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(MURDER) PERFORMANCE

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Source: *English Studies in Latin America*, No. 16 (January 2019)

ISSN: 0719-9139

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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## Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*: Adaptation and the Repeat (Murder) Performance

Anita Neira Tiemann<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

With little attention from the academic and critical world, Agatha Christie is considered to be one of the most popular authors in detective fiction. Possessing a recognizable style and admirably prolific, this paper will focus on her work as playwright and adapter of her own pieces. The works analysed are the short story “Three Blind Mice” and its transposition as a play for the stage *The Mousetrap*. Different concepts from reception and reading theories used commonly in the analysis of the formulae underlying detective fiction will be utilised in conjunction with notions of theatricality and the perception and reception of the stage, in order to understand the different effects and construction of both texts. Through the discussion of both short story and play, *The Mousetrap* is analysed considering its popularity and its belonging to the dramatic genre, hence performative, visual and aural. This will allow for a further understanding of Christie’s style and her rarely discussed expertise when it comes to crafting a play and a piece of detective fiction.

KEY WORDS: detective fiction, Agatha Christie, adaptation, reception theories

### RESUMEN

Aunque no ha recibido demasiada atención desde el mundo académico, Agatha Christie es considerada como una de las autoras más populares en la novela y ficción policial. Considerando su estilo reconocible y admirable prolificidad, este artículo se centrará en su trabajo como dramaturga en su trabajo de auto-adaptación. Los trabajos analizados serán el cuento “Three Blind Mice” y su transposición para el escenario, *The Mousetrap*. Se usarán distintos conceptos de teorías de recepción comunes en el análisis de las fórmulas que se encuentran en la narrativa policial además de observar la conciencia sobre teatricalidad y percepción y recepción de la obra teatral. Con esto se pretende comprender tanto algo de los efectos como la construcción de ambos textos. En la discusión sobre el cuento y el texto dramático, *The Mousetrap* se analizará considerando su popularidad y su carácter de obra teatral y, por lo tanto, performativa, visual y auditivo. Así, podremos discutir un poco más el estilo de Christie y su pericia al construir un texto dramático policial.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ficción detectivesca; Agatha Christie; adaptación; teorías de recepción

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Dame Agatha Christie is best known for her most famous characters Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, immortalised in several of her novels and protagonists of numerous television and film adaptations that have been enjoyed by readers and audiences in different corners of the world. *Murder on the Orient Express*, with several film adaptations, must be the clearest example of how, every now and then, some of her most famous works are given new lives (and the same deaths) for the entertainment of life-long fans and younger audiences alike. Although her most famous novels tend to receive more attention, little seems to have been said of her work as playwright. Despite the lack of critical interest, Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* has for some time been known and advertised as the longest-running theatre show in the world. Premiered in 1952 as a play, the truth is that this murder mystery had already had a few lives before coming to the stage.

Christie's 30-minute radio-play *Three Blind Mice* was broadcasted in 1947 as part of the BBC's celebration of Queen Mary's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. No recording of the radio-play is known to exist (British Universities Film and Video Council). We do know, however, that this was "a programme of music, drama, and variety approved by Her Majesty" ("In Honour of Queen Mary's Eightieth Birthday"). Three years later, it was published in the U.S. as a story in an anthology by Dodd, Mead & Co. Then, after observing that others were succeeding by adapting her works to the stage, she decided to do it herself and turn the story into a play-script. Apart from some changes related to the characters and details that have to do with transposing description and narration into the performative and the visual/aural, its name was changed to *The Mousetrap*. Although "Three Blind Mice" is not one of the works that we most readily associate to Agatha Christie, nor perhaps one of her masterpieces, it is worth asking ourselves why *The Mousetrap* has found such an unprecedented success in British theatre. Its belonging to the genre of detective fiction and the long-lasting popularity of the "whodunit" narrative may, to some extent, account for the public's interest. In her adaptation from "Three Blind Mice" to *The Mousetrap*, Christie not only shows us her usual skill at pre-empting and subverting reader/audience expectations, but also successfully adapts her story into the language of theatre while drawing from cultural and genre references that reflect her awareness of the genre and the experience of the reader.

*The Mousetrap* comes to the stage at a time when the centre of British theatre was in London and in which “the West End was dominated by drawing-room comedies [and dramas], lightweight whodunnits, American musicals and classic revivals” (Phillips 100). This is the same picture theatre scholar John Bull paints of the 1950s in Britain. He shows how mainstream post-war theatre was mainly traditional and attached to the past, with an emphasis on reconstructing proscenium Victorian or Edwardian stages (331) and plot-lines, themes and set designs that “did nothing to threaten a theatrical status quo clearly out of tune with the changing cultural climate” (335). Christie’s play fits well within that type of mainstream commercial drama, taking the stage at the Ambassador’s Theatre from another thriller, *Murder Mistaken*, in 1952. It makes sense, then, that some of the critical reception described it as a “middling piece” (“Noovember [sic] 24 1952”). However, this only adds to the mystery of it becoming the longest-running play in the world; even more so if we consider the age of innovation that playwrights like John Osborne and the English Stage Company established at the Royal Court from 1956 onwards. Despite the bold writing that the London audience would witness during the second half of the twentieth century, *The Mousetrap* proves surprisingly unwavering.

In order to find a way to appreciate how this play works as a piece of detective fiction and as theatrical event, we should look at the differences and similarities in the relationships the story and the play establish with the audience. Hence, some concepts from reader response criticism will be used, but also theatre audience response in an instrumental assumption that the processes of reader and audience detection share enough features as to compare the reception of the two works, short story and play. The processes of reading and inferring and how they closely relate to the formula of detective fiction will be at the centre of this paper’s discussion.

Such an understanding of the modes or codes at play in the detective novel may help us begin to unravel what is underneath the adaptability of a story like Agatha Christie’s “Three Blind Mice.” Being a true representative of the genre, it follows several of its rules. There is a murder in the city at the beginning. Then, we are transported to a village guesthouse, Monkswell Manor. Beginners in the lodging business, Giles and Molly Davis (Giles and Mollie Ralston in the play) are

anxious about receiving their first guests that night in the middle of a snowstorm that threatens to leave them isolated for a few days. From the rules of this formulaic genre, we see the crime at the beginning so that everything is set up for a group of people to have to solve the problem together. Once all the guests have arrived, each with their own particular personality and suspicious behaviour, Sergeant Trotter comes in informing them that the police has found a notebook, dropped by the killer, that had the address of the first victim, the name Monkswell Manor, and the title of the nursery rhyme “Three Blind Mice.” This renders everyone staying there a possible killer or the next victim, and the steps to find the answers to those questions begin. The story opens a few gaps so that the reader suspects all characters; what is given to us as evidence keeps shifting before and after Mrs. Boyle, the second victim, is strangled.

#### DETECTING AS READING AND READING AS DETECTING

Detective fiction must be one of the genres that is most aware of the reader and what their relationship with the text entails. Here, the text, highly conventionalized and formulaic in terms of plot and character, is structured in a way in which the reader is meant to ask and attempt to answer questions in order to find resolution. In his critical work *The Pursuit of Crime*, Dennis Porter makes use of Roland Barthes’ concept of *le lisible* when he states that the “detective novel is the most readable of texts, first, because we recognize the terms of its intelligibility even before we begin to read and, second, because it prefigures at the outset the form of its denouement by virtue of the highly visible question mark hung over its opening” (86). It is the structure of the genre, then, which would make detective fiction such an accessible and pleasurable narrative: the reader is presented with a crime, a question, and is taken, usually by means of a trial and error inquiry of the text, to a sense of justice or resolution. For George N. Dove, this means sacrificing depth for the fulfilment of expectations, which come from knowing and understanding the rules of the game, and the close relationship that this, therefore, allows between reader and text.

We can believe David Grossvogel when he says that Christie “kept a gimlet eye on her reader at all times, knowing the disposition of his afferent nerves as accurately as might an acupuncturist” (9). Much like in any game played against another person and in which winning involves strategizing

or making decisions, writing this type of fiction seems to demand a keen observation and consideration of the reader. The author-reader relationship in this genre has been analysed by Peter Hühn, who provides a convincing discussion on how the criminal is the author of the text (the crime and its readable traces) while the detective performs the role of the reader.

For Hühn, detective fiction can be said to be composed by at least two authors: the real-life writer and the criminal or killer who creates a narrative in order to conceal the truth. At the same time, in the other end of the process we find different readers: “the detective, the Dr. Watson figure [who, writes and reads the crime and the process of detection as the detective’s companion], and us, the readers, who by comparing the original text of the mystery with the story of the detective’s reading attempts may try to compete with him” (458). “Three Blind Mice” and *The Mousetrap* present us with an additional complication of this relationship among authors and readers.

In order to explain how Christie does that, I will have to reveal the ending. Sergeant Trotter, the sleuth and reader of this story, is discovered as the murderer. Therefore, the subverting of our horizon of expectations lies in the double (and triple) role Trotter performs: the detective-reader trying to find the criminal, the murderer-author who, as disguised reader, has led us astray all along, and the murderer-reader (only in the case of the play). In his pretending, he is actually trying to find out who (Mollie or Miss Casewell) is the former teacher who failed to protect his brother from being killed by their guardians. The other characters in the short story and the play also become readers. They all suspect each other due to different signifiers placed strategically in both texts. So, as readers or audience members, we do not only identify with Trotter while he is impersonating the detective, but we share fears with the others while we acknowledge them all as potential murderer-authors.

Both Porter and Dove reference the codes identified by Barthes as the ways in which the signifiers of a text are present in all texts: 1) hermeneutic, 2) proairetic, 3) semantic or semic, 4) symbolic, and 5) cultural or referential. Porter seems to give more importance to the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, because they refer to the questions and answers that we find in the text and the construction of plot and events in the narration, respectively. As for the semantic and the symbolic codes, they refer to the connotations suggested by the elements in the text and the wider systems

in which these work, respectively. Very much like any other text, a murder mystery will, in a way that is coherent with the enigmas drawn from the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, give the reader the elements and clues to interpret (and very frequently misinterpret) the blanks or gaps in the text in order to reach a solution. Moreover, if these codes are recognized and accepted by the reader through the experience of reading, a contract with the text and the genre that is renewed every time the person engages with it, we should gather that the murder mystery is also reliant on the cultural code. The reader's experience of the detective novel depends on and is strengthened by their background and cultural knowledge of it. We shall see how this works in *The Mousetrap* shortly.

Along similar lines, Andrew Elfenbein has summarised how cognitive science looks at the reader's experience and process of activating concepts when reading. Here, we find four sources: 1) the string text that is being read (a cycle); 2) the cycle read immediately before it; 3) the connections the reader makes from the first two or "episodic memory representation;" and 4) background knowledge (488). These sources identified by cognitive science work from the basis of understanding the process of reading as dependent on working memory and how the text may "acquire cognitive materiality" (Elfenbein 499). Hence, the act of reading posits limitations and possibilities that will necessarily affect the interpretation process. Those posed in the reception of performance are undoubtedly different.

#### FROM READER TO AUDIENCE

Until now, we have reviewed and described a phenomenon that deals with a single person interacting with a text. These individuals may also choose to share, in person or through different media, their reading experiences with others. However, the process of making sense of the text remains a private journey with the detective and only later socialized with a reading community. In addition, the process of decoding strings and cycles of text relying on working memory, will differ from the process for the audience in the theatre. In order to understand the adaptation process that turned "Three Blind Mice" into *The Mousetrap* (the staged play), we need to acknowledge that the nature of the audience as reader will be strikingly different, even though the process may be comparable.

The reception of a dramatic work is necessarily intended and addressed to the group and, although each audience member will experience a relationship with the work from their own perspective and background knowledge, the shared space of those interacting with the performance makes the process a collective one. This and the material difference of the signs, as some are not mediated through the word for the audience, require that we include some notions of perception and reception in theatre. Summarizing the discussion of well-known theatre semiotician Patrice Pavis on how to understand contemporary performance, which tends to be of a non-referential character, as opposed to more traditional theatrical works, Malgorzata Sugiera writes: “watching a performance means looking for something that will attract our attention as meaningful, like a Gestalt sign. That should give us the vector we were seeking to meaningfully shape the stage material in a way that may prove right or may then be invalidated by the next Gestalt sign” (227). To understand the implications of this view as, we could say, a proposed hermeneutic approach for the performative arts, it is necessary to unpack a few concepts from which it develops. This view of perception considers the process of making sense to a whole (Gestalt) by means of interpretable elements (signs) that are designed in a particular way, with vectors oriented towards or pointing to one or several meanings.

This approach provides us with a model of perception and interpretation that shares common ground with those derived from Barthes and Hühn. In fact, the use of what has been already described as the semiotic, symbolic and proairetic codes in order to answer the questions derived from the hermeneutic code in detective fiction is at least comparable to this proposed manner of interpreting a contemporary performance. The latter’s distance from an immediately recognizable frame of reference belonging to the audience’s world also poses a question mark or enigma to the audience, as that which the reader of a detection narrative experiences from the outset. In addition, what is suggested is a very similar process of reading the signs and blanks as in detection by proposing a trial and error reading dynamic that rules out possibilities of the truth.

As a way of interpreting both traditional as well as more experimental theatrical works, Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter have proposed three levels of the hermeneutic process in the



auditorium: sensory, artistic, and fictional. The sensory level refers to all the objects and images, what is physically on stage, and how the audience member reacts to those stimuli. Then, while the artistic level alludes to the aesthetic encoding of the mentioned signs, the fictional level encompasses the fictional world that the work of art creates. These are “tightly interwoven and activated parallel to each other” (Martin & Sauter 79), with different degrees of emphases during the performance. Moreover, we can see that these levels also include an underlying notion of the creative process. In other words, there is an explicit awareness that what is wrought by the writer, as well as the director, actor, or designer, is understood as an intentional creative action in the artistic level. Only in the fictional, then, do we find a world that may seem to be governed by its own rules. Christie’s intentional process of adaptation, then, the way she crafts the play and how that is communicated to the audience may be worth looking at under this scope.

#### ADAPTATION OF THE DETECTIVE STORY: RELIVING THE SAME MURDER?

An important consequence of the way in which the detective fiction text works is that “people normally do not re-read detective novels – the text has consumed itself” (Hühn 458-459) after the solution and explanation is reached in the last chapters. That said, why should an adaptation of a murder mystery that had already been made public in the forms of a radio play and short story be so successful as a stage play? The same could be asked about other works that have been and are being adapted from novels or films to the stage and vice versa. It has already been suggested through the revision of some of the literature dealing with the hermeneutics of the detective narrative as well as performance that the relationship established involves the reader/audience in a voluntary game of misunderstood signs with the promise of closure. However, from Caroline Marie’s study of adaptations from page to stage by Agatha Christie, we gather that there may be derived pleasure from the adapted piece as isolated from the source, as she concludes from the analyses of some differences between short story and play. Considering that the radio-play was broadcasted once in 1947 and that the short story was never published in Britain, we cannot point to the audience’s knowledge of the texts to explain their interest in watching it. Hence, we can assume that the audience will most likely come to the theatre without a previous reading of the text.

For Linda Hutcheon, leading figure in adaptation studies: “the creative transposition of an adapted work’s story and its heterocosm is subject not only to genre and medium demands . . . , but also to the temperament and talent of the adapter – and his or her individual intertexts... [which filter] the materials being adapted” (84). This supports the notion of the value of an adaptation as another work of art in its own right, without negating its intertextual nature. Therefore, we will look at both pieces (short story and play), understanding that not only will they have an intertextual relationship with each other, but also with other ones, as well as considering the influence exercised by the author/adapter’s style and the features of the chosen media.

A clear illustration of this is the telling of the crime that will begin the story. In “Three Blind Mice” we experience the narration of the first murder with a description of the building in London in which it takes place, of the murderer’s disguised appearance and his actions before the murder. The mood and the enigma are suggested right from the start and work in conjunction with the advance signs and expectations the reader gets from the very author’s name. The description is enough to tell us we are reading about a killer: “A man in a dark overcoat, with a muffler pulled up round his face, and his hat pulled down over his eyes, came along Culver Street and went up the steps of number 74” (“Three Blind Mice” 7). The narrator, keeping the character’s identity from us and making us ask the first questions (Who is he? Who is he going to kill?), makes use of signs that connote hidden and bad intentions, drawing from the reader’s previous world and genre knowledge, establishing an intertextual relationship with other texts from the same genre. The reader is probably reminded of other detective stories and encouraged to use that in what is going to be yet another process of pattern recognition and search for the truth.

The air of mystery in the short story is enhanced by a description of sound that will be exploited further in the play. Shortly after we meet the disguised character, we get learn of two actions that will be part of the web of signs to disentangle later in the narrative: “The man standing silhouetted against the lowering sky outside asked in a whisper, ‘Mrs. Lyon?’” and “When the man got round the bend of the staircase he began to whistle softly. The tune he whistled was ‘Three Blind Mice’” (7). That is where the narration leaves the scene of the upcoming crime to focus

and introduce us to the place where most of the action and the detection is going to take place, Monkswell Manor. We next hear about the crime through diegesis when Molly and Giles Davis, the guest house owners, listen to the news on the radio: “The news consisted mainly of grim warnings, the usual deadlock in foreign affairs, spirited bickerings in Parliament, and a murder in Culver Street, Paddington” (14).

The jump in time and place that the short story’s genre allows for is suggested through different and theatrical means in the play. The stage directions provide hints to know that the audience in the theatre will be given the feel of mystery and will also be asked to picture the murder with the help of their mind’s eye:

*Before the CURTAIN rises the House Lights fade to a complete BLACK-OUT and the music of “Three Blind Mice” is heard.*

*When the CURTAIN rises the stage is in complete darkness. The music fades giving place to a shrill whistle of the same tune [...]. A woman’s piercing scream is heard then a mixture of male and female voices saying: “My God, what’s that?” “Went that way!” “Oh my God!” Then a police whistle sounds, followed by several other police whistles, all of which fade to silence.*

VOICE ON THE RADIO. . . . and according to Scotland Yard, the crime took place at twenty-four Culver Street, Paddington.

*The LIGHTS come up, revealing the hall at Monkswell Manor. (The Mousetrap 299-300)*

Here, though similar to the partial telling of the crime in the short story, the audience is only provided with auditory signs, and then confirmation from the radio, that a murder has taken place. This scene is confirmed in Jennifer Dorn’s 2011 review. By literally keeping the audience in the dark while the actions seem to happen in front of them, Christie seems to be teasing them in a way that would not be possible for the story on the page. The narration in that case presents the actions as removed from the time of the reading and is more obviously mediated by a narrator. In contrast, those watching the play share the time of the murder and space with the scene of the crime. This real-time mode is only interrupted, later, by the narration that comes from the radio voice. A veil of darkness covers the full truth in the narrated version of this murder, but it is a literal one which

allows questions to be raised in the staged version. For Marie, “the written text plays on the reader’s illusion of language’s transparency, and the play on the false equivalence of stage, visibility and truth” (52). But, as we understand from the relationship that we establish with the detection text, the illusion of transparency and equivalence is agreed to and conventional.

After the enigma is presented, *The Mousetrap* is quick at showing signs, potential clues, for the audience to read and misinterpret. Following the crime, we find the exposition of the setting, the characters of Mollie and Giles and their new situation as hosts in a guest house which is about to open and is already expecting a group of guests. This is a clear example of how the playwright is aware that the audience of this murder mystery is participating in a similar interaction to the reader’s. On stage, the development of the news from the radio is paired with Mollie’s careful and unconscious exhibition of plausible signifieds:

*(GILES exits through the arch up R, [...] Mollie switches on the radio)*

VOICE ON THE RADIO. And according to Scotland Yard, the crime took place at twenty-four Culver Street, Paddington. The murdered woman was a Mrs. Maureen Lyon. In connexion with the murder, the police—

*(MOLLIE rises and crosses to the armchair C)*

—are anxious to interview a man seen in the vicinity, wearing a dark overcoat—

*(MOLLIE picks up Giles’ overcoat)*

—light scarf—

*(MOLLIE picks up his scarf)*

—and a soft felt hat.

*(MOLLIE picks up his hat and exits through the arch up R) (303)*

These elements are clearly made to happen together on the stage in order to direct the audience’s interpretation and suggest a false foreshadowing of Giles as the culprit. This seemingly clear suggestion of our first suspect is blurred as the possibilities are shown as wide open after all the male characters have arrived to the guesthouse and we see, for the remainder of the performance, a group of overcoats hanging in full visibility for the audience. Caroline Marie insightfully states in her

essay that “[t]he theatrical lining up of the coats blurs the limits between sign, clue, and evidence, a structural necessity in any detective story, but in a way that the stage alone allows” (53). With the visible multiplication of overcoats as the guests come in, there is a multiplication of suspects.

Perhaps the most salient changes in the adaptation to the stage has to do with the addition of the character of Miss Casewell, the modification of Mollie’s backstory and the new name for the piece. The most likely reason for these changes is that, after a revision of the story, Agatha Christie sought to improve the audience’s experience by adapting to the medium, not only by altering the way in which the crime is communicated, as we saw above, but also by making more structural changes, always having the audience and the genre in mind.

First, let us take a look at the inclusion of Miss Casewell as one of the guests staying in Monkswell Manor. It has already been mentioned that in addition to having Inspector Trotter as detective-reader and murderer-author according to Hühn’s analysis of the traditional detective narrative, the stage version also has Trotter playing the role of murderer-reader. It is the inclusion of a third female character, Miss Casewell, that gives him this third task in the story. The murderer makes his way to Monkswell Manor in order to kill the two other people that he blames for his family tragedy. Here, he succeeds in murdering Mrs. Boyle, who was the authority in charge of sending them as children to live with a family in the countryside, and a third person he is holding responsible, but is not sure who that is. Trotter realises that both Mollie Ralston and Miss Casewell have changed their names, the first because of her recent marriage and the latter seems to be there under an alias; both seem to be hiding information about their past too. Miss Casewell is even described as manly, casting doubts as to whether she is actually a woman, as expressed by the characters. Both women repeatedly mention wanting to forget traumatic events of their past and Trotter becomes murderer-reader by trying to find out which is the one he is trying to find. The audience is also trying to answer the same question. We want to know who the culprit is, but also the next victim.

The new backstory we get for Mollie can be thought of as having a better effect on the stage too. In “Three Blind Mice” Molly is revealed as the third victim to be, but only because

Trotter confuses her for her sister, the teacher who failed to help the children after being informed of the abuse they were suffering. In the short story, she explains her traumatic memories about those events alleging she saw how hard this had been for her sister and that she never recovered. As readers, we experience a degree of disappointment in this explanation that seems to rely too much on sibling empathy, instead of arriving to more rational conclusions. By making Mollie more directly concerned with the events that led to one of the children's death by the hands of the couple taking care of them, the link to the murderer is stronger and the audience becomes more aware of the threat to her life and a better explanation about her visible feelings of guilt. In the short story, the reader may think that there is still a chance that the murderer will refrain from killing her if she was not the teacher he has been blaming for so long. Miss Casewell and Mollie's identities in *The Mousetrap* are constructed with the audience and their experience in solving the various enigmas this play poses.

Miss Casewell turns out to be Trotter's long-lost sister, survivor of childhood violence and looking to overcome her past. In the play, she has a key role as reader: she recognizes her brother and is able to get help and prevent the third murder. In an interview to Miss Casewell while Sergeant Trotter is pretending to be detective-reader, but actually wanting to read as murderer, she recognizes a gesture. This is explained in the final scene:

TROTTER. Kathy, it is you. What are you doing here? [...]

MISS CASEWELL. I came to England to find you. I didn't recognize you until you twirled your hair the way you always used to do.

(TROTTER *twirls his hair*) (*The Mousetrap* 377)

The gesture is repeated for the audience to confirm this explanation of the revelation. Trotter's twirling of his hair could only become relevant for the audience after its importance is explained. An unnoticed sign at a sensory level becomes activated and has significance in the artistic and fictional level as well.

After noticing this, she decides to inform Major Metcalf. While Trotter's true identity is revealed through gesture, Metcalf's wrongfully obscures his. He seems the most stoic of the

characters, except for his uncharacteristic surprise and concern when they were informed a police officer would come to the house. This is one of the signs that make him a suspect, in the eye of the reader and audience member. In the final revelation, we are told, both in the short story and the play, that Major Metcalf is an undercover police officer sent there to find out if Monkswell Manor was the unknown murderer's next destination because of the notebook they had recovered. Major Metcalf, like the other suspects in the narrative is suspect-reader, but only at the end do we realise that he is also detective-reader.

Characterisation has been an issue in the play's reception, as characters are unsurprisingly stereotypical: "the masculine young woman ...; here as her foil is the effeminate young man ...; and all over the place are the comic major... and the suspiciously articulate foreigner" ("Noovember [sic] 24 1952"). We may expect this from the entertainment pieces that represented the status quo during the 1950s in British theatre. More so, stereotypical characters seem to be the staple of a drawing-room mystery drama that relies on reader/audience expectations to misinterpret the signs so that they can all remain suspects until the very end.

Geoffrey Bewley has written a rather passionate defence of Christie's style in this sense, stating that undeveloped characters are in fact what support the story line (60). This is a fair point if we remember the role background knowledge may have in aiding working memory when reading, and the one it may have in relating the sensory and artistic levels in performance. But, in his review of the queer-studies possibilities in her fiction from 1920 to 1952, J. C. Bernthal sees beyond the bourgeois setting and characters that have made her appear overly conservative in her writing. There seems to be "an extraordinary amount of playful destabilization in the texts, much arising from Christie's deliberately jarring presentation of ready stereotypes...[I]t draws attention towards the artificial nature of taxonomized identity itself" (Bernthal 3). On one layer, it may be instrumental to reveal enough of each character to be rendered as suspect. But the space for play, if we consider Miss Casewell and "the effeminate young man" Christopher Wren, with all their own open questions about themselves, may be pointing to signs outside the fiction and that may be worth exploring further, as Bernthal has recently done. So, although the mannerisms shown in the play have been

deemed superficial and predictable, we can argue that questions about identity here go beyond a dichotomy of good and evil. It may be a mere suggestion of a deeper level, but one that holds performative and interpretable potential.

Finally, we should not overlook the effect of the new name: *The Mousetrap*. If we look at the intertextuality in the source text and the adaptations, we recognize the cultural code that is being communicated to the reader and audience. The one they have in common is “Three Blind Mice,” a popular nursery rhyme of disturbingly cruel lyrics:

Three Blind Mice  
Three Blind Mice  
See how they run  
See how they run  
They all run after the farmer’s wife  
She cut off their tails with a carving knife  
Did you ever see such a sight in your life  
As Three Blind Mice (“Three Blind Mice” 6)

These verses introduce the story in the published book, serving as the first element that the reader is given before they get immersed in the narrative. Similarly, the stage directions of the opening of the play specify that, still in the dark, the tune to the nursery rhyme is played and then turns into “a shrill whistle of the same tune” (*The Mousetrap* 299). Although without the lyrics, the tune may be enough for the audience to link it to the well-known song that will be continuously referenced, through whistling and piano playing. Some characters will also comment on how cruel the lyrics are, and thus, make the familiar unfamiliar to a British audience. There are different ways of interpreting who the blind mice in this story are. The most immediate interpretation is that they are three clueless people that the murderer has set out to punish through death. However, if we consider that the first victim, the woman that abused the children, was a farmer’s wife, we can also think of them, the first victims of this story as the three blind mice. The theme of blindness and seeing that the word choice of the rhyme suggest may have several connotations in detective fiction, and two-fold if we consider the



spectatorship involved in the theatre event. *The Mousetrap* is a play in which visibility and invisibility, and what the playwright is making visible or not, is directly related to its effect on the audience. The crimes happen in the dark in the staged version, with the audience right there, but unable to see.

Another interesting case of cultural code is the intertextuality involved in the reference of “the mousetrap.” A Western audience, and I would expect any regular theatre-goer, knows another famous theatrical mousetrap: the play-within-a-play that Prince Hamlet uses to prove whether his uncle Claudius poisoned his father or not. Hamlet uses this performance to watch Claudius watching the play; he is both author and reader. This intertextuality makes the various levels of reading and readers in *The Mousetrap* more aware, even if the realisation comes only at the end, that there is a strategic writing and reading at work here. Mollie foreshadows this just before the end (perhaps the only instance of foreshadowing that is not a false clue). Trotter assembles the whole party and asks them to perform the actions that everyone claimed to be doing when Mrs. Boyle was murdered, but they will all be performing somebody else’s actions (a second performance for those characters staying there under pseudonym and hiding their real identity). Mollie is to sit in the piano and play the tune of “Three Blind Mice” as Paravicini had done before. While in the short story we get to know of Mollie’s feelings of danger at the proposed role-play to catch the killer, in the play we hear it from her mouth:

GILES. You want – a repeat performance?

TROTTER. Yes, Mr. Ralston, I do.

MOLLIE. It’s a trap.

TROTTER. What do you mean, it’s a trap?

MOLLIE. It’s a trap. I know it is. (372)

The metatheatricality here is evident, but it is also the clearest sign and the only clue that Christie is willing to give us, even if it is only apparent after the big reveal at the end, that the director of this “repeat performance” is author of more than one narrative line in the text. The fact that this referent is now the clearest advance sign in the play, by being in its title, does not mean that it will be immediately and consciously available for the audience to give them all the answers before the

questions are even asked. However, it allows the audience members to make sense of the events of the murder mystery, once they are explained in the revelation. The audience can see that they were given one of the most important clues before the play even started, nevertheless we chose to misinterpret those that both Christie and Trotter made a point of leaving as a trace bound to failure.

Needless to say, this is hardly an exhaustive analysis and discussion of *The Mousetrap*. Acknowledging its close relationship with the short story “Three Blind Mice,” can serve as just a little more evidence of Agatha Christie’s expertise at pre-empting and subverting reader/audience expectations. This is surely an important factor in her success and fame as an imaginative and prolific writer all over the world, even when her fictional worlds are usually rather local.

With a clear understanding of her genre’s formulae and the horizon of expectations that they generate, Christie shows a crafty and cunning awareness of both reader and audience. She understands the possibilities of both the diegetic and dramatic/theatrical modes, by using the elements that the genres allow for in order to direct the reader/audience into the paths that she has laid out for us. And, even though the process through which both interact with text and performance may be different socially and may be thus influenced by different expectations, the reader of the story and the audience member watching the stage can be said to be looking for similar things from the experience. From this we can conclude that, though through different devices, the writer, adapter and playwright will control (by opening and closing) the signs in the text, and mirror their craft in the role of the fictional detective-reader. We can go as far as to say that in this popular game, Christie’s signature puzzle, the sometimes antagonistic relationship between real-life author and reader/audience, is performed by the criminal-author and the detective-reader. Those of us enjoying the text and willing participants of this interaction are made to chase the author and catch-up with whatever seems to be the truth at one point or the other. This game, however, will end with the closure and admiration for the both the author and the detective-reader, who share the truth with us, but only after they made us fall into every trap they laid out for us.

The reasons for *The Mousetrap*’s unprecedented popularity cannot be easily uncovered, as there may be multiple factors to explain it, many of which may escape the literary ones. Its title as

longest-running play in the world may be enough to spark curiosity. Regardless, the fact that this is not only a well-wrought play but also a shrewdly crafted detective fiction, of additional complexity if compared to its narrative predecessor, may help to understand the phenomenon. Christie draws from her talent to read the reader in order to understand how her audience will experience the play, based on their assumed knowledge of the world and foremost the detective fiction genre. Unfortunately we have no access to the first source text of this adaptation, the radio-play. We would be able to see to what extent the aural nature of that version fed and informed the workings of the third rendering of the same murder and journey of detection.

As self-aware as detective fiction seems to be, in its intertextuality and relationship with every text that follows the same formula, this play, and short story, seem surprisingly metatheatrical. This awareness of the medium only seems to aid the effect of the reception of the murder mystery. Even Bewley has been realistic in accepting that *The Mousetrap* is not Christie's best piece, but that it survives because it works and because it gradually became a classic (63). It seems to be one of the last representatives of the old-fashioned drawing-room plays that fail to introduce innovation, but including enough elements for a theatrical adaptation that will engage an audience seeking entertainment. It delivers closure and expectation fulfilment for audience members looking to derive pleasure from the detection of clues and the involvement that the auditorium and the performance allows.

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