

# Hamlet – The Original Mousetrap (emagplus 91)

Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* is the world's longest running play, but the term was used in theatre long before that in a very different context – in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*. Here Varsha Shah talks about its role in the drama.

It is the midpoint of the play and Hamlet, seeking truth, and uncertain of whether his Uncle Claudius has in fact murdered his father, decides to recreate the murder on stage. When Claudius asks the name of the play that is to be performed, Hamlet hastily improvises, calling it 'The Mousetrap' (which really should be classed as fair warning to Claudius). Claudius's reaction to seeing the murder acted out in front of him exposes his guilt, the trap snaps shut, and the stage is subsequently littered with dead bodies. But the play within a play is just one example of the many traps laid in *Hamlet*. Whilst most of Shakespeare's plays have freewheeling plots and intricate designs, none, I would argue, is more beautifully constructed than *Hamlet* itself. It is a mosaic of traps -verbal, psychological, practical - that time and time again catch out its characters.

## Will Hamlet's Intellect Help Him Avoid the Traps?

Hamlet as a character defies easy categorisation - at certain points he is sensitive, vulnerable, gentle; at others he is full of vengeance, anger and violence - but one of the qualities that stays consistent and makes him shine across the centuries is the sheer dazzle of his intellect. This is not a character who easily falls prey to the manipulations of

### Writer

Varsha Shah is an English teacher. Her novel won The Times/ Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition 2020.

This article was first published in emagplus for emagazine 91, February 2021.

[Plays](#)

[Writers A-Z](#)

[Print this article:](#)

others. The first scene in which we see him, he signals as much, resisting the easy path of succumbing to his Uncle's charm, with an effortless verbal dart: 'A little more than kin, but less than kind'. The line burrows into the play and into the minds of the audience - this is a young man who from the start is aware of the games that people play around him, and is unafraid to expose their hypocrisy. Nor does his intellect stop there - unlike Macbeth, who might fight like an 'eagle' and a 'lion' but seems to be persuaded by all and sundry when it comes to committing regicide - Hamlet questions whether the ghost is telling the truth:

*The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil, and the devil hath power  
T'assume a pleasing shape.'*

In the world of Elsinore it is wise not to just be wary of the human world but the supernatural too.

The audience soon understands that Hamlet will need every spark of his intelligence to evade the traps springing around him. Elsinore is that darkest of places - where people are complicit in the corruption and it is impossible to tell friend from foe. In the centre of this 'rotten' state - like two spiders weaving webs - sit the characters of Claudius and Polonius.

## Polonius' Machinations

Polonius, seems incapable of being straightforward, going so far as to set traps for his own son by urging Reynaldo, his servant, to use the 'bait of falsehood' and 'By indirections find directions out.' Reynaldo, to his credit,

seems perplexed at the whole business, answering Polonius's gleeful 'Wherefore should you do this?' with the simple, chin-scratching line echoed by the audience, 'Ay, my lord,/ I would know that.' Luckily Polonius is also a self-aggrandising fool (or at least can be played that way), and one that Hamlet runs rings around both verbally and intellectually. Yet the audience is not allowed to forget that Polonius's designs and machinations have real consequences - the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is poisoned as a result of his interference, and his spying - a nod to Elizabeth 1's spymaster Frances Walsingham perhaps - creates the suffocating claustrophobia that lurks at the heart of all oppressive regimes.

## Claudius – Brutal and Deadly

In contrast to Polonius sits Claudius. Whereas Polonius's traps are often inept and foolish, Claudius's traps are brutal and deadly. Behind his statesman-like veneer, this is a man who, even before the play starts, has murdered his own brother, and largely made the country complicit in the wrongdoing. Once his guilt is exposed by the Mousetrap, he acts swiftly, first engineering Hamlet's banishment to England so that he can be killed en route. Worst of all perhaps is that he does this by persuading Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to betray the young Prince - and that betrayal, with them seeking to spy on their old friend, leads to them being trapped by Hamlet, 'hoist by their own petard'. It does not stop there. When that plan fails, and Hamlet returns to Denmark, very much alive, Claudius manipulates Laertes, and then, just in case Laertes fails to kill Hamlet, adds a further trap of a poisoned chalice.

# The Trap as a Suspenseful Plot Device

At first Hamlet, seemingly dances and skates around all the traps set for him. He has weapons in his arsenal: in addition to his intelligence is a quick wit, a clear sightedness, and the ability to act (in the dramatic sense) even to the point of pretending to be mad. By turns the audience is urging his character on, and awe-struck, as again and again he survives the weight of his own uncertainty about Claudius's guilt and each ambush. There is an exhilaration to this. The traps are working as plot devices. Shakespeare keeps his audience tense and unable to settle. In this most political of plays, power dynamics continually shift, and, as each trap snaps shut and another one is set, the audience is kept in suspense, wondering who is in charge and who has the upper hand. Will it be Claudius with his political power, or Hamlet with his intellect and keen sense of right and wrong, who will ultimately win out?

## The Trap as Theme – Political Intrigue

But as the play continues it becomes clear that the traps are serving a purpose that goes beyond mere plot. This is not just a story about survival or revenge but something darker and deeper. It is about the effect of living in a world where intrigue, spying and political machinations have been normalised. Shakespeare knew something about this. He wrote about politics at a time when political intrigue was rife and rippled through the lives of ordinary citizens. He and his audience would have been aware of threats of invasion from abroad, the plots to assassinate Elizabeth

1(some of which had sprung up in her own Court), and the deadly state machinery, including Walsingham's army of spies and the Tower and its torture chambers, used to counter them. Hamlet is not the first play of Shakespeare's to deal with the human cost of living in a world of Machiavellian plotting and scheming - Richard III and Julius Caesar spring to mind - nor will it be the last. After all Shakespeare will later write Macbeth who at the height of his power boasts: 'There's not a one of them but in his house I keep a servant fee'd'. What makes Hamlet so unnerving though is that it is not just about individuals behaving badly, nor about a single plot to murder that plays itself out. It is about a 'rotten' state in which traps, some of them set by Hamlet himself, the sympathetic hero of the play, are everywhere. And the consequences of this are chilling. The play of traps becomes a play of corpses. By the time of the final scene, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are already dead. The final scene itself is of a blood bath as the traps laid for Hamlet catch Laertes, Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet in their grip. Fortinbras, Prince of Norway and no stranger to war, speaks for the audience when he looks upon the dead and says in obvious horror:

*Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this  
Becomes the field, but here shows much  
amiss.*

At its essence the tragedy of Hamlet is perhaps this: in a 'rotten' state littered with traps within traps, even those most alive to right and wrong, like Hamlet, will end up adopting and using the same stratagems. As a result there

is no escape. Whether innocent or guilty, whether smart or foolish, every person who lives in such a state is at risk of paying the ultimate price - a price as severe as found on any battlefield.