



## **“The Play’s the Thing” The Dramatic Space of *Hamlet*’s Theatre**

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**Abstract.** In my paper I investigate the use of the dramatic space in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The tragedy will be observed with the method of “pre-performance criticism,” which first and foremost makes use of the several potentials a play contains and puts on display *before* an actual performance; it offers, also in the light of the secondary literature, various ways of interpretation, resulting from the close-reading of the play and considers their possible realizations in the space of the stage both from the director’s and the actor’s point of view, including the consequences the respective lines of interpretation may have as regards the play as a whole. *Hamlet* does not only raise the questions of the theatrical realization of a play but it also reflects on the ontology of the dramatic space by putting the performance of *The Mousetrap*-play into one of its focal points and scrutinises the very interaction between the dramatic space and the realm of the audience. I will discuss the process how *Hamlet* makes use of his private theatre and how the dramatic space is transformed as *The Murder of Gonzago* turns into *The Mousetrap*-performance.

**Keywords:** *Hamlet*; *The Mousetrap*; dramatic space; pre-performance criticism

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup> does not only raise the questions of the theatrical realization of a play but it also reflects on the ontology of the dramatic space by putting the performance of *The Mousetrap*-play into one of its focal points and

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<sup>1</sup> In the present paper I quote the play according to the Norton Shakespeare edition (Greenblatt et. al. (ed.) 2008, 1683-1784). The locus of the quotation in the title is: *Hamlet* (II;2; 581).

scrutinises the very interaction between the dramatic space and the realm of the audience. In what follows, I will investigate how the mental space transforms into physical stage space in one of Shakespeare's longest tragedies, concentrating primarily on three texts: the Hecuba-soliloquy (II;2), the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy (III;1) and the *Mousetrap*-scene (III;2). In the course of my investigation I will rely on the method of "pre-performance criticism," which first and foremost makes use of the several potentials a play contains and puts on display *before* an actual performance; it offers, also in the light of the secondary literature, various ways of interpretation, resulting from the close-reading of the play and considers their possible realizations in the space of the stage both from the director's and the actors' point of view, including the consequences the respective lines of interpretation may have as regards the play as a whole.

Hamlet's enigmatic "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy has been widely discussed among scholars and several classic interpretations have been put forward. My argument takes its clue from Alex Newell's reading (cf. Jenkins 1982, 485), who emphasises that the text should be interpreted in its immediate context in the play, thus the soliloquy is primarily about the question whether Hamlet should proceed with the staging of the *Mousetrap*.

It is indeed important to observe where exactly the soliloquy is recited in the tragedy. The last time the Prince appeared in front of the audience was in Act II Scene 2, delivering the Hecuba-speech. His last words before the famous starting line of the "To Be Or Not To Be" were: "The play's the thing // Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II;2; 581-582). The exact time that elapsed between the two scenes is not given but Hamlet asked the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* "tomorrow night" (II;2; 517); therefore, the time gap between the two soliloquies must be less than a day. The fact that Hamlet asked the players to insert some of his own lines into the performance and that he promised that he would visit them at that very night ("I'll leave you till night" (II;2; 523)) shows that the idea of the theatrical performance is fresh on his mind and preoccupies him to such an extent that the soliloquy delivered in the meantime can hardly be independent of this topic. Hamlet enters the stage in Act III Scene 3 by immediately starting his soliloquy, which might give the impression that the train of thought (and possibly the soliloquy as well) has already started in his mind offstage and the audience can "join in" *in medias res*.

It is important to note that during the soliloquy, Claudius and Polonius are hiding to spy on Hamlet while he encounters Ophelia. This raises the question if they also overhear the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy immediately preceding the Ophelia-scene or if the speech is unheard by them and is only available for Hamlet and the audience. In the first case, Claudius will be the first person in the long queue of the soliloquy's interpreters who will have to come up with a reading to understand Hamlet's behaviour. The general nature of the speech's topic, which

will be a target of a detailed discussion later on, also puts the King on a shaky ground when he makes an attempt to “look into” the Prince’s “head.” Nevertheless, his words after the Ophelia-scene, in which he gives voice to his doubts concerning Polonius’s proposal that Hamlet’s disturbed attitude roots in love (“Love? His affections do not that way tend, // Nor what he spake, though it lacked from a little, // Was not like madness.” (III;1; 161-163)), might also originate not only from the encounter between the two youths but also from overhearing the ambiguous and, thus for Claudius, also disturbing monologue. If, however, Claudius and Polonius do not hear the soliloquy delivered by Hamlet, the situation will forecast the dramatic pattern of the Prayer-scene (Act III Scene 3), where Hamlet is standing and talking behind the kneeling Claudius, who – seemingly – does not hear his nephew behind his back. Thus, it seems that both possibilities are available for directors. However, there seems to be no evidence that Hamlet would be aware of the eavesdropping men in his presence.

The exact reference of the so often quoted first line of the soliloquy has always puzzled readers of *Hamlet*. In my interpretation, this initial question is a translation of another problem, which is not uttered explicitly but which has most probably occupied Hamlet’s mind even before he started to speak aloud. The question may also be read as asking how to make a choice between two conflicting attitudes, namely passive suffering under the circumstances he created around himself, and of active participation. This underlying inquiry is translated into a more universal question about existence because that silent endurance seems to bring survival, whereas active participation might result in death (as it eventually does at the end of the play). Yet, as it was argued above, active participation here may not mean whether to kill Claudius or not but whether to put *The Murder of Gonzago* on the stage or not, or, more precisely, what purpose should the performance serve: if Hamlet directs the play, will the production provoke Claudius, and thus open the can of worms? What is striking in observing the “To Be Or Not To Be”-soliloquy is that, in line with its several possible interpretations of great diversity, it does not include any specific reference to the actual situation of Hamlet or to the dramatic context: he does not mention the plan of staging *The Mousetrap*, as he does not specifically refer to the possible assassination of Claudius, or to the suicide of his own, either. This feature of the text makes it possible for productions to treat the exact locus of the speech liberally and move it from Act III Scene 1 and place it somewhere else, where it can still communicate its universal philosophy.

However, it is remarkable that in terms of generality, the soliloquy may be read as having a proxy in the tragedy, namely Hamlet’s instructions to the actors in the following scene, which also lacks any kind of a specific lead for the actors as to how to approach the characters they will impersonate in *The Mousetrap*. The question is why we have such a careful avoidance of focus and specific references

on Hamlet's part in the respective texts, which, under my reading, both seem to be connected to the play-within-the-play.

*The Mousetrap* or in its other name, *The Murder of Gonzago* depicts the central event of the tragedy in question, i.e., the alleged murder of Old Hamlet by his brother Claudius. Although this happened before the play starts and no one witnessed it, including Hamlet himself, through the figure of the Ghost this is the main impulse behind the whole play called *Hamlet*. When the Prince of Denmark decides to put this drama on stage, he finally agrees to take part in his play more actively than he has done so far. The plot of *The Mousetrap*<sup>2</sup> can be interpreted in two fundamental ways: either as a depiction of the past, representing the death of Old Hamlet, or as a prediction for the future where the murderer Lucianus is the stage-equivalent of Hamlet himself (cf. Hamlet introducing the stage murderer as "This is one Lucianus, *nephew* to the King" (emphasis mine – B. Sz.) (III;2; 223)) and the performance shows how Hamlet is going to take revenge on Claudius. In both ways, the purport of *The Mousetrap* is directed against Claudius: he is expected to react to the show and/or receive Hamlet's message. This goal also stands in accordance with the final decision formulated at the end of the Hecuba-soliloquy, i.e., to "catch the conscience of the King" (II;2; 581-582).

However, if we investigate Act II Scene 2 for the purposes of the play-within-the-play, a disturbing factor emerges: by the time Hamlet starts thinking in the second half of the Hecuba-soliloquy about a possible way of getting closer to the fulfilment of his revenge and finally arrives at the idea of the theatre as a "solution," he has already asked the players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* and told them that he is going to insert some lines into the play ("You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in't, could ye not?" (II;2; 517-518)). Both a theoretical investigation and a theatrical production have to account for this discrepancy, i.e., why Hamlet asks for a play about murder and what he wants to insert into it, if the idea of testing Claudius in such a way has not yet occurred to him.

Hamlet gives the assignment to the actors to put a play on stage after he was stunned by the breathtaking performance of the First Player. The Hecuba-soliloquy, which is engendered by this experience and takes place right after the actors leave the stage, starts with a comparison between the Prince himself and the player, including comments on the actor's brilliance:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his whole conceit  
That from her working all his visage waned,

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of *The Mousetrap* see Dover Wilson (2003, 137-198).

Tears in his eyes, distraction in ‘s aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.  
For Hecuba!  
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have? (II;2; 528-539)

The fundamental conclusion initially is that the First Player is capable of creating passion – perhaps even of performing action – Hamlet only desires to have. James Calderwood concludes similarly discussing the soliloquy when he states that here Hamlet complains about being overloaded with passionate potentials “to which he is denied expressive access” (1983, 32). In Calderwood’s meta-theatrical reading of the play, Hamlet here is in the role of an actor who is not allowed to proceed with his equipment for revenge: he is constrained by the plot of the tragedy he participates in; yet, outside the framework of theatrical self-reflection, it seems more convincing that it is Hamlet’s own personality and doubts which do not let him express his inner state openly and take action against his uncle. However, through Hamlet’s comparison between himself and the Player, they become the proxies of each other and the Prince of Denmark can suddenly see an immense potential in the world of the theatre, i.e., he can make something happen on the stage which he cannot yet realise in reality, at least not for a while. He realises that what he is unable to carry out, the First Actor can in fact do instead of him on a stage of the stage, in the framework of fiction: he can turn meaning into presence, into performance.

Importantly enough, Hamlet did not see the murder of his father, he was only informed about it from a source the authenticity of which is never completely verified, and it seems that at first the production of *The Mousetrap* is primarily for Hamlet’s own sake: this way he can *see* what he has only heard, he can reconstruct the crime like a good inspector and, most significantly, he can play the revenge plot in a test-tube, observing it from a safe position before he actually goes on realizing it in reality. Yet, such a venture can only be carried out effectively with the aid of professional actors, just like the one who delivered the story of Hecuba in such an excellent manner. This is why Hamlet asks for a play about murder and why he wants to add some further lines to make the play fit his own situation better. Significantly, he does not mention at all that the play is going to be performed in front of the King.

Thus, following the interpretation above, when asking for a performance, Hamlet especially wants this for himself and not for the public, especially not for the King, as he is not prepared for that move at this stage of the events: he only

needs a private theatre to observe his situation from the outside, through the living fiction of the theatre. Yet, throughout the Hecuba-soliloquy, the audience can witness how another idea is formed in Hamlet's mind. Through reflecting on the brilliance of the First Player, the Prince has to face his own inability to act and arrives at the conclusion that this kind of a passive attitude is to be condemned: he is even disgusted by himself: "Fie upon't, foh!" (II;2; 565). This conclusion pushes him forward to reach over the limits of his recent decision, and abandon the idea of his private theatre and engage himself in a more active plan. Yet, Hamlet seeks for such a solution in the framework of his already formulated plan, i.e., in the world of the theatre but this time – as opposed to his original plan – he realises that he needs to stretch out the focus of his theatre and gear it – direct it, in both senses of the word – more towards Claudius than himself:

I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,  
I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,  
I know my course. (II;2; 571-575)

Significantly, when Hamlet turns from self-condemnation to plan formulation, he refers to his brain: "About, my brain" (565). The word *about* in the given context means an imperative, 'into action' (Greenblatt et. al. 2008, 1731), while *brain* obviously relates to thinking. However, besides the plausible meaning of this half-line, that is 'let's think,' the choice of words probes into deeper layers of the dramatic event. Hamlet here wishes his *brain* to start *action*, he wishes his thoughts to manifest themselves in deeds, to make the inward outward and, in general terms, to reconcile contemplation with action (the significance of which regarding the whole play will be discussed later). This above quoted half-line tangibly represents the shift in the purpose of *The Mousetrap*, i.e., the private theatre (corresponding to the inner thoughts, the brain) should turn into a trap for Claudius by taking action.

However, Hamlet's plan initially seems to be rather naïve and he refers to an unnamed source, when he expresses his expectations about Claudius's reaction.

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. (II;2; 566-569)

Nevertheless, the following lines might explain why Hamlet believes in this effect of the theatre:

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ. (II;2; 570-571)

On one level, the subject of the sentence, *murder* refers to the performance as well, which *is* about murder as it is also reflected in its title, *The Murder of Gonzago*. Hamlet's conclusion that murder has no tongue yet it can speak is clearly reflected in the dumb show, where it is performed via mere action. Yet, on another level, *murder* metonymically can also refer to Claudius (the one who committed the deed) and whom Hamlet expects to react to the performance and through his behaviour to 'talk' about his own deed. Thus, Hamlet can see an intimate connection between the two references of the word *murder*, i.e., the plot of the performance and his uncle (as the "source" of murder) in the audience, affecting each other, just in the same way as he saw his own proxy in the figure of the First Player, who gave him the whole idea of making theatre, initially only a "private" one, just for himself. Consequently, what makes Hamlet sure that Claudius will react to the play performed in the Danish court is precisely his own experience he has gone through some minutes before when he saw the Player perform and when he was so moved by his acting that (as opposed to Claudius's *murder*) his own *grief*, "though it have no tongue" started to speak from him at the beginning of the Hecuba-soliloquy.

Some may argue, though, that Hamlet had already made up his mind to use the performance as a trap for the King when he asked the actors to put on the play and his mentioning this idea at the end of the Hecuba-soliloquy is only for the sake of the audience to let them know about his thoughts which had engendered previously (cf. Jenkins 1982, 272-273). Yet, in the constant present tense of theatrical time, it is more effective if the ideas of the Prince get formulated in our present, and it is not only a narration of thoughts, "sitting" already "ready-made" in his mind. In this interpretation, the prepositional phrase part of the above quoted lines: "before mine uncle" is born in the same moment as it is uttered and this is the very minute when Hamlet decides on involving Claudius as an audience as well, in order to test the credibility of the Ghost<sup>3</sup> and to gather evidence against the King. From this moment on, there is a different plan in his head, hence his original intention to insert "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (II;2; 518) is now overwritten from the point of view of the new purpose of the play. Thus, it is unnecessary to make assumptions about the exact loci of Hamlet's insertions since the whole text of the play-within-the-play might have been rewritten by him for the sake of his new goal. The already noted fact that the play has two names, i.e., *The Murder of Gonzago* and *The Mousetrap* becomes significant at this turning point:

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the uncertainty of the status of the Ghost see Jenkins (1982, 154-155), Greenblatt (2008, 1686-1687) and Hibbard (2008, 34-41).

when Hamlet first ordered a play from the actors for primarily himself, he asked for an already existing play with the former title. However, when the scope of the performance changes and it will be primarily directed against the King, and when the possibility rises that the whole play was rewritten by the Prince, it ceases to be its original version and turns out to be another play, its new aim now metaphorically<sup>4</sup> reflected in its name: *The Mousetrap*.

From the point of view of pre-performance criticism, what is primarily important in a theatrical production in this reading of the play is that the actor playing Hamlet should be aware of the accurate pace of the Prince's thoughts, i.e., to know in each and every minute of the scene what his exact intentions are with the performance of *The Mousetrap*. This is enough to make the acting of the protagonist credible enough; however, the production might further emphasise this transfer of the play-within-the-play's focus with visual representation as well. In a rudimentary sketch for a possible staging, it might be beneficial to direct the scene in question (Act II; Scene 2) in the area where the actual *Mousetrap*-performance will take place in Act III Scene 2, with the chairs of the future audience also present. In such a stage-set, Hamlet listens to the actors from his seat he is going to occupy during the performance later, and can also deliver his Hecuba-soliloquy from there, watching the now bare stage where his "private" theatre is going to take place. By the time the idea of involving his uncle in his enterprise occurs to him, he can suddenly move towards the royal chair of Claudius, which has been situated with its back towards the onstage playing area of the actors and turn it towards the spot where *The Mousetrap* will be realised later on.

Thus the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy is in a way a direct continuation of the end of the Hecuba-speech, discussing the question raised in the latter one on a much more general level. It accounts with the possibilities of his new decision, i.e., to be more active and to go public with the play of the actors. However, it is of utmost significance from the point of view of the interpretation of the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy that for Hamlet the performance of *The Mousetrap* also preserves its original aim besides being a trap for Claudius, namely to create a reconstruction and also a fictionalized, figurative ("tropical") representation of the vengeance for the Prince. At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned Hamlet's too general attitude concerning, in my interpretation, *The Mousetrap*, both in the famous soliloquy and in his instructions to the actors. It seems surprising that the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy does not mention the preparations for the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. with the following exchange: Claudius, already during the performance of the play, asks (perhaps characteristically) "What do *you* call the play?" (III;2;216, emphasis mine – B. Sz, instead of, e.g., "what is the play called?" or "What is its title?") Hamlet says: "*The Mousetrap*. Marry, how? Tropically" (i.e., as a trope/rhetorical figure, e.g., such as the best-known trope, metaphor, III;2;217, cf. Greenblatt 2008, 1713).



performance by name, whereas the Hecuba-soliloquy was loaded with exact details. However, we have noted previously that *The Mousetrap* performance in a certain way represents the most fundamental event of the whole play called *Hamlet*, namely the execution of murder: both in the past (murdering Old Hamlet and thus generating the whole plot) and in the expected future (taking revenge on Claudius and thus concluding the whole plot). If the play-within-the-play represents the whole play it is hosted in, then it seems understandable that Hamlet’s attitude towards *The Mousetrap* is similar to his attitude towards the whole play called *Hamlet*.

Hamlet’s relation to his own story and destination is thus enlightened by his two speeches relating to *The Mousetrap* (III;1; 58-90 and III;2; 1-40) and the fact that both the “To Be Or Not To Be”-soliloquy and his directions to the actors include almost exclusively general points. This indicates that Hamlet tries to approach the questions of his own plight universally and from the outside. The key to this interpretation is already there in the second line of his soliloquy: “Whether ‘tis nobler in the *mind* to suffer (/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune)” (emphasis mine – B. Sz.) (III;1; 59-60), whereas the line would perfectly be understandable without the insertion of *mind* (cf. Whether ‘tis nobler to suffer the slings... etc.), still it significantly indicates that the Prince is desperate to deal with the questions theoretically, i.e., he wants to solve what can be solved in his mind. He also wants to play the whole “game” in his mind and to kill Claudius there and not in physical reality, which explains why he first asked the players to perform a *play* about murder. This preference of Hamlet is further supported by the fact that he has assaulted the King *verbally* several times previously when the Prince was alone: “O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!” (I;5; 106) or “Bloody, bawdy, villain! // Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindles villain!” (II;2; 557-558). Observing Hamlet’s attitude towards his own story, it turns out that he wished to have a position of the outside spectator, not mingling with the events directly; yet, unfortunately for him, this position is already occupied by his father’s Ghost, who came literally from outside of the boundaries of the play, as he returned from the realm of death into the circle of the living. Significantly, however, he does not move into the centre of events but established a connection only with his son and sends him into the centre of dramatic action, while Hamlet apparently would also prefer the position of the outsider, joining or replacing Old Hamlet.

Some theatrical productions<sup>5</sup> involve Hamlet in the cast of *The Mousetrap*, for example, in the role of Lucianus, the murderer, “nephew to the King,” and by doing so they make the connection between the fictionalised murderer and Hamlet even more obvious. Although it might very well clarify Hamlet’s intentions with

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the *Hamlet*-production of the József Attila Theatre (2009, directed by Sándor Zsótér) and the Hungarian National Theatre (2012, directed by Róbert Alföldi).

the theatrical performance with respect to Claudius, such a solution goes against Hamlet's character as I interpret it. Just as he does not want to actively participate in his own story and longs for an outsider position, his attitude towards the play-within-the-play representing the whole plot of Hamlet is thus very similar. Therefore, it becomes very important that Hamlet should not play a part in *The Mousetrap*: not only because he might not be on the professional level of the Players but especially because he wants to relate to the story externally and observe it from the outside, or, as it has been mentioned, to solve the problem in the *mind*, or, in this case, to project the story onto the stage-within-the-stage and thus keep it within the framework of fictionalised reality. This view approximates that possible aspect of Hamlet's theatre which might be called a certain kind of "fictionalised reality," a phenomenon balancing on the borderline of these two realms. When the action (and in our case, more specifically, murder) is carried out on stage, it happens in its "own reality": we see the murderer during the action, and the victim, too, as he is either struggling before death, or just peacefully drops dead. That this is fiction might be indicated by the actor playing the deceased King finally standing up to take a bow, take the applause, etc. In this world where fiction and reality are neatly separated, neither Hamlet – nor anybody – would be tormented by a guilty conscience, since no one's hand is dipped in blood by directing a play and thereby making a character "die." However, if fictionalised reality is functioning as a projection of the mind of its producer (in our case the Prince of Denmark), the mind can also reproduce lively fictionalised events rooted in reality (in the same way as one uses verbal abuse against someone, here Hamlet against Claudius). If we take Hamlet for the producer (writer and/or director) of *The Mousetrap*, creating it, yet not participating in its production, then even a further parallel between the plays *Hamlet* and *The Mousetrap* will be apparent, namely that Hamlet takes a similar position concerning the latter one as the one his father has regarding the former. From one perspective, Hamlet is given the outsider's position of Old Hamlet with respect to *The Mousetrap*; yet, from another, he is not, since in the course of the performance in Act III, Scene 2, Hamlet starts to involve himself in the play to a greater and greater extent, first through some commentary on scenes. He is thus acting as a narrator ("as good as a chorus" (III;2; 224), according to Ophelia) and to some extent he is an organic part of the show. For Hamlet, it is impossible to remain totally outside of his story, unlike Old Hamlet, who can remain outside of his son's plot (apart from one more return to his wife's bed-chamber) because his – i.e., the Ghost's – story has ended. The Prince cannot avoid going from "tropical" (cf. "Marry, how? Tropically!", i.e., metaphorically, as mentioned above, III;2; 217) to "topical", i.e. into actualization by finally giving a definition of Lucianus as "nephew to the king," where this time the name, Lucianus, seems to be far less important than the nexus to the king, the description: *nephew*. Yet it is significant that his participation ends at this point: he never really

steps over the borderline of the stage during the performance as an actor. Thus, his relative proximity to *The Mousetrap* is a model and indicator of, and, thus, it is in direct proportion to, his relative proximity to the play that bears his (and his father's) name as title: *Hamlet*.

It is worthy of consideration that the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* will be similar to the final performance in another celebrated revenge play of Renaissance England, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, where the producer of the play-within-the-play (and in one person the avenger), Hyeronimo takes part in the acting and actually murders his enemies during the very process of the performance by involving them in the acting, too. The fact that the act of revenge takes place within the performance highlights the fundamental contrast between Hyeronimo's and Hamlet's use of their respective theatres. Since in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the play uses a direct device to fulfil the revenge, it ceases to be a theatrical performance and thus "fictionalised reality" proper, also in line with the classic Aristotelian definition of drama, i.e., that it is (only) the *representation* (imitation, *mimesis*) of action and not the action itself, or, translated into the vocabulary of the revenge play: the representation of murder, and not the murder itself. The contrast with Kyd's tragedy indicates that what Hamlet needs is precisely not action but only representation itself: at this point the Prince does not want real deeds but theory, a fictionalised form of action taking place "in the mind" as noted in the soliloquy and being projected onto the stage as it happens in the production of *The Mousetrap*.

This contrast between theory and practice and indirectly also between universality and specificity is represented in the choice between passivity associated with the "To Be" pole and activity appearing on the "Not To Be" side – the former attitude also associated with potential survival, while the latter one with possible death, as it was discussed above. Thus, the fundamental question of the "To Be Or Not To Be" soliloquy can be translated in Hamlet's case as 'to speak and contemplate further or to carry out the deed,' in other words, it is about philosophizing about what might happen if he stops philosophizing.

The juxtaposition of thinking and acting is, as it has been observed since Goethe, highly characteristic of Hamlet, whereas these two have never been so separated for Claudius. In the case of the King, action and thought are most of the time organically connected, as it is visible if one considers his soliloquies and monologues. Claudius has two major speeches in the play: his inaugural speech in Act I Scene 2 ("Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death // the memory be green"... etc. (1-39) – continued in a reply to Hamlet's *Seems*-monologue in the same scene (87-117)) and his Prayer-scene ("O, my offence is rank! It smells to heaven"... etc. (36-72)) and both of them are linked very closely to action and do not replace it: the first monologue is to justify his new position as the King of Denmark and to deal with his uncomfortable problem with Hamlet, while the

second one is about a deed already committed with a detailed diagnosis of its effects. By contrast, Hamlet acts when he does not think about it in advance and does that on a sudden impulse (cf. murdering Polonius behind the carpet and killing Claudius at the end, when he realises that the King is responsible for his mother's and his – Hamlet's – own death) and fails to act when he contemplates about it, as it happens behind the kneeling Claudius in the Prayer Scene (Act III Scene 3), when again theory (To Be) wins over practice (Not To Be). Still, just as the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy does not reach a final answer for the initial question in the middle of the play, it will be again exactly *The Mousetrap*-performance where the two poles can both appear combined with each other in an *aurea mediocritas* fashion: it is neither the mere contemplation about the duty of revenge, yet nor the direct action exhibited by Hyeronimo's theatre in *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Hamlet's soliloquy directly thematises death already in its fifth line: "To die, to sleep" (III;1; 62). The problem of the nature of death is curiously connected to both sides of the initial question of the speech. As the "To Be" part is primarily connected to the passive suffering in my interpretation, it effectively depicts the situation of the protagonist during the delivery of the "Sullied flesh"-soliloquy in Act I Scene 2 (129-159), where he directly referred to the possibility of suicide: "Or that the Everlasting had not fixed // His canon against self-slaughter!" (II;1; 131-132). By contrast, the "Not To Be" pole is more obviously connected to death as a potential result of taking action (perhaps directly against the King). Thus it is not surprising that the investigation of the nature of death and the life afterwards moves into the foreground; the speaker wants to get to the deepest meaning of the very phenomenon he might be approaching. It is significant that the idea of suicide here appears only as a device of testing *others'* attitude towards death and not as a personal choice seriously considered by the Prince. This alternative of suicide was abandoned upon the effect of the appearance of the Ghost (the "Sullied flesh"-soliloquy is immediately followed by Horatio bringing the news about Old Hamlet) when Hamlet will start to move into an outsider-position to his story (wearing the actor's mask of the Fool, the "antic disposition," for example) though never completely reaching the externality of his father. In the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy, the idea of death only serves to arrive at the conclusion that others are afraid to freely choose death because of the unpredictability of the afterlife and the possibility that thinking (contemplation, reflection) might not cease to *be* even after physical death. There is a characteristic modal change from *may* ("what dreams *may* come...") to *must* ("must give us pause"), from possibility to obligation, yet characteristically skipping the phase (the realm) of "facts," of assurances, of certainties.

It is noteworthy that Hamlet's enumeration of the torments of our life is primarily general:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th’oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,  
The pangs of disprised love, the law’s delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th’unworthy takes... (III;1; 72-76)

This part of the monologue may have certain points of connection with Hamlet’s personal history: like “disprised love” may refer to his relationship with Ophelia. Yet, the soliloquy in general remains on the universal level, further emphasizing that the question of suicide is not a serious option for Hamlet but rather a theoretical test to an unanswerable question.

The soliloquy of Hamlet can be divided into three parts. The first one states the fundamental question but in a rather enigmatic way, thus allowing several interpretations to emerge. In my analysis this initial thought gains significance if we consider the speech to be a continuation of the immediately preceding Hecuba-soliloquy and also a text organically connected to its dramatic context, i.e., the preparation for the performance of *The Mousetrap*. In this case, the question is whether to contemplate further instead of taking direct action against Claudius and preserve the production of the play-within-the-play to be only a private theatrical experience to Hamlet in order to visualise the murders (potentially that of both Old Hamlet by his brother and that of Claudius by his nephew) *or* to take action, yet not via the very deed of murder. At this stage, Hamlet is not prepared for that, not only because he lacks evidence (“The spirit that I have seen // May be a devil” (II;2; 575-576)) but also because, as it was noted, in a way for him action is speech (while, e.g., for Macbeth, for the sake of contrast, it is the other way round: speech is precisely action). Yet Hamlet is ready to launch the theatrical performance: this way he widens the spectrum which will involve Claudius as well, while also using the stage as a catalyst to test the credibility of the Ghost (to make him more “internal,” too) and, at the same time, he might also be revealing his intentions in front of his uncle. However, this situation also includes the possibility of dying and this generates the second part of the soliloquy, which investigates the nature of death on a universal level. The performance Hamlet is planning to stage is not only a metaphorical mousetrap for Claudius but it is also such for Hamlet, as it would once and for all drag him into the whirlpool of the events and cease his quasi-outsider position, since he has to dig deep down into his own story and taint his hands with the world he looked upon so contemptuously in the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy (I;2; 129-159). With his potential actions he is going to put people’s lives at stake: not only his own but that of Claudius and potentially others – which turns out to be true through the several deaths occurring during the play later on. This way, it is perhaps not surprising that the nature of death “in general” plays such a significant part in the soliloquy.

However, there is a disturbing phrase in the part under discussion, namely when Hamlet identifies the afterlife as the “undiscovered country from whose bourn // No traveler returns” (III;1; 81-82), which does not only “puzzle the will” (82) but also the audience who very well know that the whole flow of events was initiated by a Ghost returning from the undiscovered country. Although here this sentence is primarily important to emphasise the irreversibility and uncertain nature or precise “content” of death, making the train of thought universally valid for those not believing in ghosts, I think that Hamlet’s remark here is more significant on another level. Following the interpretation outlined so far, the whole speech is about whether to take action against Claudius with the aid of the theatre, as it was also noted above, the whole problem of death originates, after all, from the order of the Ghost, which denied Hamlet the position of the contemplative outsider, pushing him inside the play and burdening him with the expectation of taking action. Therefore, in a soliloquy philosophizing about this very problem, Hamlet has to reach to the root of his predicament and with one – half-conscious – remark, he perhaps tries to exorcise the Ghost from his story by denying his existence: “from whose bourn no traveler returns” (82). Although still on a highly general and indirect level, this is Hamlet’s “real” rebellion against his father, whose proxy, also in terms of the sons’ hatred towards fathers and their dissatisfaction with them, is of course, throughout, Claudius (after all, he “asked for it,” replacing the real father through murder). In a production this can be emphasised by Hamlet uttering this sentence (“from whose bourn no traveler returns”) in a kind of a self-suggestive manner. Hence, the very thing that “puzzles the will” is not only the unknowable nature of afterlife but also the recurring doubts concerning the Ghost, whose existence is too uncertain in proportion with the gravity of the deeds he specifies and assigns. Following this short interlude about the transcendental impulsive force, the soliloquy quickly returns to its main concern and concludes that it is impossible to know death from this life’s perspective, and with this disappointing result he turns back to the initial question in the third part.

The last part of the “To Be Or Not To Be”-soliloquy starts with the line “Thus conscience does make coward of us all” (85), where *thus* refers back to the train of thought about the nature of death and afterlife (the second part of the soliloquy) but the whole line might be read as a continuation of the first part of the speech and not the second one, which is now put between parentheses. Should the line in question be rooted in the second part, its meaning would be that everyone is too weak to end their own life; yet, as it has been noted, after Act II Scene 2 Hamlet does not deal with the question of suicide. Yet, if the initial line of the third part relates to the first phase, it means that we do not dare to act if our life is at stake because we do not know what to expect in afterlife. As it is now common knowledge in Shakespeare-criticism, the word *conscience* had two meanings in Shakespeare’s age: ‘the sense of right and wrong’ (i.e., in the sense the word is used today) and

'knowledge, awareness' (Kéry 1989, 29) and both of them stand in contrast with action. If we take its first meaning, it is related to the scruples of murdering somebody, moreover, a King and relative, which repeatedly underscores the advantage of Hamlet's fictionalised reality on the stage, where murder can be committed without staining one's hand with real blood. However, the meaning of 'knowledge' is more consistent with the motive structure of the soliloquy. In this case, the line in question gains the meaning of 'knowledge makes us cowards,' i.e., we do not dare to act when we know, which connects back to the fundamental juxtaposition of knowledge/thought *versus* action, dominating the soliloquy as a whole. This line of argumentation is continued in the following lines scattering the major key words of the speech: resolution is thwarted by "the pale cast of *thought*" (87) and the final conclusion is that enterprises finally "lose the name of *action*" (90). Yet, in Hamlet's stream of consciousness, *action* is not entirely excluded by *thought* (although he indeed does not decide to immediately kill Claudius here, or in any of his soliloquies) but the two are combined in order to give birth to *The Mousetrap*, i.e., the *thought* from his *mind* (cf. "my brains" II, 2, 584) is projected onto the stage to depict and investigate *action*.

The fact that Hamlet wishes to occupy an external position with respect to his own story, although this is impossible for him, is very well indicated by the end of the soliloquy. The Prince is alone (or he thinks he is alone, depending on whether Claudius and Polonius overhear him), contemplating but has to interrupt his train of thoughts at the appearance of Ophelia: "Soft you, now, // The fair Ophelia!" (90-91). And it will be precisely the entrance of the girl which will drag Hamlet back from the momentary outsider position of the thinker (keeping a certain distance from others and consequently from the play itself) into the very core of events, into a certain kind of action, namely handling his affair with Ophelia. This way the relation between the "To Be" and "Not To Be" parts (contemplation and action) will be mirrored back in the relation between the whole "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy (contemplating) and the immediately following Ophelia-scene (taking action). Hamlet's harsh attitude towards Ophelia might be a result of the Prince having just been dragged into a situation where he does not feel himself at home, since while he is glad to observe and analyze the situations from the outside, he is afraid, or even disgusted, to sink deep into the whirlpool of actions personally. This is also the reason why he does not stab Claudius during the Prayer-scene: although the Prince now has both the – *almost* – confirmed justification and the – *rare* – opportunity to take revenge in order to fulfill the deed, he would have to push the blade into his uncle's flesh with his own hands. It is remarkable that Hamlet was very enthusiastic when Claudius left the performance of *The Mousetrap* and believed that he gained unequivocal evidence of the King's sin, but precisely because the Prince is perfectly happy with the *knowledge* of Claudius's guilt, i.e., since he has solved the riddle *in the mind*, now he has to step into a realm which

does not agree with his personality, i.e., that of direct action, which results in his failure of murdering Claudius right after the play-within-the-play. It is also the very consequence of Hamlet's disgust of personal involvement that the Prince does not say anything specific to the actors in his instructions at the beginning of Act III Scene 2. If *The Mousetrap* indeed represents the whole play in which Hamlet is expected to take action, the play-within-the-play has utmost significance for the Prince and condenses all his doubts and fears concerning it, making the production a can of worms. This interpretation can be underscored in the performance of *Hamlet* if the actor in the main part is visibly agitated while he is instructing the actors and he frightfully and deliberately avoids any specific references to the actual plot of *The Mousetrap*, and, consequently, while his mind is apparently somewhere else, he gives universal instructions which are very well known to the players, as it is also tenderly suggested by their polite replies. It seems as if Hamlet were afraid of opening up the shield of generality to touch the particulars. However, the points of connection between his own story and the play-within-the-play may be emphatic exactly by his careful and obvious avoidance of them. Thus, the universality dominating the tone of Hamlet's instructions to the actors, as well as that of the famous "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy is the manifestation of the Prince's fear of involvement and of losing his external position with respect to the plot he is supposed to act in.

Hamlet's quasi-outsider position with respect to his own play may be given a theatrical representation by placing him outside of the stage while delivering the "To Be Or Not To Be"-soliloquy, occupying a position closer to the members of the audience rather than to the other characters of the play. Consequently, while discussing contemplation and action, he is physically looking at the bare stage, just as he can look at *The Mousetrap* representing the whole play one scene later. Hamlet's desire to occupy an external position similar to Old Hamlet's can be further emphasised by situating the delivery of the soliloquy to the same place where the ghost of the father had appeared previously in Act I. The stage, the expected area of action is now empty, action is there via its absence as if the whole tragedy has stopped for a few minutes for the sake of the Prince in order to give him the opportunity to reflect on his position on the general level. The relationship between contemplation and action is further reflected in the relationship between the audience and the stage in the theatre, the former only observing, experiencing, evaluating but not directly participating in the actions provided by the latter, and Hamlet is thus visually roaming on the verge of the two: escaping from the stage for a shorter while and sitting in a seat which is not designed for him and can only host the Prince for just a few minutes. However, by the end of the soliloquy, this frozen interlude is over and the stage is set in motion again by Ophelia stepping onto it. Should Hamlet physically move back to the stage from the vicinity of the audience, Ophelia's and the whole plot's magnetic effect on him would be clearly



manifested. When the Ghost gave the information to the Prince which only the transcendental being returning from the grave can possess, he also provides his son a certain amount of his external position enabling Hamlet to observe the events from the outside, which can be underscored if Hamlet meets his father somewhere outside the stage and occupies the place of the Ghost for a while during his soliloquy as mentioned above. Thus by encountering Old Hamlet, he crosses the boundaries of the magic circle representing the stage of the tragedy he is the protagonist of but it is only possible for him temporarily just as the actor in the leading role cannot perform the whole play from the seats of the audience, outside the dramatic space of the stage.

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