

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1994

Volume 21 Number 3

- 261 Mark Kremer Aristophanes' Criticism of Egalitarianism:
An Interpretation of *The Assembly of Women*
- 275 Steven Forde The Comic Poet, the City, and the Gods:
Dionysus' *Katabasis* in the *Frogs* of
Aristophanes
- 287 Tucker Landy Virtue, Art, and the Good Life in Plato's
Protagoras
- 309 Nalin Ranasinghe Deceit, Desire, and the Dialectic: Plato's
Republic Revisited
- 333 Olivia Delgado de Torres Reflections on Patriarchy and the
Rebellion of Daughters in Shakespeare's
Merchant of Venice and *Othello*
- 353 Alfred Mollin On Hamlet's Mousetrap
- 373 Joseph Alulis The Education of the Prince in
Shakespeare's *King Lear*
- 391 David Lowenthal *King Lear*
- 419 Glenn W. Olsen John Rawls and the Flight from Authority:
The Quest for Equality as an Exercise in
Primitivism
- Book Reviews*
- 437 Will Morrisey *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten
Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*, edited by
Thomas L. Pangle
- 441 John C. Koritansky *Interpreting Tocqueville's "Democracy in
America,"* edited by Ken Masugi

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin, Dept. of Philosophy, Queens College
Executive Editor Leonard Grey
General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth •
Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) •
Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin
• John Hallowell (d. 1992) • Harry V. Jaffa • David
Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.
• Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott
(d. 1990) • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) •
Kenneth W. Thompson
- European Editors Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann
• Michael Blaustein • Patrick Coby • Edward J. Erler •
Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Stephen
Harvey • Pamela K. Jensen • Ken Masugi • Grant B.
Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrisey • Aryeh L.
Motzkin • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin •
Bradford P. Wilson • Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert •
Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$25
libraries and all other institutions \$40
students (four-year limit) \$16
Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.
Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
(or the U.S. Postal Service).

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals based on it; double-space their manuscripts; place references in the text, in endnotes or follow current journal style in printing references. Words from languages not based on Latin should be transliterated to English. To ensure impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Please send THREE clear copies. Contributors using computers should, if possible, provide a character count of the entire manuscript.

Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542

On Hamlet's Mousetrap

ALFRED MOLLIN

Civil Division, United States Department of Justice

I. PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS

An intrigue recounted by the ghost of Hamlet's father begins the play's dramatic action. The ghost claims that his brother, scheming to steal both queen and crown, poured poison in his ears while he slept in his orchard. The ghost asks Hamlet to avenge his murder.

Intrigues abound as Hamlet moves toward his goal. The play's early plots seek to induce inadvertent revelations of hidden information. Hamlet's behavior at court following his encounter with the ghost arouses attention and concern, and he thus becomes the object of two such plots: Polonius and Claudius, trying to discover whether Hamlet's antic mood is rooted in an unrequited love, provoke a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia upon which they can eavesdrop; at the same time, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are commissioned by Claudius and Gertrude to visit with Hamlet, "draw him on to pleasures," and, when he is thus unguarded and behaving openly, determine "[w]hether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus." (II.ii.15, 17).¹ Hamlet easily deflects these schemes, showing how difficult it is to plot successfully against someone who is on his guard.

At the center of the play lies the scheme devised by Hamlet. Its purpose is to unmask the clever and guarded Claudius. Its principal element is a staged drama—a play-within-a-play—dubbed by Hamlet "The Mousetrap."

With the success of the Mousetrap, the pace of the play accelerates. Intrigues become deadly. Claudius plots with the unwitting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to take Hamlet to England where he will be slain, but Hamlet discovers the scheme and concocts a counterplot that results in his friends' death. After Hamlet's escape and return to England, Claudius and Laertes scheme to lure Hamlet into a sporting duel where he can be killed with a poisoned sword point. A poisoned goblet of wine, ready to Hamlet's hand, backs up the primary plot. It is this last series of intrigues that litters the floor of Elsinore Castle with the bodies of Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes, and places the crown of Denmark within Norway's grasp.

The Mousetrap is therefore the fixed point about which the dramatic action of *Hamlet* pivots. How does the Mousetrap occasion these consequences?

II. PROBLEMS OF ANALYSIS

Hamlet intends the Mousetrap to trick Claudius into betraying his guilt. The Mousetrap begins with a dumb-show—a kind of prologue—in which a would-be usurper pours poison into the ears of a king while he sleeps in his garden; the murderer then woos and wins the widow, who had been devoted to her king.

The spoken play that follows concerns a duke named Gonzago. It initially addresses the evils of remarriage by widows. The spoken play is performed up to the point where Gonzago's nephew pours poison into the Duke's ears. After Hamlet's brief elaboration on the nephew's motives, Claudius rises and cries out "Give me some Light. Away" (III.ii.259, 263). Polonius orders the play stopped. Confusion is everywhere. As the turmoil subsides, on an emptied stage an exultant Hamlet proclaims to Horatio that the Mousetrap has accomplished its purpose: "O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pounds" (III.ii.280–81).

Although we have the word of Hamlet and Horatio for its success, demonstrating just exactly how the Mousetrap works has proved to be "a famous critical problem" (*Hamlet*, Jenkins ed., p.501). The central difficulty arises from a murder's being depicted twice—first in the dumb-show and later in the spoken play. Why are there two depictions? And if the point of Hamlet's scheme is to startle Claudius into an emotional response by a scene that resembles his murder of old Hamlet, why does Claudius react only to the spoken play? Why does he not react to the dumb-show?

The solutions that have been offered to this problem fall more or less within three categories: (1) Claudius does not see the dumb-show and therefore is startled by the spoken play;² (2) Claudius sees the dumb-show but does not understand it and therefore is startled by the spoken play³ and (3) Claudius sees and understands both the dumb-show and the spoken play, and while his nerve holds up through the dumb-show, he ultimately cannot stand the pressure and breaks down during the spoken play.⁴

The proponents of these theories, while unsuccessful at establishing their own views, have made effective attacks on the theories of their rivals.⁵ It is widely agreed that none of these theories provides a compelling analysis.⁶ As we briefly discuss below, none presents a plausible explanation for Claudius' reaction to the spoken play without taking liberties unwarranted by the text.

"Second-Tooth" Theory

The theory that Claudius can withstand the shock of the dumb-show, but collapses under the pressures brought to bear by the spoken play, has been dubbed the "second-tooth" theory. This theory might be powerful if Claudius' pain were physical rather than emotional, and second-tooth proponents often

make metaphorical reference to physical torture (Robson, *The Dumb-Show*, p.12). Physical pain is cumulative. Each new onslaught is at least nearly as difficult for the sufferer to endure as was the first. This is why physical torture works. We know the pain will always be bad, and the strength we expend in enduring the pain must ultimately be sapped. But emotional pain is different: We become accustomed to its causes, and repetition blunts its force. Successful torture, for example, could not be premised upon the prospect of being repeatedly frightened.

This problem is heightened for the second-tooth proponents because the spoken play presents a less faithful depiction of Claudius' crime than the dumb-show. Although the unusual method of murder—poison in the ears—is retained, the spoken play concerns: (a) the murder of a duke, not a king, (b) by his nephew, not his brother, (c) for his estate, not his crown, (d) and the murder is not apparently committed in a garden. No one doubts that it would be difficult for Claudius to weather the shock of the dumb-show's revelations without giving some visible sign of his inward turmoil. But the second depiction of the murder—the one in the spoken play—is anticipated; its parallels to Claudius' deed are extenuated. Because it is not startling, Claudius will find it easier to maintain an outward show of composure during the critical moments of the performance.

The force of this analysis is illustrated in Act V. As Gertrude grasps the poisoned cup, Claudius blurts out "Gertrude, do not drink" (V.ii.294). This scene is typically played as if Claudius were struggling for control, and only barely able to keep the courtiers in attendance from sensing his alarm. However, when, several moments later, Gertrude falls dying to the floor before him, Claudius, prepared for what must happen, coolly explains that "She swoons to see them bleed" (V.ii.314). In the same way, if an emotional reaction is to become visible during the Mousetrap against Claudius' will, the reaction should be provoked by the first depiction of the murder of old Hamlet, not a second.

Some proponents of the second-tooth theory have attempted to finesse this difficulty by making the cause of Claudius' being startled during the spoken play something other than, or in addition to, the depiction of his crime. But generally, these variations hypothesize attitudes in Claudius that are implausible or not warranted by the text. For example, under W.W. Robson's rendition of the second-tooth theory, the spoken play gradually reveals to Claudius that Hamlet *knows* that he murdered old Hamlet, and it is this revelation that occasions Claudius' failure of nerve. The premise of Robson's reasoning is that Claudius did not immediately recognize Hamlet as the author of the dumb-show's message:

Hamlet's meeting with the Players immediately before the play was unknown to the King, who in any case, as we know, had other things on his mind. There was therefore no reason why the King, on seeing the dumb-show, should at once be certain that Hamlet knew his secret. (*The Dumb-Show*, p.12)

But Claudius knows, through Rosencrantz, that the performance was at Hamlet's command, and he knows, through Polonius, that Hamlet "beseech'd me to entreat your Majesties/To hear and see *the matter*" (III.i.22–23). Hamlet's prominent role in the production of the performance has not been concealed. Indeed, his role has arguably been flaunted.⁷ And whatever may have been on Claudius' mind before the dumb-show began must pale to comparative insignificance when the dumb-show's implications are understood. It is more plausible to conclude that "[t]he moment the dumb-show is over, [Claudius] realizes that Hamlet knows the whole truth" (Lawrence, *The Play Scene in Hamlet*, p.9).

Claudius Does Not See the Dumb-Show

The principal alternative theory, forcefully elaborated by Dover Wilson, argues that Claudius cannot be startled into an inadvertent reaction by the spoken play if he has seen the dumb-show.⁸ Dover Wilson recognizes as well that the second-tooth theory gives no persuasive account of why Hamlet has included two depictions of a murder in his plot. Dover Wilson concludes, therefore, that the dumb-show is not part of Hamlet's plan, but is rather a scene introduced by the players without Hamlet's knowledge.

As the players begin the dumb-show's performance, Dover Wilson views Hamlet as fearful that the unexpected dumb-show will undermine the surprise necessary to the success of the Mousetrap. Therefore, he has Hamlet distract Claudius' attention with antic behavior, which then becomes the subject of a discussion that preoccupies Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius during the dumb-show's performance. In this way, Claudius can still be startled against his will into an emotional expression by the depiction of murder in the spoken play. To the natural question about why a scene lacking any dramatic purpose was included in the play, Dover Wilson speculates that Shakespeare intended the dumb-show as an aid to the audience, so that they might be better able to follow the action in the spoken play that follows.

The price of this rationalization is great. A modern audience, likely to be familiar with the plot of the play, has no need of such on-stage prompts. But if the dumb-show has no dramatic importance and does not otherwise add to the play's inherent intelligibility, it ought to be omitted. Only a thoughtless, pious adherence to the forms of the past would lead a director to include the scene. Indeed, Dover Wilson's theory, which is functionally equivalent to the kind of textual emendations that are usually adopted when Hamlet is staged today, may be viewed as having prevailed in the theater, if not in the textbooks.

But even if Shakespeare felt a need to elucidate the Mousetrap for the "groundlings" (III.ii.11), it seems implausible that he would accomplish this end with a scene so foreign to the dramatic action of the play that the principal

characters' attention must be distracted. Moreover, having Polonius, Gertrude, and Claudius carry on a conversation during the presentation of the dumb-show, absent the use of extraordinary staging techniques, would risk distracting the audience from following the dumb-show, thus defeating the hypothesized purpose for its inclusion.⁹

However, in any event, Dover Wilson's proposed solution does not resolve the problem he has posed. Just before the crucial scene in the spoken play, where the player-king is poisoned by Lucianus, Hamlet places Claudius on his guard by three separate statements: (1) He alerts Claudius to the fact that *poisoning* is about to occur; (2) he tells Claudius that his title for the play is "the Mouse-trap," thereby alerting Claudius to the possibility that the play is a *trap*; and (3) he announces that what will occur is "knavish," but that, as long as Claudius has a "free soul," it will not touch him (III.ii.229–36). Claudius, whose soul is emphatically not free, is thus warned by Hamlet about a trap involving knavish poisoning that will concern him in a disturbing way. This message is less blatant than that of the dumb-show. However, there has been only one knavish deed involving poisoning in Claudius' life about which he has reason to be concerned. These warnings are therefore as likely as the dumb-show to place Claudius on high alert. Surely inventing yet another stage direction, which in some way further distracts Claudius' attention from these warnings, would go too far.¹⁰

Claudius Sees But Does Not Understand the Dumb-Show

Finally, in a variation on Dover Wilson's theory, some have argued that, although Claudius viewed the dumb-show, he did not recognize what he saw. The proponents of this theory take their textual cue from Hamlet's disparaging reference to "inexplicable dumb-shows" (III.ii.12), and they speculate that the dumb-show may have been performed in a manner so stylized as to be unintelligible to its viewers.¹¹ But this seems inconsistent with the special pains Hamlet has taken with the actors to ensure that their performances were realistic.¹² Moreover, as Jenkins points out, "if *no one* is the wiser for the dumb-show, it will defeat its purpose . . ." (p.504). And the text suggests no dramatic explanation for Claudius' viewing the dumb-show, and missing its significance, while the dumb-show remains intelligible to *Hamlet's* audience.

An Additional Analytical Problem

It is not necessary to examine each of these three theories and their variations in detail, identifying and comparing the sum total of their defects, in order to determine which is most likely to be true. All three theories must be squarely

rejected. Each is open, to the same degree, to a conclusive objection. Focusing, as they have, on rendering Claudius' emotional reaction to the spoken play both psychologically plausible and consistent with the text, these theorists have lost sight of Hamlet's purpose in staging the Mousetrap: evoking from Claudius a sign of his guilt.

For example, imagine that Hamlet had directed the dumb-show so that a player at the periphery of the stage clashes a large, previously concealed, cymbal at the very moment that poison is poured into the player-king's ears. If Claudius should blench at this moment, could any fair observer conclude that this emotional response bespeaks Claudius' guilt of old Hamlet's murder? The answer, of course, is no. It is not possible to determine whether Claudius is responding to the clanging cymbal or to the depiction of the murder of old Hamlet. Either hypothesis is plausible. To serve Hamlet's purpose and conclusively establish Claudius' guilt, the Mousetrap must provoke from Claudius a response that can *only* be explained by the hypothesis that Claudius murdered Hamlet's father.

The central problem thus emerges: Suppose that—*sans* cymbal—Claudius were to blench in response to the player-king's being poisoned through the ears in the dumb-show. Would this have trapped "the conscience of the King" (II.ii.601)? Again, the answer must be no. A depiction of regicide in Claudius' presence is the functional equivalent of a large, clanging cymbal: It would plausibly account for Claudius' reaction. Even if the remainder of the stage audience views the dumb-show as no worse than tasteless, a king could be excused of a more agitated reaction. The safety of his person is indirectly implicated by the dumb-show. Justifiable outrage could account for any visible reaction by Claudius, let alone a mere "blench," in response to the dumb-show.

Later, when Claudius does react with strong emotions to the spoken play—"How fares my lord?" asks Gertrude, as he rises (III.ii.261)—his courtiers understand his behavior in just these terms. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern imply that the Mousetrap threatened Claudius' life, and thereby the well-being of the whole state. They agree that Claudius' concern about Hamlet's behavior is well founded (III.iii.7–23). Likewise, when speaking to Gertrude, Polonius attributes Claudius' anger to Hamlet's improper behavior,

Look you lay home to him,
Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with
And that your Grace has screen'd and stood between
Much heat and him. (III.iv.1–4)

And, most convincingly, Gertrude, upon Hamlet's rude behavior in her closet after the play, immediately expresses concern for her safety: "What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?/Help, ho!" (III.iv.20–21). But if everyone in the stage audience views the depiction of regicide as a clanging cymbal, how can

Hamlet conclude otherwise with any certainty? Hamlet, unlike the courtiers, may know that it is *possible* that some other reason has caused Claudius' strong emotional response to the spoken play's depiction of the murder of a king, but it does not follow logically that this alternative explanation is more likely to be true than the other. Thus, if the Mousetrap is, as Hamlet claims, successful, its mainspring cannot be anything so simple as merely provoking, by a dramatic scene depicting the murder of a king, an emotional response from the king in attendance.

The theories thus far propounded about the Mousetrap have not recognized this problem. W.W. Lawrence, for example, believed his arguments established no more than that

[Claudius] has betrayed himself to Hamlet and Horatio by "blenching" at the crime as enacted on the stage. The revelations of the ghost are confirmed.¹³

This is insufficient. Without more, Hamlet cannot know that the Mousetrap has caught its intended victim. It might be supposed, by Dover Wilson's disciples, that just as Claudius was ignorant of the performance of the dumb-show, so also was Hamlet ignorant of this flaw in his plan. Or second-tooth theorists may propose that Hamlet, like Claudius, had too many other things on his mind to work through the logical consequences of Claudius' reaction to the Mousetrap. But this is too much ignorance. There are too many people that must be regarded as fools. A fresh approach is called for. This approach can begin with an analysis of the reactions of Claudius and the stage audience to the unfolding play within a play that is not from the outset guided—and hence distorted—by the premise that Claudius' emotional response is a key event in the springing of the Mousetrap.

III. HOW THE MOUSETRAP WORKS

1. Reactions to the Dumb-Show

How are the viewers of the dumb-show likely to respond? Claudius, without question, will be sorely agitated. The dumb-show pantomimes his murder of his brother in detail he thought known only to himself. Most men—lesser men—might betray their agitation. But Claudius is not most men. He is a "villain" who can "smile, and smile" (I.v.108). His daring is on record. He has stolen his brother's queen and crown. He watches Gertrude dying at his feet without betraying his remorse. When Laertes, at the head of a revolutionary army, stands prepared to slay him on the spot, Claudius calmly turns Laertes' rage to serve his own purposes. And Shakespeare makes a special point of displaying Claudius' ability to control his responses when he is confronted unexpectedly with reminders of his murder of old Hamlet.¹⁴ It is no surprise that

an alert, resourceful, and courageous man—who in any event is predisposed to be suspicious of matters in which his unpredictable nephew has a hand—can keep his outward composure in the face of a depiction of his murder of old Hamlet.¹⁵

Claudius can think clearly enough to reject, almost as quickly as it is entertained, the possibility of chance coincidence.¹⁶ The highly unusual manner of murder,¹⁷ the quality of the victim, the wooing of the wife: All speak so directly to his crime that coincidence could be no more than a fanciful hope, and Claudius is not a fanciful man. But if the dumb-show's depiction of his crime is purposive, it carries with itself an implicit but unambiguous message: "I know what you have done." Claudius, outwardly composed, is instantly alert as his thoughts move to the only possible author of that message—Hamlet, whose now-intelligible emphasis upon "the matter" of the play-within-a-play marks him as Claudius' mortal enemy (III.i.23).

The courtiers do not share Claudius' perspective; they do not see the dumb-show as mirroring their own actions. But the dumb-show depicts regicide, and it presents this heinous crime in the presence of the reigning King. Ophelia's remark at the conclusion of the dumb-show—"What means this, my lord?" (III.ii.134)—seeks not an explanation of what has just been portrayed, but, rather, an explanation of Hamlet's intent in portraying it.¹⁸ The question is a mark of sober concern. And her next remark, persisting through Hamlet's evasion—"Belike this show imports the argument of the play?" (III.ii.136)—surely echoes concerns shared by all the courtiers in the room. Is this unseemly pantomime to be the subject of the play to follow?¹⁹ Even if Claudius does not overhear this discussion between Hamlet and Ophelia, the same question must soon occur to him, for he is alert to discover what his enemy is about. Does the dumb-show portend the argument of the spoken play? Is the dumb-show merely Hamlet's first salvo? If so, Claudius has reason for concern. The dumb-show portrayed regicide. The regicide did not implicate the legitimacy of Claudius' throne, because the relationship of the murderer to the slain player-king is left unspecified. But the spoken play cannot fail to reveal the murderer's identity, and if it elaborates the events depicted in the dumb-show as Claudius understands them, it will portray the murderer of the player-king as his brother. No one will mistake the reference. This fact alone will convert the dumb-show's message from an insult into an indictment.

Claudius has much to fear from such an indictment. The passions that Hamlet has begun to inflame in the courtiers about the death of kings may be turned against Claudius. His crown will be under challenge—and by one whom many will view as possessing a rightful claim to occupy that throne. A challenge to his crown does not, in itself, mean that Claudius will lose it. But the apparent ease with which Laertes will shortly raise a revolutionary army suggests that things are far from settled for Claudius. And, most worrisome to him must be

the accurate detail of the dumb-show, suggesting that Hamlet is not merely guessing, but that he has some proof—some witness, perhaps, whose secret presence had escaped Claudius' notice.

2. *Reactions to the Spoken Play*

As the spoken play unfolds, the concerns of no one in the stage audience abate. A discourse on the evils of second marriages by widows—in the presence of a widow who remarried in remarkable haste—must seem to the courtiers an escalation of the bad taste inaugurated by the dumb-show.

For Claudius, however, the spoken play confirms his fears. The player-queen of the dumb-show is being more particularly characterized in ways that make her similar to Gertrude. And Hamlet emphasizes the personal relation between the player-queen and Gertrude by his interruption and pointed question to Gertrude: “Madam, how like you this play?” (III.ii.224).

Hamlet's intentions must now seem clear to Claudius. When the murderer is identified as the brother of the slain king, Claudius' throne will be under direct attack. But no way to avoid the confrontation comes to sight. Ordering the spoken play halted will merely force Hamlet to play his proof card, whatever it may be, immediately. Claudius has no choice but to wait and discover how severe Hamlet's accusation will be. He must begin to think of his defense.

Claudius' absorption with the prospect of such a confrontation makes understandable his unchivalrous query of Hamlet, during the Mousetrap's second interlude: “Have you heard the argument? is there no Offence/in't?” (III.ii.227–28).²⁰ Claudius' motives in asking this uneasy question are not fully clear. Perhaps the courtiers are his true audience, and this query is the beginning of the defense—the counterattack—he feels will soon need to be made.

But Hamlet's answer to this question, with its unsolicited mention of poison, and Hamlet's response to Claudius' next query are not puzzling at all: Hamlet replies to Claudius' question that the title of the play is:

The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna. Gonzago is the duke's name; his wife, Baptista. You shall see anon.
'Tis a knavish piece of work: but what of that? Your majesty and we that have free souls, it touches us not. The galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung.
(III.ii.233–38)

Hamlet's answer is a declaration that the portrayal of knavish deeds to follow will touch him to the quick. When, with a melodramatic, croaking call for revenge, Hamlet orders the spoken play to resume, we must imagine Claudius hanging on every word that is uttered. He is about to be accused, the battle for his throne about to begin in earnest.

3. The Denouement

Lucianus murders Gonzago, after speaking the lines that may have been written by Hamlet for the occasion:²¹

Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing;
 Confederate season, else no creature seeing,
 Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
 With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
 Thy natural magic and dire property
 On wholesome life usurps immediately.

[Pours the poison in the sleeper's ears.] (III.ii.249–54)

What are Claudius' thoughts as he hears this "talk of the poisoning" and sees the murder enacted (III.ii.283)? Moments before Lucianus began speaking, Hamlet identified him as Gonzago's nephew; and, immediately before speaking, Lucianus was identified as the "murderer" (III.ii.247). This must be, for Claudius, initially confusing. The nephew to old Hamlet? Who is this? And the nephew is the murderer? The murderer of whom? Where does this fit within the dumb-show's argument? Claudius watches intently. As the poison is poured into Gonzago's ears, Claudius receives a wholly unexpected revelation. The *nephew*, not the *brother*, is the murderer of the king. Hamlet has not carried out what Claudius had taken to be the threat of the dumb-show. Claudius is not publicly accused of his brother's murder. There is no public indictment.

After having steeled himself for the desperate battle that Hamlet's public indictment would occasion, Claudius' relief must be almost palpable. A lesser man might give in to an impulse to relax, to slouch, or to display by some other physical mannerism the release of this almost unbearable tension. But Shakespeare gives no such stage direction. So we continue to imagine Claudius, despite his internal turmoil, successfully maintaining his composure, remaining outwardly calm.

But the game is over. The Mousetrap has accomplished its purpose. Claudius has silently unmasked himself. Although Claudius does not immediately recognize what has occurred, he will in a moment. To understand how his guilt has become apparent to Hamlet, it is necessary to focus upon the stage audience.

For different reasons, Hamlet's casting of the nephew as the murderer of the player-king is also shocking to the stage audience. The tasteless dumb-show had first portrayed the murder of a king in the presence of a king; the spoken play continued the unseemly exercise by impliedly insulting Gertrude, and now, the personalizing has been completed. To the courtiers, Hamlet's making the nephew the murderer implies that he, Claudius' nephew, intends the murder of his uncle, the King.²² Hamlet makes, in effect, a public threat to the person and throne of Claudius. In the eyes of the courtiers, Hamlet's audacious behavior,

once merely impudent, now hovers at the brink of treason. This is why the courtiers conclude after the play that Hamlet has threatened Claudius' life. To everyone in the room, Hamlet's identification of the murderer as the nephew is received with all the force of a hard slap in the face—to everyone in the room, that is, save one . . . Claudius, to whom the unexpected identity of the murderer comes first to sight as a blessed relief.

How can Hamlet reason from Claudius' behavior to the certain conclusion that he has murdered his father? No king will endure such threats and insults as have been delivered by Hamlet. But Claudius does not timely react to the talk of the poisoning with indignation, therefore he did not immediately recognize its message. Who could look at the spoken play with full and complete attention, and yet be even temporarily blind to its true import? Only the person who had murdered old Hamlet in the manner recounted by the ghost; only such a man has reason to be distracted; only such a man will remain composed. This revealing composure does not long endure, certainly not long enough to become an object of attention for those, like the courtiers, whose eyes are not "rivet[ed] to his face" (III.ii.85). But Hamlet is attentive. He is prepared to listen to Claudius' silences as well as his speeches.²³ And thus can he exultantly conclude, with certainty, that the ghost has been vindicated. Accordingly, the Mousetrap does not work *despite* Claudius' being on his guard and suspicious of Hamlet. Indeed, to the contrary, Hamlet must use every opportunity to fan the flames of Claudius' suspicion. Claudius *must* see the dumb-show. Claudius *must* be alarmed by its depiction of his guilt. Hamlet *must* overtly threaten Claudius with the prospect of the spoken play's dealing with his poisoning of old Hamlet. Hamlet so distracts Claudius with the prospect of being frontally assaulted with his crimes, that Claudius fails to recognize timely the blow delivered to his flank, a blow that could never have escaped the notice of an honest man.

4. The Aftermath

After the murder of the player-king, his trap sprung and his purpose achieved, Hamlet interrupts the play's performance to provide the stage audience with several items of information about the spoken play. His statements tend to extenuate the treasonous overtones of the murder of the player-king in the spoken play: The murder is not committed for the crown, but the "estate" of Gonzago; it is not a piece written by Hamlet, but an "extant" story, "written in very choice Italian"; and Hamlet reminds the audience that the murderer comes to get "the love of Gonzago's wife" (III.ii.255–58).²⁴

Although the courtiers, perhaps with the beginnings of relief, see Hamlet backing off from the brink of treason, the spoken play does not continue. Stage directions now abound. "The King rises," says Ophelia (III.ii.259). As he

does, Gertrude asks: "How fares my lord?" (III.ii.260). Polonius stops the play. Claudius calls for light and leaves. Turmoil is everywhere as the stage empties, leaving only the exultant Hamlet with Horatio, who confirms Hamlet's judgment that the Mousetrap has caught its intended prey.

Gertrude's query in the midst of this confusion, asking how Claudius "fares," is a telling remark, suggesting that Claudius looks ill.²⁵ A betrayal by Claudius of the infirmity he feels would be understandable, for he has come to realize what Hamlet has done, and why: Hamlet did not *know*, after all, about the murder; he suspected, but he did not know; he needed proof, and now he has it, from Claudius himself. The proof, it is true, is not of a sort that may be propounded in a court of law; however, Hamlet and Claudius both know it is beyond cavil. Thus, the pretense of equanimity that Claudius had, with effort, been maintaining no longer has purpose. Unchecked by prudence, Claudius' sickened reaction surges to the surface, alarming Gertrude. Thus, Claudius' strong emotional response is not, as has been assumed, the means by which he is trapped; it is rather a sign of his recognition of what Hamlet's scheme has already accomplished.

If this is the state of mind and body that Gertrude observes, it does not long endure. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern almost immediately advise Hamlet of Claudius' "choler" (III.ii.295). Claudius' anger—incorrectly understood by his courtiers to be a consequence of Hamlet's apparent brush with treason—must soon arise when Claudius comes to see the two messages Hamlet intended the Mousetrap to deliver: The dumb-show, which looks to the past, said, "You killed my father"; the spoken play, which announces the future, says: "I will kill you for it." The delivery of these messages—along with Claudius' knowledge that he has let himself be trapped into revealing his guilt—makes fully intelligible the "marvellous distemper" of the king (III.ii.293).

But the quality of Hamlet's craft must leave Claudius with an indelible impression of the true measure of the adversary he now faces. At the least, the clever Claudius has met his match. We are not surprised by the immediacy with which he begins to plot Hamlet's death; nor are we surprised at Claudius' subsequent use of a backup scheme to the fencing match with Laertes. And when Laertes, after failing in the first two matches to strike Hamlet with the poisoned sword point, says to Claudius, "My Lord, I'll hit him now," we are not surprised as Claudius, resigned and empty of hope, concedes Hamlet's mastery: "I do not think't" (V.ii.299).

5. *The Tragic Core*

The certitude obtained through the Mousetrap makes possible *Hamlet's* tragic inflection. Paul Cantor persuasively argues that Hamlet's Christianity goes far to explain why, despite his admiration of classical, pagan virtue, he

hesitates to exact his revenge.²⁶ Indeed, the demand for vengeance by Hamlet's father, whom Hamlet views as the embodiment of classical virtue, is conditioned with Christian precepts: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught" (I.v.85–86). Old Hamlet would have his son be a Christian hero—that is, a hero with a conscience.

Ignorance is the aspect of man's finitude that figures prominently in Hamlet's explanation of his hesitation (II.ii.594–600). And Laertes' actions later vividly demonstrate why ignorance makes the seeking of revenge so problematic: He nearly slays the wrong man in seeking to avenge Polonius' death. If Hamlet could not circumvent the inhibition that derives from man's finite nature, action would never be possible.

But Hamlet, by means of the Mousetrap, can peer into the center of Claudius' heart. He is certain of his guilt. Passing judgment is normally the province of the "Everlasting" (I.ii.131), but, armed with certainty, Hamlet may undertake the divine task. Pagan demands and Christian inhibitions are no longer at odds. "Now could I drink hot blood," Hamlet exclaims (III.ii.381).

Hamlet's pace, after the Mousetrap, is almost frantic in comparison to the early portion of the play. In the space of some four hectic days, Hamlet slays Polonius, Laertes, and Claudius; he causes the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; after months of inaction, as Hamlet acknowledges to Horatio, he behaves "Rashly" (V.ii.6); he leaps aboard a pirate ship, jumps battling into Ophelia's grave, and fights a desperate duel. Thoughts of suicide disappear from his soliloquies. After the Mousetrap, Hamlet acts.

Ultimately, Hamlet fails. His quest for revenge occasions Gertrude's death. Certitude about Claudius notwithstanding, Hamlet has been unable to remain within the constraints established by the ghost. If Hamlet does come to recognize that pagan and Christian demands are, after all, mutually exclusive, it would explain why, with his last breath, Hamlet does what he can to give Denmark's crown to Norway. He seeks to reverse the consequences of old Hamlet's noble combat with Fortinbras' father. By renouncing the fruits of that combat, he impliedly renounces the tree—pagan virtue, whose claims occasioned his tragic fall.

IV. TEXTUAL OBJECTIONS

Some may question whether this analysis of the Mousetrap is consistent with Hamlet's own comments concerning his scheme. Shakespeare shows Hamlet as he first conceives of the idea for the Mousetrap. A troupe of actors has just arrived at the castle. During the course of a moody soliloquy in which he berates himself for delay, Hamlet, recalling that scenes from plays are reputed to have prompted murderers to confess openly their guilt, hits upon the idea of the Mousetrap:

I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,
 I'll tent him to the quick. *If a do blench,*
I know my course. (II.ii.590–94. Emphasis added.)

These lines are commonly taken to mean that Hamlet believes Claudius' guilt will be revealed if he is provoked to some emotional response, some "blench" by the play within a play.²⁷

Even if Hamlet is here thinking of no more than provoking Claudius to a visible, emotional reaction, the soliloquy portrays Hamlet at the moment that this idea first occurs. Most accounts of Hamlet's Mousetrap assume, explicitly or implicitly, some degree of evolution in Hamlet's planning and thinking.²⁸ And it would be the mark of a rare man indeed whose ideas were not refined as his plan of execution was worked out in detail. Moreover, there would be good reason for such a plan to be revised: As we have demonstrated, it cannot work. And it is improbable that Hamlet and Horatio could witness the reaction of the courtiers—who attribute Claudius' anger to Hamlet's thinly veiled threat to Claudius' person and throne—and remain certain that Claudius had been trapped, if the Mousetrap in its final form had involved no more than Claudius' "blench." Finally, the balance of Hamlet's comments concerning the Mousetrap are consistent with the plan that has been outlined above.²⁹

Moreover, the meaning of the lines "If a do blench, I know my course" is far from certain. The lines do not say that if Claudius blenches, his guilt is revealed; they say that if Claudius blenches, Hamlet "knows [his] course." If, as is commonly assumed, Hamlet is here understanding a blench by Claudius as proof of guilt, then his "course" would be to exact his revenge; but, on this reading, the lines immediately following seem to be an abrupt interruption of Hamlet's train of thought:

If a do blench,
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 may be a devil, and the devil hath power
 T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me. (II.ii.593–99)

An alternate reading avoids this abrupt interruption; if Claudius' blenching at the critical moment signals the *failure* of the plan to establish Claudius' guilt, then Hamlet's "course" is not action but further inquiry. Hamlet's reflection upon the credibility of the ghost and his own infirmity—and upon the possibility that the ghost is involved in some demonic intrigue, with Hamlet's soul in the balance—is a natural and logical continuation of this train of thought.

Finally, under this latter reading of these lines, another problem of interpretation concerning Hamlet's Mousetrap may be resolved. It has been observed that Hamlet asks the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, with the addition of his penned lines, *before* the soliloquy in which we see him conceiving for the first time the notion of having "these players play something like the murder of my father" (II.ii.590–91). This creates something of a temporal anomaly under standard interpretations of the Mousetrap. As Jenkins notes:

The plan that Hamlet seems only now to be arriving at he has of course already set in motion and in a more precise form (a named play with a proposed additional speech) than at this point he envisages.³⁰

But if the plan which Hamlet conceives during this soliloquy includes using the two different depictions of the slaying of a king in the manner outlined above, the apparent anomaly disappears.

The Murder of Gonzago, with the addition of the lines penned by Hamlet, may be assumed to contain a depiction of the killing of a duke by his nephew. On the other hand, the soliloquy represents Hamlet as not yet having conceived the plot to unmask Claudius when asking the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago*. But, of course, there is no anomaly if Hamlet's initial motive is *not* the unmasking of Claudius. And such an independent motive is not difficult to identify. Before the success of the Mousetrap, Hamlet cannot, or will not, act. But he can speak. *The Murder of Gonzago*—with the addition of the lines penned by Hamlet—will depict a nephew slaying a king, the deed to which Hamlet is called by the demands of pagan virtue. Speech, then, is a substitute, albeit weak, for performing the deed itself. No doubt Hamlet, who has shown no reluctance to insult Claudius, recognizes immediately that Claudius will react angrily to such a scene's being played in his presence. But it is only later, during the course of his soliloquy, that it occurs to Hamlet that the indignant reaction Claudius ought to have to the spoken play might be derailed and his guilt established, if Hamlet precedes the event by having the players "Play something like the murder of my father" (II.ii.591). This turns out to be the dumb-show, which parallels more closely the murder of his father than does the spoken play. Accordingly, Hamlet's two, different references to the players' putting on the play-within-a-play concern two distinct aspects of the Mousetrap, as that plan evolves in Hamlet's thinking.

V. PRACTICAL OBJECTIONS

It may be also argued that it will be difficult for this reading to be successfully staged, that it will be nearly impossible for an audience to grasp that Claudius' misplaced silence is the most revealing moment of the Mousetrap. A

modern audience—perhaps accustomed to the view that tolerance, even of a varlet’s insults, is a virtue—may not understand as readily as would an Elizabethan audience that kings do not sit without indignation through a dramatic depiction of their own murder. As Dover Wilson points out:

An Elizabethan audience would have *demand*ed such a reaction, conscious as they were of the sensitiveness of royalty on such matters, more especially with the Essex rising of February 1601 fresh in their minds; a rising which had been preceded the day before by a performance of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* in order to incite the people of London to rebellion and to show them that princes had been deposed and might be again. (*WHH*, p.170. Emphasis added.)

Moreover, the distracting turmoil that must follow Claudius’ pregnant silence—as the play within a play is halted in midperformance, and Claudius and his court exit—compounds staging difficulties. There are two responses to be made to this point.

First, directors may choose to make more apparent the emotions that Claudius is undergoing at the moment of the “talk of the poisoning.” For example, although it arguably detracts from his deserved stature, Claudius might be made to look profoundly confused—or perhaps even relieved—when it becomes clear that the nephew is the murderer of the player-king. A display of relief during the talk of the poisoning would betray Claudius to Hamlet just as surely as does his silence.

Similarly, Hamlet’s reading of the line “nephew to the King” could be made the dramatic center of the scene. A threatening tone and a self-referential gesture would inform the theater audience that the spoken play is more than a mere re-enactment of the dumb-show. The courtiers could visibly register their rising indignation at Hamlet’s insult. It is easy to imagine ways in which modern lighting and dramatic staging techniques could lend emphasis to these distinctions, and staging decisions that are based upon sound textual analysis need no defense. Ultimately, however, the practical objection may be well taken; the working of the Mousetrap is complex and subtle, and the point of denouement, even with dramatic prompts, will escape the notice of many.

However, Shakespeare’s dramatic artistry goes far toward eliminating the serious consequences of a failure to grasp the import of Claudius’ silence. Although all elements of the Mousetrap are shown to the theater audience, Hamlet makes known beforehand that he and Horatio will, upon the Mousetrap’s conclusion, come together to join judgment “in censure of [Claudius’] seeming” (III.ii.86); and the pair fulfill this promise, subsequently assuring us that the trap has worked. Any lingering doubts about Claudius’ guilt would be dispelled by the reference in his ensuing soliloquy to his “brother’s murder” (III.iii.38). Thus, should those who “are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise” (III.ii.11–12) fail to understand *why* the Mousetrap works, they will still understand *that* the Mousetrap works, and accordingly be able to follow the general flow of the dramatic action.

It is, then, perhaps preferable, and certainly most faithful to the text, to stage the play-within-a-play with Claudius outwardly calm and unmoved throughout both the dumb-show and the spoken play, reacting only after his unmasking. His silence can thus continue to speak to *Hamlet's* "judicious" observers for "the censure of which one must . . . o'erweigh a whole theatre of others" (III.ii.26–28)—those who, Polonius reminds us, as a matter of course, "By indirections find directions out" (II.i.66).

NOTES

1. Hamlet's antic behavior is itself a scheme of this nature: "I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft." *Hamlet* (III.iv.189–90), Harold Jenkins, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), hereinafter "*Hamlet*, Jenkins, ed." All quotations of *Hamlet* are from the Arden edition.

2. See, e.g., J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (London: Cambridge, 1967), hereinafter *WHH*.

3. See, e.g., S.L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1944).

4. The initial, and still most elegant, presentation of the second-tooth theory is set forth in W.W. Lawrence, "The Play Scene in *Hamlet*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 18(1919):1 For a more modern variation, see M.R. Woodhead, "Deep Plots and Indiscretions in 'The Murder of Gonzago,'" *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (1979): 151.

5. See e.g., W.W. Lawrence, "Hamlet and the Mousetrap," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 54(1939): 709, criticizing the theory that Claudius did not see the dumb-show.

6. See *Hamlet*, Jenkins, ed., pp. 501–5, and W.W. Robson, *Did the King See the Dumb-Show?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), hereinafter *The Dumb-Show*.

7. Ophelia's questions to Hamlet during the first interlude of the Mousetrap's performance imply that Hamlet has a superior knowledge of the play's contents (III.ii.134 ff.). And Claudius asks of Hamlet, during the second interlude, "What do you call the play?" (III.ii.231).

8. This theory has its root in a suggestion in J.O. Halliwell-Phillips' 1865 edition of *Hamlet*: "Is it allowable to direct that the King and Queen should be whispering confidentially to each other during the dumb-show, and so escape a sight of it?" Quoted in *The New Variorum edition* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1877).

9. Dover Wilson would solve this problem by having the King and Queen stop acting at this point, i.e., "remain still and without by-play while the dumb-show is proceeding; since the whole attention of the audience must be concentrated upon that" (*WHH*, p. 184 n.1). Another adherent of this theory would solve the problem by having the dumb-show performed on a part of the stage not visible to Claudius and Gertrude. R. Flatter, *Hamlet's Father* (London: Heineman, 1949), pp. 50–55. In the same spirit, one might have the dumb-show performed in another theater.

10. This, however, is very nearly what Dover Wilson does in his explanation of this crucial scene: "'Poison!' the word grates harshly on the ear of Claudius, as it was meant to do. Hamlet . . . is flashing the vial in his face, but so swiftly that he cannot see what it is. The flash is disconcerting, but Claudius has no suspicion of the truth" (*WHH*, p. 191).

11. See, e.g., A. Walker, "'Milching Malicho' and the Play Scene in *Hamlet*," *The Modern Language Review* 31(1936) 513. See also *Hamlet*, Jenkins, ed., p. 502 (summarizing variations on the theory).

12. See, e.g., III.ii.17–19:

Suit the action to the word,
the word to the action, with this special observance,
that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature.

13. W.W. Lawrence, "Hamlet And the Mousetrap," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 54(1931): 734. See also Woodhead, "Deep Plots and Indiscretion in 'The Murder of

Gonzago,” p. 153: “[Claudius] sits through the [dumb-show] unmoved but at the climax of the play more than blanches, his ‘occulted guilt’ having been clearly demonstrated to Hamlet.”

14. See, e.g., III.i.49–54:

O ’tis too true,
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience

O heavy burden!

15. It is probable that Hamlet did not intend or expect the dumb-show to startle Claudius into some misplaced expression: After the Mousetrap has been sprung, and Hamlet is seeking confirmation that the prey has been trapped, he asks Horatio whether he had observed Claudius’ reaction “upon the *talk* of the poisoning” (III.ii.283). For Hamlet, the critical moment of the intrigue is Claudius’ reaction to the spoken play. Hamlet is not interested enough in Claudius’ response to the dumb-show even to ask whether Horatio has observed some aspect of Claudius’ expression that he himself might have missed. Similarly, when asking Horatio to assist in observing Claudius’ behavior, Hamlet focuses Horatio’s attention upon the spoken play:

There is a play tonight before the King.
One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father’s death.
I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel *in one speech*,
It is a damned ghost that we have seen. (III.ii.75–82)

Speech, not pantomime, will unkennel Claudius’ guilt. Indeed, Hamlet’s lack of concern for how Claudius reacts to the dumb-show is one of the reasons that Dover Wilson offers in support of his theory that the dumb-show was not part of Hamlet’s plan.

16. In his prayer-soliloquy following the Mousetrap, Claudius reveals the high degree of emotional agitation occasioned by the Mousetrap. Yet, in the immediately preceding scene, he calmly gives orders to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet’s going to England, implying he has already devised the means and manner of the plot against Hamlet’s life. We can have no doubt of his ability to think clearly, despite his agitation.

17. The Mousetrap, in both the dumb-show and the spoken play, speaks of the poison’s being administered in the ears—both ears, not one—echoing the ghost’s claim that Claudius “in the porches of my ears did pour/The leperous distilment” (I.v.63–64).

18. This conclusion is reinforced by Ophelia’s next remark, asking whether the dumb-show constitutes the argument for the spoken play to follow. An “argument” for a play, like the play, must possess an intelligible beginning, middle, and end. If Ophelia did not understand what had been portrayed by the dumb-show, it is unlikely that she would think of it as a potential candidate for an argument.

19. Hamlet makes a bawdy rejoinder to Ophelia, the kind of remark perhaps inconsistent with an intent to offend Claudius deeply, and the remark diverts Ophelia from pressing her inquiry. Had the dumb-show raised more than moderate concern in Ophelia, it is unlikely that she could have been put off so easily. But Ophelia and the courtiers, like anyone confronted by the prospect of tasteless behavior, will now be more than usually attentive to the spoken play that follows and alert to innuendo. Hamlet has, by his dumb-show, captured the full attention of everyone in the room.

20. Gertrude’s reputation is under apparent assault. Claudius’ failure to come to his wife’s defense—and his asking instead whether the argument of the spoken play has any “offence” in it—implies a total preoccupation with his own concerns.

21. See II.ii.534–36: “Hamlet: You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in’t, could you not?” While it is not possible to do more than speculate about what lines Hamlet penned, the lines spoken by the player-nephew do differ in style from the preceding lines. The nephew’s lines are far more melodramatic, and they employ to

a great extent the rhetorical device of repeated grammatical forms, a device not used in the lines preceding.

22. In the interest of clarity, we have referred to the actor portraying Gonzago as the “player-king” and his wife the “player-queen,” and they indeed are denoted as “king” and “queen” in the text of *Hamlet*. But the text of the play-within-a-play does not suggest that they are king and queen; that text is consistent with Hamlet’s characterization of the player-king as a Duke named Gonzago: and Gertrude’s response to Hamlet, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (III.ii.225), confirms that they are being portrayed to the stage as lord and lady—i. e., *sans* crown. It would have been more precise to refer to them as the “player-duke” and “player-lady.”

Accordingly, when Hamlet introduces Lucianus as “nephew to the King” (III.ii.239), the courtiers must see Hamlet as personalizing the scene to follow. Gonzago is not a duke, but a king. The courtiers are thus prepared by Hamlet to see Gonzago as Claudius, and Hamlet as Lucianus. To Claudius, who has been thinking of the player-king as standing for old Hamlet, the reference to “King” would have little impact; for him, the puzzling reference to old Hamlet’s nephew would be heard most prominently.

23. Shakespeare has prepared us to understand such rhetorical uses of silence by having Polonius explain at length, at the beginning of Act II, an almost whimsical scheme directed against his son, Laertes. Polonius, concerned that Laertes may be committing minor “crimes,” such as “drinking, fencing, swearing, quarreling,” and the like, directs his emissary to ask after his son and pretend to be a distant acquaintance who recollects Laertes as being “wanton and wild” in the manner “most known to youth and liberty” (II.i.22–24, 25–26). If Laertes is an honorable man, he will have made honorable friends who can be counted upon to rise with indignation at such slanders. But if Laertes’ friends answer with something like, “I know the gentleman; I saw him yesterday, or the other day, or then, or then, with such and such” (II.i.55–57), then the friends’ failure to object would impliedly affirm the set of facts presupposed in the emissary’s questions and thus reveal Laertes’ licentious behavior. Polonius’ scheme, overtly unconnected with the dramatic action of the play, reminds us to listen for the silences, even in the midst of clanging cymbals.

24. Whatever subconscious motivations may be hypothesized for Hamlet’s utterance—see, e.g., Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Doubleday, 1949)—his stating that the player-nephew becomes the lover of the player-queen would be taken by the stage audience to undercut the possibility that he had intended the audience to identify him with the nephew of the spoken play. No one, the courtiers would think, would willingly subject himself to such obloquy. Cf. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, I.i.145–48.

25. The characterizations of Claudius’ exit have been wildly divergent, ranging from Robson’s suggestion that Claudius maintains his outward decorum, to Dover Wilson, who has Claudius “totter,” to Flatter, who is convinced that Claudius rises “violently and compulsively” (Robson, *Dumb-Show*, at p. 19; Dover Wilson, *WHH*; R. Flatter, “The Climax of the Play Scene in Hamlet,” *Shakespeare Journal* 77, no. 8 [1952]: 26–42, 29).

It is not necessary to put too fine a point on Claudius’ reaction to Hamlet’s interruption of the play. Even if Claudius is viewed as displaying anger at this point, it would be too late to cover his failure and thus irrelevant to Hamlet’s purposes. It is *after* the “talk of poisoning” (III.ii.283) that Claudius rises.

26. *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 22–64.

27. Shakespeare, in other contexts, uses “blench” to mean a kind of mental misstep: swerving from the path of reason or deceiving oneself. See *The Winter’s Tale*, I.ii.333. But line II.ii.593, referencing Claudius’ “looks,” makes it difficult to insist on that reading here.

28. See, e.g., Robson, *The Dumb-Show*, p. 13:

“When [Hamlet] first conceived the plan he may have jumped to the optimistic conclusion that the King would betray himself flagrantly. But . . . he [came] to realize that this was unlikely.”

29. Before the Mousetrap, when speaking to Horatio about the plan for the first time, Hamlet says that he expects Claudius’ guilt to “itself unkennel in one speech” (III.ii.81). This manner of speaking is neutral to the way in which Claudius is expected to betray his guilt. Hamlet seems to be

taking care not to prejudice Horatio's judgment. But Hamlet's insistence that Claudius must be watched very, very closely—"Even with the very comment of thy soul/Observe my uncle"; "Give him heedful note"; and "I mine eyes will rivet to his face" (III.ii.79–80, 84, 85)—suggests that Hamlet's plan involves some subtle point, not merely a blatant emotional response.

Likewise, after the Mousetrap has been sprung, Hamlet asks whether Horatio "Didst perceive" the success of the Mousetrap? (III.ii.281). When Horatio answers affirmatively, Hamlet carefully ensures that Horatio is basing his judgment "upon the talk of the poisoning" (III.ii.283), that is, upon Claudius' demeanor several moments *before* Claudius displays his most demonstrative, physical response to the play-within-a-play.

30. *Hamlet*, Jenkins, ed., pp. 272–73 n. Some have explained this apparent temporal anomaly by construing the soliloquy as retrospective, portraying Hamlet's frame of mind as he asked the players to perform the play. See, e.g., Dover Wilson, *WHH* at p. 142 n. This interpretation, however, is inconsistent with the first lines of the soliloquy, which locate the soliloquy in time after the departure of the players: "Now I am alone, O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II.ii.543–44). Harold Jenkins correctly observes that the apparent temporal anomaly "cannot quite be explained away" by Dover Wilson's theory (p. 273 n.).