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ENGL 305

Dr. Scheler

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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 where 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 with the performance of *Hamlet's* resident play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap*, we see Hamlet's attempt to do this. *The Mousetrap* parodies Hamlet's reality in a way that is Carnavalesque, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin who based it off of the exploratory work of Middle Age carnivals by Rabelais, a contemporary of Shakespeare. Through the advent of *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet attempts to complete a personal carnival that parodies his reality, allows him to express his opinions without fear of consequence, and directly and intimately involves him. 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,

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Comment [1]: Heh.

characterized by a temporary transformation of reality through folk humor such as verbal compositions of parody and satire of the upper classes. The uniqueness of the carnival was in 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).

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 must seek alternative ways to express his feelings. Although he wholeheartedly disapproves, 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

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Comment [2]: This is a very abrupt way to start your next paragraph. If you're still talking about carnival, I'd some how weed that into your introduction sentence to assure the reader that this is connected and not a completely new subject.

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.

After the visit of his father's ghost, Hamlet also bottles up the knowledge of Claudius's crime, but along with his opinions of his Gertrude's remarriage, finds a way to express his subversive judgment of his mother's remarriage through the performance of *The Mousetrap*. The play-within-a-play emulates key characteristics of a carnival: the direct and intimate involvement of the participants (Hamlet), a parody of reality, and a means of expression without consequence.

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.

However, it is not truly Hamlet's life that is being displayed, 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 mates come in again, seem to condole with her...The pois-ner wood 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 Hamlet's reality. His father and mother were indeed in love, and his father was then murdered by another man (his uncle) by having poison poured in his ear. His murdering uncle then proceeded to woo and marry his mother. However, while a mirror of Hamlet's reality this show, and thus *The Mousetrap* is not literally his reality, 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, Claudius', and Gertrude's reality, it is but an echo of it, living both in reality and fantasy.

Because the play is a parody of reality, 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).

Previously, Hamlet was recorded to say "...I must hold my tongue," when it came to his opinion on his mother's remarriage, because he felt that there would be consequences, or it wouldn't have been received well, but because Hamlet directed the content of the performance, it is his opinions on their reality that are valued and displayed above all others. So, 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. Because the play is a

parody of reality, and not reality itself, Hamlet needs not fear consequences for his expression, especially because his audience isn't fully aware of what he is doing.

More important than these characteristics of a carnival, however, is the purpose for which Hamlet initiated *The Mousetrap* in the first place: revenge. The content which mirrors the plot of *Hamlet* was not chosen by coincidence, but specifically dictated by 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 is banking on the ability of *The Mousetrap* to reveal Claudius's guilt, so that Hamlet will then "know [his] course," but also to poke fun at Claudius through mockery and make him feel uncomfortable.

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, and his laughter is not at all directed towards himself. To be a true carnival, the subjects being parodied must simultaneously be uplifted and deflated. However, Hamlet's parody is only full of contempt for Gertrude and Claudius. 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. 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.

However, the deepest offense against *The Mousetrap* as a personal carnival for Hamlet is the fact that it doesn't leave Hamlet with a sense of renewal and doesn't liberate him from truth, temporarily or otherwise. Before *The Mousetrap* began, Hamlet has pent up angst against his mother for marrying his uncle, and against his uncle for killing his father, hence the whole reason

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Comment [3]: You use this idea of a parodied reality a lot in the last few paragraphs. It's a wonderful idea that fully fits carnival and your paper, but don't overuse it because, besides the fact that repetition can be bad sometimes, it lessens the strength of it.

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Comment [4]: Random question: how *didn't* they know? The play is literally the exact same thing as what really happened. Some people are so dense.

for the performance as a way to both express his feelings and verify Claudius' guilt. However, 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. Since *The Mousetrap* revealed Claudius' guilt, Hamlet feels more chained to his promise to avenge his father by killing his uncle. 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). Unlike the true carnivals, where the participants are left with celebration and laughter at the spectacle's end, Hamlet is only left with angst, derision for his mother, and the promise of future murder.

The Mousetrap contains key characteristics of a carnival that Bakhtin lays out based on Rabelais' work, but it is unable to attain the function of a true carnival because it does not leave Hamlet with a sense of renewal. Thus it is the ability of a carnival to renew the participants of carnivals with a vigor for life that becomes 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.

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Comment [5]: This is an awkward last sentence. It's a good sentence and I think you should keep it, but I feel like this doesn't fully tie up the paper. I'd maybe add a different conclusion sentence to make this feel more complete.

Works Cited

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

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