin to tip the deliveryman. Arthur poses all the right questions to John about prospects and income. Then he taps his cane for wife and daughter to enter. They inadvertently make Arthur look foolish, by failing to hear his prearranged distress signal.     Arthur’s many problems with communication undercut his authority. He misreads the meaning of the extra glass on the tray. He can’t find his own glasses to read the letter informing them of Ronnie’s expulsion from the Academy. He is unaware of the notice they receive for the first appointment with Sir Robert. He can’t summon the courage to fire the maid and balance the household budget. He misses the verdict when it is read in court: *I would like to have been there*, he says wistfully. As the family name suggests, *Win-slow*, a gradual victory arrives but it is too understated to cause much celebration.     In the end, Arthur wonders what kind of statement he should give the reporters and is told, *Whatever you say will have little bearing on what they write*. Arthur starts the film wearing basic black and wielding his cane as a weapon. He ends up in a wrinkled suit of beige linen, the cane his only support. Arthur changes as he discovers the limits to his trap of money, power, and influence.     As Arthur contemplates the Bible’s wisdom of seven years of good luck followed by bad, his family members escape their problems through loopholes. For his wife Grace, the trips to court are a chance to expand her wardrobe. Arthur chides her, *This isn’t a cricket match*. She comes back with *I can’t wear the same dress every day*. She pretends to be a servant, and she revels in her disguise. To whatever the reporters ask her, she says, *I don’t know nothing*. The case gives Grace a loophole out of her role as proper wife, mother, and organizer of the household.     Similarly Catherine escapes marriage to the dreary John. The two are clearly incompatible. She pulls away when he grabs her for a passionate kiss. Even Arthur says that she is not acting like a person in love. She studies *Social Evil/Social Good* when she should be emoting over Lord Byron. Later, we learn that John is engaged to a general’s daughter. He will be one of those first called to the war. Catherine escapes a restrictive role as military wife and no doubt widow. At least now she is free to wear a hat that charms Sir Robert.     Asimow notes that *At first, we thoroughly dislike Sir Robert*. Certainly his legend for courtroom finesse and Catherine’s comment about his *dead heart* precedes our view of him. When we finally catch a glimpse, Sir Robert is in shirtsleeves struggling to put on his coat. He seems considerate about smoking in front of Catherine and appreciates her directness. He is fierce with Ronnie to counter Arthur’s gentlemanly, code-of-honor questioning. For all his legal solidity, Sir Robert too slips through loopholes, showboating in court or using his trick of being ill. He dodges the trap of an unspecified higher position, saying the robes would not fit. In the closing scene, there is some question about whether the trick of his illness is real. Exhausted, he tells Catherine that it is *easy to do justice, hard to do right.*     But is the court’s verdict right? Usually, the guilt or innocence of the accused drives a legal film toward its conclusion. This case lets loose a storm of publicity. London is raining souvenir mugs, pencils, and political cartoons (*No children. No pets. No discussion of the Winslow case*.). Yet Ronnie sits, almost irrelevant, at the center of the concentric circles spun from the trial. Is he a thief? A forger? A liar?     Like a good defense lawyer, the film cannot press those questions. On the one hand, we have the boy’s persistent, unflinching denials. Ronnie is no smirking Macauley Culkin from *The Good Son*. We see why Arthur buys the boy’s innocence.  On the other hand, Sir Robert’s questioning lays bare the possibility of guilt. Ronnie backpedals. He might have practiced the forgery. He meant to say *deposit*, not *cash*. He can’t account for twenty-five minutes. This exchange provides our most in-depth view of the case. We never see any courtroom activity directly, *a la* *Court TV*. It seems we are always in the ladies’ gallery. Action is reported, muted, or filtered through a screen. Even if we could see, would it help? At one point, Catherine and Desmond discuss that day’s proceedings. Catherine says, *The Postmistress restored the Admiralty’s case*. Desmond, who was also there, vehemently disagrees. The facts are locked in a stalemate of ambiguity.     This film looks at the tangled motivations of those bringing litigation and the personal cost of justice. What does it all add up to?     Some reviewers have found it ironic that the previously profane dialogue of Mamet is missing in *The Winslow Boy*. But this film is exactly what we might expect from the writer-director of *House of Cards* (1987) and *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997*)*. In its subtle chess game of move/counter-move, this film dramatizes the missteps and imperfections of human experience. The law as an institution mirrors this imperfect world. Negotiations, plea bargains, appeals, and re-interpretations are not loose loopholes, but evidence of the ongoing resilience of the law. A too rigid code of behavior is its own dead-end trap. The true hero of this film is a responsive legal system.     The film ends with Catherine accusing Sir Robert: *How little you know about women.* He answers, *How little you know about men*. These are useful reminders for people in the law who must deal regularly with the complexity of human muddles.    **Would you like to to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments)       |  | | --- | | ***Other related Picturing Justice Articles of Interest*** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | - | [**The Music of Inner Justice in Ally McBeal**](http://docs.google.com/ally-music.htm) **by Chris Jackson** | | - | [**RETURN OF THE HEROIC LAWYERS . . . AND THE HEROIC CLIENTS: THE WINSLOW BOY AND THE CASTLE**](http://docs.google.com/winslow_boy.htm)**By Michael Asimow** | |  | [**From Baltimore to *Providence*: It’s Farther than You Think**](http://docs.google.com/providence-jackson.htm) **By Chris Jackson** |  |  | | --- | | **Related Web Sites - *The Winslow Boy*** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | - | [**The Winslow Boy**](http://www.spe.sony.com/classics/winslowboy/index.html) **- official site from Sony Pictures Classics.** | |  | |  | | --- | | [**Yahoo! Movies: The Winslow Boy**](http://movies.yahoo.com/movies/guide/the_winslow_boy.html) | | |  | [**Winslow Boy, The (1998)**](http://us.imdb.com/Title?title=winslow+boy,+the+(1998)) **- IMDb page** | |  |  | |

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