

1-1-1976

Page and stage: A structural investigation of Agatha Christie's "Three Blind Mice" and "The Mousetrap"

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Recommended Citation

Morrow, Martha, "Page and stage: A structural investigation of Agatha Christie's "Three Blind Mice" and "The Mousetrap"" (1976). *Masters Theses*. 330.
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Page and Stage: A Structural Investigation of Agatha

Christie's "Three Blind Mice" and The Mousetrap
(TITLE)

BY

Martha Morrow

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1976
YEAR

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Page and Stage:

A Structural Investigation of Agatha Christie's

"Three Blind Mice" and The Mousetrap

KING CLADIUS What do you call the play?

HAMLET: The Mousetrap. . . . 'Tis a knavish piece
of work, but what of that? . . .¹

Hamlet, III, ii, 242-7

On January 12, 1976, before the 9,611th performance of Agatha Christie's play, The Mousetrap, the lights of St. Martin's Theatre in London were dimmed to honor the memory of the eighty-five-year-old mystery writer who had just died at her home in Wallingford, England.² Itself one of the curious phenomena of modern theatre history, The Mousetrap is the longest-running play in the world and has grossed nearly \$3 million since its London debut in 1952.³ Written as a birthday present for Queen Mary, the radio play and later the stage adaptation were based on the earlier short story "Three Blind Mice." Obviously the play is now running on its longevity and tourist appeal, but, as G. C. Ramsey notes, it is very difficult to argue with that sort of success.⁴ Certainly, success was no stranger to Agatha Christie. Heralded variously as the "duchess of death,"⁵ "queen of crime,"⁶ and "mistress of mystery,"⁷ Dame Agatha poured forth from her pen a

torrential stream of bloodshed unequalled by that of any other mystery writer. Besides her mystery novels, she also wrote six sentimental novels, two volumes of poetry, seventeen plays, nine volumes of short stories, and Come, Tell Me How You Live, a humorous autobiographical account of her archaeological adventures with her husband, Max Mallowan. One final treat lies in wait for Christie fans. Publishers Weekly reported that before her death in 1976, "Miss Christie told Francis Wyndham that she was at work on her autobiography which . . . [was] only to be published after her death, adding 'if anybody writes about my life, I'd rather they get the facts right.'"⁸

Clearly, Christie has demonstrated the ability to write effectively and pleasingly in many genres, but her most memorable achievement may have been the successful adaptation of "Three Blind Mice" into The Mousetrap. This transformation incorporated changes in every aspect of literary structure except theme and plot. A study of these changes brings into focus the relative advantages of the short story and the drama in creating suspense--in particular the suspense generated when all of the characters individually and collectively are made to appear guilty of murder.

Theme is a crucial element of almost every literary attempt--except some types of mystery fiction! Julian Symons very neatly and very satisfactorily divides mystery writers into two categories--serious writers and entertainers--based on their respective attitudes.⁹ The serious writers have in common "the fact that they are all to some

degree emotionally involved in their work. Their books offer some personal feelings about the world and society."¹⁰ The entertainer "thinks instead of what will amuse his audience, and if an idea or a subject seems disturbing, it is put aside."¹¹ Without a doubt, Agatha Christie is an entertainer. She attempts to amuse, puzzle, and tease, but she does not moralize, philosophize, or preach in her books. Theme becomes irrelevant in work of this nature, subordinate to the intricacies of the plot.

Plot is, of course, the structural element which gives form to all other elements.¹² Obviously, the basic plot action of both "Three Blind Mice" and The Mousetrap is the same; the same main characters are involved in the same basic conflicts and complications. The psychological motivation of the murderer is the same as is the means of murder. Still, both "Three Blind Mice" and The Mousetrap are mystery fiction, and as such they demand examination in relation to the basic rules of that movement. Most mystery critics agree that one particular characteristic unique in and requisite to that genre is the direction of plot action. That is, a "straight" plot moves forward;¹³ the mystery plot moves simultaneously forward and backward--"from the inception to the execution, as carried out by the criminal, and from the discovery back to what must have been the planning stages, as worked out by the detective."¹⁴ Christie has not rested the burden of the mystery on the shoulders of her detectives in either "Three Blind Mice" or The Mousetrap. Instead she has given her reader Major Metcalf and Miss Casewell.

The former is the policeman in disguise who solves the crime in time to save Molly's¹⁵ life in "Three Blind Mice." The latter is the lost sister who recognizes her brother in time to join forces with Major Metcalf in The Mousetrap. Moving forward, the plot begins with the oldest of three children who, long ago, had been mistreated by foster parents. This eldest child now determines to kill the three people he blames for his young brother's death. The first victim is the foster mother, Maureen Lyon; the second, the billeting officer in "Three Blind Mice" but the magistrate in The Mousetrap, is Mrs. Boyle who placed the children in the foster home; the third is the teacher who ignored the younger boy's letter in which he pleaded for help. Posing as a policeman, the older boy interviews and interrogates the snowbound guests and proprietors of an English guest house until he determines who will be his next victim. His main problem is maneuvering everyone to the right place at the right time because he must elude suspicion until he has committed both murders.

In both the short story and the play, Major Metcalf is the detective force who must work the puzzle backwards. He is a policeman who has traded places with the real Major Metcalf. His first real clue comes as Molly announces that the police are on their way to Monkswell Manor. His startled reaction teases the reader and the audience into regarding him as a murder suspect when, in fact, he is the representative of the law who knows that the police are indeed already there. Later, in retrospect the audience realizes that Miss Casewell, an addi-

to the play, must have recognized her brother and organized the pieces of the puzzle in her mind in time to warn Major Metcalf. Once the puzzle is solved, the reader and/or the audience cannot but realize that the only two possible victims were Mrs. Boyle and Molly; however, once again Dame Agatha has very cleverly concerned her audience primarily with the identity of the murderer, thereby allowing the two future victims to be considered for a time as murder suspects.

Since suspense is the key to the success of a well-made detective plot, the author must give the reader all the clues he needs to solve the crime himself, but they must be cleverly disguised so that he sees them without realizing their importance. The obvious explanation is the wrong one--the red herring, and the subtle explanation, right in front of the reader's eyes, so to speak, is the true one. Thus, in G. C. Ramsey's words, "No one can say he has been cheated."¹⁶

If the basic plot is the same, the means for adapting the type of suspense peculiar to the different genre must rest with the other structural elements, one of which is character development. Although the characters, too, remain basically the same in The Mousetrap as they were in "Three Blind Mice," still the overall demands of the stage require some changes that the short story does not. Many small changes exist for no apparent reason other than whim. For example, Molly Wainwright Davis in "Three Blind Mice" becomes Mollie Waring Ralston in The Mousetrap. Maureen Lyon's alias is Gregg in the short story but Stanning in the play. Major Metcalf's real name is Inspector

Tanner in "Three Blind Mice," but he does not announce his real name in the play. Also, the three children's last name is not revealed to the reader in "Three Blind Mice," whereas the audience in The Mousetrap knows that their last name was Corrigan. These changes are very minor and do not affect the overall effectiveness of either genre.

Christie's adaptations of the characters' situations and relationships intensify the suspense to which the mystery writer gives precedence even in the realm of character. Edmund Wilson has dismissed the Christie characters as flatly two-dimensional and contrived.¹⁷ Judged by the standards of straight fiction, his observation is true.¹⁸ Much of the success of straight novels relies on the readers' capacities to identify with one or more of the characters;¹⁹ however, in the detective novel the principal requirement is that every character be a suspect. As G. C. Ramsey observes, since "we do not like to consider our friends potential thieves and murderers, and few of us fancy ourselves in these roles, it is difficult if not impossible to have a detective story in which the reader can identify with any of the characters, and please remember that the detective and narrator are suspect, too."²⁰ For example, in "Three Blind Mice" Trotter cautions all the people in the house that he must know which of them has had some connection with the Longridge Farm case and stomps from the room.²¹ Only then does Major Metcalf reveal that Mrs. Boyle, as a district billeting officer in World War II, was the one who sent the three children to the farm ("Mice" p. 50). This revelation sets Mrs. Boyle up as a possible

victim and points a guilty finger at Major Metcalf because of his unexplained knowledge and his grave accusation, "You were responsible for sending those children to Longridge Farm" ("Mice" p. 50). The revelation that Mrs. Boyle was the billeting officer also causes the reader to wonder about Molly's earlier recognition of Mrs. Boyle ("Mice" p. 51). In a conversation with Giles, prior to Mrs. Boyle's arrival, Molly says that Mrs. Boyle is certain to know what beginners they are at the guest house business because, "she's that kind of woman" ("Mice" p. 12). When Giles asks her how she knows since she has not yet met Mrs. Boyle, Molly (as the narrative tells the reader), "turned away" ("Mice" p. 12). Since the audience in a theatre does not have the advantage of the printed page, Christie must somehow create the same impression on the stage. She affects this impression by changing Mrs. Boyle's identity to that of the magistrate who placed the children at Longridge Farm. After Major Metcalf's accusation, Mollie stares at Mrs. Boyle and says, "Yes, I was right. It was you."²² The foreshadowing accomplished in the short story is not present in the play, but the desired effect is the same: this exchange creates a question concerning Molly's and Major Metcalf's unexplained knowledge which remains unanswered at this point.

Trotter's identity is the same in both the play and the short story, but his name changes. In "Three Blind Mice" he is Georgie, the brother of Jimmy who died, and in The Mousetrap he is Jim, the brother of Georgie who died. However, Molly's actual identity is

altered. In "Three Blind Mice" Molly is the sister of the teacher to whom the youngest child had written for help, and so the brother of one would kill the sister of the other. However, in The Mousetrap Dame Agatha heightens the suspense by changing Mollie's character to that of the teacher herself. Her link to Longridge Farm is much stronger, then, in the play, and the theatre audience, which demands a tighter plot, is not disappointed.

For various reasons the move from the short story to the play necessitated some additions or deletions of characters. For example, Mrs. Casey, Maureen Lyon's landlady, is not in the play because the Culver Street murder is only heard at the very beginning of the play before the stage lights come up. The policemen and the workers who share a scene all their own in "Three Blind Mice" do not appear in The Mousetrap because the confines of a stage production lead Miss Christie to limit the number of practical sets in a two-act play. The scene is interesting, particularly for the brief but detailed character descriptions of the two workers, but it is not crucial to the plot line, so it disappears in the play. In "Three Blind Mice" the Davises have no servants, but in The Mousetrap the one servant, Mrs. Barlow, has left early to avoid becoming marooned by the snow. She does not appear on the stage, but the reference to her exists mainly to give Mollie a functional but noncommittal entrance line.

The most interesting character addition, that is also a major structural change from the short story to the play, is Leslie Casewell.

Strangely enough, she does not even appear in "Three Blind Mice," and yet, through careful dialogue manipulation, Christie points to her as a very likely murder suspect in The Mousetrap and uses her to point more strongly to the other characters' guilt. On one level she functions as a foil for Christopher Wren. Her masculine appearance and manner are a direct contrast to his rather effeminate ones in the play and serve to make the two appear to the audience as complimentary characters--that is, as sister and brother. If she is the missing sister from the Longridge Farm case, then Christopher is the brother, the murderer. On another level, her presence permits another ending, a more dramatically effective one than in the short story. "Three Blind Mice" ends as Major Metcalf, the policeman in disguise, leaps from behind the couch to prevent Trotter from shooting Molly. He takes Trotter into custody as Molly and Giles discuss their anniversary-gift trips to London which precipitated all their jealousies and suspicions. However, in The Mousetrap, it is Leslie Casewell who enters opportunely and soothingly persuades Trotter, her brother, to leave with her. Only then does Major Metcalf reveal that he is the policeman and that Miss Casewell has brought her realization to his attention just in time. The conversation between Molly and Giles is basically the same as it was in "Three Blind Mice." A major reason for Miss Casewell's presence at this point is, of course, to reveal that she and Trotter are indeed the two survivors of Longridge Farm. However, the change also covers the functional impracticality of Metcalf's leap

from behind the couch onstage. Without an awkward lighting maneuver--perhaps a blackout--he could not have sneaked into position without the audience's awareness.

Finally, and most significantly, Miss Casewell and Mollie have a conversation in The Mousetrap which is completely absent in "Three Blind Mice" and which very cleverly sets up both women as suspects as well as victims. Following Major Metcalf's revelation about Mrs. Boyle's involvement in the Longridge Farm case, Metcalf, Mrs. Boyle, and Paravicini exit, leaving Mollie and Leslie Casewell alone onstage (Mousetrap p. 30). Mollie comments that the song "Three Blind Mice" is indeed horrid, at which point Miss Casewell asks Mollie if the tune reminds her of her unhappy childhood. Although Mollie denies that she was unhappy as a child, the seeds of suspicion have been sown. Miss Casewell then reveals that she lived through a very unhappy childhood but that she now lives for a happy future--a future which she controls. The whole conversation is less than a page in length, but it does serve to further implicate both Mollie and Miss Casewell as the sister at Longridge Farm. Since the audience is still not certain what the murderer's motivation is, they are further confused by this device which points to both Mollie and Leslie Casewell as both murder victim and suspect.

As characterization is a major element of literary structure, so dialogue is crucial to characterization. Not all short story writers employ dialogue, but fortunately Dame Agatha's proficiency at present-

ing believable dialogue enables her to move easily from one genre to another. In a most unusual linguistic study of Agatha Christie's writing, Frank Behre criticizes her stories' dialogue as "careless in the choice of structure and wording, brimful of hackneyed phrases and cliches, and disdainful of elegant variations; in short, like everyday conversations . . ." ²³ Yet, it is that very quality "like everyday conversations" that is the main reason for the success of Agatha Christie's dialogue. For one thing, it is the aim of the playwright to present speech patterns reminiscent of those of the audience. As Sam Smiley notes in his book, Playwriting: The Structure of Action, "Dialogue represents spoken language . . . Every dramatist, writing for actors' voices and listeners' ears, is a composer of a special kind of music, the melody of human speech." ²⁴ Moreover, in both The Mousetrap and "Three Blind Mice," Christie uses this everyday style of speech to trick her readers and her audience once again with a red herring. Christie camouflages the real clues with the superficial conversation of her characters. Behre, himself, admits, "The main stream of events . . . flows through the dialogue--slowly, haltingly, tortuously until it reaches open water, where the truth is unravelled, freed from the tangles of lies, subterfuges, faked alibis, and false conclusions." ²⁵

Necessarily, the addition of Miss Casewell to the play forced some changes in the assignment of lines to various characters. These changes do not particularly affect plot, and they are among the few alterations which do affect heightening of suspense. However, because

Christie eliminates some references to World War I from The Mousetrap, other changes in dialogue were necessary which do affect suspense. For example, following Mrs. Boyle's murder and Trotter's talk with Molly in both the short story and the play, Christopher and Molly find themselves alone together. Again, the changes in this scene do not affect the basic plot line, but they are important because in each case they promote the kind of suspense peculiar to each genre. In "Three Blind Mice" Christopher's confession about his unhappy childhood and his career in combat causes him to look even guiltier than he had before. Apparently, his mother was killed in an air raid, but he projected the experience onto himself and deserted from the Army ("Mice" p. 64). This revelation, of course, further implicates him as the murderer since Trotter has told everyone that the older boy was a deserter. In the play, the war references are not as pointed, so Christopher says only that he deserted and that he deeply resents his mother's death (Mousetrap p. 44). Since her death is not connected to the war at all in the play, the audience may infer that he was placed at Longridge Farm as a result of his mother's death. Thus he appears again to be the oldest child from Longridge Farm. In this same conversation, Molly's lines also change. In "Three Blind Mice," she reveals that she was engaged to a young fighter pilot who was killed, and when pressed by Christopher, she continues: ". . . I'd had a nasty shock when I was younger. I came up against something that was rather cruel and beastly. It predisposed me to think that life was always--

horrible. When Jack was killed it just confirmed my belief that the whole of life was cruel and treacherous ("Mice" p. 65). In the play, the war reference, pertinent when the original draft of the story appeared, disappears again:

CHRISTOPHER What was it? Something very bad?

MOLLIE Something I've never forgotten.

CHRISTOPHER Was it to do with Giles?

MOLLIE No, it was long before I met Giles.

CHRISTOPHER You must have been very young. Almost a child.

MOLLIE Perhaps that's why it was so--awful. It was horrible--horrible . . . I try to put it out of my mind. I try never to think about it. (Mousetrap p. 44)

In this instance, the dialogue gives the audience another very strong hint that Mollie might be the sister and therefore either the murderer or the next victim. Moreover, as Leslie Casewell's complimentary masculinity makes her seem to be a likely sister to the effeminate Christopher Wren, so does the mutual sympathy between Christopher and Molly promote the possibility that the young proprietress is his sister. In the short story, the emphasis is less direct, but still the implication exists:

"That's very interesting," said Christopher in a level voice.

"What is?"

"That you're not afraid to be--alone with me. You're not, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

"Why aren't you afraid, Molly?"

"I don't know--I'm not." ("Mice" p. 61)

In the play, where a writer must ensure that a point registers instantaneously with the audience, Christie is less subtle:

MOLLIE . . . Considering that I never saw you until yesterday, we seem to know each other rather well.

CHRISTOPHER Yes, it's odd, isn't it?

MOLLIE I don't know. I suppose there's a sort of--sympathy between us. (Mousetrap p. 44)

Clearly, whether Christie altered dialogue to eliminate war references or to adapt to the immediacy of the stage, her crucial concern was that key element of all mystery fiction--suspense.

Dropping the war period as the background for The Mousetrap was insignificant compared to other changes in setting that Christie made to adapt her story to the stage. Continuity is crucial to most art forms, and the physical time and effort necessary to change a full set on a stage break the continuity on which both the playwright and the audience rely. The Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, originally applied to tragedy, apply equally to the well-made play--which includes the mystery drama--in that they ensure the audience the uninterrupted concentration necessary to maintain the suspense of the murder plot. Furthermore, the physical limitations of the theatre impose problems that the narrative writer need not face. For example, "Three Blind Mice" takes place at 74 Culver Street, in several rooms at Monkswell Manor, in the exterior of Monkswell Manor, and at the police station. However, The Mousetrap has only one main setting, the Great Hall of Monkswell Manor. The opening scene, at 24 Culver Street in this case, is played in total darkness at the beginning of Act I. The audience hears the sounds that simulate the murder, but when the lights come up, they do so on the Great Hall in which the rest of the play takes place. Superficially, the short story, with more

settings, has the advantage, especially in the scene immediately preceding Mrs. Boyle's murder. Christie invites the reader into the mind of each character, in the room where each happens to be, to examine and to judge each at that crucial moment. Everyone--Molly, Giles, Paravicini, Christopher Wren, and Major Metcalf--is implicated--strongly. However, this omniscient point of view shifts into the objective position just prior to the moment of the crime, and the reader is left suspended and just as uncertain as he was before.

The time setting changes too between the short story and the play to meet the continuity requirements of stage production. The Mousetrap takes place in fewer than twenty-four hours. Act I is set in late afternoon of one day, and the play ends the following day after lunch. Mollie enters immediately after the sound simulation of Maureen Lyon's murder, and everyone but Trotter has entered by the end of the first scene in Act I; Trotter enters early in the second scene. However, "Three Blind Mice" spans three days and two nights. On the first day Maureen Lyon is murdered, Molly and Giles return home separately, and Christopher Wren arrives. On the second day, Mrs. Boyle arrives at Monkswell Manor, the two workers visit the police station, and Major Metcalf comes to the guest house. That night Paravicini arrives with the story that his car has overturned in a snow drift. On the third day Trotter arrives, Mrs. Boyle is murdered, and the murder is solved. The short story does not suffer from the spread of action over three days; in fact, the narrative form lends itself to

intensifying suspense in this way. The dramatic illusion, however, profits from the adherence to Aristotle's emphasis on unity of time, place, and action. In The Mousetrap the Lyon murder takes place on the first day; the guests arrive later that day. Mrs. Boyle dies the next day after lunch, and the final act begins ten minutes after Mrs. Boyle's death. Thus, the drama is made more effective by compacting the time span into twenty-four hours.

Finally, Christie adapted her short story into a play by means of some changes which can only be explained by the shift from narration, what the author can tell, to performance, what the audience can see. As Otto Reinert notes, ". . . even narrative, whether in prose or verse, is, despite an area of possible overlap, different from drama. A novelist or an epic poet can suspend action indefinitely, do without dialogue . . . and discourse abstractly on any number of subjects . . . He can judge and analyze his characters in authorial comment, by god-like ubiquity and omniscience enter at will into their hearts and souls, and just as easily exit back into straight narrative of external events."²⁷ Both short story and play provide advantages in the individual genres because of the different demands of a reading and a viewing audience. For example, the narrative approach of the short story allows the reader to see, at the author's discretion, into the minds of the characters, and masks the ages of the characters as the performance cannot. On the other hand, the play provides the audience the illusion of reality that the narrative cannot duplicate. That is, the drama offers

the ultimate red herring: the audience has seen every clue enacted before its very eyes and is still taken by surprise in the final moments of action.

In the first scene of "Three Blind Mice," the narration tells the reader explicitly that the murderer of Maureen Lyon was male: A man in a dark overcoat, with his 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. He put his finger to the bell and heard it shrilling in the basement below ("Mice" p. 7).²⁶ Later, Trotter does acknowledge the possibility that the murderer might have been a woman ("Mice" p. 59), but the narrative technique has already eliminated that possibility. No doubt Christie was relying on the reader's faulty memory or lack of perception; nevertheless, the fact is that the sex of the murderer is definite from the beginning of the short story. Contrastingly, the likelihood that the murderer is a woman is much stronger in The Mousetrap. Again, but much more pointedly in the play, Sergeant Trotter suggests to Mollie and the audience that the murderer might have been a woman:

TROTTER Mrs Ralston, let me tell you something. I've had all possibilities in mind ever since the beginning. The boy Georgie, the father--and someone else. There was a sister, you remember.

MOLLIE Oh--the sister?

TROTTER (rising and moving to Mollie) It could have been a woman who killed Maureen Lyon. A woman. (Moving C) The muffler pulled up and the man's felt hat pulled well down, and the killer whispered, you know. It's the voice that gives the sex away. (He moves above the sofa table) Yes, it might have been a woman.

MOLLIE Miss Casewell?

TROTTER (moving to the stairs) She looks a bit old for the

part. (He moves up the stairs, opens the library door, looks in, then shuts the door) Oh yes, Mrs Ralston, there's a very wide field. (He comes down the stairs) There's yourself, for instance.

MOLLIE Me?

TROTTER You're about the right age (Mousetrap p. 41)

This conversation, cleverly situated as it is, again opens the field of suspects to include both Mollie and Miss Casewell. The Mollie-Miss Casewell conversation (Mousetrap p. 30), discussed earlier, takes place late in Act I; the Mollie-Christopher exchange immediately follows the one above with Mollie and Trotter. Examined closely, this ordering creates an impressive effect. All three conversations implicate Mollie as the murderer. In the one with Leslie Casewell, she appears to be the sister from Longridge Farm because of the reference to her unhappy childhood. Trotter openly states that she is a suspect because of her age. And the spontaneous sympathy generated with Christopher again causes her to seem to be the sister. Christopher not only does nothing to turn the finger of guilt away from himself but in fact further implicates himself by establishing the sympathetic (possibly brother-sister) relationship with Mollie; and Leslie Casewell looks guilty because of the troubled childhood to which she admits in her conversation with Mollie. Ironically, she too seems to be the alter-ego of Christopher's character (again implying the possible brother-sister relationship) because they both have now admitted to the unhappy pasts that the children at Longridge Farm must have suffered. However, Trotter's line, "She looks a bit old for the part . . ." (Mousetrap p. 41) shifts the focus of guilt temporarily away from her.

Clearly, the range of suspects is wider in the stage.

Another example of the different approaches in the short story and the play centers around that very curious character, Mrs. Boyle. Agatha Christie's character portraits are one of her most notable talents, and in Mrs. Boyle she has painted a detailed and delightful picture to rival that of her renowned Caroline Sheppard from The Murder of Roger Schroyd. Onstage, in the hands of a capable actress, Mrs. Boyle is paradoxically both obnoxious and endearing. Fortunately, she enters early for the audience enjoys her only until the end of Act I, at which point she is murdered. The play offers only limited stage directions: "Mrs. Boyle enters through the archway up R, carrying a suitcase, some magazines and her gloves. She is a large, imposing woman in a very bad temper" (Mousetrap p. 7). The rest of her character must and does come through in her lines, although she does not reveal the extensive information that the narration provides the reader in "Three Blind Mice." For example, the description of Mrs. Boyle as she enters in the short story gives the reader as vivid a mental picture of this imposing lady as her actual presence does on the stage: "Mrs. Boyle herself did not lighten the prevailing gloom. She was a large, forbidding-looking woman with a resonant voice and a masterful manner. Her natural aggressiveness had been heightened by a war career of persistent and militant usefulness" ("Mice" p. 19). Later Christie treats the reader to a two-page tour ("Mice" pp. 28-30) of Mrs. Boyle's mind, during which the reasons for Mrs. Boyle's coming

to Monkswell Manor and for her general behavior become clear. Christie also repeats the clue about Mrs. Boyle's important and secret war career, but in this case the rambling narrative serves to mask the importance of the implication of that clue.

Giles, too, appears more guilty in "Three Blind Mice" than he does in The Mousetrap because of the license which the narration permits that the performance does not. Immediately following Mrs. Boyle's death, the five suspects and Trotter have gathered in the kitchen as Trotter begins his interrogation. Giles bursts into the questioning to protect Molly but finds the proverbial tables turned upon himself:

"Can't you stop bullying her?" said Giles angrily. "Can't you see she's all in?"

"I'm investigating a murder, Mr. Davis--I beg your pardon--Commander Davis."

"I don't use my war rank, Sergeant."

"Quite so, sir." Trotter paused, as though he had made some subtle point" ("Mice" p. 55).

And indeed he has with the reader. The narrative license allows Christie to insert an interpretation of Trotter's pause that she cannot add in the play. Giles' admission that he does not use his war rank serves to implicate him as he has not been before. Although he and Christopher are about the same age ("Mice" p. 65), Giles constantly insists that Christopher is the right age to be the murderer. This behavior, coupled with the maneuver by Trotter, forces Giles, who has previously enjoyed relatively guiltless obscurity, into the forefront as another possible suspect.

Mr. Paravicini receives a treatment in the play that is uniquely

different from that in the short story. The reader first encounters Paravicini in "Three Blind Mice" when he arrives at Monkswell Manor in the middle of the night with the very probable story that his car has overturned in a snow drift. As Giles goes to the door to greet him, Molly peers at him through the banisters: "She saw an elderly man with a small black beard and Mephistophelian eyebrows. A man who moved with a young and jaunty step in spite of the gray at his temples" ("Mice" p. 27). Paravicini seems guilty of something immediately simply because he is not what he seems, and as Molly tells the reader soon after Paravicini's entrance, "He's a foreigner" ("Mice" p. 27). Guilt inevitably settles on anyone who is not British in an Agatha Christie work. However, Dame Agatha reveals her ploy in the one "heavy-handed" stage direction in The Mousetrap. The other guests have exited, leaving Mollie and Giles alone on the stage. The door bell rings; Mollie exclaims, "Who can that be?" Giles' answer, "Probably the Culver Street murderer," sets up Paravicini's entrance two lines later: "Mr Paravicini staggers in up R, carrying a small bag. He is foreign and dark and elderly with a rather flamboyant moustache. He is a slightly taller edition of Hercule Poirot, which may give a wrong impression to the audience . . ." (Mousetrap p. 13). A double red herring! To the audience familiar with Christie's work, Paravicini will look like her famous sleuth, Hercule Poirot. He has the famous accent, too, which is so often associated with the Belgian detective, and his mannerisms are particularly Poirot-like in his early scenes.

Since Trotter has not yet entered, the audience will conclude that Paravicini is the law in disguise and will then be especially ripe for Trotter's entrance as the police sergeant and Paravicini's increasingly suspicious actions. When Mollie reveals to Trotter that Paravicini wears make-up to look older instead of younger, the audience is ready to suspect Paravicini who is obviously trying to hide something since he is in disguise. The revelation at the play's end that he has dealings in the black market is not completely satisfactory because the audience has had no hint of that involvement before, but it does serve to support the assumption that Christie means for him to look very innocent and then very guilty as part of the unravelling of the mystery.

A final example of the structural adaptations necessitated by the move from short story to play concerns the description of the murderer which Molly hears on the radio in both cases. Since the reader has witnessed the murder of Mrs. Lyon first-hand through the narration in "Three Blind Mice," Christie gives only a brief mention of it as Molly and Giles listen to the news: "The news consisted mainly of grim warning about the weather, the usual deadlock in foreign affairs, spirited bickering in Parliament, and a murder in Culver Street, Paddington" ("Mice" p. 14). Almost immediately the doorbell rings, and, as Molly turns to see Christopher Wren for the first time, she thinks: "How alike . . . were all men in their livery of civilization. Dark overcoat, gray hat, muffler round the neck" ("Mice" p. 15). However, since the presentational mode of the drama does not allow the audience

to see into the characters' minds without an artificial aside or soliloquy, Christie allows Mollie to literally act her thoughts on the stage.

Again, the stage directions are particularly important:

(Giles exits through the arch up R, carrying the sign board. 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)

Motorists are warned against ice-bound roads.

(The door bell rings)

The heavy snow is expected to continue, and throughout the country . . .

(Mollie enters, crosses to the desk, switches off the radio and hurries off through the arch up R)

MOLLIE (off) How do you do?

CHRISTOPHER (off) Thanks so much (Mousetrap pp. 4-5).

This maneuver by Christie has thrown suspicion onto both Giles and Christopher. Obviously, Giles was dressed as the murderer was, and when Trotter later reveals that Giles was in London, unbeknownst to Mollie, the cloud of guilt around him thickens. Christopher, too, is implicated as he was in the short story. Just as the news of the Culver Street Murder comes over the radio, Christopher enters. Of course, he, too, is dressed as the murderer was. Christie places more emphasis on the murderer's garb in the play simply because that technique allows her to subject more characters to heavier suspicion.

Miss Casewell, Mrs. Boyle, and Mollie also wear overcoats and mufflers. Thus, the visual approach of the theatre makes suspects of characters who could not appear so in the short story. Certainly, the greater the number of suspects, the greater the suspense.

Clearly, then, Agatha Christie was a proven literary technician who evaluated her audience and then manipulated her methods to amuse the particular audience for which she was writing. As fellow mystery writer Margery Allingham observed, her major achievement was that she entertained "more people for more hours at a time than almost any other writer of her generation."²⁸ But Dame Agatha was not merely an entertainer. Never wavering in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of all mystery writers--the maintenance of peak suspense--, she made extensive changes in literary structure to effectively adapt her successful narrative, "Three Blind Mice," to the even more successful stage production, The Mousetrap. The requirements of the two genres differ because of the differing demands of the reading and viewing audience; Agatha Christie analyzed and met these demands to earn and retain her title as the undisputed "mistress of mystery."

Footnotes

¹In his book, Agatha Christie: Mistress of Mystery, G. C. Ramsey notes that "'The Mousetrap,' Mrs. Christie admits with a smile, was in fact written to supply the play Hamlet had in mind but never got around to seeing performed in full . . ." pp. 44-5.

²"Dame Agatha: Queen of the Maze," Time, 26 January 1976, p. 75.

³Time, p. 75.

⁴G. C. Ramsey, Agatha Christie: Mistress of Mystery (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1967), p. 74.

⁵Jeffrey Feinman, The Mysterious World of Agatha Christie (New York: Universal Publishing and Distributing Corporation, 1975), Cover.

⁶Nigel Dennis, "Genteel Queen of Crime: Agatha Christie Puts Her Zest for Life into Murder," Life, 14 May 1956, p. 87.

⁷Ramsey, Title page.

⁸Clare D. Hinsman, ed., Contemporary Authors: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Authors and Their Works, 1st rev. ed. (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1976), Vol. 17-20, p. 139.

⁹Julian Symons, Mortal Consequences: A History--from the Detective Story to the Crime Novel (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 199.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Sam Smiley, Playwriting: The Structure of Action (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 12.

¹³Ramsey, p. 6.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Christie spells this character's name Molly in "Three Blind Mice" but Mollic in The Mousetrap. Except for those references in which the play only is involved, the first spelling--Molly--will designate the character in both genres.

¹⁶Ramsey, p. 39.

¹⁷Edmund Wilson, Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Co., 1950), p. 234.

¹⁸Smiley, p. 91.

⁹Ramsey, p. 2.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Agatha Christie, "Three Blind Mice" in The Mousetrap (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1974), p. 49. [Subsequent references to this short story appear in the text.]

²²Agatha Christie, The Mousetrap (New York: Samuel French, 1954), p. 29. [Subsequent references to this play appear in the text.]

²³Frank Behre, Studies in Agatha Christie's Writings: The Behavior of A Good (Great) Deal, A Lot, Lots, Much, Plenty, Many, A Good (Great) Many, Gothenburg Studies in English, Vol. 19, ed. Alkar Ellegard (Goteborg, 1967), p. 31.

²⁴Smiley, p. 162.

²⁵Behre, p. 31.

²⁶Italics are not Agatha Christie's. They have been added for emphasis.

²⁷Otto Reinert, ed., Modern Drama, Alternate edition (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1966), p. xiii.

²⁸Stanley J. Kunitz and Vineta Colby, ed., Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature, 1st supplement (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1955), p. 197.

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