

### **Katie Hopkins: Social Critique Draft Feedback**

I think this is a great start at a very perceptive study. I think that your basic insight—reading *The Mousetrap* as a carnivalesque moment in *Hamlet*—is right on. However, there are a couple conceptual issues hindering this analysis. In turn, your prose here lacks the precision and perceptiveness that I usually see in your writing. Here are some conceptual tweaks that should inform your choices for revision:

- 1) First, I'm not sure if you have Bakhtin fully sorted out. One thing that I see missing here is a hard distinction between the Carnival as a historical event (like Mardi Gras) and the Carnavalesque as a theoretical idea. As a result, what I see here sits uneasily between a theoretically-informed social critique and a contextual study; I can't tell exactly what you're doing! So I'd take a fuller look at Bakhtin, as well as Wofford's discussion of Marxism and introduction to Bristol. There, you'll find that the carnivalesque is the key theoretical idea—and that it has much more to do with resistance to the upper class than you're letting on.
- 2) I think this essay would also benefit immensely from a consideration of Bristol's argument. By looking at Bristol, I think, you'll get a better sense of Bakhtin's theoretical ideas and how they might play out in *Hamlet*. More importantly, your argument can easily be positioned against Bristol's, in two ways. First, you look at a scene that he kind of breezes by (the Mousetrap). Second, you end up directly addressing the specific question that he ends with: can Hamlet truly adopt the carnivalesque? He is upper-class, after all.
- 3) All of this might have you strategically reorganizing what you have here. I'll let you make your decisions about how to roll this out. However, I would point out that, throughout your close readings, you'll want to bring in a much clearer sense of the carnivalesque as a kind of parody designed to resist, mock, and destabilize the authority of those in power. That's there sometimes, but not all the time. Especially the class part.

4)

Katie Hopkins

ENGL 305

Dr. Scheler

April 12, 2017

## Hamlet, a Party Pooper

In the first half of *Hamlet*, Hamlet struggles to reconcile his current circumstances: he lives in a household of which the head is his uncle, Claudius, who murdered his father, and then immediately remarried his mother, Gertrude. Hamlet's reality deeply affects him by way of excess emotion, and while warranted, makes him unstable and his actions unpredictable. Like any human being, his emotion needs to be released and he attempts to do so through the performance of *Hamlet's* resident play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap*. *The Mousetrap* parodies Hamlet's reality in a way that is Carnavalesque—using folk humor to temporarily relieve oneself of a stagnant reality to gain a sense of renewal—a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin who based it off of the exploratory work of Middle Age carnivals by Rabelais, a contemporary of Shakespeare. *The Mousetrap* exhibits key characteristics of a personal carnival for Hamlet: it directly and intimately involves him, parodies his reality, and allows him to express his opinions without fear of consequence. However, he fails to complete the carnival because the focus of the parody doesn't include himself, and thus the spectacle doesn't renew him, but further entrenches him in feelings of stagnation and revenge.

Bakhtin's cultural theory of the Carnavalesque is indebted to the work of French Renaissance writer Rabelais, who immortalized folk culture and humor through his depictions of irreverent carnivals. Bakhtin retroactively studies the carnival and ultimately prizes it for its

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:12 AM

**Comment [1]:** Period, not a colon.

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:15 AM

**Comment [2]:** Already you have an opening to incorporate Bristol. Here you might be able to suggest that Bristol already brought in Bakhtin to tackle this problem, and that you're going to focus in on a more local aspect of the play—*The Mousetrap*.

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**Comment [3]:** ?

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**Comment [4]:** And here you're directly tackling the problem that Bristol ends with: "can Hamlet, as an upper-class person, truly take on the carnival"?

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:17 AM

**Comment [5]:** Not totally sure what you mean by this here or before.

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:18 AM

**Comment [6]:** "built on an analysis of..."

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:18 AM

**Comment [7]:** not necessary.

unique ability to temporarily deteriorate the system of normally functioning hierarchical society. Carnivals were celebrations of the lower classes in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, characterized by a temporary transformation of reality through folk humor such as verbal compositions of parody and satire of the upper classes. The distinctive quality of the carnival was its ability to provide a tangible space where all classes became equal, which made it possible for the lower classes to parody the bourgeois and ruling classes without fear of repercussion. Participants of carnivals need not fear consequences because their celebrations weren't reality, but a subversion of it. The carnival was an alternate life, bordering between fiction and reality, and was motivated by the need for laughter. Carnivals such as Mardi Gras—the indulgent celebration before the fasting period of Lent—a grew out of the need for celebrations that focused on renewal, change, and life to counteract the stodgy nature and immortalization of stability that official celebrations had come to be. These spectacles were not seen by the public, but lived by them, fueled by a laughter that was at the same time playful and mocking towards the parodied subjects, but most importantly directed also at the people themselves. Carnivals left the participants with a sense of renewal for temporarily being released from the prevailing stability of the upper classes before being subjected to the normal functioning of society at the carnival's end. (Bahktin 1-11).

Like the lower classes of the Middle Ages, Hamlet too suffers from the repressive stagnation of an upper class. Although of royal birth, Hamlet is a minority when it comes to his negative opinions on his mother's remarriage after his father's death and—like the lower classes—must seek alternative ways to express his feelings. Hamlet wholeheartedly disapproves of his mother's decisions, and he laments that he cannot express his opinions: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good, / But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue," (1.2.158-9). Hamlet

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**Comment [8]:** Carnivals are a historical phenomenon; the "carnavalesque" is a theoretical concept.

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:20 AM

**Comment [9]:** Hm. You're fudging here. You're discussing carnival as a historical context, which is true. But Bakhtin discusses the carnivalesque as a theoretical concept. Keep reading.

I'd also take a look at Bristol's discussion of Bakhtin as a kind of guide.

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**Comment [10]:** "stagnation" means "lack of movement"

knows that he cannot express his opinions of his mother and uncle's union publicly because his views are not shared by the masses, however he alludes to a need to express himself, because not being able to will "break [his] heart." So much like the way the lower classes of the Middle Ages sought to find a way to express their opinions against the stability of the ruling classes, so to does Hamlet seek to express his opinion of his mother's remarriage against the readily accepted one of the rest of the court.

While his inability to discuss his mother's decision to remarry ails him, it is another the knowledge of Claudius' murder of his father that piques him to act and express his undisclosed feelings through the performance of *The Mousetrap*. It may seem Hamlet takes a back seat as a viewer of *The Mousetrap*, but it is actually ripe with his own purpose and action. Though he does not specifically act in the performance, he intimately participates in it through his hands on direction of the play's content: "...I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle," (2.2.574-6). Just like the participants in a carnival, Hamlet is quite literally living the spectacle and in two ways: his physical direction of the content, and in his intimate connection to it—along with his mother and uncle alongside him, he is watching his life play out in front of him. He is not an apathetic bystander, but a willing and active participant.

However, it is not truly Hamlet's life that is being played out, but a parody of it. The dumb show reveals the dual nature of *The Mousetrap*, both its similarities and differences to reality:

Enter a King and a Queen (very lovingly), the Queen embracing him and he her...He lies him down upon a bank of flowers. She, seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon come in another man, takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears, and leaves him. The Queen returns, finds the King dead...The pois'ner with some three or four mutes

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:24 AM

**Comment [11]:** This construction is awkward.

Also, I don't see how this paragraph fits, exactly.

Drew Scheler 4/18/2017 10:25 AM

**Comment [12]:** I think the word you're looking for is "parody"—a mocking, grotesque, or burlesque version of something. A (historical) carnival is a "parody" of power.

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**Comment [13]:** Aha!

come in again, seem to condole with her...The pois-ner wooed the Queen with gifts; she seems harsh (and unwilling) awhile, but in the end accepts love. (3.2.127s.d.)

The dumb show, without a doubt, relays exactly the plot of Hamlet's reality. His father and mother were indeed in love, and then his father was murdered by Claudius who poured poison in his ear. Claudius then proceeded to woo and marry his mother. However, while the show mirrors Hamlet's life, it is but a performance of it, and thus *The Mousetrap* is not literally his reality because there is a degree of physical separation. The play is being performed in front of Hamlet and his family, they are not actually a part of it. The Queen is not Gertrude, but a Player Queen, an actor. The poisoner is not Claudius, but in *The Mousetrap* is revealed to be Lucianus, the nephew of the Player King. So although these actors are playing out nearly exactly Hamlet's, Claudius', and Gertrude's reality, it is but an echo of it, living both in reality and fantasy.

It is because of the play's parodied nature that Hamlet is able to portray his mother's remarriage and father's murder in a light that is unflattering to both Gertrude and Claudius, without fear of retaliation. After the Player Queen boisterously denies to the Player King that she would ever remarry if he died, Hamlet asks Gertrude her opinion of the story:

Hamlet: Madam, how like you this play?

Queen: The lady doth protest too much, methinks. (3.2.217-8).

Because Hamlet directed the content of *The Mousetrap*, the plot naturally reflects his own opinions, and thus the Player Queen, who stands in for Gertrude, is painted in infidelity and full of false promises. His opinions clearly get across, because even his mother, the offender in his eyes agrees that "the lady doth protest too much" and is false in her promises of fidelity to the Player King. However, because the play lies partially in a realm of fantasy and is not reality itself, Hamlet needs not fear consequences for his expression, especially because his audience

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Comment [14]: Run on sentence.

isn't fully aware of what he is doing. Thus, Hamlet is able to get his mother to talk trash against herself and is not punished for it.

However apparent these key characteristics of carnivals are in *The Mousetrap*, it must not be forgotten that Hamlet's driving force for initiating the performance was not just for humor's sake, but also for revenge. The content of *The Mousetrap* was not chosen by coincidence, but specifically dictated by Hamlet to aid in his quest for revenge against his uncle: "I'll observe his looks / I'll tent him to the quick. If 'a do blench / I know my course," (2.2.576-8). Hamlet uses *The Mousetrap* to poke fun at Claudius through mockery and make him feel uncomfortable, but he is really banking on the ability of *The Mousetrap* to reveal Claudius's guilt, so that Hamlet will then "know [his] course," in proceeding to avenge his father.

This is one of the reasons that Hamlet fails to complete a true carnival; his mockery of his uncle and mother is only full of derision since it is seeded in such personal acts against him as the murder and disgrace of his father. The depths of Hamlet's hatred can be felt in the many insults he lobbed at the two, heralding Gertrude with "frailty thy name is woman" (1.2.146) and calling Claudius a "murderer and a villain," (3.4.96). To be a true carnival, the subjects being parodied must simultaneously be uplifted and deflated, but Hamlet feels that Gertrude and Claudius have so unforgivably wronged him that he cannot find a shred of light in them. Through *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet accuses Gertrude to be an unvirtuous wife who breaks her promises to her husband, and Claudius is slandered, albeit rightfully, as a murderer who marries his brother's widow. Furthermore, none of this mocking laughter is turned on Hamlet himself as a carnival requires. The dumb show lists the characters of the spectacle as the Player Queen, Player King, and the Poisoner. Nowhere is there the son of the Player King either present or mentioned. Because Hamlet does not include himself in the content, his parody is not turned

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**Comment [15]:** Here your lack of distinction between a historical carnival and the carnivalesque is messing with your argument. Hamlet can't "complete" a carnival, because he's not of the lower classes. He can, perhaps, take on carnivalesque speech and action (parody).

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**Comment [16]:** And here your interesting argument here can be better bolstered by considering Bristol.

upon himself and he does not recognize himself as another flawed part of the world like the lower class participants of carnivals did.

However, the deepest offense against *The Mousetrap* as a personal carnival for Hamlet is that it doesn't leave Hamlet with a sense of renewal and liberate him from the truth, temporarily or otherwise. *The Mousetrap* displays Hamlet's pent up angst against his mother for marrying his uncle, and against his uncle for killing his father, but after his subversive expression against the reigning reality, Hamlet's feelings do not change. After the performance, Gertrude calls upon Hamlet to talk, and then chastises him when he kills Polonius upon discovering that he is eavesdropping. Hamlet responds to her in anger: "A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king, and marry with his brother," (3.4.27-8). From his outburst towards Gertrude, it is clear that he feels no sense of renewal towards his situation. He is still entrenched in his angst and disapproval. In fact, rather than liberated from his reality, he is more chained to it because the revelation of Claudius' guilt commits Hamlet avenging his father. Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius when he is alone praying, but muses that he should kill him in a time of sin, so that "his soul may be as damn'd and black / As hell, whereto it goes," (3.3.94-5) revealing the depth of his angst that *The Mousetrap* did nothing to allay. Unlike the true carnivals, where the participants are left with celebration and laughter at the spectacle's end, Hamlet is only left with amplified feelings of angst and derision.

It is curious that although *The Mousetrap* contains key characteristics of a carnival that Bakhtin lays out based on Rabelais' work, it is unable to attain the function of a true carnival. Since Hamlet's carnival only fails in its ability to renew him through laughter, it highlights that characteristic inherently important to Bakhtin's theory of the Carnavalesque. In theory, Hamlet's personal carnival should have worked because he was of a marginalized status in need of

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**Comment [17]:** Upper-class world. There's a class distinction here that you're not making clearly throughout.

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**Comment [18]:** See the Sentences tell stories powerpoint on nominalizations.

In addition to being unclearly-worded, I'm actually not sure what you're saying here. "Offence"?

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**Comment [19]:** More like "the reality of class distinctions"?

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**Comment [20]:** ?

temporary liberation from the upper class' narrative, but in action it failed, making one wonder if there are truths too heavy to overcome, that a carnival cannot cure. It seems that in order for a carnival to work, the oppressive and stable regime from which it stems need not be so heavy that laughter cannot permeate it, and thus, Hamlet's venture was doomed from the start.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Introduction." *Rabelais and His World*. Tr. Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press. 1984. Bloomington.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: William Shakespeare: Hamlet*. Ed. Susanne L. Wofford. Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press. 1994. New York. Print.