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## Deceit and Catches in "Hamlet" Tragedy

When Hamlet's father orders him to kill Claudius, Hamlet's reaction is one of questioning and disbelief. While he feels strongly about the murder of his father and yearns to discover the killer, he harbors suspicions about the truth behind the ghost's jarring indictment of his uncle Claudius. So, Hamlet decides to put on a play: a trap to expose the potentially sullied conscience of the king. Without examining the results of this scheme, its basic structure is one used by nearly every character in the play. They do not immediately accost the culprit; rather, the characters set up small, contained traps and patiently wait for the results. These traps are not always dire, seen in Polonius's plan to discover Hamlet's intentions in loving Ophelia. In a wider scope, the play as a whole is a deeply intertwined and complex web of traps and plots, from which only Horatio escapes by the end of the play. As a commentary on human behavior, Shakespeare includes this theme to indicate that there is always a winner and a loser, or in Polonius's terms, a springe and a woodcock. However, ironically, the winner is not always the spy and the loser is not always the culprit. As a result, the line between hero and villain does not remain consistent throughout the play.

Hamlet's purpose for the play is evident: he names it "The Mousetrap." If he lacked proof before, or if he had feared that his personal feelings were perhaps clouding his judgment, the king's own performance during "The Mousetrap" could very well hold the key to Hamlet's subsequent actions. The trap sets up in a traditional way. There is a springe (Hamlet) and a woodcock (Claudius) from the outset, and the results will be explicit: either the king reacts and Hamlet is victorious in his private game of cat and mouse or the king does not react and Hamlet faces even more self-doubt than before the play. Eventually, the play does the trick: "Give me some light. Away" (3.2.275). To those who are aware of the situation, Claudius's reaction confirms every suspicion. As Hamlet so eloquently noted, "What, frightened with false fire" (3.2.272). Indeed, Claudius is trapped by his own actions. There was no actual accusation made, not directly at least. But the fact that he was so disturbed by what he saw could only mean that he, as Hamlet had hoped, understood the subtle message being sent. To Claudius, it was equivalent to someone calling him out, exposing him as the murderer he is in front of the world. When the play overwhelms him, Claudius demands light. The significance of the "light" has a meaning unique to Claudius, to those near him, and to Hamlet. To Hamlet, it is the smoking gun and the final measure of escape by a desperate man. To Claudius's court, it's a simple command for light. And for Claudius, it is a plea for air, for a way out of the trap he had unknowingly stepped into when he took his seat in the theater.

Reviewing the scene of "The Mousetrap" alone, Hamlet is the hero in the eyes of the reader. He has suspicions about his corrupt uncle and they are confirmed by Claudius's reaction to the

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play. He has a clear path to outing his uncle as the murderer and adequate grounds on which to seek deadly revenge. In contrast, Claudius is the obvious villain, having now killed Hamlet's father, married his mother, and essentially revealed his conscience to Hamlet. So, "The Mousetrap" establishes lucid definitions for both the hero and the evildoer. Yet, consider a second scene of spying which takes place just after the play. Claudius is praying in a confessional, acknowledging his wrongdoings to God. Hamlet enters the room to hear Claudius praying and secretly slips into the booth adjacent to that of the king for a closer view. After some minutes of spying on Claudius, Hamlet unsheathes his dagger and prepares himself mentally to end the king. However, he thinks twice, lowers his sword, and secretly flees the chapel. Again, in this scene there are two distinct outcomes: Hamlet kills Claudius and fulfills his father's orders or he hesitates, weighed down by his conscience and flair for the dramatic. He does the latter, fearing that killing Claudius at a time of absolution would do a justice to Claudius that Hamlet's father never received at the time of his death. In a short period of time, the reader's opinion of Hamlet shifts dramatically from laudatory to slightly disappointed. Should Hamlet have killed Claudius in the church, he would have been the hero. Instead his actions are sly and shady, even dishonorable. As the spy, according to the definitions laid down by "The Mousetrap" scene, one expects, even hopes for, Hamlet to emerge with better footing against his uncle. However, Claudius's prayer thrusts him into a more positive light, while Hamlet's flight casts a villainous shadow. By blurring this line between hero and villain, Shakespeare projects the moral incertitude experienced by Hamlet onto his audience, who are left to decide for themselves.

"The Mousetrap" is one of several important "mini-traps" within Hamlet. The theme is first established by Polonius in Act one, Scene three: "Ay, springes to catch woodcocks. I do know,/When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul/Lends the tongue vows. These blazes, daughter,/ Giving more light than heat, extinct in both,/Even in their promise, as it is a-making,/You must not take for fire" (1.3.115-20). Warning his daughter Ophelia of Hamlet's tricks, Polonius ironically foreshadows his own demise at the hands of Hamlet while spying. In fact, he foreshadows the demise of his entire family. There are three different instances where either Polonius's, Ophelia's, or Laertes's use of entrapment leads to their respective ruin. The first is when Polonius uses Ophelia as bait while he and the king watch to uncover what is ailing Hamlet. Ophelia is not the mastermind behind the plan, but she willingly participates. Of course Hamlet, distraught from seeing his father's ghost, is despondent and angrily condemns all women after his fruitless dealings with his mother. He is aggressive and, at times, outright violent with Ophelia. She, thinking that the plan was nothing more than a harmless observation of her lover, finds herself shattered by Hamlet's rebuke: "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched...O, woe is me/T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.158-64). As the story further unfolds, Ophelia crumbles into childlike insanity, still tortured by Hamlet's reckless misogyny. Where she was once the spring in the plan to ensnare Hamlet, she is now the woodcock, trapped by her own naïveté.

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The second instance occurs when Polonius decides to hide behind a curtain in Gertrude's bedchamber while she feuds with Hamlet over his recent behavior. He uses a woman as bait in his plan to uncover Hamlet's insanity and, once again, he is worse off for it. There are three main players here: two springes (Polonius, Gertrude) and a woodcock (Hamlet). However, as in the past, the outcome is all but predictable. Polonius makes a noise, causing Hamlet to blindly thrust his sword through the curtain behind which Polonius is hiding, in turn killing him. His response to Gertrude is less physical and more verbal, though there are suggestions of Hamlet assaulting his mother. Entering the scene, Hamlet has just succeeded in catching his uncle with the play and has just finished telling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is aware of their duplicitous intentions: "Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing/ you make of me! You would play upon me; you/ would seem to know my stops...Call me what instrument you will, though you can/ fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.371-81). In short, the audience is rooting for Hamlet to emerge from the ashes as a hero with a clear path to glorious vengeance. However, his condescending tone to the dying Polonius and misogynistic actions toward his mother lead the audience to a different conclusion at the end of this scene. Shakespeare's use of traps and good versus bad imagery create two categories of character: hero and villain. And though Hamlet often enters the entrapment scenes with the momentum of a hero, he leaves under the guise of the latter because of his actions toward others.

Alas, there comes the final trap: the king, Laertes, and the sickened body Politic versus Hamlet, who has recently returned to England. If the previous two plots were traps, this final one is a minefield: Claudius and Laertes create traps, backup plans, etc. all with the final goal in mind of killing Hamlet. First, "He, being remiss,/Most generous, and free from all contriving,/Will not peruse the foils, so that with ease,/Or with a little shuffling, you may choose/A sword unabated, and, in a pass of practice,/Requisite him for your father" (4.7.134-9). Second, "I'll anoint my sword...I'll touch my point/With this contagion, that, if I gall him slightly,/It may be death" (4.7.140-9). Third, "...And if he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him/A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,/If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck,/Our purpose may hold there" (4.7.159-62). Three plans for a final, climatic scene where someone, though not yet guaranteed, will die. In context, Hamlet has killed Laertes's father and has driven his sister insane. He has made fruitless attempts at the king's life and has casually killed others in the process (i.e. Polonius). For the first time, Hamlet is the outright villain going into a scene, his crimes far fresher in the minds of the audience than those of the king at this point in the play. So when Hamlet dies heroically, and Laertes not so, the roles are flipped one final time. Even Laertes acknowledges this cycle: "Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe,/Osric,/I am justly killed with mine own treachery" (5.2.307-8). This statement recalls Polonius' first statement, ironically bringing the story of his family to a tragic close. This statement, on a more general level, also interchanges the roles of springe and woodcock from the statement by Polonius early on in the play. Laertes raises the point that, in traps, it is not the role going in that matters, but rather the role you own after emerging from the plot. This idea is accentuated by the

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permanence of the final scene: all the roles are secured with no opportunity to change thereafter.

Traps are not only set in the public sphere, but also on a personal level. Thus far, the analysis has focused on two-person traps with a clear winner and loser. Yet, some of the most important traps in the play, those that are figurative, never come to clear conclusions. Hamlet is trapped by his tendency to over-think situations. He is retarded by his pursuits in academia, as he cannot cross over into the realm of barbarism long enough to fulfill the requests of his father in the most brutal way. In the same way Hamlet is trapped by his mind, Claudius is trapped by his conscience. He says, "Try what repentance can. What can it not?/ Yet what can it when one cannot repent?/ O, wretched state! O bosom black as death!/ O limed soul, that struggling to be free/ Art more engaged" (3.3.65-9). Claudius is held back in his dealings with Denmark because he is constantly aware of how his newfound positions was achieved. Ophelia is, in the later stages of her life, trapped by her naïveté about love. Her shattered views of mutual relationship, which manifest themselves in oddly childish behavior, prevent her from restoring mental order. She is unable to move on in such an obviously unkind world. These private traps do not have a hero and a villain in the traditional sense, but often a winner and a loser. Ophelia loses to her childishness, as she commits suicide. Claudius never defeats his conscience, and his deeds return to deliver justice. Hamlet is somewhat victorious over his mind as he puts aside reason in the final scene long enough to duel with Laertes and kill the king.

Traps are a fundamental part of Shakespeare's Hamlet. They concern most of the plot intrigue and introduce many important themes, namely good versus evil. In each trap, there is a springer or a woodcock, a spy and the one being spied on. Each character enters the trap fitting one of the molds and emerges either the victor, one who successfully trapped or one who successfully maneuvered the trap, or the loser. Shakespeare uses these trap to form audience opinion on the supposed heroes and villains of the play. However, as the play progresses, it is clear that the outcome is never consistent. After every ploy to entrap another character, the audience is left questioning a previous stereotype and potentially forming a new one. In the end, there is no clear hero or villain, mimicking Hamlet's questioning of his role in society. And, for better or for worse, when the brutal final scene concludes, these stereotypes are set. Thus, Hamlet is forever remembered as a hero whereas his intentions may have been villainous. Finally, there are those traps in the play which are figurative and not physical, like Claudius's conscience and Hamlet's mind. These traps are the respective characters' tragic flaws and prevent the characters from fully realizing their goals from the beginning of the play. Traps are a convenient way for Shakespeare to set up one of his most interesting plot dynamics, where the protagonist has slightly evil and brooding tendencies while the antagonist has some good qualities.

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