

Mousetraps: Sunday, June 17 (2 Samuel 11: 26-12:10, 13-15; Luke 7: 36-8:3)

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

How do you prove that your uncle killed your father on his way to seizing both a crown and a sister-in-law for himself? Hamlet decides that a bit of drama called “The Mouse-trap” might be the way to “catch the conscience of the king”:

I have heard  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
Have by the very cunning of the scene  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaimed their malefactions.

The plan works: Claudius reacts as a guilty man would when he sees himself and his crime exposed on stage. The mouse is trapped through the indirection of art.

So, too, is David trapped when the prophet Nathan uses a story to catch his king’s conscience. After turning Uriah the Hittite into canon fodder in order to have his way with the man’s wife, Bathsheba, David thinks that he has gotten away with murder. And he might have, had Nathan not used a fiction to flush the truth out of hiding. He tells the king about a certain rich man who, not content with all that he had, took the sole possession of a poor man. Reacting to this injustice with the righteous indignation of the Lord’s anointed, David is enraged that anything so egregious, so pitiless, should take place in his kingdom. Restitution and damages are not enough. The rich man must die!

As the trap clicks shut, Nathan takes full measure of the sputtering king before he moves in for the kill: “You are the man!” We’re told that David was spared his own death sentence by the fact that he repented on the spot.

Jesus too was adept at allowing a narrative to set an ambush and draw the listener in. The winding path, of course, was not the only one he took. The Gospels frequently show him preaching straightforwardly. But quite as often, and perhaps

more characteristically, he resorted to the curved ball of a parable or the seduction of a riddle—that is, to the “very cunning” of a story that forces the listener to come clean. There were no kings in his audience, but he had his fair share of scribes and Pharisees, rich in righteousness and proud in the spiritual treasures they possessed.

Like Simon, for instance. Luke tells us that this substantial citizen invited Jesus to his home for dinner, perhaps out of genuine curiosity about the itinerant rabbi, perhaps out of a desire to be the first to entertain a newly famous miracle worker. With the stage set for a decorous evening, there suddenly appears an uninvited guest whose reputation has preceded her—“a woman in the city, who was a sinner.” One can imagine Simon’s reaction to her as she makes her way, weeping uncontrollably, through the undoubtedly all-male banquet, then stations herself behind the recumbent Jesus and starts to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Luke adds that while she “continued kissing his feet,” she also anoints them with perfumed oil. “Over the top” is the phrase that comes to mind.

Simon is understandably appalled: the alleged prophet is blind to what even the dimmest person in the house can plainly see. Jesus allows himself to be handled in public by a notorious woman who, with her unbound hair and hysterical display, is rendering him as ritually impure as she is herself. What can he be thinking?

Then Jesus tells a very short story that lets us know. A certain creditor had two men who owed him money, one a great deal, the other a smaller amount. Faced with two debtors, neither of whom could repay the loan, the creditor decided to cancel both obligations. Jesus asks Simon which man would love the creditor more. Suspecting a rhetorical sleight of hand, the Pharisee hedges his bet: “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” Exactly!

But no sooner does Jesus praise Simon for having judged aright than he makes the narrative disappear altogether. The fifth wall dissolves and the characters turn out to be none other than the righteous Simon and the “woman of the city, who is a sinner.” Because the Pharisee believes that he has very little to ask from Jesus, he has little to give him in return: not a drop of water, a kiss or a drop of oil. The woman, on the other hand, knows the enormity of the debt that has been canceled. As a result, she crashes a party to make a fool of herself, skipping all appropriate expressions of thanks and soaring straight into the stratosphere of the outrageous. Forgiven much, she loves much more than good taste could ever allow.

We are not told what Simon made of all this. Commentators reassure us that by the standards of the day he was not really a derelict host, nor were Jesus' words to him intended to be rude. Simon had no cause to take personal offense. Perhaps. Yet it seems likely that he would have been furious, not only at having been compared unfavorably to a mad woman of no standing in the community, but also at having participated in his own humiliation. Hadn't he, when asked to evaluate the two debtors in the story, offered the "right" answer that ended up putting him in the wrong? Reason enough to never again let down his guard.

Or might he, like David, allow himself to be trapped long enough to take the point and become someone new—someone who could, in fact, be forgiven much and then go on to love in spades?