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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 unique ability to temporarily deteriorate the system of normally functioning hierarchal 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 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

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

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 lobbies at the two, heralding Gertrude with "frailty thy name is woman" (1.2.146) and calling Claudius a "murtherer 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

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

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.

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