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“WE’LL HEAR A PLAY TOMORROW”

ASPECTS OF PRE-PERFORMANCE CRITICISM IN READING

SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET AND MACBETH

“HOLONAP ELŐADÁS!”

A PRE-PERFORMANCE CRITICISM ASPECTUSAI:

SHAKESPEARE HAMLET ÉS MACBETH

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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. 2  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. 4  
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 5  
What is pre-performance criticism ..................................................................................... 5  
Performance and text: Aschcroft versus Mack ................................................................. 5  
Meta-theatre: Calderwood ................................................................................................. 8  
Presence present: Gumbrecht .............................................................................................. 13  
Audience, stage, knowledge: Cavell .................................................................................. 18  
The phenomenology of action: Rayner ............................................................................. 22  
Close reading: Ewbank ........................................................................................................ 26  
Theatre semiotics: Kiss ........................................................................................................ 30  
Performance-criticism: Worthen, Braunmuller, Kilman .................................................. 34  
Towards pre-performance criticism: Dessen, Weimann and Bruster ................................ 40  
So what is pre-performance criticism? Hamlet, the director and Macbeth, the actor ....... 43

## Chapter One

### “This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good”

**The Dramaturgy of Transcendence** .............................................................................. 49  
“His beard was grizzled, no?” (H; I; 2; 240) — The visual representation of the Ghost 49  
“You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so”  (M; I; 3; 43-45) — The visual representation of the Weird Sisters ........................................ 54  
“Why do you start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?” (M; I; 3; 49-50) —  
Burden or Desire? .............................................................................................................. 59  
“I have thee not, and yet I see thee still” (M; II; 1; 35) — Potential stage representations  
of the task ............................................................................................................................. 64  
“Do you see nothing there?” (H; III; 4; 132) — Questions of Invisibility ....................... 69  
“A bold one, that dare look on that which might appall the devil” (M; III; 4; 59-60) — A  
(Transcendental?) Visual on the Deed .............................................................................. 72

## Chapter Two

### “Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought”

**Action and Thought in Hamlet and Macbeth** ................................................................ 80  
“The play’s the thing” (H; II; 2; 581) — From The Murder of Gonzago to The Mousetrap ................................................................................................................................. 80  
“Nobler in the mind” (H; III; 1; 59) — The fear of the particular ....................................... 88  
“With a bare bodkin” (H; III; 1; 78) — The possibility of death ........................................ 93  
“Denmark’s a prison” (H; II; 2; 239) — The painful impossibility of an external position  ................................................................................................................................................. 96  
“That is a step on which I must fall down or else o’erleap” (M; I; 4; 48-49) — The focus  
of the Scottish thane .......................................................................................................... 99
“Nothing is but what is not” (M; I; 3; 140-141) — Fictionalized reality and realized fiction .................................................................................................................. 102
“I’ll call upon you straight” (M; III; 1; 141) — Professionals commissioned ....... 108

Chapter Three

“Hie thee hither, that I may pour my spirits in thine ear”

Women on the edges of the private and the public .............................................. 113
“Married with my uncle” (H; I; 2; 151) — Irreconcilable roles of mother and wife. ... 114
“I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (H; I; 3; 104) — Ophelia under the scrutiny of the public eye .................................................................................................................. 118
“This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness” (M; I; 5; 9-10) — The layers of intimacy regarding the Macbeth-couple ........................................................................................................ 122
“False face must hide what false heart doth know” (M; II; 1; 82) — Background and foreground dramaturgy .................................................................................. 126
“My most seeming-virtuous queen” (H; I; 5; 46) — Gertrude’s thematic presence in the transcendental account .............................................................................................................. 128
“Leave all the rest to me” (M; I; 5; 71) / “I do not know, but truly I do fear it” (H; II; 1; 85-86) — Transcendental encounter and the lovers: inclusion and exclusion .............. 131
“It will make us mad” (M; II; 2; 37) — Murder, madness, connection and alienation .. 134
“Sweet Gertrude, leave us too” (H; III; 1; 28) — The enforced absence of Gertrude .. 137
“Ophelia, walk you here” (H; III; 1; 43) — The enforced presence of Ophelia .......... 140
“And I, of ladies most deject and wretched” (H; III; 1; 157) — Ophelia’s soliloquy ... 144
“Madam, how like you this play?” (H; III; 2; 224) — The female characters as audience ................................................................................................................................. 146
“Would it were not so, you are my mother” (H; III; 4; 15) — Gertrude’s “amnesia” .. 153
“More needs she the divine than the physician” (M; V; 1; 64) — Madness ............... 157
“She should have died hereafter” (M; V; 5; 16) — The dramaturgy of deaths ........ 160

Chapter Four

“We with wisest sorrow think on him together with remembrance of ourselves”

The aspects of regicide regarding Claudius and Macbeth ........................................ 165
“Now I am alone” (H; II; 2; 543) — The possibility of soliloquies .......................... 166
“There’s blood upon thy face” (M; III; 4; 11) — Sin and glamour .......................... 168
“His title hang loose about him” (M; V; 2; 20-21) — Replacing the previous king .... 173
“Frightened with false fire?” (H; III; 2; 260) — Confrontation with the deed ......... 178
“Pray can I not” (H; III; 3; 38) — Help expected from heavenly forces ................. 182
“How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!” (M; IV; 1; 47) — Help expected from demonic forces ................................................................. 191
“O yet defend me friends” (H; V; 2; 329) — Battle for and against stage dominance. 196

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 204
Bibliography .............................................................................................................. 216
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Introduction

What is pre-performance criticism

Performance and text: Aschcroft versus Mack

Edward Gordon Craig, the acclaimed theatrical director at the turn of the 19th and 20th century once claimed that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*\(^1\) is the best when it is unperformed\(^2\). There is of course an ironic hue in the above mentioned laconic conclusion, especially when it comes from a man who directed the play in question for the Moscow Art Theatre, and, both before and after, there were several great stage (and film) productions of the play. Yet Craig’s remark seems to function to a certain extent as a motto for Shakespearean criticism. The thorough and excellent secondary literature on Early Modern English plays scrutinizes various points of view and reveals hidden connections, gives deep and complex analyses but it tends to stop in the realm of the written text, and hardly ever considers theatrical potentials. Or if it does, it is already performance criticism, concentrating on the finished product, production (if we may claim that a theatrical production is ever finished at all), which was created by the director and the actors and other people of the theatre together. To modify Craig’s sentence to fit our purposes here, performance criticism wishes to state that *Hamlet* is the best when it *has been* (*was*) performed.

What seems to be absent is an approach towards the bridge between the two realms, the written text and the theatrical performance. What is missing is the conviction that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (and all plays) are best when they are performed, upon the stage, in our presence, in the actors’ and our shared present continuous tense of “it is now actually happening”. This dissertation attempts to apply a theory which is interested in this process but not by functioning as a director’s diary but by outlining various theatrical possibilities and their potential stage realizations hiding in the text, sometimes hidden from the reader at first sight. I call this approach “pre-performance criticism”.

Pre-performance criticism 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

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\(^1\) In the present dissertation I quote both plays according to the Norton Shakespeare edition (Greenblatt et. al. 2008, 1683-1784 and 2569-2632). The locus of the quotation in the title of the dissertation is: *Hamlet* (II; 2; 530). The quotation in the Hungarian title is Ádám Nádasdy’s translation.

\(^2\) Cf. Darrida 2010, 142
of the secondary literature, various ways of interpretation, resulting from the close-reading of the play and considers their possible realizations on 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. Thus, as it can be seen, pre-performance criticism is a blend of already existing (and flourishing) performance criticism\(^3\), and close-reading (recently redefined by Marjorie Garber as “reading in slow motion”\(^4\), while it remains open to interpretative strategies from other fields as well, depending on the stage-realization the (imaginary) director of the play envisages.

From another angle, and as stated above, pre-performance criticism wishes to do away with the traditional (and unfortunately still existing) opposition between the “literary” (poetic) and the “theatrical” (“realizing”) reading of plays, between the “descriptive” and the “performative”, between “page and stage”: it analyses scenes, characters, the dynamics and the chemistry between the characters in a scene, the setting, etc. as if the actors were in our presence on the stage. People of the theatre, even great and widely acclaimed performers, feel the need of profound apologies for talking about Shakespeare in a non-academic manner, as if this activity was in need of some earlier authorization and the best one was coming from scholars rather than professional directors and actors. The irony is that a director, in order to bring about a successful performance, will have to interpret the texts, and by necessity just as thoroughly, as a scholar. That people of the theatre have different perspectives on a play than academics is true and this needs no elaboration; problems rather arise when people on and around the stage feel intimidated by “the professor” and the question becomes who is “more entitled” to tell what a play is about: those who talk about, or those who speak from within the text. Dame Peggy Aschcroft, who played almost all of the major female roles of the oeuvre, from Juliet to old Queen Margaret, starts her essay, published in one of the most prestigious journals on Early Modern English Literature, with the following words: “I can only talk about Shakespeare as he came into my life, because I am no scholar – I have no academic knowledge.”\(^5\) The meaning is clear: Dame Peggy is saying that she is an actress and not a university professor teaching and researching Shakespeare. But the sentence may also imply that really authentic talk about Shakespeare is academic, and that scholars do not

\(^3\) See especially Hogdon and Worthen 2005, a massive collection of thirty-four essays on nearly seven hundred pages, the topics ranging from early modern times to the present day; Erne 2013, the “Shakespeare in Performance” series of Manchester University Press, e.g. Kilman 1992, etc.

\(^4\) Garber 2010 and Garber 2011

\(^5\) Aschcroft 2002, 11
meet Shakespeare “coming into their lives”. The typical scholar Ascherroft at least potentially fears and compares herself with, sounds in the following way, here exemplified by Professor Maynard Mack, a highly influential Shakespeare-critic of the middle of the 20th century:

The most obvious result of subtextualizing is that the director and (possibly) actor are encouraged to assume the same level of authority as the author. The sound notion that there is a life to which the words give life can with very little stretching be made to mean that the words the author set down are themselves a search for the true play, which the director must intuit in, through and under them. Once he has done so, the words become to a degree expendable. […] In the hands of many directors in today’s theatre, where the director is a small god, subtext easily becomes a substitute for text and a license for total directorial subjectivity.  

The presuppositions (the “subtext”) behind Mack’s view are also clear: he seems to think that there is an “ideal” interpretation of the text, most probably provided by the scholar, while the director (and actor) will practically re-write the play, which, licentious as it is, will be very far from the “original”. He obviously does not think that the director and actor have the right to “intuit in” an interpretation of their own; in his view people of the theatre would like to throw Shakespeare out and still call what they produce Shakespeare. In my view, the rich resources a Shakespearean text provides (the actual sentences pregnant with meaning) are channeled, and ultimately framed and ordered by, the viability, feasibility and manageability of a potentially actual, possibly suggestive production on stage and the director and actor (and, for that matter, the “plain” reader or viewer) are just as authentic interpreters of the play as scholars are. It is very true that academics and people of the theatre have different tasks, means, instruments, and even different immediate goals when reading Shakespeare. But, I am convinced, they do not work “at cross purposes”: they all wish to arrive at a convincing, persuasive reading of a play. They need not, and usually do not, agree (but scholars or directors disagree between one another all the time, too), and one of the most important principles guiding this dissertation will be that the differences in the approaches of the “theatrical and the scholarly apparatus”, respectively, are able cross-fertilize one another, so differences should rather be amplified than cancelled out, and one perspective should not be favoured over the other. There should not be subordination but cooperation, there can be collaboration rather than rivalry.

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6 Mack 2005, 33
In my dissertation I will project two of Shakespeare’s great tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* onto each other, claiming not only that they might serve as “inverses” of each other, as it was noted, for instance, by James Calderwood\(^7\) but also showing that establishing a line of interpretation in one of the plays might also reveal hidden connections and patterns in the other one. I have chosen these two, almost “overinterpreted” plays, producing so much commentary and criticism that most probably a whole lifetime would be too short to master, partly precisely because of this challenge: can I, can my Reader find anything revealing and new in these critically and culturally so heavily loaded tragedies with the help of pre-performance criticism? But my choice fell on these two magnetic pieces also because they famously contain several references to their own performance: how presentation happens, who is responsible for it, what effects a production, a sight, a role, a person, a “deed” may have on an audience, on actors, etc. are their shared, central concerns. This comparison will serve as a theoretical basis for the application of “pre-performance criticism”. In this introductory chapter, I will outline the nature of this new way of reading, enlisting and discussing the branches of literary theories on which I base my approach. Yet, the complex nature of “pre-performance criticism” will be demonstrated precisely by the following chapters of the dissertation, which shed light on the various ways this method might work on dramatic texts.

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**Meta-theatre: Calderwood**

Regarding the already flourishing literary theories, the approach of “pre-performance criticism” is, to a certain extent, also related to the meta-theatrical reading of a drama. *Hamlet*, during the performance of *The Mousetrap*-scene, is constantly impersonating the fool. And at one point he cries out: “[I]ook you how cheerfully my mother looks and my father died within’s two hours” (III; 2; 124-125), which Ophelia dutifully corrects as “Nay, ‘tis twice two months, my lord” (III; 2; 126). Of course, Hamlet is pretending to be mad here and the time that elapsed since Old Hamlet’s death is constantly shrinking in his mind. Yet it should also be noted that whenever being or acting out the “madman”, Shakespeare’s characters in the two tragedies in focus tend to go meta-theatrical, i.e. they start reflecting on their context as theatrically constructed for stage performance. During her sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth cannot get away from the dramatic presence of murdering Duncan: she is talking to her husband as if they were at the threshold of their

\(^{7}\) Cf. Calderwood 1987, 123-125
victim’s bedchamber and she can still sense the smell of blood on her hands. Fusing the past into the dramatic presence of the stage is what a playwright or a stage director does, and at this point the mentally tormented Lady Macbeth becomes the stage metaphor for these directorial processes and, therefore, of the mechanisms of the theatre itself. Similarly, the mad Ophelia seems to possess qualities of professional actors when she enters with flowers in her hands. According to the symbolism of flowers in the Early Modern English age illustrated in the footnote of the text: “[t]he plants have their meanings appropriate to their recipients”\(^8\). Thus Ophelia symbolically steps out of one of the fictional contexts of the play, to enter into the framework of “fantasy within fantasy”. She can glimpse deep into the characters’ core, thus evaluating them according to the principal traits they wish to hide. Hamlet, “really” mad or not, also breaks out of one of the fictions on the stage and reflects on his status as if he were looking at the play he is supposed to be the protagonist of from “above”: from the “outside” and an “omniscient position”. Thus, his fiction becomes that he is a role in a play “under construction”, while, of course, he ultimately remains in the play which bears his (and his father’s) name as its title. When he claims that his father died only two hours earlier he is of course exaggerating from the point of view of this - new - fiction, yet he gives an apt observation from the point of view of theatrical production. The Mousetrap-performance takes place approximately in the middle of the whole play. Hamlet from the beginning to the end, fully acted out is approximately four hours long, so when Hamlet shouts his reproach at his mother during the theatrical performance, according to stage-time, roughly two hours had gone by. So, from the point of view of audience-time, about two (“physical, real”) hours had passed since the audience learnt that Old Hamlet was – as it had been announced by Bernardo – dead. Similarly, Calderwood connects the “mad-self” of Hamlet to the son trying to fulfill the duty assigned to him by the father (“[i]n a metaphorical sense Hamlet has been driven ‘mad’ by his father’s Ghost”\(^9\)) and this is what manifests itself in Hamlet’s apology to Laertes before their duel: “Was’t Hamlet wrong’d Laertes? Never Hamlet. (…) Who does it then? His madness.” (V; 2; 229, 233)). Thus the Prince overtly claims that his mad-self is responsible for murdering Laertes’s father in the wider context of plotting the revenge on Claudius, since it is the meta-theatrical, or theatre-conscious self who knows about himself and is aware of that he is the protagonist of a revenge play, so he must act accordingly\(^{10}\).

\(^8\) Jenkins 1982, 359 (ff. 173-183)
\(^9\) Calderwood 1983, 44
\(^{10}\) Cf. Calderwood 1983, 42-47
Madness is thus connected to the meta-theatre in explicit ways, yet the plays are full of references to the very fact that they were constructed theatrically. In his book titled *Shakespearean Metadrama*, Calderwood gives an overview of how meta-theatre, or, in his terminology, “metadrama” works in the Bard’s plays. Calderwood starts from the observation that Shakespeare’s plays are also about Shakespeare’s plays, “not just ‘the idea of the play’ (…) but dramatic art itself — its materials, its media of language and theater, its generic forms and conventions, its relationship to truth and the social order — is a dominant Shakespearean theme, perhaps his most abiding subject”12. This means that not only the obviously self-reflective scenes focus on the nature of the theatre like the theatre-in-the-theatre in *Hamlet* or in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or in the well-known lines of Jacques in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage”. Rather, the plays are full of covert references to playing parts, scenes, acting on the stage, constructing plots, which might all underscore that these uses of the terminology of the theatre, both linguistically and thematically, give us a pattern of new meaning. Therefore, the plays themselves via their artistic medium can tell us a lot about the conceptions of Shakespeare’s art. If a play is written in words then it involuntarily talks about its author’s relation towards language. If it is intended to appear on stage, it cannot avoid knowing about itself as a piece of art that will have to face the judicious eyes of the audience. This, of course, may also be overtly exposed in such plays as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Calderwood emphasizes that Shakespeare was making-an-illusion and making-an-illusion at the same time, i.e. his characters exist on two different levels simultaneously and emphatically: they are real-life characters in a realistic world and also instruments that were fashioned by the playwrights to be inserted into the constructed world of the play and to fit into the role its framework requires13. This duality was reflected upon in the analysis of Hamlet’s madness when the character all of a sudden can consciously step onto another level of fantasy and see himself and all the others as constructed devices fashioned by their playwright. This duality of the created characters is especially true for Shakespeare, says Calderwood, since:

> given his unique standpoint as actor, playwright, and later housekeeper of the theatre – a standpoint so radically different from that of the nondramatic poet in relation to his art – a play would have for him (…) something of the in-and-outness of psychologists’ ambiguous

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11 Calderwood 1971, 3-22
12 Calderwood 1971, 5
13 Calderwood 1971, 11
figures, at one moment receding from him into its own seemingly autonomous fictive reality and at the next extrorsing to present itself as his dependent, a tenuous extension of his own playwrighting and directorial skills\textsuperscript{14}.

Yet, this duality extends beyond the characters to everything that once appears on the stage, be it an innocent object or language itself. This is illustrated by an example of the three-fold nature of a simple “joint stool” in a production of \textit{Macbeth}. In its primary reality: it exists as an ordinary stage prop, belonging perhaps to the theatrical company. However, once it “participates” in the production, it is absorbed into the fictitious world of the play and turns into a piece of furniture in Macbeth’s castle. Moreover, in Act III Scene 4, during the entrance of Banquo’s ghost, the Lady says to her husband: “Why do you make such faces? When all’s done, / You look but on a stool”, thus the stool undergoes a further transformation into the imagined ghost of Banquo. At this point, the stool is wholly interiorized by the play and this process is true for language itself: once it enters the world of the play, its semantic units are specifically constructed and constitute a self-enclosed complex of meaning, leaving behind their usual referential status in our “ordinary world”. Very importantly, this is a one-way-street into the self-enclosed reality of fiction: there is no route back for either the stool representing Banquo’s ghost, or the language of \textit{Macbeth} into their own referential, everyday reality. This happens because through their insertion into a fictional world, the context being changed, the stool becomes Macbeth’s property and language is also reconstructed via the contextual change, rather than material alteration\textsuperscript{15}.

Pre-performance criticism is largely based upon meta-theatrical analysis. The fact that Shakespearean plays besides creating a realistic self-enclosed world on the stage are so much conscious of their own artificiality and constructed nature entails that these self-reflections overtly or covertly resonate that elusive thread which connects the text with the performance. It might be through this nature of the plays that Shakespearean texts sometimes seem to “direct themselves”, and if one explores these hidden clues and mingles them with interpretation, a perfect breeding soil for a new approach is gained. John Barton in his book \textit{Playing Shakespeare: An Actor’s Guide} discusses several hidden messages Early Modern texts might offer. Such a one is the use of the iambic pentameter and its deliberate negligence. For instance, Barton points out that a shorter verse line, i.e. which does not contain five iambbs but less is precisely a covert stage direction indicating a kind

\textsuperscript{14} Calderwood 1971, 11-12
\textsuperscript{15} Calderwood 1971, 12-13.
of pause for the actor\textsuperscript{16}. Such a hint is great help for pre-performance criticism, as it will turn out in the analysis of Macbeth’s \textit{Dagger}-soliloquy, when a short line in the middle, together with the meaning of the lines indicate the exact moment when the actor impersonating Macbeth draws his real dagger inspired by the imaginary one created in his mind.

Nevertheless, the \textit{Dagger}-soliloquy of Macbeth might also be an apt illustration for how metatheatre works hand in hand with pre-performance criticism. As it was noted above, the world of the play of course incorporates everything it requires, such as actor, stool, or language. In the soliloquy in question, the actor transformed into Macbeth interiorizes language and the two, with joint effort (i.e. the acting of the person and the language he uses), create an imaginary dagger out of nothing in the audience’s mind, similarly to the process how the playwright creates a story. Or, more precisely, here it creates a motive for regicide. However, in the course of Macbeth’s speech, also indicated by the fragmented iambic pentameter besides the line “as this which now I draw”, the actor playing Macbeth draws his real dagger and all of a sudden, the instrument is there in its physical palpability, realized on the stage: this is already the path of pre-performance criticism.

The fourth chapter of my dissertation exposes primarily the meta-theatrical aspect of my approach. In discussing the respective careers of the two monarchs, who reached their thrones via regicide, the status of soliloquies is put into focus, which, especially from a metadramatic aspect, are means of direct communication with the audience. Discussing theatrical performances in Early Modern England, Martin White claims that the interaction of the actors with their audience was common in the given age\textsuperscript{17}. This might prove an excellent starting point in observing the soliloquies of Claudius and Hamlet as competing for the favours of the audience, relying a lot on metadrama. From this perspective, a Shakespearean soliloquy is not only “uttered thoughts”, overheard by the audience but also the self-interpretation of the characters. The first critic dissecting the character of Richard III is himself in his opening speech at the beginning of his history play. Similarly, Hamlet himself gives the first character analysis of the Prince (of himself) in his several soliloquies and following this pattern, the same applies to Macbeth and Claudius. Moreover, while in the fourth chapter Claudius’s road to perdition is primarily demonstrated via the status of his speeches, the tragic career of Macbeth is observed through the lenses of his meta-

\textsuperscript{16} Barton 1984, 30  
\textsuperscript{17} White 1998, 61
theatrical self-references, directly reflecting upon being stuck in the actor’s costume, too loose upon him to fit him properly, and never being able to leave the stage of the play he is expected to be the protagonist of. Two different paths of two different monarchs, yet both of them reveal a high degree of meta-theatricality: one tries to establish some connection with the audience, the other tries to get rid of the role he took upon himself as the murderer. Both monarchs are well aware of their theatrical limits: they can see the edges of their stage and thus able to illustrate how meta-theatre works as a basis for pre-performance criticism.

In the second chapter of my dissertation I will dissect the relationship between action and thought with respect to the careers of Hamlet and Macbeth and, by doing so, I will scrutinize maybe the most famous speech of world drama: the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy. When the complex meaning of the speech is observed, it is clearly pointed out that Hamlet is providing here a general train of thought, elevating, observing and combining philosophical ideas relating to his whole dramatic career, status of man, or even to mankind in general. However, for pre-performance criticism it is by definition essential, to start out from the immediate dramaturgical context of the lines and thus project it onto the specified needs and aims of the character. When the actor playing Hamlet comes to his director for instructions, the leader of the production has to provide exact guidelines why these lines are uttered, and why it is so universal immediately after the very specific idea of staging The Mousetrap was born in the Prince’s mind. Therefore, when the soliloquy is observed dramaturgically, and, as a consequence, specifically (because dramaturgy is specific, whereas philosophy is universal), the undeniably universal nature of the speech gains specific dramaturgical significance. And exactly this significance is what is relevant on the stage. This is similar to how the idea of murdering Claudius in Hamlet’s mind is realized in The Mousetrap—performance. Because at the moment Hamlet decides to put the death of his father or (depending on interpretation) his threat towards Claudius on stage, he transforms meaning into performance, into presence.

**Presence present: Gumbrecht**

The aspect of presence has been forgotten in the background in literary theory for a long time: it is rarely realized and acknowledged that a work of art calls attention to its own presence. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in his book *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* makes an attempt at restoring the significance of presence besides the
creation and the interpretation of meaning in works of art. Thus Gumbrecht, in a certain sense, juxtaposes, or even opposes meaning (as the product of primarily intellectual activities) and presence, the latter encompassing the viewer or reader as a kind of non-mediated spatial relation between viewer/reader and the work of art, primarily depending on the relative proximity of the experiencing agent to the artistic object. Thus, another possible theoretical perspective pre-performance criticism may take as a point of departure is Gumbrecht’s production of presence. As he claims, as opposed to the metaphysical approach, which attributes greater significance to the actual meaning of a phenomenon than to its material presence, presence is a spatial relation and its production immediately implies that this object is “brought forth” in space. Thus presence is produced through the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the medium of communication. This tangibility consists in movements of greater and lesser proximity, and of greater and lesser intensity in space\(^\text{18}\). In our discussion here, the medium of communication is, in the first place, the written text of the drama, yet, via the production of presence, its practical theatrical functions will come to the foreground, expanding the referential zone of the medium of communication. “Presence” for pre-performance criticism involves first and foremost the bodily presence of the actor but at the same time also the scenery, the costumes, stage design and also the stage-director’s conception of the stage “as a whole”. For instance, in Hamlet’s case, as it was pointed out, this meaning is gradually being transformed into presence.

Gumbrecht’s central claim is that Western culture has forgotten, and, consequently distanced itself from the significance of presence. This is a great loss for interpretation in the broad sense because, our aesthetic experience constantly oscillates between “presence effects” and “meaning effects”. The quest is therefore for breaking away from the Western-type of dominance of meaning, which is often associated with processes in the mind, in human psyche, in “the human spirit”. The production of presence observes how materiality can influence meaning. Historically speaking this approach started to evolve exactly in the Early Modern period, originating, more specifically, in the iconographic tradition. The world was, at that time, a flat surface from an outsider’s point of view. Thus man considered himself as occupying a position outside of the world, whereas the man of the Middle Ages was part of the world, surrounded and enveloped by it. Thus “Renaissance man” in his outsider position is purely spiritual, incorporeal; his single role is observance.

\(^\text{18}\) Cf. Gumbrecht 2004, 15-18
while the world observed and interpreted is purely material. This duality gave rise to the subject-object paradigm in Western culture. Moreover, human body was also categorized to belong to worldly objects, as opposed to the Middle Ages, when body and spirit were inseparable. The conclusion of such a world-view is, therefore, that the world is a material surface ready for interpretation and we have to penetrate through this surface and identify meaning, which is something spiritual.\textsuperscript{19}

An excellent example of Gumbrecht for how meaning can turn into presence is how Christ’s body and blood can become palpable in the form of bread and wine. Catholic Eucharist functioned as a magical act when a substance remote in time and space became present during the service. Contrastingly, protestant theology is much closer to the present Western type of metaphysics as it transformed presence into the evocation of meaning. There, the bread only designates the body but does not transform into it, which is connected to the modern notion of sign, i.e. it can leave behind both temporally and spatially those substances which they evoke.\textsuperscript{20}

Henceforth, theatrical practice is deeply rooted in the Catholic Eucharist, as a similar transformation on the stage can be witnessed, sacred in its own genre. Ian McKellen entering as Macbeth in Trevor Nunn’s direction is in a way a magical act, not representing an abstract notion of the character called ‘Macbeth’ existing only in meaning, i.e. on the pages of the written edition but impersonating him, bringing him into the presence of the audience, who can see the very Macbeth in their here and now.

Interestingly, while it seems obvious to project the theory of presence onto the stage, Gumbrecht talks very little about the theatre; yet what he mentions is of crucial importance in our investigation. He points out that in the theatre, attention was directed from the body of the actor to the constructed personality, and this personality is the result of complex notions and meanings. In the modern theatre, however, the plots are available via the actors’ body and voice, although the curtain separating the stage from the space of the audience suggests that those which are palpable are beyond our reach and thus of secondary importance. This was also different in Medieval times when situation was primary over character development, and the bodily presence of the actor was built in a space shared with the bodies of the audience. This shared presence, resulting from the mutual physical contact between actor and spectator was represented best in the passion-plays, when the audience could throw stones at the body of the actor impersonating Christ.

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Gumbrecht 2004, 21-51
\textsuperscript{20} Gumbrecht 2004, 28-30
This tradition was more or less still alive in the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, which only outlined the story itself but hardly got entangled in the development of the characters’ meaning. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that this more or less intensity of presence reached its end in the French classical tradition when the complexity of meaning gained priority over presence effects, since according to the Cartesian approach every material existent is subordinated to human reason. In modern culture, we cannot observe the rituals of producing real presence but the superiority of the *cogito*: the dimension of time gained priority over the dimension of space\textsuperscript{21}.

Gumbrecht is right: theatre is usually characterized as a practice where during the performances the audience share the same time with the actors but not the same place\textsuperscript{22}. Peter Szondi in his *Theorie des modernen Dramas* observes that the audience is present as witnesses of the dramatic dialogues, silently, inactively. The stage we can only witness (and Szondi also derives its separation from the auditorium from the Renaissance and Classicism) is connected to the absolute nature of drama: there is no bridge between the stage and the auditorium. The stage generally becomes visible and therefore existing at the beginning of the play as if created by the play itself. At the end of the act the curtain falls and the play makes the stage disappear, reinforcing the impression that they belong together\textsuperscript{23}. There are alternative solutions today: the audience can see the stage not concealed by a curtain before the play starts, and even actors can move on it. Actors can, furthermore, leave the stage during the performance, cross the rows of the spectators, touch them; yet the general tendency is that although they might leave the stage, they will sooner or later be incepted by the stage, their expected space of action. In 2013 I saw a *Taming of the Shrew* production (directed by Catarina Hebbard and Cienda McNamara) at the Brisbane Shakespeare Festival, which took place open air on two stages and the actors performed on both and even on the meadow between the two, sometimes getting into physical contact with the audience. However, these are unique examples and also in this performance, the corridors for the actors between the two stages were indicated by lines on the grass, separating the acting space from the spectators. This phenomenon Gumbrecht and eventually Szondi is talking about is palpable: we can experience it to a lesser or greater extent in the theatre. But it applies to theatrical practice.

\textsuperscript{21} Gumbrecht 2004, 30-34
\textsuperscript{22} Cf, Cavell 1976, 334
\textsuperscript{23} Szondi 2002, 16-17
What I wish to do is to take the gist of Gumbrecht’s observation about the significance of presence and apply it to dramatic theory. As I argued above, the Macbeth entering the stage is in the “here and now” of the audience. He, of course, does not get into physical contact with the audience, he most probably does not leave his stage (or if he does, as it will be discussed in the analytic chapters, he does so with a precise dramaturgical goal and consequence, exactly because it is deviation from the norm, like breaking the iambic pentameter for new meanings), but it is inevitable that the actor is present in his physical appearance. He has a characteristic face, eye and hair colour, stature, size, movement, voice and his bodily presence “brought forth” onto the stage will contribute much to the character called “Macbeth”. Gumbrecht provides the metaphysics of presence, putting emphasis on the physicality of drama. The bodies of the actors are interconnected with each other, therefore physicality and its manifestations cannot be neglected: they are imminent, producing their effects immediately. Theatre has always been a combination of text and physical movement, the latter reinforcing or even going against the former one. The above mentioned oscillation between meaning and presence in connection with drama can only exist in the very moment when it is performed. However, according to Gumbrecht, literary criticism has almost exclusively concentrated on the “spiritual” aspect of meaning: the question now is how it actually happens on the stage, including the crude “material reality” of bodies and objects in the immediate presence of the audience. Pre-performance criticism wishes to bring this “presence” back into critical analysis: taking the physical manifestation into account, setting the above mentioned “presence effects” into motion besides the well-functioning, traditional, almost exclusively textual “meaning effects”. Since critical interpretations of dramatic texts, especially in literary or “philological” approaches, stubbornly remain in the realm of the “meaning effects”, we may justifiably raise the question, and with a “double force”, how presence could be useful and fruitful for the theatre, how it can be communicated not so much to a “reader” but to an (also very concrete) member of the audience. It seems that in order to achieve this, we have to “infiltrate” traditional interpretations of meaning with “presence effects”, giving them a certain form, and a possible stage interpretation which potential directorial solutions may already contain, this way combining meaning with presence, and this may result in the complex aesthetic experience the spectators may have.
Audience, stage, knowledge: Cavell

In order to pursue this route of analysis, however, it is required to elaborate briefly on the above mentioned question of shared or separated time and space between stage action and audience. In discussing the ontology of stage time, Stanley Cavell in his essay about *King Lear, The Avoidance of Love* starts from the general question how a medium, namely Shakespearean drama may function when it uses poetry to such a great extent; Shakespeare’s plays are, in some analyses, even labeled “long poems”. Cavell calls our attention to the fact that Shakespearean plays are often compared to music, yet he finds a fruitful basis of argumentation at one particular aspect of comparison: when watching dramas we have to live up to the same requirements we are supposed to perform when we are following musical pieces: we can hear its directedness and we can only hear what is happening at the moment. In dramas, continuous attention should be paid to what is happening in the “here and now”: this is a way of experiencing “continuous presentness” in observing a performance. Cavell claims that historically the disappearance of Shakespearean tragedies also meant the loss of this kind of presentness and this chased us into such a conviction that we can only save our lives by knowing our lives instead of seeing them performed.24 This headway of epistemology, typically attributed to Locke and Descartes, reflects the phenomenon Gumbrecht highlighted: meaning started to dominate over presence. While the actors’ bodies were metaphorically distanced from their audiences, when the observing person refused to acknowledge her unity with the world observed, exactly this presentness weakened, which would be an indispensable “contract”, a constant harmony between stage and audience. Cavell argues that *King Lear* exposes exactly the problem of losing this presentness. If it is gained through the certainty of our senses, it cannot compensate us for that presentness, which “had been elaborated through our old absorption in the world”25. To put it differently, the dominance of meaning cannot compensate for the loss of presence. In *King Lear*, characters give up observing their world in its presentness and magnify their losses by starting to know about this loss, whereas the world is to be acknowledged, just like other minds’ presentnesses are to be acknowledged as well26.

By characterizing the experience of the Shakespearean dramatic method, Cavell arrives at the question of the *reality of time*. He claims that the future of the characters is

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24 Cf. Cavell 1976, 321-323  
25 Cavell 1976, 323  
26 Cavell 1976, 323
open and the plays themselves are not stories but “history happening, and we are living through it”. Yet, what is the role of a stage character in such a constantly happening history? Cavell claims that first of all the stage character is not aware of our presence in the theatre and this fact is also dramatized when the auditorium is darkened and we become invisible for them. However, we are not in their presence even when we are sitting in a richly illuminated auditorium. Of course, there are dramaturgical solutions playing with this effect, when during a performance, all of a sudden the lights are switched on and the actors address, still within the play, the spectators as if they were at a public gathering. Yet I would certainly claim that then the spectators are given a certain role within the play, created by the action but they are never there in this present history as the members of the audience, i.e. in their real-life self – they are “merely” props or devices. Like the stool of Macbeth which Calderwood mentioned: an ordinary object is interiorized by the performance and in a certain way there is no way back to reality: the audience will have an imprint, they are the “general public” from the point of view of the play, and the audience is “made use of” with such an ease “a stool” becomes the stool of the play and performance called Macbeth. The actors bring in the stool when they require it and the stage manager switches on the light when the “public-prop” is required.

Since, Cavell argues further, we as audience are not in the presence of the characters, they are in our presence: we (have to) acknowledge them. But then what is the difference between tragedies happening in real life and on the stage when we have suffering people in our presence in both cases? In reality, acknowledgement is incomplete, it does not exist there, unless we put ourselves in the presence of the others. However, this necessity does not function in the theatre and one can eliminate pity and fear, which seem to thwart this acknowledgement. And we can express this acknowledgement, we can put ourselves in the presence of the others exactly by revealing ourselves. Theatre gives us a place where our hiddenness is accounted for, and thus it provides us a chance to stop theatricalizing. However, not even through acknowledgement can we establish direct contact with the characters. If we want to approach them, we can only approach the actor, since we never occupy the same place with a dramatic character on the stage. But Cavell states that on the other hand (as it was noted above) we share the same time with them. The time that is staged is this very moment, fundamentally different from the already happened time of narrations. This way, through acknowledgement we make the present of the

27 Cavell 1976, 332
28 Cf. Cavell 1976, 332-338
characters our own. We have to find a character’s present otherwise we will never be able to make him- or herself present for us and (s)he will just remain a fictitious character for me, just like any other person in my life whom I failed to know well. However, by making them present, we might get to the completion of acknowledgement. But first we have to reveal what we share with everyone else who is present at what is happening, namely that we are sitting silently and hidden, incapable of doing anything in connection to what is happening on the stage. This is how we arrive at catharsis: we purge everything except for the presence, we purge away pity about the past and fear about the future. As Cavell puts it

"what is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them other, and face them" 29

This awareness of the constant presence with the events taking place on the stage that Cavell elaborates on, gives theoretical support to Gumbrecht’s approach. In my dissertation I will largely build on these observations, taking for granted that the physical presence of the actor is meaningful, yet we must be constantly aware that we do not share the same physical space with them, thus creating the theatrical ontology for our later discussions. The Hamlet escaping his stage during the performance can never be a member of the audience but exactly through his entrapment can he dramaturgically reflect on his position (as we will see later) and his reflection is going to share the same time with us, which enables the audience to experience his plight to the full. The same mechanism functions behind the meta-theatrical features of the given plays. Claudius and Hamlet can deliver their respective soliloquies to establish direct contact with the audience since they share the same time with us. Yet, we are separated in space and this is what makes them dramatic characters, which enables them to reflect on this status and analyze themselves in dramatic soliloquies. However, characters and actors should not be confused at this point: it is only the characters, which are, to a certain extent, separated from us spatially. The actors themselves cannot and perhaps do not even want to ignore the audience’s presence, since the performance itself is always an organic whole built up from stage and audience, hence the spectators’ response can be a dominant factor in shaping the rhythm, atmosphere or just that very specific manifestation of the performance. Nevertheless, further

29 Cavell 1976, 338
elaboration on this question would lead us into actors’ psychology and thus away from our intended focus.

Having established the significance of physical presence in connection with the genre of theatre, it logically follows that pre-performance criticism is highly interested also in visual representations. In the following chapter discussing the dramaturgical roles of the transcendent phenomena in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, an obvious starting point of discussion is the possible visual representations of the Ghost and the Weird Sisters. However, it is important to clarify the working mechanism in such investigations. It does not mean that the passages offer ad hoc possibilities for staging visuals and afterwards discussing their meanings but the other way round. The analyses first offer a theoretical approach towards the dramaturgical, metaphorical, meta-theatrical questions of the plays and then consider their possible ways of translation into the world of the living performance. Pre-performance criticism is also the re-thinking of the ontological status, and, thereby, the dramaturgical-semantic significance of, audience, character and actor.

To provide a brief example in advance, before actually going into the details in the chapter fully devoted to the transcendental in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, two major lines need to be taken into consideration. One is text-based description: the Ghost is precisely described by Horatio to Hamlet, while in the Scottish play, Banquo gives a detailed account of the three strange creatures’ outward features. The other important factor pre-performance criticism concentrates on is the dramaturgical intention, the goal the director wishes to achieve in the audience, which is based on previous interpretation and is realized afterwards, *in* and *during* the performance. In the case of Old Hamlet’s ghost, the guards and Horatio start talking about him when it actually materializes, thus narration suddenly turns into presence, which is an extreme illustration of Cavell’s claim about the constant presence of the theatre: although narration by definition reaches back into the past, it is happening in our presence, becoming thus dramatic action. Here *Hamlet*, again meta-theatrically, i.e. reflecting on its own features as dramatic event, goes one step further and narration is not only happening in the “here-and-now” but it actually turns into the dramatic appearance of the topic itself, as the past (symbolized here by the already deceased king) steps into our presence, washing away everything that is non-existent in the present, i.e. is not dramatic. Besides the scene’s metadramatic reflection on its present tense, the part in question is significant from another point of view: although narration stops, description takes over its place as the guards claim that the apparition came in the figure of the recently deceased king. It is obviously fearful for them but not for us, as we
have never seen Old Hamlet in his life, so unless it bears an obviously fearful, transcendental outlook (significantly not mentioned in the play), we just see an ordinary adult walking through the stage in armour. Nevertheless, there is a way to wrap the figure into the cover of unearthliness and that is via the representation of the fear of the guards on stage. And this fear is created not by the lines they speak but by the performance of those lines: through speech, tone of voice, facial expressions, bodily movement, etc. Of course, the actual behavior of the guards will build on certain patterns of behavior, also known for the members of the audience from past, “ordinary” experience, which communicate fear: without certain “clichés”, the actors could not build their “panels” which will help them to mean. However, this meaning, in line with Gumbrecht’s and Cavell’s respective argumentations, will not be purely “spiritual”: it will be anchored in the very bodies of the actors from which the audience must “read off” the meaning (if the performance is successful). Even further, the actual acting out of fear on the part of the guards – since it happens in our presence – will fulfill and annihilate itself in the very moment of the actual acting out, in the concrete “playing it up”: strictly speaking, it is unrepeatable and will be different each and every time the play is on. Thus we all – actors and the audience – need the constancy of meanings – this constancy ranging from well-known clichés of behavior known form ordinary life to past performances of plays that got stuck in our minds – and the absolute present of the here-and-now, in which the presence of the bodies of the actors is vital and through which they perform. Semantic constancy (relative permanence, recurrence) and momentary actuality (particularity, evasiveness) are just as much in tension as they are totally dependent on each other.

The phenomenology of action: Rayner

Drama is generally considered as the genre of action and if an approach aims at putting the realized production into its focus, it has to account for the relationship between action and performance. Alice Rayner, drawing on the works mainly of philosophers from Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty, in To Act, To Do, To Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action starts her investigation concerning the meaning of these three notions by observing the Gravedigger’s lines in Hamlet while he is digging the grave for Ophelia: “an act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform” (V; 1; 11-12). In the exploration of the nature of action and performance, Rayner provides some key notions for pre-performance criticism.
In the introduction of the analysis it is stated that performed drama relies on three areas, namely the text, the material and the public. Via being conscious about the public nature of drama manifesting itself in the performance, Rayner claims that drama is expected to shape action, and it is made visible by the theatre, therefore action itself combining thus shape and visibility appears somewhere between the two. Consequently, it appears that pre-performance criticism is first and foremost concerned with action in this terminology: a dramatic medium shaped by the text and visualized by the stage.

Action is inherently connected to intention, Rayner argues. That is what separates voluntary and involuntary actions and mere motion, and she projects this intention on the Aristotelian theory of drama (tragedy), claiming that intention is related to form, which has a beginning, middle and an end. Yet, we cannot evaluate deeds in themselves but they should always be observed in context since the meaning of an action is an assertion, having a name shaped by the given circumstances as well as motives or the state of mind of the acting agent. Yet, these circumstances, both for fictional and historical characters involve the historical moment in which the reception is made, because a certain act will have different meanings in various ages or cultures. Therefore, the status of the audience is to be accounted for when evaluating theatrical acts. Their position is peculiar as the spectator is in the middle of the meaning of an action (deed), i.e. she cannot avoid the effect of her presence with the object. Furthermore, “[t]he theatre audience (…) manifests an instance of the fact that human action, no matter how private, always occurs in a social and historical context. The audience is not in that context, it is part of the context and therefore partially constitutes the structure of the act.”

The theory arrives at the discussion of “to do” through highlighting the difficulty of an objective description of an event, since verbal evaluation precedes and influences our perception of them. Whereas “to act” is very much connected to intention, “to do” throws away this background knowledge and concentrates on the event only in its materiality, it observes doings in their mere thingliness, therefore “to do” turns out to be, in a sense, “an empty verb”. As opposed to “to act” it is nonmimetic action, since it functions only in the present, without the real awareness of the past and the future. Acting here is made into an object and the questions of motivations are ignored. When the actor playing Macbeth is expected to throw a cup on the floor in his agitated state of mind and he asks his director

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30 Rayner 1994, 7
31 Rayner 1994, 13-21
32 Rayner 1994, 20
why exactly he is doing this, it is an approach from the “to act”-side. Whereas, if he just
does the deed in order to learn about it according to its own measures (to spontaneously try
it out, for instance, during a rehearsal or performance), then it is forwarding to “to do”33.

We started our approach towards performance by claiming that it is via the way
Horatio and the guards relate to Old Hamlet’s ghost that provides the basis for this notion
and conveys the intended meaning. Rayner supports this argument34 by stating that what
differentiates “to perform” from “to act” and “to do” is quality, and this is a feature of its
public nature. These qualities are not simply done or interpreted but executed for a public,
even if this public is one person only. “If the act-dimension gets values and meanings
imposed upon it by the social context, the performance dimension engages an audience
with sensory qualities in an exchange that can best be called erotic35”. Audience is the
ultimate goal for performance. It stands in for something absent, something which is not
staged. In our example, it precisely stands for the missing scenes, in which Old Hamlet
could have been seen by the audience as somebody “living his life”, and then dying. Then
it would be easier to relate to his death and then being informed about his death so that
they could infer from the scenes at the battlements that it is an already dead person coming
back. We might have similar emotional responses from Macbeth when he faces the Ghost
of Banquo at the banquet but there, I would claim, his behaviour is action, motivated by
the frightful figure, but we as audience have already seen Banquo living, moreover, we
were invited to witness his death, so we do not need a performance to make ourselves
believe that he is coming from an “undiscovered country”. However, the appearance of
Banquo itself is performance, since, as Rayner points out correctly, death cannot be
anything else but performance, as it is always standing in for something, functioning as the
ultimate “other” for life. It seems that performance is the aspect which directly makes
action to be the bridge between the text and the stage because it draws the path from
character to actor. Character is basically textual and it is the actor who performs it and thus
the core of the character is only present as a linguistic construct. The performance of the
character is going to be, thus, a qualitative creation, moreover a particular one. Ian
McKellen playing Macbeth will bring forward his personal qualities, both physical and
professional and this particularity is going to contribute a lot to persuade the audience of
the character’s reality and the qualities of this reality.

33 Cf, Rayner 1994, 21-26
34 Rayner 1994, 27-32
35 Rayner 1994, 27
Referring back to Gumbrecht, performance appears to be not just a mediator between written text and stage representation but also between meaning and presence, combining the two, as Rayner puts it:

_to perform_ is both medial, standing between act and do, and formative, at the public edge where the act opens into a sensory and social world (…). It is neither part of the sedimentation of the narrative act, which traverses past and future in a portable form, nor of the present tense of the body. It serves both, however, in phenomenological terms, by breaking up the false dichotomy between the purely conceptual and the purely physical.°

This means that performance cannot be interpreted without the aspect of publicity, i.e. the presence of the audience and, as a consequence, the performance itself is going to have its own presence for the audience. It connects the history with the very present moment (cf. Cavell’s argumentation) and reconciles meaning with physical presence (cf. Gumbrecht’s observations). As the name of this dissertation’s approach indicates: our focus of investigation will fall on “pre-performance”, the formulation of performance and thus on the processes how text is turning into staged scene, meaning into presence, past and future into present tense.

So far, we have seen the theoretical framework, scrutinizing the nature of theatrical self-references, the presentation of the presence, the significance of shared time but separated space, the ontology of action. All these support pre-performance criticism, i.e. the process how we get from the written text to the actual performance of the plays. These somehow adumbrate the working mechanism of my dissertation, they build up the bridge between the two dominating realms. However, what we need to reflect on briefly is the nature and inventory of these two sides we wish to connect. One is the theoretical approach of the plays; especially close reading, which gives birth to the interpretations we wish to work with. This is one side of the river, our point of departure. The other side is where we wish to arrive, the world of the theatre. Therefore the second field pre-performance criticism wishes to be conscious of is performance-criticism, supplemented by the semiotics of the theatre as a separate discipline. In the remaining part of my theoretical introduction I will be concentrating on these above mentioned fields of observation.

° Rayner 1994, 32
Close reading: Ewbank

The third chapter of the dissertation is primarily devoted to the analysis of the dramaturgical roles the female characters possess in the respective tragedies, and I will start my investigation by observing their first appearances on the stage. Similarly to the discussion of the visual representation of the transcendental, first we need to have a look at what the text says. Ophelia first enters the stage in a domestic environment, and she is preached to, first by her brother, then by her father. Her replies to Polonius are short and faint. Yet, the tones, the pauses, the ways these lines are uttered can on the one hand reinforce this attitude, while on the other it can also go against it, showing a much stronger character. The outcome in the story is, of course, the same in either case: Ophelia’s letters will be shown to the royal couple, she will be sent to a nunnery by Hamlet, and finally drown in the river. But just as we do not know, according to the gravedigger, if she “willfully seeks her own salvation” (V; 1; 2), we cannot be completely sure about the personality which is entrapped in the frame pushing her to the given destiny. Thus, based on the close reading of her lines and on their interpretation, the internal energies of the character may vary to a great extent and it will be the director’s choice to choose one and realize it. Similarly, it will be discussed that Lady Macbeth, traditionally interpreted as the strong woman, can indeed appear as a powerful and confident woman when evoking the dark spirits while preparing for regicide but also as a more hesitant character in need of external help. And the actual realization of these various interpretations may depend on the personality, the “type” of the actress (to return to Gumbrecht: the physical presence of her) as well as on the overall conception of the director. Yet, what we need to start from in building up these potential interpretations is close reading.

In her essay titled Close reading, Inga-Stina Ewbank describes how close reading works when applied to Shakespearean plays. She briefly summarizes this method as reading ‘again and again’, concentrating on the given words of the plays, understanding and appreciating them and formulating questions about both text and context. In her approach, reading has a more general meaning, which is a fruitful basis for pre-performance criticism, since it involves not only the reading of the written lines but in wider terms it refers to the construction of meaning from signs which are presented to us, not necessarily printed, therefore it can apply to both theatrical performances or films as well. She supports her argumentation that words are sometimes even less revealing than
visual signs by Lady Macbeth’s lines directed to her arriving husband: “Your face, my thane, is as a book where men / May read strange matters” (Macbeth I; 5; 60-61).37

Marjorie Garber in Shakespeare in Slow Motion also emphasizes the relevance of close (or slow) reading in connection with the Bard’s plays. She wishes to redirect attention to the language of the dramas, observing the text scene by scene, or even word by word, concentrating solely on the philological and rhetorical devices of language. This means that the play is analyzed in itself, deprived – to the extent this is possible at all – from historical and cultural contexts.38 Ewbank, however, highlights the importance of the difference between the context of the production and the context of the reading of the play, since we are obviously conditioned by our own experiences and background. Yet, the two views do not contradict each other, since the context Ewbank is talking about is precisely important to make us understand the language of the plays, which is not necessarily available to us in its original complexity of meaning(s) unless its 400-year-old context is considered. As she puts it, the reader, therefore, should be aware of the changes of meaning in the plays and might also encounter such references, let these be mythological, Biblical, or, perhaps, Early Modern topical, which might mean very little to us.39 However, pre-performance criticism here immediately has to face the question what it should do with such changes of meaning or obsolete references, because while the reader of the play may read the footnotes, the “reader” of the performance is not given any such opportunity. I would suggest that in such cases, the footnote should be transformed into instructions to the actors. Martin White observes this problem exactly from the theatre’s point of view, claiming that:

[this phenomenon is] what Peter Brook terms a ‘vibrating word’ – one that cannot and should not be restricted to a single, certain meaning – and editorial practice is misleading in generally reducing in the glossary the range of meanings a word might have had for the original audience. For the modern actors playing this scene, though they obviously won’t be able to convey that range, just the knowledge of the variety of meanings the word may have had for the playwrights might influence vocal tones and physical behaviour and help them establish their attitudes to other characters and events.40

37 Cf. Ewbank 2003, 391
38 Cf. Garber 2010, 151-164
39 Cf. Ewbank 2003, 392
40 White 1998, 8
Something similar applies, I would say, to less-known references, e.g. to mythological figures. When Hamlet compares his mother to Niobe in Act I Scene 2, the audience cannot be expected to be familiar with the story of the petrified Greek queen, yet the exploration of this image’s meaning for the actor can give him specific theatrical instructions, showing him why Hamlet uses this simile, i.e. what attitude he exactly wishes his mother to follow. This example is elaborated on in more details in the chapter on women.

In discussing close reading, Ewbank is constantly aware of the characteristic features of the genre and its relation towards the theatre. She emphasizes that the words of the dramatic text are to be spoken on the stage and understood by the audience in a continuous present, moreover in a more or less given, particular time frame. Therefore, emphasis is to be put on structure and the exact location of something that might prove to be as important as the semantic content. In Macbeth, the word “sleep” first appears to describe the seemingly unimportant trick of the witches on a sailor: “Sleep shall neither night or day / Hang upon his penthouse lid” (I; 3; 18-19) but it will gain an ominous importance in the second act, when the protagonist hears the curses after murdering Duncan “Sleep no more: / Macbeth does murder sleep” (II; 2; 38-39), which will run into the Lady’s line in the middle of the play to Macbeth: “You lack the season of all natures, sleep” (III; 4; 141) and culminate in her sleepwalking in the last act as if she had, by her former remark taken the curse upon herself. However, Ewbank goes further, claiming that not only the what and the where is important in discussing the significance of the lines but, resulting again from the performative nature of drama, who is speaking and to whom. To illustrate this, she recalls the scene when Hamlet and Gertrude attribute different meanings to the same words after Claudius’s inauguration, which I will also discuss in the third chapter. There, Gertrude claims that the death of Old Hamlet was “common”, i.e. according to the natural law of the world but Hamlet immediately throws this word back at her as “Ay, madam, it is common” (I: 2; 74), using the word here in the sense of ‘crude’.

As it has been noted above, Ewbank’s essay devotes special attention to the theatrical context in close reading, claiming that we cannot separate the passages read from the seen images on the stage and that words can provide us the emotional impulse of a scene, just as in the case of Gertrude reporting Ophelia’s death in a longer narrative, which Rayner also uses as an example to illustrate how the above discussed performance works when “Gertrude’s performance of Ophelia’s death is for the court and for a theater

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41 Ewbank 2003, 393
42 Ewbank 2003, 393
audience. (...) Aimed at the court and the larger audience, it is also a self-contained set piece that seduces by means of its own excess. (...) More than describing or giving information, the speech serves to render pathos to the scene of the death, to offer sympathy (...)\textsuperscript{43}. Ewbank goes further, pointing out that the language of Hamlet’s soliloquies imitate the formulation of thoughts in the protagonist’s mind and therefore language itself turns into action – this will clearly be visible in the discussion of Hamlet’s \textit{Hecuba}-soliloquy in my second chapter on the duality of action and thought. Close reading is, moreover, closely connected to meta-theatricality, as it should always be aware of the theatrical context, involving the practice, the conventions, in which Shakespeare produced his dramas, and also of the way these reflect upon themselves. This kind of reading will be illustrated primarily in the comparison between Macbeth and Claudius\textsuperscript{44}.

Close reading is, of course, much reliant on language and Shakespearean plays exhibit a great creativity of the raw material, i.e. the English language. Sometimes also the etymology of the words become meaningful as in Macbeth’s lines of his schizoid state of mind, when he seems to lose control over his words and they split into Latin and Anglo-Saxon roots (Ewbank’s example): “No: this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red” (II; 2; 64-66), where this verbal imagination indicates the flexible medium of language Shakespeare worked with. Similarly, his plays often required new vocabulary for describing new experiences, such as the “the mobbled queen” (II; 2; 499) in \textit{Hamlet}. Yet, not only Shakespeare plays with his raw material but his characters needed new words as well. Our example could be Claudius’s first long monologue, when he manipulates his on-stage audience (II; 2) (and perhaps the \textit{real} audience as well) in his role of the confident politician. Similarly, Hamlet is constantly playing with words throughout the tragedy. Thus, language is meaningful not only with respect to its semantic content but in terms of choice of words, rhetoric, the alteration of verse and prose, or even the modality of sentences. For instance, \textit{Hamlet} is dominated by questions\textsuperscript{45}. Yet, if one observes \textit{Macbeth} closely, one might realize that almost all the major characters (and often the minor ones as well) have questions as their first utterance in the play: the witches, Duncan, Macduff, Banquo, Donaldbain, Lady Macduff and also some others start with interrogatives. And this fact has its own dramaturgical significance: while the majority of the characters are searching stable points in the uncertain surrounding

\textsuperscript{43} Rayner 1994, 28
\textsuperscript{44} Ewbank 2003, 393-395
\textsuperscript{45} Ewbank 2003, 396-400
words, there is one character who significantly starts with a statement (“So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I; 3; 36)). This is the protagonist, Macbeth, who arrives confidently, not asking about the world but defining it. Yet, after the murder, he loses the seemingly present point of orientation, he loses bearings, and will start with a question: “Who’s there?” (II; 2; 8) (similarly to his victim, Duncan, whose first sentence in the play is: “What bloody man is that? [I; 2; 1], and later on, when Ross and Angus are approaching, he asks: “Who comes here?” [I; 2; 44]). These are interconnections that close reading is able to reveal and pre-performance criticism can transform into either instructions to the actors, or stage representations. Via the latter, we arrive at the other side of the river: the semiotics of the theatre.

Theatre semiotics: Kiss

It has already been stated in connection with close reading that the theatrical context in which the given play was produced for performance is to be taken into consideration. Attila Kiss in Contrasting the Early Modern and the Postmodern Semiotics of Telling Stories starts from similar grounds in discussing theatrical semiotics. He states already at the beginning of his book that we need to know the logic of representation of both the theatrical context and the cultural one in order to understand a play, since there are blanks in the meaning, which can only be filled in if we put the play back into the theatrical context of the reception. What we need to look at is the logic of representation, which is formulated by the cultural context. Early modern culture moves away from the high semioticty of the middle ages and Kiss finds a parallel in postmodern semiotics, which also exposes a “crisis of the unfinished project of modernity”, which might conclude in the phenomenon that both early modern and postmodern dramas exhibit similar representational strategies to talk about dilemmas of identities. Theatre characteristically thematizes the problem of representation, i.e. the impossibility of complete presence and the given culture’s semantic disposition is defined by exactly the belief in the possibility or the impossibility of evoking the absent in its actual presence on the stage.46

Kiss emphasizes, that there was a remarkable change in dramatic representation during the transition from the middle ages to the Renaissance, since the latter one exhibits drama as a mimetic art, the art of doing instead of reporting things. The high semioticty already mentioned in connection with medieval culture manifests itself to a great extent in

46 Cf. Kiss 2011, 4-7
the theatre of the age: the elements of reality function as the icons of the textuality of the world, and they are motivated by, and they stand in, a direct relationship with universals and with its generating force, Christ. Therefore what medieval theatre wishes to achieve is transparency, and is not interested in offering interpretative strategies to its audience, therefore it cannot become “literary” (in our present sense of the word). Yet, religious drama always suffers from “representational insufficiency”, since Christ can never be totally present, therefore its transparency is just a mere illusion. Its characters are only symbols, not individuals, there is an ontological analogy between the characters and the universal ideas, e.g. Cain is an image of Vice.

Renaissance theatre, however, gives rise to the concepts of representation and mimesis, where Macbeth or Claudius are not images of Vice any more. It is also connected to protestant theology, which, to save the purity of God, passivizes the human capacity of signification, therefore it will not essentially signify something else (cf. Gumbrecht’s observations about the Eucharist above). This recontextualises human action as well, since now it will burden the individual with responsibility and it seems to be inherently connected also to the change in world view, i.e. to the loneliness of the human being in an uncertain universe. New semiotic anxiety emerges as a result of the dissonance between desire and actuality and its later suppression is going to indicate the beginning of modernism. The dominance of symbol, i.e. a semiotically motivated, metaphysical sign, was broken and replaced by the sign, i.e. the unmotivated symbol of semiotics: the relationship between reality-elements as signifiers and the supposed origin behind them is causal but no longer motivated. As a consequence, the drama of the Renaissance aimed at the “live” theatre, a place which involves its audience in the quest of representational attempts to penetrate epistemological uncertainties which surround us. This gave birth to the logic of involvement, relying on established methods of stage-audience interaction. This also gave rise to the two theatrical areas Robert Weimann calls platea, i.e. the interactive front part, involving audience activity and the locus, i.e. the interior part of the stage hosting mimetic and self-enclosed action. Platea-oriented characters thus, in a way, continue the tradition of morality plays by transferring the drama’s world onto its audience, sometimes directly addressing them. Whereas comedies are based on carnivalesque involvement, tragedy imposes testimony onto its spectators to witness the sacrifice. And
the corpses, produced by the actor, will be the pure signifiers, since “it achieves the greatest intensity in signification by signifying the absence of life”\(^{47}\).

The representational logic of the early modern stage practice is, according to Kiss, primarily emblematic. The dramatic texts of the age are to be activated in this context since they were purposefully designed for this essentially emblematic stage. His context, this theatrical logic is still based on the high semioticity of the Middle Ages and it enables stage representation to rely on a minimal number of properties to create symbolical meanings which provide the context for broad, connotative references. An illustrative example is also provided at this point: when Gloucester’s eyes are kicked out in *King Lear*, a theatrical production of today may rely on various representations of this horrific scene, using a finger or an object to act out the deed but then the original emblematic meaning is lost: the visual representation of stepping on an old patriarch’s head, being and emblem of respectability, which provides the tie between the young and the old.

As a result of the change between medieval and Renaissance thinking, the characters of early modern plays tend to be both realistically psychological and emblematically complex and thus members of the audience assign emblematic values to the psychological characters. This complex emblematic representation of the complexity of the human is deconstructed by new interpretative strategies, desemioticizing the human signifier, and taking away its polysemious potential. This process indicates the transition from the emblematic to the photographic or illusionistic theatre. Emblematic stage images and actions were replaced by purposes of creating an illusion for reality. As a result of the changes in the interior architecture of theatres (the appearance of the proscenium arch and lighting) the close interaction between actors and audience started to fade away.\(^{48}\)

Kiss, however, suggests that early modern and postmodern theatres share features as they both use a self-reflexive theatre to observe the nature of the heterogeneous subject, confronting the uncertainties of self-knowledge. Similar anxieties and ambiguities to the ones operating in the early modern are present in the postmodern era giving rise to the epistemological uncertainties and the crisis in values. Yet, crisis is not only present in values but it also penetrates the social subject, the notion of the human being, resulting in the metamorphosis in the ideas constructed about the theatrical character. The subject

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\(^{47}\) Kiss 2011, 29-39

\(^{48}\) Cf. Kiss 2011, 41-57
dissolves into the plural, heterogeneous character\textsuperscript{49}. On the basis of the above outlined tendencies, Kiss distinguishes between two types of theatres:

I am going to apply the name \textit{genotheater} to the first type which operates with various techniques of the theatrical \textit{metaperspective} and audience involvement, while \textit{phenotheater} will be the designation of the second type, which tends to aim at photographic representation. The genotheater (...) avoids or even destroys the illusion of the closure of signification and the seeming success of mimetic representation (...), and it employs self-reflexive strategies to continuously jolt the spectator out of the expected, comfortable identity-positions in which reality would appear to be representable and consumable. As opposed to this, it is exactly the unreflected, problem-free position that is offered to the receiver by the phenoteater, which communicates the ideology that reality is totally representable and manageable.\textsuperscript{50}

His argumentation states that the tradition of the genotheater usually prevails when rival world-models clash. The striving to get to know reality at such periods gives birth to the intensified semiotic activity, in which this kind of a theatrical approach participates.\textsuperscript{51}

The fundamental point of the semiotics of the theatre outlined above in a way connect back to the strategies of close reading Ewbank emphasized: in order to interpret the texts properly, one must be aware of the theatrical context which the meanings were constructed for. White also emphasizes the dominance of emblems in early modern plays, claiming that emblems were very popular in England at that time. Stage images often functioned as three-dimensional emblems and the audience was eager to decode what they saw or heard. And although the majority of these emblematic meanings is lost, the knowledge of them is important for the actor or actress in order to gain a deep insight into the character or the situation\textsuperscript{52}. The example above about \textit{King Lear} clearly illustrates the emblematic importance of the visual representation of blinding Gloucester, yet it is questionable to what extent the original symbolical meaning of the image resonates in the minds of the audience today. Similarly, the Weird Sisters in \textit{Macbeth} are described to have beards, which had its own significance in the Renaissance, denoting usually post-menopausal women\textsuperscript{53}, thus connecting them symbolically not only to the presence or absence of blood but to Lady Macbeth, who asks spirits to deprive her from her sex.

\textsuperscript{49} Kiss 2011, 63-64
\textsuperscript{50} Kiss 2011, 65-66
\textsuperscript{51} Kiss 2011, 66
\textsuperscript{52} White 1998, 9-11.
\textsuperscript{53} Cf. Braunmuller 1997, 34
However, pre-performance criticism should be careful in applying such a solution on stage because not only did it lose its original emblematic meaning but it might also prove to be comical today, which might go straight against the intended purpose.

The analyses the semiotics of the theatre provides, however, do not only contribute, to a great extent, to the interpretation of the context, but they also have relevance in accounting for the potentials of staging various readings, as they overtly reflect on the determining self-reflexive strategies of theatrical traditions. Moreover, through the notion of the *genotheater*, they connect our present day stage practice with the one of the “Early Modern”. For instance, the audience involvement Kiss is talking about refers back to the meta-theatrical practices that we claimed pre-performance criticism partly originates from. Theatre semiotics is thus a theoretical background which is also relevant to this dissertation, primarily as it lays such a great emphasis on visual representations of textual signs: on the one hand, we are concerned with early modern interpretative strategies in building up our interpretations of the plays, whereas, on the other hand, it is the present-day imagery we are focusing on in accounting for staging possibilities.

**Performance-criticism: Worthen, Braunmuller, Kilman**

The emphasis on theatrical possibilities thus evokes pre-performance criticism’s closest theoretical relative both in name and content: performance criticism. This immensely growing field of “Shakespeareology” inevitably makes the author of this dissertation – in Claudius’s words – to “double business bound” with a “twofold force” (III;3;41 and 48), and makes him realize that his tasks are, in Lady Macbeth’s phrasing, to be “twice done, and then done double” (I;6;15). This is because, on the one hand, Emma Smith is completely right when she, in her recent book on Macbeth claims that “performance is at the centre [sic!] of contemporary Shakespeare studies.”

Parallel to the flourishing of the analyses of particular stagings of Shakespeare – and obviously not unrelated to it – we can, on the other hand, witness to the emergence of a separate discipline in the past twenty-thirty years: Performance Studies, as this is documented in Simon Shepherd’s and Mick

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54 Smith 2013, 12, although not all scholars would agree. David Scott Kastan, in his also recent *A Will to Believe*, discussing the role religion plays in Shakespearean drama, remarks in his chapter on *Hamlet* that contemporary criticism sees “culture’s complex religious history as the motor of the play. Theology has replaced psychology as the favoured [sic!] tool to penetrate the heart of the mystery that is *Hamlet*” (Kastan 2014, 118).
Wallis’s up-to-date survey, *Drama/Theatre/Performance*. Consequently, to offer pre-performance criticism as a third, alternative approach to drama (tragedy) is an indeed “doubly” precarious task, and I am aware of the responsibility. Now specifically concerned with Shakespeare and performance, James C. Bulman in his essay *Shakespeare and performance theory*, discussing the relationship between text and the stage states that Shakespearean plays do not exist in one authentic form but exist as multiple texts and these variations are basically accounted for by the constant alterations of “the text” as a very relatively “constant” “core” during the performances. Performances themselves are always bound by the time and space they take place in: the universality one might find in the production of a play is a cultural construct. This works with respect to the audience as well: we cannot generalize about audience response, either, since the cultural context shaping the production, is not enough to guarantee – to say the least – that each and every member of the spectators will react to what is seen in the same way. This elusive nature of the theatre is not surprising, if we take it for granted that the performance of drama is always inherently connected to the very present in which the performance takes place.

In discussing the nature of performance criticism, which takes its subject from such an evanescent subject I will evoke W. B. Worthen’s essay *Staging “Shakespeare”*. Worthen distinguishes between two versions of performance criticism: the one which involves academic writing on text and performance, and the other, which discusses actors’ accounts of their way of translating text into behaviour. It is not surprising, though, that Worthen also originates performance criticism from the exploration of the original theatrical context of the given plays, which was discussed above in connection with close reading and theatre semiotics. Referring to Styan’s observation, he claims that the twentieth century found its connections between Shakespearean and modern performance practice, both turning to the non-illusory nature of the theatre (which was notably emphasized by Kiss as well), and it also manifested itself in post-Second World War scholarship, when critics started to share the idea of non-illusory Early Modern

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55Shepherd and Wallis (2004) argue that the symbolic turning point occurred in 1980, when “New York University’s Graduate Drama Program was renamed the Graduate Department of Performance Studies” (102). The authors show how Performance Studies struggled with traditional ways of interpreting drama, concentrating on the page, rather than on the stage. Yet they think that reading e.g. Shakespearean drama as “poetry”, as, for example, New Criticism was prone to do, is also absolutely legitimate and fruitful; it is another, alternative interpretation of drama with a lot of significant insights (cf. especially 27-29). My study would precisely like to combine the best results of close reading (hugely indebted to New Criticism) and theatre studies, please see further in the main text. As far as I can see, Shepherd’s and Wallis’ attitude to the relationship between traditional, textual readings and the values of a performance is not very distant from mine.

56 Bulman 2005, 2
performances, which was primarily controlled by the playhouse itself, making no pretence of realism. However, Worthen warns us that such generalizations are dangerous, since the performance ensemble of the Shakespearean performances was differently constituted and present in the production than we are today.

About actors and character formation, he states that the text itself gets reformulated in the theatrical process, since it inscribes itself in the personality of the actor as his or her identity and experience is being textualized, and, therefore, the theatrical self rewrites it in its own dynamics. Consequently, “neither actor, nor character remains a self-present authority prior to their production in performance; both emerge as effect of representation”\textsuperscript{57}. This is what Peter Szondi highlights as well, talking about the absolute nature of drama i.e. the relation between actor and character must not be seen but actor and dramatic character must unify in a single dramatic person\textsuperscript{58}. Worthen continues that the work of an actor is often like the work of a detective, looking for clues in the text in order to build up a moral and psychological perspective of the character in question\textsuperscript{59}. Finally, he arrives at the conclusion that

Drama, in the theatre, is a means of “textualizing” the body, making the body and its actions – gesture, movement, speech – readable in specific ways. This “textualization” does not, however, take place in isolation from other forms of social signification, as though the textual formalities – conceptions of character, action, language, behavior – were somehow already complete and immanent in the text of the play. Instead, textual formalities of the drama collide with the practices of the theatre, forcing a negotiation between the organization of the written text and the discursive materiality of the mise-en-scène\textsuperscript{60}.

In this theoretical introduction, I do not wish to give a prolonged overview about the foundations of performance criticism, rather I would like to concentrate on its relation to other approaches. What is important to note, however, is what legitimizes and connects performance criticism’s theoretical background with its actual working field. It is the analysis of certain productions which serves as the foundation Worthen provides in another writing of his. In his view, the theatrical performance is not a derivative version of the idealized written text because the performance of, for example, \textit{Hamlet} is not a citation of

\textsuperscript{57} Worthen 2005, 22
\textsuperscript{58} Szondi 2002, 17
\textsuperscript{59} Worthen 2005, 23
\textsuperscript{60} Worthen 2005, 25
the Shakespearean text but its transformation and the “[d]ramatic performance is not determined by the text of the play: it strikes a much more interactive, performative relation between writing and the spaces, places and behaviors that give it meaning, force, as theatrical action.”

Once the legitimacy of discussing theatrical performances is established, the question is how it is actually applied in practice. A section on the performance history of a play can now be found in most of the critical editions of Shakespeare, discussing the stage history of the given plays. For instance, in A. R. Braunmuller’s edition of *Macbeth* for *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, the editor provides a longer chapter titled “*Macbeth in performance*”. In this chapter, he starts discussing the performance history of the Scottish play from the Jacobian age, based on the frequently noted diary inscriptions of Doctor Simon Forman, who bore witness to one of the productions and continues over the centuries discussing famous couples creating the roles of Macbeth and the Lady on stage, like 18th-century Philip Kemble, whose performance of the Scottish thane was said to have been overshadowed by the acting of her sister, the infamous Sarah Siddons in the role of the Lady. Braunmuller does not only reflect on contemporary opinions about the productions but describes dramaturgical changes as well; yet, resulting from the genre of performance history he wishes to supply, the chapter remains on the level of a catalogue. The reader can have an insight into how the dominant figure of the Lady from Pritchard through Siddons changes into the “essentially feminine” portrayal of Helen Faucit in the mid-19th century, or the “frail, porcelain beauty” of Vivien Leigh in the twentieth and finally arrives at Trevor Nunn’s production, describing how a chalk circle represented a non-conventional stage, which turned the acting space into a rehearsal studio. Performance criticism can supplement such an overview with concentrating on one particular aspect of the play relating to one particular cultural context and exploring how theatrical productions exploited this connection. Such an enterprise is illustrated in Gay Smith’s book, *Lady Macbeth in America*, who immediately starts his introduction claiming that [p]erceived as iconic, and experienced as a mythic type haunting America’s cultural memory, Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth migrated from the stage to the White House” and promises to focus on performances discussing the person of the actress in the given role,

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61 Worthen 2003, 12-13
62 Cf. Braunmuller 1997,56-84
their ways of performance and the effect they achieved. Such an approach, however, is more telling with respect to the culture it takes as a context than to the plays themselves.

Bernice W. Kilman’s essay titled Hamlet *Productions Starring Beale, Hawke, and Darling From the Perspective of Performance History* also starts from reflections on earlier performances, yet in the second half of the text arrives at recent productions and tackles them in more detail. However, when discussing Simon Russell Beale’s portrayal of the Danish Prince from 2000-1, the study seems to remain on the level of a performance review with such general remarks as “this Hamlet has no desire to be a king, no urge to be a hero. He wants to do the right thing. He is deeply grieved by his father’s death and mother’s swift remarriage but incapable of hatred”. The actor’s bodily presence on the stage is taken into consideration in the review as it discusses solutions like Hamlet “pulling strands of hair to stand up rather than anything more obviously manic”. The account of the theatrical solutions the production exhibits takes on the shape of a coherent and neat catalogue, yet not historical this time but exploring more and more details of the performance, proceeding chronologically in the play. Thus the reader is informed that Gertrude has a painting of her late husband in her neck and Hamlet takes that and the one about Claudius in her locket to compare them, which is labeled as a “fresh solution to the two-picture problem, and a relief from the ubiquitous double lockets of so many productions: Beale’s Hamlet does not wear his father’s picture in a locket; he is neither father- nor mother fixated”. Or, concerning *The Mousetrap*-scene, Kilman points out that *that* Hamlet is mesmerized by the Player Murderer, Lucianus and is virtually acting out the poisoning himself, imitating the bodily gestures of the performer.

One of the differences between performance criticism and pre-performance criticism is precisely that the latter is not interested in this or that particular Hamlet of production X but is concerned with some of the performative potentials of the text the character is “made of”, with an eye wide open for some physical patterns of behavior in the stage context of lighting, scenery, costume, etc., into which the text may be “translated” in the immediate presence of an also potential audience. Thus performance criticism and pre-performance criticism are different levels of idealization. The performance critic cannot put his (more particularized) Hamlet, in his physical reality, on the very page of his review, either: the performance critic describes that figure in a particular production (in this

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63 Smith 2010, 1
64 Kilman 2003, 143
65 Kilman 2003, 144
theatre, that night, etc.) from memory. The pre-performance critic is engaged with (the close reading of) the Shakespearean text trying to imagine (as opposed to remembering) how the character he gets to know as Hamlet might behave on the stage, in a certain context. Yet, now opposed to the purely “textual critic”, the pre-performance critic imagines a character as both limited and liberated by the stage. Assuming that Shakespeare (the implied author) also imagined his characters on stage, the pre-performance critic, using his imagination, constructs his or her Hamlet, based on the textual “evidence” (s)he reads out from the play, onto a stage which might never exist “in reality”, but contains constraints (but also possibilities) which the specialized medium of the theatre, duly described by the semiotics of the theatre, necessarily contain and are not always taken into consideration by “purely” textual critics. The pre-performance critic is interested in the conditions the text and the (actors on the) stage and the audience jointly provide to make action and event (including actual speech and actual movement) possible.

Another type of secondary literature based on performance criticism is like the studies contained in Performing Shakespeare’s Tragedies Today in Michael Dobson’s edition, which discusses specific theatrical productions from the actors’ perspective, which illustrate the variation of the theory Worthen called the actors “translating” the text into behaviour. This volume contains an essay by the above mentioned Simon Russell Beale, discussing now another role of his, Macbeth in John Caird’s direction in 2005. Yet, as far as I can see it, performance criticism asserts its ontology but hardly talks about its methodology. This might originate from the fact that, just like Kilman’s essay, the whole discipline seems to be oscillating between diachronic catalogue-construction and synchronic impression-based reviews of certain productions. They are of great value in providing a picture of stage history and the basic interpretations of famous roles and scenes, including actual solutions of the director and the actors. However, and emphatically, they record something already given. They may also attempt to reveal the already existing conception behind productions, which might or might not coincide with the intentions of the actors or directors. But they are concerned with productions that actually took place, which are part of (human) history, not with productions in the imagination (also as potential productions of the future).

Cf. Beale 2006, 107-118
Towards pre-performance criticism: Dessen, Weimann and Bruster

Pre-performance criticism needs the previously outlined philosophical and theoretical background ranging from Calderwood’s meta-theatre, through Gumbrecht’s notion of presence, Cavell’s interpretation of presentness and concluding in the methodology of close reading and theatre semiotics because it is based on textual interpretations and then translates these into theatrical solutions. It grabs the phenomenon of “the play” from the other end: it does not consider either an existing, or a fictitious finished theatrical production but arrives at a (yet) non-existing one, and when this is done, it might have a look at performance criticism to see if other productions arrived at similar solutions. However, pre-performance criticism — as it has already been hinted at — has to arrive there through a path which combines the views of a literary critic and the theatrical director with moderate inclinations towards philosophy. The result it is seeking is not even one specific potential performance, since, because of its text-based nature, it sometimes offers different interpretations for characters or scenes. Performance criticism does speak about the theatre but the strongest feature of the reality of the stage, its continuous presentness is lost, because if some of the characteristics of a performance are written down, these get, so to speak, behind the glasses of a cabinet in a museum, preserved for the future, yet not containing the future but representing the past, having lost the presentness of a production as well. This is an obvious consequence of the elusive nature of the theatre.

Pre-performance criticism, therefore, does not deal with existing productions but with interpretations. It does not want to capture productions but stages solutions and scenes in the mind, where it can maintain its continuous presentness. This does not mean, of course, that the potentials it offers cannot be staged: that is the next step, actually realizing it but that is already the job of the theatre and not of a doctoral dissertation. Pre-performance criticism is thus celebrating the constant present tense of Keats’s Grecian Urn: the “Bold Lover” can never actually kiss the girl but is entrapped in the very present because once he does so, the excitement of the moment is dissolved in the rigid framework of the past.

The reading method of pre-performance criticism is not unprecedented, though. Performance-conscious approaches to Early Modern texts are exhibited in certain critics’ works like Dessen, Weimann and Bruster. In his book, Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary, Dessen claims that even if a director does not wish to realize museum theatre, she might need the original (Early Modern) reading of Elizabethan plays,
since the onstage rationales might explore new layers of meanings. Dessen undertakes to work as a philologist but with the focus on theatrical strategy as it was taken granted by Shakespeare’s audience. Yet, of course, the actors and the audience of that period no longer exist but if one recovers something from the theatrical vocabulary they applied, their stage conventions might be understood and we might get closer to how original audiences could decode and interpret performances. Dessen takes theatrical references from plays, like a stage direction and does not take them for granted with unambiguous meaning but projects them on the physicality of a potential stage and highlights the various meanings of their various realizations. For example, he takes a seemingly innocent “Exeunt omnes” in Macbeth (II; 4), where the direction itself might result in different physical exits (who is going through which door and who is coming through that same door in the following scene) and its possible implications. I also refer to some of Dessen’s remarks concerning stage-direction interpretation later on in the dissertation.

In a later book further elaborating on this problem, Rescripting Shakespeare, Dessen provides a dramaturgical observation of speeches. He considers the physicality of the stage and the actors standing on it and reflects on the fact that whenever certain lines pose staging problems for directors, they are free to omit or reposition them. Dessen provides several illustrations for such solutions (e.g. how one of Puck’s monologues could be transported into Act IV, Scene I in A Midsummer Night’s Dream in order to create time for the actor impersonating Oberon to change into the role of Theseus, should the production have the same actor portraying the two) but always takes them from already existing productions. This way, his approach is closer to performance criticism, yet in a different way: he does not discuss coherent productions, and he does not reflect on the history of a play’s performance history but takes his observations and comments as mosaic-like illustrations to supplement his points. Dessen also reflects on the difference between theatre semiotics and emblem interpretation regarding the Early Modern audience and the contemporary one. To illustrate this, he takes a scene from Romeo and Juliet, where Romeo arrives to the tomb with tools to force it open. On the bare stage of the Elizabethan theatre, this was to convey the sense of the tomb but it is no longer indispensable for a contemporary director. However, cutting the tools from a production would sustain a romantic view of Romeo and additional meanings of the emblem itself.

67 Dessen 1995, 1-15
68 Cf. Dessen 2004, 66-69
would be lost\textsuperscript{69}. Dessen explicitly states that his working method is primarily based on performances and theatre reviews; yet by claiming that his focus is on interpreting page and stage together, his method is an immediate predecessor to pre-performance criticism.

Observations on dramatic texts supplied by Weimann and Bruster also take a similar point of departure. In their book *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance*, they state that their interpretations of plays do not only rely on textual interpretation but contextualizes the relation between text and performance and by doing so they consider an actor’s physical voice and embodiment together with the space and purpose of his action as a significant factor in the construction of meaning. These analyses take into account a performative impulse that is not external to the stage but affects its action from within the play\textsuperscript{70}. It is not surprising, hence, that these remarks have meta-theatrical interests as well, which I will recall later on. Yet what is important to note here is that significant approaches are already present; these, like Dessen’s, Weimann’s or Bruster’s, take the actual theatrical realization as an indispensable way in constructing readings of dramatic texts. To illustrate Weimann and Bruster’s method, they, for example, arrive at such conclusions in discussing *King Lear* that the semiotics of the performance may go against the signification created by the dramatic text of representation\textsuperscript{71}. Or in a single-authored book by Weimann, the *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice*, full chapters are devoted to exploring the mechanism of theatrical representations and dramatic representations. He also brings in theatre semiotic aspects into the discussion, explaining the use of *locus* and *platea* in Shakespearean plays\textsuperscript{72}.

Pre-performance criticism is thus closely related to these analytical approaches but it steps one step further. The approach of this dissertation will largely build on the assumptions and findings of the methods listed above with the difference that it does not take existing performance-criticism-like references to existing productions (like Dessen). Nor does it rest satisfied with theoretical interpretations, nevertheless, largely inspired by theatrical considerations (like Weimann), it combines theory and application, yet it does not, finally, project the theoretical findings onto actual performances (because that would involve another methodology, precisely performance criticism). My approach wishes to open up and create potential performances to illustrate that several theoretical interpretations may manifest themselves in several ways on the stage.

\textsuperscript{69} Dessen 2004, 116-117  
\textsuperscript{70} Cf. Weimann & Bruster 2008, 3-12  
\textsuperscript{71} Weimann & Bruster 2008, 211  
\textsuperscript{72} Cf. Weimann 2004, 180-215
So what is pre-performance criticism? Hamlet, the director and Macbeth, the actor

Pre-performance criticism is thus a reading method, the mechanism of which I will illustrate in comparing two of Shakespeare’s great tragedies: Hamlet and Macbeth. It has been long stated that these two plays constitute, in a way, a counter-image to each other. In his essay, titled Macbeth: Counter-Hamlet, James Calderwood suggests that in writing Macbeth, Shakespeare must have been influenced by those which he had or emphatically had not written into Hamlet. Calderwood goes as far as naming the two plays “photographic negatives” of each other and compares them briefly along certain aspects like taking action or questions of inbetweennes and immediacy\(^\text{73}\). In this dissertation I take this “negative image” metaphor as a point of departure and choose four major themes along which I will project the respective plays onto each other. This includes first the dramaturgy of the “transcendental” characters, followed by the dichotomy of action and thought, moving on to the role of the female characters and finally observing the nature of regicide and remorse from a meta-theatrical point of view. For reasons of space, I need to constrain myself strictly to the exploration of these topics, even when it is tempting to bring in new aspects. Naturally, the fields where we can compare the two plays could easily, or perhaps infinitely, be extended with themes like the role of metaphysics or the comic elements but this dissertation must reduce its viewpoints to preserve its coherence. The structure of this work, therefore, represents the representational logic of the problems listed above.

Before the performance of The Mousetrap should start in the castle of Elsinore, Hamlet gives instructions to his actors. His directions start as follows:

> Speak the speech, I pray you, as I have pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as life the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently. (III; 2; 1-5)

The longish list of pieces of advice stays on the track of generality later on as well: the actor “must acquire and beget a temperance that my give it smoothness” (III; 2; 6-7), the

\(^{73}\) Cf. Calderwood 2010, 7-32
role must not be overacted; yet being too tame on the stage is also to be avoided: it is important that the actors should focus on modesty since:

For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as ’twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure (III; 2; 18-22)

There is not a single instance among Hamlet’s instructions which would refer directly and particularly to the expected manner of performing The Mousetrap: the Prince of Denmark does not, for example, advise the First Player to depict the Old King with some significant dignity, neither does he direct the Third Player to what extent the murderer’s figure is required to represent a demonic character. The list of advice is accurate; yet, it can easily be detached from The Mousetrap; moreover, even from Hamlet himself. As a general theory of acting, it could feasibly be inserted into any other play in which the theatre appears on the stage in a self-reflective manner, or it could conveniently be hosted by a book on actor-training as well. However, it is precisely this very general nature of Hamlet’s text which makes it relevant even today: this makes the gist of the instructions valid “both at the first and now”, in the constant present tense of the theatre. It is the duty of both Hamlet’s actors as well as of the actors of today to specify these instructions according to the particular character of the given performance.

Hamlet’s directions, in the first place, emphasize the adherence to nature, i.e. it urges in today’s terminology, “realistic representation”. Yet, this “stage-realism” does not only change according to the diversity of the respective plays but in a larger context, too, since of course the very basics of theatrical realism changes with history as well. For instance, the English theatre before David Garrick preferred so-called “declamatory acting” with its use of broad gestures, giving ample room to the actor/actress to express the very chore of his/her individual personality; 74 this might well prove to be unrealistic for a modern spectator. By contrast, in the 20th century, following the principles of Stanislavsky, the actor approaches the role with the inventory of a psychiatrist in favour of a naturalistic depiction. To conclude, the theatrical realizations of Hamlet’s everlasting general

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74 See, for example Charles Lamb’s account in his essay On Some of the Old Actors, where he remarks that Mrs. Powell (an influential actress of the times) made a great impression on him because her “fine spacious person filled the scene”. Lamb from his early childhood was a frequent visitor of “Garrick’s Drury”, i.e. Drury Lane Theatre, cf. his The Essay on Elia, where he describes his visits in the 1781-82 season (quoted Banks 1992, 37).
instructions vary both synchronically (according to the respective plays to be performed) and diachronically (based on the expectations of the respective ages).

Exactly owing to its universal nature, the Hamlet-instructions provide only a few palpable points of orientation for the actor, and whether the players, arriving in the Danish castle were satisfied with such directions or not is left unclear. This does not, however, seem to be surprising if one takes the generalizing inclination of the Prince into consideration. He always takes the particular and projects it on the universal axis, like when his disappointment in his mother made him formulate the judgement of “Frailty, thy name is woman” (I; 2; 146). Yet, he does not only wish to instruct the actors (who, being professionals, seem to be stunned by being advised by a layman) but everyone else in his play: he wishes to turn his mother into the mourning Niobe and bring her to a realization of her guilt, to fool around with Polonius and position his body here and there even in his death, to manipulate the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to send Ophelia out of the play, either to a nunnery or to a brothel (where female procreation is no longer valid) and he especially wants to punish Claudius. His only problem is that he cannot remain in the director’s position but the script of the play he is expected to realize and which he received from the ghost of his father involves him as the protagonist of a revenge tragedy with the explicit duty of murdering the king (which, to complicate matters even further, has already, with respect to another king, been done, precisely by Claudius). However, he suffers as a director as well: he cannot relate to the surrounding people as characters of the stage as they hardly ever do what he wishes them to do; he is desperately entrapped in his universal thinking and instructions. Moreover, there seem to be characters whom he cannot really relate to as a director. As Calderwood noticed, there are two possible mirror-images for Hamlet in the play, the two other sons losing their father: Laertes and Fortinbras, but Hamlet contacts Laertes rather physically than verbally, and to Fortinbras he passes on the country but Hamlet – famously – dies before Fortinbras would actually enter the stage.

In the other tragedy of Shakespeare under our scrutiny, Macbeth, however, appears as the professional actor lacking a proper director. He is given an elusive play to act in by the Weird Sisters at the beginning of the drama, and he is ready to carve his way through

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75 As Marcell Gellért noted, this is true for other characters of the play. *Hamlet* is a play of the causative, where many wishes to make actions done by others: Old Hamlet wants Hamlet to take revenge for him, Claudius employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy upon the Prince, even Polonius has Reynaldo to keep an eye on Laertes. Gellért (2014, personal communication). Yet, whereas all the other characters concentrate on one specific aim, it is only Hamlet who considers the complete play as a whole and tries to have directorial control over it.

76 Cf. Calderwood 1983, 12-17
the plot without anybody telling him exactly what to do in terms of practical, immediate, concrete behavior or concrete action. He is only prompted, and given hints, by the obscure Weird Sisters and hiswife. As opposed to Hamlet’s universal way of thinking, he only concentrates on one specific task at a time and steps forward after its termination. He does not want to be director of his story; he wants to be the protagonist of a play about a king (whose role for a while he does play) but he also wishes to escape from the play when it turns out to be a drama about murder and the conscience of guilt. He desperately needs instructions from outside but he is denied this: when he visits the Weird Sisters for the second time, they only give him elusive and ambiguous prophecies about the “future” he himself has to interpret. And Macbeth fails in doing so, which will bring about his final fall.

Thus, what we are presented with in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are two protagonists, where the former one relates to his story as a director, while the latter one participates in it as an actor. My dissertation wishes to combine the attitudes of both of them and present the approach of pre-performance criticism in discussing the tragedies. As if Hamlet was looking at the text with his universality, building up interpretations and formulating them into specific theatrical solutions his professional actor, Macbeth exactly requires. All of the topics of comparison are thus to be approached as if it was a joint production of Elsinore and Inverness.

This metaphor above is what sheds light on the basic concept of pre-performance criticism, which are to be illustrated in more detail in the following analytical chapters. This approach towards texts is primarily based on close-reading the plays and establishing the interpretations with the aid of meta-theatrical codifications the texts explicitly or implicitly contain. I do not wish to provide a comprehensive analysis of the meta-theatrical elements of the respective tragedies: meta-drama is thus not going to be an aim but rather a means of discussing the plays and realizing staging potentials in them. These aspects, listed above, which constitute the framework of the comparison, manifest themselves throughout this close-reading procedure. After arriving at theoretical conclusions, the dissertation puts these findings onto a hypothetical stage. The aspects here are all based on the philological investigations but the goal is not one particular and all-encompassing coherent concept for a potential performance. If this was the case, the dissertation would immediately subordinate itself to a real theatrical production, which should indeed exhibit some coherent concept, yet preparing for an actual performance, the director, the actors and the theatrical staff do not only talk about possibilities but perform (some of) them. Instead,
what pre-performance criticism offers are, emphatically, typified problems, in contrast with the contingent nature of a performance. Thus, my approach does not wish to give the reader a comfortable view of a complete production, which is theoretically finished and the only factors missing from its actual realization are the flesh-and-blood actors and the physical stage. On the contrary, pre-performance criticism first and foremost wishes to provoke and facilitate thinking about these plays in theatrical terms. It deliberately preserves its mosaic nature, since it takes one theoretical phenomenon and then accounts for how this problem could be performed, and then takes another interpretation and accounts for the potentials of that one. Consequently, it obviously does not aim at taking over the role of a theatrical director but wants to stay between the realms of theory and practice and highlight text-based interpretative problems with ideas of potential stage-realization, which might either provoke the reader to further thinking about these problems or perhaps give hints to directors when they construct their indeed coherent (and necessarily contingent) performances.

The title of the dissertation promises to provide its reader “aspects” of pre-performance criticism, since it is not yet a coherent theory and in the framework of a PhD dissertation I do not even aim at providing one. What this study wishes to demonstrate is not more than a relatively new method of reading plays. Therefore, at this early point it is not yet its aim to initiate a dialogue with other theoretical schools like, for instance, new historicism, deconstruction or psychoanalysis. It would, of course, be extremely beneficial to do so, yet, only if my approach finally mature into a complete methodology. For now, these are just the first approaches, concentrating only on those theoretical works, discussed in this introductory chapter, which already foreshadow or facilitate this methodology.

My view of the plays in question was fundamentally shaped while I was directing Hamlet in a university production of 2010 (ELTE, Budapest) and also played the title role in it. Besides this, I have long been thinking about putting Macbeth on stage as well. In the course of rehearsing Hamlet, many ideas of the present dissertation already got formulated. I had to face problems of theoretical interpretations versus staging and realized that several inventive ideas come when one considers staging potentials or even wants to provide guidance for his actors in building up a character. In a certain way, during this experience was the idea of pre-performance criticism born, acknowledging that theory and stage practice can well complement each other. Acknowledging that one’s theoretical interpretations might highlight ideas for the theatre and one can provide them by putting
the conclusions on the hypothetical stage. This is what the present dissertation attempts to demonstrate.

Let the curtain of our mind rise.
Chapter One

“This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good”

The Dramaturgy of Transcendence

In both tragedies, transcendental forces bear a significant role in formulating the plot (transcendental meaning not more than ‘other-worldly’). The Ghost of Hamlet’s father returns from the grave to hold witness against his brother in an otherwise perfect case of murder and by doing so he initiates the traditional machinery of the revenge play. By contrast, the Weird Sisters of Macbeth do not evoke but generate the murder, and, as opposed to Hamlet, they do not shepherd the plot into the (seemingly) traditional channel but create new ways for a dramatic protagonist who becomes a tragic hero from a villain.

In the theatrical realization of such transcendental creatures, the primary question is their visual representation, since while reading the play, the reader can only rely on the actual utterances of these creatures, as well as their descriptions by other characters in the drama. On the stage, however, they must appear in their own physical form, markedly before they would say anything at all. Luckily, descriptions about these strange appearances can be found in both plays.

“His beard was grizzled, no?” (H; I; 2; 240) — The visual representation of the Ghost

The transcendental forces appear in the very first scenes of both Hamlet and Macbeth; yet, while in the former the Ghost is only talked about, and talked to, and the apparition itself does not say a word, the exact opposite happens in Macbeth: the first scene is constituted exclusively by the utterances of the Weird Sisters. The guards of the first scene of Hamlet have already met the apparition twice before the plot starts and now are about to try to convince the recently returned Horatio that the figure of the Ghost is not a mere hallucination. Initially, Horatio is reluctant to acknowledge the existence of the Ghost.

77 Macbeth I; 3; 129-130
78 As Fletcher observes, Horatio at the beginning is completely aware of the strangeness of the Ghost, similarly to the night-guards. There is, however, a shift in his attitude towards the apparition and regards it as
solely on the basis of hearing about it, and calls it only a “thing”\(^79\) (“What, has this thing appear’d again tonight?” (I; 1; 19)), and then Bernardo prepares to give a detailed description about the Ghost; yet, he can hardly start his account when the protagonist of his narrative turns up, and the apparition sweeps through in front of them. Thus narration is suddenly replaced by visual representation and action before the scene would sink back into a recounting, the function of which is to scatter the seeds of information necessary for the audience’s understanding of the plot. The appearance of the “thing”, however, does not completely replace the description of the Ghost, since its stage presence is not surrounded by silence but by dramatic dialogue, and an important aspect of his outward features is mentioned: “In the same figure like the King that’s dead”\(^80\) (Bernardo, I; 1; 39). Thus, the Ghost is importantly easy to identify: he appears in the form of the recently deceased Old Hamlet and not even his clothes give the impression of transcience: as Horatio observes: “Such was the very armour he had on / When he th’ambitious Norway combated” (I; 1; 59-60). Consequently, there is nothing in the description of the mere sight which would indicate that not a real-life, living person is being observed: what highlights the ghostly status of the “thing” after all is only that it appears in the form of a recently died person, and when the guards try to stop him, Marcellus cannot help acknowledging that “it is as the air, invulnerable” (I; 1; 126). Therefore, the outward appearance of the Ghost is endowed with a single significant feature: it appears in the form of Hamlet’s father. In the following scene we only gain information further supporting this aspect: it is emphasized again that he was wearing armour, we get to know that he wore his beaver up, looked rather in sorrow than in anger, and that his beard is of the colour of sable silver (cf. I; 2; 226-241). For the reader of the play, these are new pieces of information, yet, the audience in the theatre has already seen the Ghost: in their case the information of the second scene is not addressed primarily to the spectator but to Hamlet: although of course only if the theatrical representation of the Ghost agrees with its description.

The director of _Hamlet_ might decide to follow the characters’ descriptions accurately and represent the Ghost on stage accordingly, i.e. in full armour, with sorrowful countenance and grayish beard. The most emphatic factor of such a representation is the

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\(^79\) It is important to note that this line is uttered by Horatio in the Quarto version; the Folio gives this utterance to Marcellus, where consequently the quoted line is not the manifestation of disbelief but of fear to name the apparition.

\(^80\) It also contributes to the dramaturgical effect of the line that it does not only identify the outlook of the Ghost but this is also the first time when the audience is informed about the recent death of the king.
armour. It is of great importance in the motif-structure of *Hamlet* that the previous king was a valiant soldier who defeated the Norwegian monarch in a duel. Such a characterization of Old Hamlet stands in contrast especially with the figure of Claudius, since the present king of Denmark is not credited with any similarly heroic deed (which seems to belong to the “heroic past” of a previous generation anyway). Hamlet’s uncle is all the more the representative of the Machiavellian intellect and the sober politician who pours both real and verbal poison into the ears of people in his vicinity, including his manipulation of Laertes in Act IV Scene 7. His type of person rather prefers machinations from behind and back-stabbing to open confrontations. Therefore the armour of Old Hamlet bears a symbolic significance: besides putting emphasis on the personal heroic past, it also means dissociation from his successor.

The effect of the Ghost’s outward appearance, however, depends to a great extent on how the other characters are clad. Should the performance use period dress, i.e. Medieval or Renaissance garments, the armour of course fits well into the world of the play and it will be the aspect of the heroic past which will be enhanced in the symbol-system of the performance. Yet, the effect changes if the production is transported into a contemporary setting and the other characters appear in clothes accordingly. This raises less problems in their case, since the text of the play hardly includes any reference to their garments (although there are exceptions, like Hamlet’s allusion to his clothes of mourning in Act I Scene 2, or like Ophelia’s description about the seemingly mad Hamlet in Act II Scene 1 (79-85). Therefore if the armour of the Ghost is a stable point of orientation (rooted in the “original time” of the plot) and if all the other characters’ clothes shift from this focal point, then the contrast will obviously be greater. Should the director chose to strengthen the first interpretation (i.e. the representation of the heroic figure) but wish to place the performance into a modern setting, the Ghost might appear in a contemporary military uniform, although this way the production deviates from the descriptions given by the other characters. The text and the stage-image, however, do not necessarily exclude but strengthen each other: if the others talk about armour upon witnessing a figure appearing in contemporary military uniform, then the audience can freely accept the two as proxies of each other. As regards a Shakespeare-play, we are talking about a poetic text and the images and metaphors constantly colouring dialogues provide us with the possibility of interpreting certain expressions, usually read on the literal level of meaning, on the metaphorical plane as well. Thus the uniform read as “armour” becomes a poetic image, emphasizing the heroic appearance of the Ghost.
Another important feature of the Ghost’s appearance is yet to be discussed: it is not only a heroic king who returns from the “undiscovered country” (in fact, according to his own testimony, from Purgatory) but he is also Hamlet’s father; therefore, the Prince can now reunite with his beloved father. Yet, the signs of intimacy seem to be missing both in the words of Old Hamlet talking to his son and also in the appearance of the Ghost, since the armour itself does not match such intimacy. The director might decide to put emphasis primarily on the Ghost as the father and head of the family and dress him in homely, or even informal clothes; this, however, goes against the content of the text. It is partly because of the lack of intimacy in the appearance of the Ghost in the Shakespearean text that the urge to take revenge weighs so heavily upon Hamlet’s shoulders: it is first and foremost an order or burden and might contribute to the procrastination of the deed, since Hamlet is unable to identify with it to the full. Although Hamlet’s utterance right after the encounter with the Ghost reveals enthusiasm and indicates that the appearance of his father is carved into his memory (“thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain” (I; 5; 102-103)), these will precisely enhance the burden-like nature of the task. If the Ghost started to speak in a more intimate voice, revenge itself would prove more to be a shared business between Hamlet and his father; the force of the aspect of an external order would weaken, and consequently Hamlet’s identification with the role would also become easier (although still not too easy). The Shakespearean dramaturgy and the dialogue supports the former interpretation: the Ghost returns in armour and the role put upon Hamlet arrives from the outside (from another, “undiscovered country”).

The Ghost has an additional appearance in Act III Scene 4 when he enters Gertrude’s closet in the middle of the argument between the Queen and his son. This time it is the First Quarto which provides a reference to the Ghost’s garment according to which the apparition arrives in his nightgown. Thus while an emotional distance characterized the presence of the Ghost at the beginning of the play, now a more dominant intimacy surrounds his entrance. The Ghost’s appearance in Act III is the only single moment when the audience can see the Hamlet-family together: the Prince of Denmark in the company of his father and mother. Although Hamlet’s hands are still warm of the blood of Polonius and the conversation between mother and son resulted in an angry quarrel, for a split moment idyll is restored. The Ghost talks only once and according to his account the cause of his reappearance is to remind his son of his duty; yet, already in the third line of his speech he changes the subject to Gertrude and asks Hamlet to comfort his mother. The fact that he changed his outward appearance, too, namely from armour to nightgown, endows
him with a more human than transcendent quality. Upon the battlements he appeared in his full armour to give emphasis to his words in which he ordered his son to take revenge, while in the bedroom it seems that he has returned to see his wife, as if his warning to Hamlet were only an excuse for him to reappear. Maybe, even in Horatio’s description, it was longing for this lost idyll which turned the Ghost’s countenance from anger to being sorrowful. However, it is only the stage direction of the so called “Bad” (First) Quarto\textsuperscript{81}, which gives unequivocal reference the Ghost’s appearance in a nightgown; in the Second Quarto and the Folio, Hamlet only exclaims: “My father, in his habit as he liv’d!” (III; 4; 126). This may refer of course to the nightgown but also to the armour worn during the first encounter, which has a different effect in this case. Whether it is armour, or it is a contemporary military uniform which is preferred by the theatrical production, neither will support the momentary restoration of the idyllic picture of the family; the Ghost will rather be an outsider and it is his primarily mission which will be important for him (to urge his son to take revenge; the duty of Hamlet to obey) rather than the reestablishment of his lost position in the family. Consequently, it is the first two lines of the Ghost’s utterance ("Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.” III; 4; 100-101) that will gain prominence, and not the lines referring to Gertrude. Should the Ghost in a modern production dash into Gertrude’s room in medieval armour, the repeated mentioning of duty can also gain a comic, or even ironic hue.

There is one more question in the visual representation of the Ghost worthy of consideration: the employment of some obvious signs of his transcendental origin. Thus the director should decide to what extent it ought to be visible that the apparition comes from another world. The text does not provide a cue other than the fact that the Ghost, in the description of others, has an otherworldly countenance (and later his claim that he returns from Purgatory – more on this later). That the king returns from the dead, however, is strange and frightful only with respect to the stage characters who knew the old king in his lifetime, whereas the audience had not seen Old Hamlet alive and are not informed about his death in the moment of his first appearance. (as opposed to the way they see the ghost of Banquo in \textit{Macbeth}, see below). Yet the transcendental status of the apparition should be expressed in one way or another, more precisely the absence of the spectators’ above mentioned lack of knowledge should somehow be compensated for. At the same time, during the first appearance of the Ghost, it is mentioned right at the outset that he

\textsuperscript{81} As Escolme notes, some defend “the integrity of the 'bad’ quarto text, suggesting that it points ‘much more towards contemporary theatrical practice’ than later editions.” Escolme 2005, 55
bears resemblance to the recently deceased king; therefore, the transcendental origin is rationally made conscious in the audience, while emotional consciousness might be raised by the truthful playacting of the actors impersonating Horatio and the guards, i.e. their emotional reaction to the fantastic and unbelievable apparition 82. A theatrical production may, of course, select from a wide range of possibilities to emphasize the transcendental features: from the tenderly pale make-up on the face to some more spectacular solutions. The Ghost might appear in a truly frightful form; this study, however, does not deal with enumerating the various devices to evoke fear in the audience.

Yet, it is important to note that in the original staging practice of the Elizabethan age, the Ghost came out of the trapdoor, which was symbolically called and thus associated with hell. Thus Old Hamlet in a way came from Hell to urge his son to take revenge 83, which might not only contribute to a potential fearful representation of the apparition to maintain the now (perhaps) lost symbolism of the Early Modern trapdoor but also questions the moral duty of Hamlet to obey his father, who, as the Prince later emphasizes in an attempt to distance himself from Old Hamlet and also his task, “[m]ay be the devil” (II; 2; 575-576).

“You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so” (M; I; 3; 43-45) — The visual representation of the Weird Sisters

The text-based representation of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* serves as a kind of counterpoint to the representation of the Ghost. As it has already been mentioned, unlike the description of the Ghost, there is no description of the witches prior to their appearance on the stage. The guards of *Hamlet* conjure up, as it were, the Ghost by talking about him, whereas the Weird Sisters are suddenly there in front of the audience at the beginning of the play. In the first scene, the Ghost silently moves through the line of the guards talking to him, while the first scene of *Macbeth* is built up exclusively of the Weird Sisters’

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82 This is what Rayner is talking about in discussing the nature of ‘to perform’, i.e. the primary target of the text on stage is the audience and the primary goal is to convey the meaning (here the information that the walking figure is the manifestation of a dead person and the fear breeding from it) to the spectators. Cf. Rayner 1994, 27

83 Cf. Gurr & Ichikawa 2000, 49. The authors also claim that the trapdoor’s symbolism connect different scenes of the play together. For example, in Act V, the trapdoor serves as Ophelia’s grave and then “Hamlet, making one of his characteristically oblique associations between his memory of the trap as the ghost’s point of entry and of revenge as leading to hell, cries out that he is his father’s ghost (‘This is I, *Hamlet* the Dane’) and leaps after Laertes”. Gurr & Ichikawa 2000, 50
communication among one another. Furthermore, as opposed to the basically narrative start of *Hamlet* (which is interrupted for a while by the dramatic effect of the Ghost’s appearance), the witches’ scene is primarily dominated by the dramatic nature of the quick and short responses of the characters and the lyricism of the major metaphors and symbols (e.g. fair and foul; the constant duality of victory and defeat) occurring in their speech. These two strikingly contrasting starts are the “muzzle velocities” of the respective tragedies, which further determine the speed of the following events. In *Macbeth*, the protagonist does not only encounter the transcendental beings sooner than Hamlet his Ghost but the actual execution of the murder happens by far much earlier than Hamlet is able to take revenge on Claudius. Moreover, as it will be noted later, this initial rhythm also determines the first encounter of the respective protagonists with the transcendental creatures in the respective plays, since while the Weird Sisters turn to Macbeth and Banquo with only a few short utterances, the Ghost does not initiate a real dialogue and recites the reasons for his arrival in a longish monologue. However, these opposing features of self-expression on the part of the transcendental beings have their dramaturgical function as regards the speed with which the respective protagonists are supposed to execute their respective deeds. The length of the verbal output of otherworldly agencies is indeed in direct proportion with this speed, yet this is not a simple and direct cause and effect relationship: Hamlet does not delay the deed as a result of the fact that the Ghost was talking to him in a long monologue, and Macbeth does not kill Duncan with little hesitation and quickly because the witches spoke in short and turbulent sentences. Yet it should also be realized that the very appearance of a transcendental agency itself is always already the result of its own dramaturgical function. It is this dramaturgical function which is, on the one hand, realized in the very “substance”, the “palpable presence” of the Ghost and the Weird Sisters, while, on the other hand, and strictly through the respective attitudes of the protagonists, transcendence influences, or even determines the plot as a whole. This particular dramaturgical function takes the shape of the inner desires for success in Macbeth, and of the emphasis on filial and princely obligation in Hamlet’s case – these will be discussed later.

As it could be seen, the transcendental forces in both tragedies are interconnected through the device of a kind of “counterpoint-technique”: a visible feature is often outweighed by a first less obvious, yet later prominent counterpoint. When discussing the Ghost it was emphasized that besides the relatively accurate description of his outward appearance, we find no direct signs of transcendence in his figure. Not only do we lack a
detailed account of the outward appearance of the Weird Sisters but, by contrast, even the vague references to their countenance are outweighed by the otherworldly atmosphere they radiate, which predominates their textual characterization as well. The description of these strange creatures is given by Banquo in Act I Scene 3, when Macbeth and his comrade-in-arms first encounter the witches:

What are these,
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th’inhabitants o’th’earth,
And yet are on’t? — Live you, or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips; you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (I; 3; 37-45)

Characterization like “withered”, “wild in their attire”, “choppy finger” and “skinny lips” are vague descriptions; yet, they suggest witch-like creatures. Mentioning the beard also serves to emphasize the masculine nature of these women and their indefinite status of gender. What is more important than the description lacking specific details is the uncertainty of the speaker\(^\text{84}\) and that he immediately claims that the creatures they see can hardly be the inhabitants of the earth. The reference to the beard further increases the doubts of the speaker and underscores the impossibility of an accurate verbal grasp on the sight: first Banquo tries to categorize them as “women”, yet even this is slackened by the application of the auxiliary should (cf. “you should be women” (I; 3; 43)); moreover, with the introduction of yet in the following coordinate clause, the force of the classification becomes practically void.

On the basis of Banquo’s speech, the most important feature in the Weird Sisters appearance is their strangeness and otherworldly nature, which is apparent even at first sight. According to the description quoted above, ugly and wizened witches appear to us on the stage. The question is similar to the one raised with respect to the Ghost: what does it mean for a theatrical production of today to follow the guidelines of the textual description in its representation of the Weird Sisters? One of the most striking factors is the beard. According to the anthropology and the anatomical studies of Shakespeare’s age, a

\(^{84}\) Still in accordance with Rayner’s notion of “performance” (cf. Rayner 1994, 27.), cf, the guards’ attitude upon witnessing Old Hamlet’s figure rising from the dead (see above).
beard can be expected to appear on a menopausal woman, while the permanent absence of menstruation (a kind of withering away and dryness) was considered to be characteristic of witches. Today’s audience, however, is most probably not familiar with the results of Renaissance medical studies or witch-lore, yet they may still easily identify them as “witches” (maybe with a beard, although its possible comic effect must be seriously considered by the director). Three, visually transcendental wizen creatures cross the path of Macbeth and Banquo and this may put the mystic, prophetic knowledge of theirs into focus. The relation between Hamlet and the Ghost is obvious: Hamlet’s own father returned (according to his account) from Purgatory and wants to speak with his son to tell him to take revenge. There is no obvious link of this kind between Macbeth and the Weird Sisters: the witches waylay the two victorious commanders, which might be the very reason for their appearance to them rather than to Malcolm or Rosse, for instance. The appearance of the Ghost, as it was noted, contains only some scanty references to his transcendental nature, which directly corresponds to the content of his knowledge, which is also devoid of supernatural features: his account contains little more than what he experienced himself about his own death and the single otherworldly element in his speech is not more than the account that he was allowed to return from his grave to enumerate some – surprisingly specific – details of how he was murdered. By contrast, the Weird Sisters somehow “contain” their transcendental knowledge already in their very appearance: they are not known to have ever been creatures of our ordinary world (as opposed to Old Hamlet), they do not provide an account of the past from the perspective of a witness but present predictions as regards the future. In accordance with their appearance, their prophecies are also strange and illusive. The Ghost gives us the impression of an agent who reports facts and direct orders, whereas the Sisters place Macbeth on unstable grounds via their famously ambiguous prophecies (gaining further significance at the second encounter). After their disappearance, Banquo gives a description of the space they have vacated which is, at the same time, a metaphorically apt diagnosis of Macbeth’s state of mind: the earth, which usually seems to be firm and reliable, now “hath bubbles, as the water has” (I; 3; 77).

Braunmuller 1997, 34-35

The semiotics of the theatre Kiss is talking about (cf. 2011, 4-7) and also the approach of close reading provide us clues for such emblematic meaning from the historical-cultural context the plays were performed in, yet, as it was mentioned in the introductory chapter, pre-performance criticism needs to evaluate the possibility of transiting these emblems into the present day performances or rather translating them into a different emblem or image that may convey a similar meaning to “the original”.

57
Nevertheless, while on the contemporary stage it is the Weird Sisters whose transcendental origin is apparent at first sight as opposed to the seemingly realistic representation of the Ghost, we find currents of almost the exact opposite in the background knowledge and common beliefs of Shakespeare’s audience. Although the Bard’s spectators accepted both apparitions as transcendental creatures, the figures of the Weird Sisters were familiar to them as opposed to Hamlet’s father, who represented an unusual way of realizing even a “stage ghost”. The majority of the audience knew that such witches were expected to seek for unsanctified dead bodies on the battlefields since bodily parts were necessary ingredients for their brews; thus, their figures are in accordance with the already established milieu of the play, unlike that of Old Hamlet, who did not appear in the expected white sheets of the contemporary stage-ghosts; moreover, he claims to have arrived from Purgatory, the existence of which was firmly denied by the official Anglican Church of England. Although it is not within the scope of the present study to explore the possible interpretations of the play in Shakespeare’s time, it is still worth mentioning that it was the Ghost’s figure who, in spite of being a “family member”, contradicted the expectations of the age, while the Weird Sisters, although otherworldly by definition, proved to be far less “weird”.

Interpretations on Hamlet calls special attention to the uncertainty of the status of the Prince’s father. According to Harold Jenkins, Hamlet is not sure about the origin of the Ghost, yet, he accepts him as his father’s spirit; therefore, the tone of the Prince is primarily characterized by filial duty and love. Greenblatt emphasizes that the nature of the Ghost remains dubious all along, since he speaks about himself as someone who is doomed to suffer in Catholic Purgatory. Protestant theologians, however, not only denied the existence of Purgatory but claimed that any kind of a ghost is of evil origin. Moreover, Greenblatt calls attention to Hamlet’s sentence in the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy, where the Prince claims that from “the undiscover’d country (…) [n]o traveler returns”, thus questioning the status of the Ghost. As Hibbard puts it, the Ghost is the masterpiece of ambiguity whose reality was established as early as in the first scene of the play, yet, his true nature remains in darkness: if, for instance, he comes from Catholic Purgatory, why does he ask his son to take revenge, which is so much condemned by (Catholic) faith?

87 Stephens 2002, 231
88 Poole argues that the notion of Purgatory was not only in the focus of theological but also geographical interest and via its description in Hamlet, it seems that Purgatory gains its geographical features from the Icelandic volcano, Mount Hecla. For a detailed discussion see Poole 2011, 95-135.
89 Jenkins 1982, 154-155
90 Greenblatt 2008, 1686-1687
According to Hibbard, in drawing the Ghost’s figure, Shakespeare combines theological approaches with common beliefs and folkloric superstitions, which contributes to the enhancement of ambiguity.\textsuperscript{91} The dramaturgical consequences of such an uncertain representation of the Ghost’s nature will be discussed later.

\textit{“Why do you start and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?” (M; I; 3; 49-50) — Burden or Desire?}

In observing the transcendental elements in the plays in question, one of the most important questions is to what extent these apparitions appear as forces independent from the other characters, and how much connection they have with the emotions and desires of the characters they visit. This question shifts the focus of attention from the discussion of the first manifestations of these transcendental beings, as well as from their descriptions provided by other characters, and concentrates on their announcements, their exact words to the respective protagonists, which occupy a central position in the plots. Hamlet names the Ghost as his own father (“I’ll call thee Hamlet / King, father, royal Dane” (I; 4; 25-26)) when he first sees him, but, even more importantly, the self-identification of the Ghost stands in accordance with this when he immediately announces at the beginning of his speech: “I am thy father’s spirit” (I; 5; 9), thus he claims a well-defined position for himself. It has already been mentioned that it is a longer monologue through which the Ghost communicates with Hamlet, which gives a narrative character to their conversation. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that at the beginning of his account, the Ghost gives a detailed account of his own condition and status in the “other world” and it is only then that he introduces the project of revenge. The Ghost’s speech touches on three different topics in the course of his narrative: the description of his own sufferings in Purgatory, the account of his death and his reflections on Gertrude. The central protagonist of each topic is the speaker and not the listener: Gertrude is also mentioned in the light of her relation to Old Hamlet. The task given by the Ghost to Hamlet stands on three pillars as well: revenge my murder, do not hurt your mother and “[l]et not the royal bed of Denmark be / [a] couch for luxury and damned incest” (I; 5; 82-83) and again, the protagonist of all the three pillars is the Ghost: the task is about his death, his wife and his royal bed. Thus Hamlet has to face a task which comes from the outside and which is emphatically not primarily about

\textsuperscript{91} Hibbard 2008, 34-41. For the further discussion of the Ghost’s character see the thorough study of László Kéry. Kéry 1989.
him: throughout the whole play, his job will be to identify with this external task and to interiorize it.

The definition and self-definition of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* show us a different picture. As it was mentioned earlier, Banquo can only give a vague, marginal description of these strange creatures, his verbal portrayal is full of uncertainty and hesitation as opposed to the definiteness of the characters of *Hamlet*, who unequivocally identify the Ghost as the dead king. When the Weird Sisters are expected to provide some kind of a self-definition, they emphatically refrain from naming themselves. Macbeth even orders them to identify themselves; yet, the three women-like figures define Macbeth instead:

**MACBETH:** Speak if you can: what are you?

FIRST WITCH: All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.
SECOND WITCH: All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.
THIRD WITCH: All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter. (I; 3; 45-48)

When Macbeth encounters the Weird Sisters for the second time in Act 4 Scene 1, he turns to them again with a question which tries to understand their essence, activity or, more generally, their status; however, just like in the case of the first encounter, he does not get a straightforward answer:

**MACBETH:** How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags! What is’t you do?

ALL THE WITCHES: A deed without a name. (IV; 1; 64-65)

Both of the instances suggest that Macbeth can identify and understand the Weird Sisters only through himself. It is important that first the prophecies are uttered as answers to the questions “What are you?”, as if the essence of the Weird Sisters coincided with their revelation of the future to Macbeth. The second instance is even more enigmatic, since the Weird Sisters give an empty definition concerning their activity: “a deed without a name” and in the case of which it will be Macbeth’s duty to give it a name and meaning and he acts accordingly when he demands further prophecies and gives them the interpretation of his own (moreover the word *deed* echoes Macbeth’s sentence after the murder: “I have done the deed” (II; 2; 14)). These factors give the impression that Macbeth meets a special mirror in the figures of the Weird Sisters and in this mirror he can only see himself in
different reflections and refractions. The Prince of Denmark has to interiorize an external task, while Macbeth puts a reversed pattern on display: the Weird Sisters are rooted much deeper in the character of Macbeth than the Ghost in Hamlet’s and have an inherent relationship with the utmost desires of the protagonist: they do not assign him a task which primarily serves the interests of the transcendental powers; they rather give external reinforcement to his own deepest desires. A plausible interpretation of the play can be that Macbeth secretly longs for the titles with which the Weird Sister greet him and his initial disbelief does not mean honest surprise. Therefore, in his case the internal desires already existing are to be exteriorized. This is initiated by the witches when they provide external reassurance, while the final exteriorization of the inner will ultimately unfold in Duncan’s murder.

Secondary literature on the Weird Sisters is just as rich as the discussion of the Ghost is endless. As early as in 1765, Whately claimed that Macbeth is “represented […] as a man, whose natural temper would have deterred him from such a design [as the murdering of Duncan], if he had not been immediately tempted, and strongly impelled to it”, as at the beginning Macbeth does not lack “the milk of human kindness”92. August Wilhelm Schlegel’s opinion is that the witches are “the ignoble and vulgar instruments of hell”; their main purpose is to embody the irrationality of dread. For Schlegel, thus, it does not really matter whether the audience or Shakespeare himself believed in the existence of such creatures or not, since it is not the poet’s task to provide an anthropological, historical or even metaphysical interpretation of their “status”, but to “show them up” as an enigma forever93. For Coleridge the Weird Sisters are the creations of Shakespeare’s own and they stand for “the lawless human nature.” They are not necessarily “evil”; they do no more than give voice to “a reasoning on a problem already discussed in his [Macbeth’s] mind, – on a hope which he welcomes, and the doubts concerning the attainment of which he wishes to have cleared up”94, thus Coleridge is of the opinion that the witches are the projections of Macbeth’s mind. A. C. Bradley’s view on the matter is the following: “The Witches, that is to say, are not goddesses, or fates, or, in any way whatever, supernatural beings. They are old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbours’ swine.” Not even Hecate is able to elevate them to the status of “real” witches, since she “is herself a goddess, not a fate […] the prophecies of

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92 Whately 1785, 70
93 Schlegel 1809, 81
94 Coleridge 1818, 93-94
the Witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal.\textsuperscript{95}

The above outlined and of course by far not complete summary of various opinions shows that, naturally, there is no one single proper interpretation, and the effect of the Weird Sisters lies in the fact that the reader or the audience lacks a secure point of orientation in deciding the question, just as Macbeth does when his way twice crosses that of the witches'. The three strange creatures are the curious mixture of external fortune and the two warriors’ inner desires. This mixture, by rising to the level of transcendental powers, encircles, closes down and governs the entire world of Macbeth: this combination symbolically draws, already at the beginning of the play, the magic circle which also marks the limits of the story itself. The Weird Sisters simultaneously exist in the inside and the outside and thus lead the protagonist through his rise to his final fall. This approach agrees with Ricoeur’s theory discussed in his interpretation of the myth of Adam in the Genesis-story. Ricoeur highlights the moment of temptation, pointing out that evil does not originate in Adam: the source of evil is rather depicted in the figure of an outsider: temptation is to be anchored in the appearance of the serpent. According to Ricoeur, the author of the Biblical story “may have been dramatizing an important aspect of the experience of temptation — the experience of quasi-externality”, i.e. “[t]he serpent, then, would be a part of ourselves which we do not recognize; he would be the seduction of ourselves by ourselves, projected into the seductive object”. Thus, evil temptation is dramatized as an external phenomenon but this is not more than an excuse for the person to distance sin from him- or herself and to project it into an object, which is ‘over there’, outside. Thus, the human being always already absolves him- or herself from responsibility: “[t]he serpent, then, represents this passive aspect of temptation, hovering on the border between the outer and the inner”.\textsuperscript{96}

Similarly to the serpent of Genesis, the Weird Sisters are such “structural parts” of Macbeth which the protagonist is unwilling, or is afraid, to acknowledge; however, if they are dramatized as external forces, they can start the mechanism of the tragedy by prompting Macbeth to commit the murder. The quick flow of events and Macbeth’s rapid decision is noteworthy: he immediately thinks of murder right after hearing the prophecies (“My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical” (I; 3; 138)) as if the concept of the deed had already been deep down in his mind and now upon the intervention of the Weird

\textsuperscript{95} Bradley 1904, 179
\textsuperscript{96} Ricoeur 1987, 146-147
Sisters it is only engendered, as it is dimly suggested by his utterance right after the above mentioned first formulation of the murderous thought: “My dull brain was wrought / With things forgotten” (I; 3; 148-149). At the same time, the witches’ externality must not be disregarded either, as it is not only Macbeth but Banquo as well who sees them and the latter is also addressed by their prophecies. Moreover, at the end of the third, and at the beginning of the fourth act, the prophecies are further supported by the appearance of Hecate (III; 5), who was previously only mentioned (“witchcraft celebrates / Pale Hecate's offerings” — Macbeth II; 1; 51-2, and “ere to black Hecate's summons / The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums / Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done / A deed of dreadful note” — Macbeth III; 2; 41-44). This moment represents a turning point in the play: so far the Weird Sisters appeared to be completely free, they were creatures absolutely unlimited in their deeds; now they are suddenly subordinated to a goddess above them and slowly a complete witch-society unfolds in the background⁹⁷, they are connected to the transcendent layer of the world and thus come from the outside.

Consequently, the characters of the Weird Sisters can be approached by various interpretations and it cannot be stated unequivocally whether they represent the power of fate or rather personal desire. However, one interpretation does not exclude the other: the Weird Sisters are such transcendental creatures who give external reinforcement to internal desires, and whose sounds touch the accords already incubating in the depth of the protagonist’s mind and they only help him to give a clear and audible voice to them. By contrast, Hamlet needs to digest the external order of the Ghost in order to become a worthy avenger of his father’s death. Although after he learns that Claudius killed Old Hamlet, the Prince refers to his prophetic soul (“O my prophetic soul! My uncle!” (I; 5; 41)) as if he had been suspecting or hoping that he might justify and thus emphasize the personal dislike he bears to his uncle (which was squarely expressed in Act I Scene 2) by a seemingly objective accusation. However, the announcement of the Ghost does not stand in accordance with the inner desires of the Prince, since his hesitation throughout the play supports the idea that Hamlet was given a task which is alien to his nature. The Weird Sisters seduce Macbeth to reach his secret desires; the Ghost arrives to burden Hamlet and expects him to act as he is told.

⁹⁷ Kiss 2007, 142
“I have thee not, and yet I see thee still” (M; II; 1; 35) — Potential stage representations of the task

A stage interpretation might decide to concentrate on the above discussed characteristics when directing these apparitions. In the light of this, a possible path to follow in putting the Ghost on stage is to emphasize disharmony. The text itself seems to support this interpretation, since — as we have seen — the Ghost’s entrance in armour deconstructs the intimacy between father and son and the more casual clothes Hamlet is wearing (in other words, the more there is contrast between the outfit of Old and Young Hamlet) the greater the effect will be. Another possible way of expressing this disharmony is that the Ghost is spectacularly taller than Hamlet and, consequently, the Prince of Denmark will be dwarfed as a small child by the father returning from the past and by the difficulty of the task assigned.  

A special stage interpretation might express that Hamlet is torn between the external expectation and the wish to identify with it by making the Ghost give his son not only information but some kind of an object or an article of clothing as well. The object may, for example, be a dagger, for which there is of course no textual evidence and thus it starts a line of interpretation which considerably increases the director’s responsibility. Yet a dagger may be seen as an obvious memento of the avenger’s task and the dagger’s constant depressing presence may count as a visible symbol of the demand on Hamlet, which never lets him rest. And if Hamlet turns up behind Claudius with this very dagger during the unsuccessful prayer-scene in Act III Scene 2 (“Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying” (III; 3; 73)) the complexity of the situation, it seems to me, increases considerably. This way it is not only the duo of Claudius and Hamlet which will be in focus but the memory of the Ghost-scene is evoked as well, and this way the drawn dagger will make, as it were, Old Hamlet present, too, i.e. the agent who initiated the whole machinery of the plot and whose order directs the blade into Claudius’s flesh. What will thus be emphasized is precisely the failure, if not the collapse, of Hamlet under the burden of the task, since this way he will not be able to carry out the deed even in the (potentially) ominous shadow of his father. Such an interpretation puts the words of the Prince in a different light: he mentions his father’s soul, which was sent to the other world without the chance of confession (“A took my father grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May” (III; 3; 80-81)). Under this interpretation, Hamlet’s words might

98 In the 1965 production of Hamlet by the Royal Shakespeare Company (directed by Peter Hall), the Ghost was played by an exceptionally tall actor, thus emphasizing that Hamlet is unable to match his father’s charisma. Cf. Bate & Rasmussen 2008, 190
be read as an explanation to the father who is metaphorically “present in the dagger”: Hamlet, as if he were desperately trying to make up a personal excuse, tries to communicate to his father why this is not the proper moment to murder the king.

If the dagger’s origin may be traced back in the visual memory of the audience to the Ghost, it may have even further implications in the next scene of Hamlet and Gertrude (Act III Scene 4). In the latter scene, the dagger is not only a symbol of masculinity but Hamlet does not stab the target person with the weapon, although the task was clearly stated by his father but he famously kills the eavesdropping Polonius. Consequently, he did not use the object of – this way – transcendental origin according to the – transcendental – user’s manual. This way it becomes also more understandable why the Ghost reappears just in this scene among all the others: he reminds Hamlet of his duty which he was so far unable to perform properly. It is further emphatic in this interpretation that Hamlet finally stabs Claudius with a poisoned sword (before he makes his uncle drink from the poisoned cup as well); therefore, if the dagger came from the Ghost, the final revenge occurs emphatically without that weapon. Its consequence in interpretation further underscores Hamlet’s incapability to identify with the external expectation and suggests that the revenge did not primarily happen to satisfy the will of the Ghost but Hamlet carried it out as a personal retribution prompted by sudden impulse for the attempt on his own life.99

Another possible representation of the Ghost’s arrival on stage might be that he does not give a dagger to his son but he rather dresses him into clothes which spectacularly remind us, at least in some of their features, of the garment the Ghost is wearing. Therefore, while the transcendental apparition explains Hamlet his duties, he is making an attempt at putting (maybe even enforcing) the attire “of his own” on his son. From one aspect, this recaptures a certain father-son relationship: Old Hamlet is dressing his child, as if Hamlet were still small, while from another point of view it emphasizes the interpretation that the father wishes to force Hamlet into a certain role and this role is categorically formulated in accordance with the taste of the Ghost, which might be further underlined by the similarities between the garment of the Ghost and Hamlet’s new clothes. Should the production aim at featuring the characteristics enumerated so far, i.e. that the Prince is unable of identify with the role, then it is important that the new attire should look strangely on Hamlet. The most obvious solution is that the clothes are too loose (“baggy”) for his body, which might be the result of the Ghost being much taller than his son. Thus, 99 Cf. Calderwood 1983, 46
throughout the play it will be visually represented for the audience how Hamlet struggles with the role enforced upon him: the “borrowed (enforced) robes” (cf. *Macbeth* I; 3; 107) hang loose upon him just as on Macbeth. Ophelia’s account on Hamlet’s attire can also be connected with this solution, since it is the girl who gives the first description of Hamlet’s – odd, inexplicable – behaviour, moreover, all this happens right after the Ghost-scene, where the Prince decided to feign madness. Ophelia says: “Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac’d / No hat upon his head, his stockings foul’d / Ungarter’d and down-gyved to his ankle / (...) he comes before me” (II; 1; 79-85). Although the deranged outfit also serves to give significance to Hamlet’s strange “habit”, it gains extra meaning in this interpretation, since this disorderly and tousled appearance occurs significantly right after Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost and thus the confirmation of the external task and the change in Hamlet’s appearance are organically linked, one of the possible inferences of this link being that it was the Ghost who put an “antic disposition” and his “habit” (both in the sense of ‘garment’ and ‘typical behaviour’) on Hamlet.

If we read *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* through each other – as, for example, the Ghost’s possible gesture of giving a dagger to Hamlet has of course been suggested by the so-important dagger in *Macbeth* – the metaphor of dressing someone into foreign clothes finds textual support in the “Scottish play”, which in the first approximation might emphasize the motif of “an enforced external task” known from *Hamlet*, as opposed to “prophecies agreeing with inner desires” featuring, as was suggested above, *Macbeth*. When Ross brings the news to the victorious commander claiming that from that moment on he is the new Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth replies: “The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me / In borrowed robes?” (I; 3; 106-107). Yet, if we observe the dramatic context of the utterance carefully, it is noteworthy that the sentence means reluctance only on the surface: it is already known from Ross’s narration that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor was defeated by Macbeth himself; therefore it can hardly be surprising for Macbeth that his predecessor was deprived from his title. Disbelief and accompanying reluctance (“why do you dress me in borrowed robes”) may only be playacting on Macbeth’s part: he feigns hesitation and modesty in front of the messengers, Banquo and

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100 When Macbeth is informed about his new title, his “metacognitive” processes begin to try to compose the distributed evidence. He seems to be searching for a way to confirm the second of the witches’ truths,” i.e. the one referring to his crown. Spolsky 2011, 507

101 According to Ross’s account: “The Thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict, / Till that Bellona’s bridegroom, lapped in proof, / Confronted him with self-comparisons, / Point against point, rebellious arm ‘gainst arm, / Curbing his lavish spirit. And to conclude, / The victory fell upon us” (I; 2; 52-58). According to interpreters of the text, “Bellona’s bridegroom” is Macbeth himself. Cf. Muir 1962, 9-10, ff. 55
even himself as a result of a defence mechanism, since it was exactly his deepest desires which were made public by the Weird Sisters.

As noted above, the text-based visual representation of the Ghost may prove to be appropriate to express that the task is forced on Hamlet from the outside. Approaching Macbeth’s behaviour in terms of this insight, we should reckon with the implications of the fact that Weird Sisters’ strange and bizarre appearance might induce repulsion both in the ones who encounter them and in the audience as well. Does the ugliness of the witches, taken in itself, alter the focus of the director when trying to communicate the highly complex nature of the prophecies? One possible way to deal with this question is to recount that it belongs to the very nature of the prophecies that it is impossible to decide whether they bring happiness to the addressee or rather make his life miserable. This duality is immediately obvious for Macbeth, too, since in his soliloquy following the prophecies he says: “This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good.” (I; 3; 129-130). Should the witches appear as ugly old women, it is the frightful – or even terrifying, appalling – aspects of a possible future that gain prominence and thus Macbeth’s reaction can be more in accordance with Banquo’s remark: “why do you start and seem to fear/ Things that do sound so fair?” (I; 3; 49-50). It is not, however, obvious why Macbeth is frightened. One possible explanation is that in the promise of the throne he can immediately see murder, thus the prophecy instantly plants the horror of the deed into his mind (cf. “My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical” (I; 3; 138)) and this terror gains visual expression through the hideous figures of the witches. Another possible interpretation is that both the thought of gaining the crown and killing Duncan for it has already been on Macbeth’s mind previously; this would explain why Macbeth immediately thinks of murder upon hearing the prophecies. It is also remarkable that independently from her husband, Lady Macbeth will later also stress the necessity and inevitability of committing murder as the very condition of gaining the crown as if the Macbeth-couple had already discussed this matter earlier, and now that it is finally winning external support through the prophecies, they arrive at the same conclusion — i.e. that they have been given a “green light” — independently from each other102: after much uncertainty and planning, they have been assured that they would succeed. From this point of view, the Sisters appear as seductive forces and Macbeth’s fright may have to do with two basic factors: one is that the Macbeths’ secretly nurtured plan all of a sudden becomes public and is uttered in

102 Cf. also “Nor time, nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both. / They have made themselves and that their fitness now / Does unmake you” (I; 7; 51-54).
front of Banquo, the other is that the moment of action, having come so close, overwhelms him with its compelling imminence. These diverse readings do not, of course, exclude each other and can function simultaneously; yet, if the production wishes to strengthen the latter line of interpretation then featuring the Weird Sisters as ugly old hags is worthy of reconsideration. Should the witches gain indeed such a text-based form, then they appear in front of the warrior as representatives of fate and report him that his deepest wishes may come true if he is brave enough to act. Yet, the transcendental creatures might appear in a different form, radiating seduction as regards doing the “deed” (i.e. committing murder), the very word *deed* – as it will be examined in more detail later – meaning also ‘copulation’ in Elizabethan and Jacobean English. Thus, the Sisters might as well appear as attractive, young women, thus providing a desirable wrapping for the seemingly joyous prophecies. Such a stage representation does not exclude the presence of some kind of a strange feature in the women’s otherwise pretty outlook, which on the one hand contributes to the immediate visibility of their transcendental origin, while Banquo’s description on their odd and hardly interpretable appearance gains firmer justification. Similarly, the intensity of the two warriors’ inner desires can be underscored even further if the Sisters’ prophecies referring to the crown (“that shalt be king hereafter” (I; 3; 48) and “Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none” (I; 3; 65)) are uttered in the respective voices of Macbeth’s and Banquo’s own.

The difference between the transcendental phenomena of the two tragedies is spectacularly revealed by the motif of the dagger. There is no textual reference to the transcendental origin of the dagger in *Hamlet*, but as we have seen, it could be an “objective correlative” of the Ghost’s commandment. In *Macbeth*, the weapon gets primary importance in the famous “Dagger”-soliloquy; however, here the speech is not initiated by a dagger possibly received from the Sisters but the weapon significantly exists in the protagonist’s mind: Macbeth seriously considers the possibility that the vision is only a product of “the heat oppressed brain” (II; 1; 39). Discussing the “Dagger”-soliloquy, Géza Kállay points out that the passage in discussion exposes the whole play’s relationship towards imagination and reality, since Macbeth differentiates between two worlds: in one of them objects can be touched and grasped, while in the other, phenomena are only available for sight, yet the “inner eye” of internal images can be the source of false images as well. Since, however, sight is the basis of our orientation in either worlds, it is through the eye-sight that connection is established between the outer and the inner, and if our judgement is based upon the mere image, there is no difference between the “dagger of the
mind” (II; 1; 38) and the weapon hanging from Macbeth’s side. Still, it is exactly material reality as opposed to which the “dagger of the mind” proves to be fatal, as it starts to live a life of its own (pointing towards Duncan’s bedchamber, its handle and blade “perspiring” blood) and which from this moment on starts to construct a certain micro-mythology around itself and becomes emblematic. The exact nature of the emblematic meaning of the dagger, however, is — in accordance with the constant ambiguity of the play — not obvious: it can drag the hero into catastrophe, it can exist as a projection or “objective correlative” of Macbeth’s murderous intentions, or in its cross-like form it can also be an emblem of Christ’s passion.\(^{103}\) Considering the effect upon the protagonist, the “dagger of the mind” is more realistic than the actual weapon on Macbeth’s side; therefore, Macbeth does not need the Weird Sisters to be given a dagger (as opposed to Hamlet, who needs to be equipped to identify with his role to some extent), since his own dagger resides in his mind. As the Sisters externalize his deepest desires, Macbeth also needs to externalize the “dagger of the mind” and this is exactly what happens when by drawing his own weapon\(^{104}\) he starts out towards the bedchamber of Duncan.

“Do you see nothing there?” (H; III; 4; 132) — Questions of Invisibility

Therefore, it is especially important that the imaginary dagger should not be visible on the stage during Macbeth’s soliloquy: it should be created by the actor’s words and with his acting he needs to make the audience believe that the vision indeed pushes him forward to the deed. This raises the question whether, following the dagger’s example, the transcendental creatures themselves should perhaps appear as invisible to the audience. The test of invisibility at the same time reveals the efficiency of the machinery of uncertainty in the respective plays. If the protagonist of either of the plays is talking to a partner who is invisible to our eyes, the question whether the person is only having imaginary visions becomes inevitable, since otherwise it is hard to tell why the audience would be denied the sight of the Ghost or the witches, especially when there are emphatic other witnesses to the respective apparitions: in Hamlet it is Horatio and the guards, while in Macbeth it is Banquo who can see them besides the protagonists. It is significant that in Hamlet, in Act III Scene 4, Gertrude is in a special position from this point of view: she is

\(^{103}\) Cf. Kállay 2006, 313-318

\(^{104}\) Although finally the murder is not carried out with this very dagger but with the knives of the guards. (Or the guards’ knives are only additional to Macbeth’s dagger. This is not specified in the play.)
present when the Ghost enters, yet, she does not sense him. This may have several interpretations, too: Hamlet is really mad and we witness the scene markedly from his (and the Ghost’s) point of view; Hamlet is not mad but the pangs of his conscience, in an extremely tense emotional state, “conjures his father up”; or from Gertrude’s point of view, it may signify that she has forgotten Old Hamlet and thus she is not “worthy” of seeing the apparition. This would underscore the idea that, provided there is an invisible Ghost on the stage throughout, those who can see the Ghost in the play can observe him as he looked when he was alive (Horatio can even recall the exact colour of the king’s beard); Gertrude does not see him precisely because she abandoned (perhaps willfully erased?) the memory of his previous husband when she got married to Claudius, and the audience cannot see him because they never saw the old king alive: they do not possess the point of view of the “insider” (Hamlet and his companions) which would enable them to watch the deceased monarch. The invisibility of the Ghost is, moreover, made possible through the careful sequencing of the scenes: before his first appearance, he is already talked about and talk may give him a visible form (as Macbeth’s talk about Banquo will make Banquo’s ghost appear); moreover, during Old Hamlet’s very first entrance, the “seers” surround him, and their descriptions and reactions give life to the apparition. If the Ghost remains invisible throughout the play, the audience shares Gertrude’s perspective not only in being blind about the Ghost but to some extent also in her judgement concerning Hamlet: “Alas, he’s mad!” (III; 4; 96). Thus, especially in Act I Scene 5, the audience face the figure of Hamlet, standing emphatically alone and talking to an invisible partner, which undermines the “reality” of what the Ghost says even more seriously. We may have textual evidence for the physical appearance of the Ghost, yet his words are not vouched for by anything: they are uttered exclusively in Hamlet’s presence, therefore the ground of reliability is rather shaky. However, and very disturbingly, Hamlet gains such pieces of information from his father which can hardly breed in Hamlet’s imagination, since such, even tiny details of a murder are revealed which happened at a time when the Prince of Denmark was not even in Denmark. It may of course be argued that Hamlet has too vivid an imagination, which is able to provide even tiny details concerning the poisoning of his Father; the significant point is that the possibility of imagining the apparition can never be totally excluded. Depending on interpretations up until the Mousetrap scene or Claudius’s prayer scene, the audience remains in doubt, yet, when Hamlet’s uncle kneels down, some point of orientation looms up. However, where the play seems to give us some certainty, it immediately leads us back to disbelief with the same gesture, since right after Claudius’s
prayer, when our doubts concerning Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost seem to dissolve, we are lead into the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude, where the prince is talking to the apparition in front of such a character who emphatically does not see it and consequently she calls Hamlet mad. Thus fresh evidence of the Ghost’s validity vanishes quickly, and we are chased back to the ground of ambiguity. Hibbard also mentions that although the reality of the Ghost is based on the beginning of the play, its presence in Gertrude’s closet makes it possible that the Ghost is a product of Hamlet’s imagination just like the “air-drawn dagger” (III; 4; 61) of Macbeth, and in this respect, the primary function of the Ghost is to give an account of the murder the reliability of which is throughout questionable.105 Thus, because Hamlet is emphatically a play of shifting perspectives, the figure of the Ghost is a prime emblematic example of uncertainty and questionable reliability which is further enhanced if the Ghost is invisible on stage throughout; then the audience — as it was mentioned above — may find themselves closest to Gertrude’s point of view, who considers her son to be mad. This is further strengthened by the fact that after Polonius’s death nobody ever mentions the Ghost: one of the most important and emblematic questions of the play dissolves like a ghost upon the crow of the cock.

The invisibility of the Weird Sisters in Macbeth is more problematic in terms of the above enumerated factors. Firstly, in Macbeth there is no other character that is present during the first scene of the sisters, so, as opposed to Hamlet, the possibility of not perceiving the transcendental creatures is not really available. Secondly, unlike the Ghost’s, the witches’ entrance is not prepared by anyone: they are not talked about before their first appearance, since it is precisely them who “prepare” (both in the sense of ‘making, brewing, creating’ and ‘making preliminary arrangements for’) the whole play. Moreover, the witches, appearing for the second time, do not speak to a single person: besides Macbeth, they also address Banquo and, more importantly, they also talk with each other: the fact that the first scene of the play is (and later on several other scenes of the drama are) constructed solely by the interactions of the Weird Sisters with each other, gives them a certain kind of “reality”, since it gives them at least the impression of the existence of their own, and of being independent from the other characters. Therefore, in Macbeth there are no conditions which would make the witches’ stage-invisibility be effective anywhere. While in Hamlet the reliability of the external, more or less seemingly objective information is counterweighted by the insecurity about the status of the Ghost,

105 Hibbard 2008, 41-42
which can be further strengthened by the potential invisibility of the apparition, the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth*, through their more reliable presence, which hardly permits invisible staging, will be the transmitters of more straightforward and initially more convincing yet, curiously, no less uncertain ideas. In *Macbeth*, the chemistry of uncertainty is mingled from different sources, yet in similar proportions as in *Hamlet*: where information seems to be more objective, the reliability of the source will fade — this is the world of *Hamlet*. More subjective and dubious messages arrive in a more palpable (or visible) way into the drama: this characterises *Macbeth*. Both the respective dramatic “engines” of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are set to work and the protagonists of both plays are initiated by transcendental forces in a way that transcendence establishes connection with them directly. This way, from the dramaturgical point of view, the problem of the transmission of information of transcendental origin is solved, yet through the atmosphere of ghastliness and weirdness, the agents of transcendence plant and transplant the audience into uncertain, swampy grounds together with the protagonists of the tragedies, and no one gets stable crampons on their shoes or onto their hands with which they could confidently disagree with Macbeth’s utterance: “This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good”.

“A bold one, that dare look on that which might appall the devil” (M; III; 4; 59-60) — A (Transcendental?) Visual on the Deed

So far we have accounted for the most important features of the respective transcendental beings and by juxtaposing them, we also shed some light on the major differences regarding the dramaturgy of the plays. It has been pointed out that there is an inherent relationship between the characteristics of the transcendental creatures and that of the two dramas, including also the tempo of the events. Accordingly, each tragedy contains a scene which has certain connection to the transcendental elements, although neither the Ghost, nor the witches appear in them. Both scenes occur in the middle of the plays (in the third act); i.e. between the two encounters when the protagonist and the transcendental beings encounter one another again, and have a significant role in formulating the events. In the case of *Hamlet* this is the performance of the *Mousetrap*-scene, while in *Macbeth*, the entrance of Banquo’s ghost during the feast of his murderer.

Whereas Banquo’s ghost can easily be considered as a transcendental being, coming back from the grave just as Old Hamlet did, the transcendence of the *Mousetrap*-scene is less obvious and thus more symbolic. Still, it undoubtedly has an otherworldly
origin as it accounts for (in a certain sense “explains”) how the previous king was murdered (the story disguised as the plot of The Murder of Gonzago, taking place in Vienna), the only source of which is the Ghost himself. It is important that Old Hamlet appears only to his son and not to Claudius; yet, in an indirect way, he manifests himself to his brother via Hamlet. Claudius cannot expect anyone to know about the murder of the previous king, not to mention the exact details like poisoning through the ear, yet the play-within-the-play reconstructs this, and makes the performance a shock to the new king. The story of Old Hamlet’s murder has returned from the grave to Claudius as well but not in the shape of a Ghost, as it manifested before Hamlet, but in the form of a theatrical production. The Mousetrap-scene will be given a detailed analysis regarding Hamlet’s attitude both towards his own play and the play within the play; yet, the claim that the performance also fulfills the role of a supernatural apparition for King Claudius, it will require some brief investigation from Claudius’s point of view. It is important that the murder in the Mousetrap is depicted twice (once in the dumb show and then in the verbal scene) and the King only stands up at the second instance. Here, productions can solve this problem in two ways: either by formulating the scene according to the director’s imagination not much supported by “textual evidence”, or by relying solely on the dramatic text and finding possible clues hiding behind the lines the characters utter. The first solution might result in arguing that Claudius is simply not paying attention during the dumb-show because he is talking to Polonius about Hamlet and Ophelia. This is supported by the last utterance of Polonius before the dumb show, which is an aside to Claudius, referring to Hamlet’s approach towards the girl: “O ho! Do you mark that?” (III; 2; 119), thus a discussion following this aside may divert the focus of the King’s attention from the non-verbal performance. Furthermore, the King notably leaves this part of the play without comment, whereas he will talk about the play during the verbal parts. If, however, Claudius witnesses the dumb show as well with full attention, it seems that the King is cold-blooded enough not to jump up and thus reveal himself when the stage poison is poured into the Player King’s ear, although he is stunned by the revelation that his secret is probably known by Hamlet. This means that his standing up should be triggered by something else than the mere representation of the murder. In my interpretation, it is Hamlet’s encroachment into the story which is the evocative factor. This may manifest

106 Ichikawa claims that the instructions for the dumb show indicates Shakespeare’s treatment of onstage corpses as the dead body of the Player King is not allowed to stand up and leave the stage but is carried away by other players, in a more ceremonious way than how Hamlet drags Polonius’s body away. Ichikawa 2013, 129
itself by Hamlet calling Lucianus, the murderer “nephew to the King” (III; 2; 223), thus offering a reading to his uncle that the victim does not correspond to Old Hamlet but to Claudius himself, and then Hamlet might be the murderer, which means that the play is not a representation of the past but a prognosis for the future, and this way an open threat to Claudius. However, we have plenty of references in the text provided by the Player King (e.g. “Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart gone round / Neptune’s salt wash and Tellus’ orbed ground / (...) Since love our hearts and Hymen did our hands / Unite commutual is most sacred bands” (III; 2; 150-151, 154-155)) which would suggest that the performance is about Hamlet’s parents. These contradictory elements (i.e. denoting the murderer as the “nephew to the King” and referring to a thirty-year-old marriage) contribute to the ambiguity of the Mousetrap-performance and since Hamlet does not give explicit and unequivocal references, the play remains free for Claudius to interpret but he cannot take it for granted whether Hamlet makes Lucianus to be the nephew of the victim on purpose or not. Yet, the production of Hamlet can enhance one or the other reading of the play-within-the-play and this way the director of Hamlet will work together with the Prince, the director of the Mousetrap.

Studying the conception of the play-within-the-play, the director may of course be aware of the secret intentions of the Prince regarding the Mousetrap and if the director puts that on the stage, (s)he does that through Hamlet himself and thus can emphasize one or the other interpretation. The most obvious way to connect the play-within-the-play to the characters of Hamlet is to make the actors of The Mousetrap wear costumes similar to the characters they are meant to represent in Hamlet. This way the clothes of the Player King and the Ghost, The Player Queen and Gertrude, and finally the murderer and Claudius can share certain visible features. To concentrate on the other meaning (i.e. the play as a threat to Claudius), correspondence can also be established between the outlook of The Player King and Claudius and of Lucianus and Hamlet, respectively. Another plausible theatrical interpretation can be that the two scenes, i.e. the dumb-show and the verbal performance do not depict the same situation but they function together as a whole. This could gain even more justification on the contemporary stage, since in the Elizabethan theatre it was common to have a non-verbal summary of the play to be performed at the beginning but for the audience of today this appears to be odd; therefore, the production needs to find a purpose for the double enactment of the murder. One possibility for that is to make the first

107 Greiner also emphasizes the ambiguity of the King’s reaction: it might be interpreted as a confession of his deed but also as a reaction to a threat on his life. Greiner 2007, 11
one depict the murder of Old Hamlet, while the second one that of Claudius, thus it will be not the Mousetrap which repeats itself but it will become a kind of “royal” history, in which kings are killed in succession: the murder of the previous king becomes the victim of another assassin (or, in this case, an avenger). Note that due to Claudius’s reaction, the “sounding” part, i.e. the part acted out both in speech and motion, does not end with the murderer seducing the widow, which would weaken the possibility of Lucianus referring to Hamlet. This reading can be achieved on the stage by making the assassin of the dumb-show play the King of the verbal one. This way the Ghost’s monologue is in a certain way translated into images and words for Claudius in the form of a theatrical performance, since the two scenes of the Mousetrap agree with two major parts of Old Hamlet’s speech in act one, i.e. the description of his death (cf. the dumb-show) and his order given to his son to avenge him (cf. the verbal part).

Another important feature of the Mousetrap-scene which connects it to the appearance of the Ghost from Claudius’s point of view is that the second half of the verbal part is interrupted, to a greater and greater extent, by the comments of Hamlet. By doing so, the Prince poses in the role of the author of the story108, taking a similar position to his father; consequently, in the Prince’s character, Claudius has to face a person who bears the name “Hamlet”. The name is the same as that of his victim’s, and young Hamlet now possesses, and is also able to reproduce a story which was believed to have been enclosed into the “sepulchre / Wherein” everyone “saw” Old Hamlet “quietly inurn’d”, behind “marble jaws” (I; 4; 48-50). This story is now brought to light by an inexplicable force. Hamlet, together with his Mousetrap, thus has a similar role for Claudius to the role of the Ghost (and his story) had for Hamlet. . Depending on the exact portrayal of the Ghost-scene, the production can place this resemblance into focus. From the encounter with the Ghost, certain motifs may be recalled in the play-within-the-play, including sound effects, or the same characteristic background-music. A momentary, yet significant correlation can be established if the Ghost-scene takes place in semi-darkness with a thin ray of light projected upon Hamlet listening to his father, thus emphasizing the gloomy atmosphere of the scene on the micro level. A similar semi-dark environment is easily justified during

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108 This reading is supported by the way Hamlet talks about the manner in which „his lines” should be spoken (some of them also quoted at the beginning of this study): “but if you mouth it [the speech] as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines” (III; 2; 2-4). Now in Act II, Scene 2, he only talked about a “speech of some dozen or sixteen lines” (535) he wished to insert into The Murder of Gonzago but it would be strange if in his instructions he were only worried about those few. So how many lines of his own had Prince Hamlet, eventually, in “his play”? Perhaps even more than sixteen? Do we hear them at all during the performance of The Mousetrap?
The Mousetrap scene: while the on-stage audience is watching the performance of Hamlet’s players, the focused ray of light may be the spotlight on the enactment of The Murder of Gonzago. When Claudius can no longer endure the show and rises, asking for light (“Give me some light. Away.” (III; 2; 247)) Hamlet as producer and manager of his own stage, with one single movement, can direct the dazzling lamp(s) on Claudius. On the micro level, this is justified by Hamlet’s desire to direct the focus of attention on the person he believes to have given unquestionable evidence of his guilt, while on the macro level this single moment of Claudius being the target of the one single ray of light on the stage connects the two scenes under discussion: the light literally illuminates the analogy in the relationships between Hamlet and the Ghost of his father, and between Claudius and the Mousetrap-performance.

Similarly to the function of the Mousetrap-scene in Hamlet, the appearance of Banquo’s ghost in Macbeth also serves the confrontation of the murderer with his deed. Moreover, it also happens during a public event and ends with the King not being able to witness the phenomenon any further. Yet, whereas the Mousetrap-performance has only indirect supernatural roots, the ghost of Banquo is unquestionably an obvious transcendental apparition from the very moment of its first entrance. The question of course arises: why is it only Banquo’s ghost who appears in front of Macbeth, and why does he not see the spirit of Duncan as well? (This question also disturbed William Davenant in the 17th century, who inserted the Ghost of Duncan appearing to the Lady in his own Macbeth-adaptation.) One possible explanation is that, as opposed to Duncan’s murder, Banquo was not killed by Macbeth’s own hands but via his instructions, and he himself did not have to dip his hands into his blood (unless we take Macbeth to be the Third Murderer in the assassination of Banquo – more on this later). Thus the entrance of the former friend and comrade-in-arms during the banquet is a way to make the culprit face the result of his machinations, and this way Macbeth will be unable to avoid the sight of the “dead” Banquo, which is now as unbearable for him as the corpse of Duncan had been, although of course we have only seen Macbeth’s “post mortem” reactions to his King’s dead body; after Duncan is dead, we never see them together, as opposed to Macbeth and Banquo. During the banquet, it is the First Murderer who has blood on himself (“There’s

109 MacIntyre emphasizes that looking different was the most essential feature for all characters of the Elizabethan stage to indicate change of status, here also change from life to death. Therefore, if someone was about to become a ghost, it always meant for him costume change behind the scenes. Banquo’s wounds and blood seem to be a conventional method for doing so, a convention Old Hamlet’s ghost clearly deviates from. MacIntyre 1992, 22
110 Cf. Miola 2004, 172-173
blood upon thy face” — Macbeth (III; 4; 11)) and this is exactly what Macbeth wanted to avoid after his shocking confrontation with Duncan’s blood on his hands (“Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” (II; 2; 58-59)). The stage interpretation can underscore this reading if at one point during his presence, Banquo’s gory ghost (cf. “Never shake / Thy gory locks at me” (III; 4; 49-50)) touches Macbeth so that some of his own blood sticks to the hand or face of his murderer, visible (at least as far as the reactions of the others on stage are concerned) only to Macbeth, thus emphasizing the impossibility of escaping the consequences of his deed.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy to examine, in a substantial fashion, Banquo’s relationship with the major transcendental beings of the tragedy, i.e. the Weird Sisters. Very importantly, Banquo is there when Macbeth meets the witches and he also talks to them and asks for prophecies related to him. As it was discussed, Macbeth does not ask for predictions from the Sisters, he only orders them to identify themselves, whereas Banquo explicitly requires prophecies. However, the prophecy given to Banquo is directed to the same extent towards Macbeth as well, since it involves both men: Banquo’s offspring will be rulers of Scotland; therefore Macbeth’s will be not. In line with one of the most significant metaphors of the play, what one gains, the other necessarily loses (cf. “When the battle’s lost and won” — Second Witch (I; 1; 4) or “What he [the Thane of Cawdor — B.Sz.] hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won” — Duncan (I; 2; 67)). Consequently, from this point of view, Banquo’s presence during the encounter with the witches serves as a channel through which the strange looking women give a kind of “fourth prophecy” to Macbeth. Furthermore, it is worthy of consideration that later in the scene under discussion (Act I, Scene 3) Banquo, though very tenderly and almost unnoticeably, acts as a persuading factor regarding Macbeth and the idea of regicide. He is the one after the sisters who first refers to the possibility of Macbeth becoming King, and thus to the possible validity of the prophecies when the arriving Ross greets Macbeth as the Thane of Cawdor (“That, trusted home, / Might yet enkindle you unto the crown, / Besides the thane of Cawdor” — Banquo (I; 3; 118-120)). Moreover, as if being an unknowing agent of the Weird Sisters, dramaturgically it is Banquo who creates the first possibility for Macbeth to remain alone with the idea of murder and to contemplate on it (as he does in the “Two truths are told”-soliloquy), since Banquo distracts the attention of Ross and Angus (“Cousins, a word, I pray you” (I; 3; 125)). Furthermore, scholars have already called attention to the fact that Banquo disturbingly keeps silent after the murder of Duncan and does not report their encounter with the strange creatures and the prophecies they
received. Even further, in Act II, Scene 1, Banquo makes explicit references to the Weird Sisters, curious of Macbeth’s reactions: “I dreamt last night of the Weird Sisters: / To you they have show’d some truth” (19-20). In a way, Banquo is constantly playing the role of the “reminder” of Macbeth’s ambitions – but strictly only for Macbeth himself – so, in a very special sense, he – as no ghost or ghost – is in a similar position as the Ghost is for Hamlet. All these above make the character of Banquo a cunningly constructed enigma. It is remarkable that just as in the case of the first encounter with the witches, where Banquo served an excuse to give an additional prophecy to Macbeth about royal succession, during the second meeting between the protagonist and the Weird Sisters, Banquo reappears again as a fourth apparition besides the other more often quoted three, and, escorted by eight kings, he helps the witches to repeat the prophecy, this time visually (cf. the visual representation, and, thus, “repetition” of the Ghost’s words in the Mousetrap).

Summarizing all the traces we have accounted for above, a strange relationship between Banquo and the Weird Sisters seem to unfold, which can be disregarded or emphasised to a lesser or greater extent; yet, it gives some explanation to the question why it is Banquo who can return from the grave as a transcendental being, similar to the witches. The theatrical production can place its focus on this connection between the witches and Banquo by giving tender signs of a certain agent-patient relationship between them, thus providing an explanation for his reappearance as a ghost. This might involve the silent, or for the characters on stage even unnoticed, presence of the Weird Sisters during the banquet scene, or some signs of similarity may be indicated during the encounters with the Weird Sisters. It might serve as an instance of the latter when, during the prophecy uttered to Banquo (and as we have seen indirectly to Macbeth, too) in Act I Scene 3 (“Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none” (65)), the witches surround Banquo, they take him from Macbeth’s immediate vicinity, and show him to the Thane of Glamis as a threat to his royal blood line and also as a potential future victim of his. Furthermore, certain motifs of Banquo’s behaviour or attitude may spookily recur from the scene in question into his reappearance in Act IV, Scene 1, when he arrives as the fourth apparition, as if potentially (and importantly not in any other way) he had already been affected somehow by the witches, and as if he had been sent to the banquet by the Sisters themselves. Reaching back to our interpretations of the Weird Sisters, it can be claimed

111 Bradley also discusses Banquo as potentially being not as innocent as interpretations in general might suppose. Cf. Bradley 2000, 379-390
that the more they are represented to appear as external forces (which does not contradict their nature of giving voice to internal desires, though), the greater is their potential power over Banquo.

Consequently, the transcendental creatures dominating the worlds of the respective tragedies do not only appear directly to the protagonists, thus initiating the flow of events but they manifest themselves also indirectly. In *Hamlet* this happens in the form of a theatrical production to affect not only the protagonist but the target of revenge, i.e. Claudius as well, or it can happen in the form of the ghost of one of the characters to make the murderer face his latest victim — this happens in *Macbeth*. And the question is if any attention should be called to these interconnections within the respective plays; in other words, if the bond between the Ghost and the play-within-the-play, and between the witches and Banquo’s ghost, should visually be enhanced or not. This is of course up to the decision of the director.
Chapter Two

“Sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought”

Action and Thought in Hamlet and Macbeth

The tragic career of both Hamlet and Macbeth involves murder, moreover, regicide; while their respective attitudes towards the deed is, at least in the first approximation, fundamentally different: Macbeth kills Duncan in his bedchamber already in Act II, while Hamlet delays revenge on Claudius until the very last scene of the whole play. In the chapter on transcendence I discussed how the idea, or the obligation of, murder was planted in the protagonists: both plays, indeed, provide a detailed insight into the process of how the thought of murder shapes into action. In what follows, the attitude of the protagonists towards their respective deeds will be observed, primarily the various stages of their respective reflections.

“The play’s the thing” (H; II; 2; 581) — From The Murder of Gonzago to The Mousetrap

I find the key towards Hamlet’s attitude towards contemplation and action in the enigmatic “To Be Or Not To Be”-soliloquy. Of course, this monologue has been widely discussed among scholars and several classic interpretations have been put forward. My argument takes its clue from Alex Newell’s reading, who emphasizes 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 takes place 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;

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112 Hamlet III; 1; 87
113 Jenkins 1982, 485
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 from 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 not heard by them, and is only available to 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 discussed in detail later on, also puts the King on shaky grounds 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 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 the actual deed happened before the play starts, and no one saw 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 a play on stage, he finally agrees to take part in his (overall) play (called *Hamlet*) more actively than he has done so far. As it has been discussed in the chapter on transcendence, the plot of *The Mousetrap* 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 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 fulfillment 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. 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,
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”[^114]. 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-

[^114]: Calderwood 1983, 32
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\textsuperscript{115} 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
realize in “reality” (i.e. in the reality of his own play), at least not for a while. He realizes
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\textsuperscript{116}.

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. 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

\textsuperscript{115} According to Sheen, the Hecuba-speech delivered by the Player, “triggers a startling mesh of intersecting
perspectives embedded in a chain of spectatorship connecting Hamlet to Player, the audience to Hamlet, the
world” to the Globe.” Sheen 2009, 107

\textsuperscript{116} Here Hamlet acts exactly according to the presence-theory of Gumbrecht. The Prince has the meaning, the
plot in his mind, just as the characterization of the other participants of his story, i.e. Old Hamlet as the poor
victim, Claudius as the vicious murderer, Gertrude as the embodiment of frailty and himself as the expected
revenger. Yet, what he needs here is to turn these meanings into the very presentness of the actors and
therefore creating an interdisciplinary field, where something is not mere contemplation but now proper
action either, and this happens to be the world of the theatrical performance. Be hosting a play-within-the
play, Hamlet reflects upon the nature of its own medium, demonstrating how theatre works in Gumbrecht’s
terms of presence, stepping beyond the realm of the cogito and thus mingling the dimension of space into the
dimension of time. (Cf. Gumbrecht 2004, 33-34)
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 realizes 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’\(^{117}\), 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\(^{118}\), 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)

\(^{117}\) Greenblatt et al. 2008, 1731
\(^{118}\) Thomas Heywood in his An apologie for actors (1612) mentions several examples of how members of the audience were compelled to confess their secret crimes by the power of the performence. Cf. Floyd-Wilson 2013, 22. Relating to this conclusion of Hamlet, West also claims that “[d]rama on the stage is perceived as taking effect upon and within reality” and therefore functioned similarly to sermons of preachers. West 2002, 56
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 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. Yet, in the constant present tense119 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 involving Claudius as an audience as well, in order to test the credibility of the Ghost 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

119 See Cavell’s observation on the “continuous presentness” of the theatre. (Cf. Cavell 1976, 321-323)
some dozen or sixteen lines” (II; 2; 518) is now overwritten from the point of view of the new purpose of the play; therefore, 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 aim. 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: 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 reflected in its name: The Mousetrap.

From the point of view of pre-performance criticism, what is primarily important in a theatrical production 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 realized later on.

In the chapter on transcendence, different possible theatrical realizations of certain interpretations were accounted for, which can also be of use here. One is the use of spotlight to create a parallel between The Mousetrap-scene and the Ghost’s arrival: should the production rely on such a solution, it can also be used in Act II Scene 2, when Hamlet directs the spotlight, which so far has only lit the acting place and his own seat, to throw light on Claudius’s chair as well – as this motive will recur at the end of the show, when Claudius asks for light as it was discussed previously. The possibilities of a dagger of
transcendental origin from the Ghost were also mentioned as a memento, and the Prince can now stand in the middle of the stage-within-the-stage where he is going to realize his duty with the help of the theatre and at the turning point of his soliloquy when the idea of involving Claudius is born, he steps out of the limits of fiction, in other words the boundaries of the theatre and with his dagger brought out from fiction to (the play’s) reality, he moves behind the chair of Claudius as if – like an ominous shadow from behind – he was already waiting there for the imaginary King to react to the show with his weapon in his hand. This gesture would, in a way, create a “short-cut” between the (imagined) effect of The Mousetrap and Claudius’s confession of his guilt, as if the King was either already making his deed explicitly known in public, or, as it were, Hamlet could “hear”, with an unpoisoned ear, the “inner thoughts” of Claudius directly, which, for Hamlet, cannot be other than the admittance of the crime. The above enlisted solutions are, of course, only possibilities to enhance the focus of Hamlet’s speech even more with directorial instructions; yet, it is important to note that the soliloquy in question works perfectly well also without such “tricks” if the actor is familiar with the precise working mechanism of Hamlet’s mind.

“Nobler in the mind” (H; III; 1; 59) — The fear of the particular

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 reckons 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 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 performance by name, whereas

120 In his essay on Hamlet, Stanley Cavell, among several other issues, suggests that in asking Hamlet “not to bear” that “the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch of luxury and damned incest” (I; 5; 81-83), Hamlet’s father asks the son “to take the father’s place, to make his life come out even for him, to set it right, so that he, the father, can rest in peace. It is the bequest of a beloved father that deprives the son of his identity, of enacting his own existence”. This is what Cavell calls Hamlet’s “burden of proof”: Hamlet is in the paradoxical plight that any kind of certainty, assurance (as to what “actually” happened between Old Hamlet and Claudius, between Claudius and Gertrude, and when, and how) immediately and automatically requires his very being, his life, his existence (Cavell 1987, 188).
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). And 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 by 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 is 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 is 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, kindless villain!” (II; 2; 557-558). Observing Hamlet’s attitude towards his own story, it turns out that he wished to take the 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: 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\textsuperscript{121} involve Hamlet in the cast of \textit{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 fictionalized murderer and Hamlet even more obvious. Although it might very well clarify Hamlet’s intentions with 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 \textit{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 \textit{mind}, or, in this case, to project the story onto the stage-within-the-stage and thus keep it within the framework of fictionalized reality. This view approximates that possible aspect of Hamlet’s theatre which might be called a certain kind of “fictionalized 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 fictionalized 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 fictionalized 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 \textit{The Mousetrap}, creating it, yet not participating in its production, then even a further parallel between the plays \textit{Hamlet} and \textit{The Mousetrap} will be apparent, namely that Hamlet takes a similar position to \textit{The Mousetrap} his father has regarding \textit{Hamlet}. From one perspective, Hamlet is given the outsider’s position of Old Hamlet with respect to \textit{The Mousetrap}; yet, from another point of view, he is rather an insider, 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

\textsuperscript{121} Cf. For instance, the \textit{Hamlet}-production of the Hungarian National Theatre (2012, directed by Róbert Alföldi).
some commentary on the 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, III; 2; 217) to “topical”, i.e. into actualization by finally giving a definition of Lucianus as “nephew to the king”. 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 Early Modern England, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*¹²², 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 fulfill the revenge, it ceases to be a theatrical performance and thus “fictionalized reality” proper, also in line with the classic Aristotelian definition of drama, i.e. that it is (only) the *representation* 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 fictionalized 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

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¹²² Bevington 1996
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, as it has been observed since Goethe, is highly characteristic of Hamlet, whereas these two have never been so separated for Claudius or Macbeth. In the case of the two monarchs, action and thought are most of the time organically connected, as it is visible if one considers their 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. On the other hand, Macbeth has several soliloquies before the murder in order to persuade himself to do the deed, all of them resulting in the very murder of Duncan. Remarkably, his order to the Murderers to kill Banquo is also preceded by a soliloquy (“To be thus is nothing”… etc. (III; 1; 49-73)) as if action and thinking about them would be inseparable for him. Macbeth’s attitude is very well represented in his lines in the “Dagger”-soliloquy:

> While I threat he [i.e. Duncan] lives;
> Words to the heat of deeds cold breath gives. (II; 1; 60-61)

This sentence can and should be interpreted on the level of dramatic action as talking about the words that will thwart the actual deed itself by delaying it, until it may happen that it will not be realized at all. Macbeth wants to spare the hotness of the deed (which he warmed up by drawing his actual dagger) from the coldness of the words, of speculation and hesitance (cf. the second half of the soliloquy). The image, which is evoked in these lines, emphatically juxtaposes deed with words, the two being present at the same time, entering into an interactive game with each other. These two phenomena appear as different and diametrically opposed, mutually exclusive forces (heat and cold), yet, from

\[123\] As Calderwood also notes: “For Hamlet imagination is an impediment to action, even at times an end itself, whereas for Macbeth it is the genesis and agency of action.” Calderwood 2010, 10
another perspective, they can reinforce each other: words are associated with coldness, which obviously goes against the heat of the deed but words are also associated with breath, which is connected to life and life giving (cf. the creative force of God). This way the metaphor of “cold breath” represents the complex nature of speech in Macbeth’s case: while words in one way delay and thus threaten the realization of the deed (as it happens in the case of Hamlet, too), in another way it is still necessary for Macbeth to talk about the deed, the “horrid image” in soliloquies or in dialogues with the Lady, in order to be able to do it, to act, to perform. From this perspective, it is the very breath of words (or, more precisely, the speaker’s breath while uttering the words) which gives life to the deed, just as air can make the hot metal (or the blade of the dagger) smolder even more. This way probably one of the most substantial characteristics of the genre of drama is brought into focus: that words are combined with action. By contrast, in Hamlet’s situation the coldness of breath goes strongly against the heat of action and prevents it from taking place. Importantly enough, 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 right he realizes 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, nor the direct action exhibited by Hyeronimo’s theatre in The Spanish Tragedy.

“With a bare bodkin” (H; III; 1; 78) — The possibility of death

Hamlet’s soliloquy directly thematizes 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

This is a direct quotation from my thesis (page 29).
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, or 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 despised 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 “disprized 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 visualize 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 for Macbeth 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 a trap 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 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 — and that is why 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 emphasize 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 that the whole problem originates 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”. 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 emphasized 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 the afterlife but also the recurring doubts concerning the Ghost, whose existence is too uncertain in proportion with the gravity of the deeds he specifies. 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.

“Denmark’s a prison” (H; II; 2; 239) — The painful impossibility of an external position

In my interpretation, 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 thoughts 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 seem to 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’ 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 fictionalized

125 Kéry 1989, 29
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 thinks he is alone, depending 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). It will precisely be 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 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 —almost — both the confirmed justification and the 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. However, 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 to murder 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, 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 if he frightfully and deliberately avoids any specific references to the actual plot of *The Mousetrap*, and, consequently, gives universal instructions, which are very well known to the players, as it is also tenderly suggested by their polite replies, while his mind is apparently somewhere else. It seems as if Hamlet was 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 emphasized 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 had 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

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126 As Greiner points out, Hamlet refuses to play the game of the world surrounding him and develops a melancholic figure already formulated to a certain extent in the character of Jacques in *As You Like It*. This melancholic character recognizes that life is only a play, like a theatrical performance but he himself wishes to stay outside of this playing area. Greiner 2007, 5. Besides Jacques, one could also mention, as a character who is to some extent a pre-figuration of Hamlet, Mercutio (in *Romeo and Juliet*), cf. Géher 1991, 183-184
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. It seems thus that the original Elizabethan stage semiotics of the platea-locus distinction\textsuperscript{127}, which is no longer present in such a clear form in contemporary theatrical practice, can be resurrected here for a present day performance but in the interpretation above the locus (the place of self-enclosed action) would correspond to the whole stage, while the platea (the place for audience involvement) would be projected onto the auditorium, where Hamlet tries to escape. 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\textsuperscript{128}. When the Ghost gave the information to the Prince which only the transcendental being returning from the grave can possess, he also lends his son a certain “amount” of his external position, enabling Hamlet to observe the events form the outside, which can be further emphasized, if Hamlet meets his father somewhere outside the stage, and occupies the place of the Ghost for a while during his soliloquy. 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.

“\textit{That is a step on which I must fall down or else o’erleap}” (M; I; 4; 48-49) — The focus of the Scottish thane

Macbeth’s way into his own tragedy is the reverse. The protagonist of the “Scottish play” does not start from inside his own magic circle but steps into it when he encounters the Weird Sisters. Thus the different effect of the respective transcendental creatures upon the

\textsuperscript{127} Cf. Kiss 2011, 36.
\textsuperscript{128} Fitzpatrick’s view discussing contemporary Elizabethan stage representations also supports this idea. He claims that the last sentence of the “\textit{To be or not to be}”-soliloquy (“\textit{Soft you now, The fair Ophelia}”), recognizing the presence of the girl, indicates that the preceding lines were supposed to be performed downstage, i.e. the location where the actor could directly address the audience and therefore this part of the scene does not actually take place in the presence of either Ophelia or the eavesdropping Polonius and Claudius, making the Hamlet’s soliloquy here a separate scene before his interaction with Ophelia, overheard by Claudius and Polonius. Fitzpatrick 2011, 126-127
protagonists of their tragedies is apparent: the Ghost draws Hamlet out of this circle, while the witches pull Macbeth into it. In this respect the first appearance of the respective main characters are also noteworthy. Both characters are mentioned before the actually step on the stage: Hamlet is referred to by Horatio in Act I, Scene 1 and Macbeth is the primary topic of the conversations between both the Weird Sisters and Duncan and his soldiers. Yet, when Hamlet first appears on the stage he is right there at the beginning of Act I, Scene 2 in the middle of the events, remaining silent for a while. The events have already enveloped him and focus will gradually move onto him: at first he is only present without being active verbally during Claudius’s inaugural speech and discussion with Polonius and Laertes, then he is engaged in conversation with the other characters, while finally he remains alone on the stage and delivers the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy, now in the centre of the audience’s attention. Contrastingly, the first scene in which Macbeth appears (Act I, Scene 3) starts without the protagonist, who is coming only after the Weird Sisters have had their conference (also about him). As opposed to Hamlet, we see him entering the stage with Banquo. A production of Hamlet can of course make Scene 2 be started by the Prince of Denmark, visibly coming in with the others but even then he is silent at the beginning, although Claudius should not start his long speech without his nephew being present. But in the Scottish play, the audience can witness Macbeth physically entering a scene which is already going on, coming from the outside and stepping over the boundaries of the magic circle the witches had just drawn on the stage before his arrival. The theatrical effect of the way the protagonist first appears on stage is – as it was stated above – of utmost importance, so Macbeth’s entrance into the circle dominated by the Weird Sisters may be emphasized by the actor coming into the scene not through one of the stage-doors but via the entrance door of the auditorium: he may walk through the aisle between the seats and finally step onto the stage but the whole point of his first appearance should be that once he is “in the ring”, it will not be possible for him to leave it any more. In his tragedy the most important murder (that of Duncan) takes place very early and the consequences of his deed, the world he has created around himself, just as the (real and metaphorical) blood on his hand, will never let him go.

The action waiting for Macbeth is murder, just as in the case of Hamlet but this very deed takes place much earlier in Inverness than it does in Elsinore. Murder in the first case is killing for gain, for position, which is regarded as the worst type of criminal act even by law, in the second case it is the act of revenge, where the killer is to some extent excused by tradition, is understood through affection one feels towards one’s family, and
justified by the conventions of the revenge tragedy. Yet, the two protagonists resemble in
that they both dissect the question of action and contemplation in soliloquies. As it has
been discussed so far, Hamlet does so especially in the “To Be Or Not To Be”-soliloquy,
while in my reading Macbeth’s corresponding attitude is revealed in the “Two Truths Are
Told”-monologue (I; 3; 126-141), right after the prophecies are revealed to him. One of the
major characteristics of Hamlet’s speech – as it was noted – is its universal nature, which
lacks any specific reference to the exact dramaturgical context of the lines. Macbeth, by
contrast, does not only mention the immediate premise of his train of thoughts (“This
supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good” (I; 3; 129-130)) but urgently
focuses on the action calling it by its name: murder (“My thought, whose murder yet is but
fantastical” (138)). This difference in the attitude of the two protagonists determines the
whole dramaturgy of their respective plays. Hamlet lacks this focus characteristic of
Macbeth throughout the play, as he is approaching his own plight on the path of theory,
observing the questions from as many aspects as possible. When it comes to take action, he
significantly murders the wrong person first in the character of Polonius, and it will only be
after a longish series of other deaths (including also his own reception of the fatal wound)
that he is finally able to murder Claudius. This lack of focus will make it possible that
although Hamlet prominently dominates the lines of the play, the spotlight of the tragedy
also irradiate other characters, and explore their detailed nature and complexity. Whereas
Hamlet is a student coming back from the University of Wittenberg (studying
philosophy?), Macbeth is a soldier, a man of action, who immediately determines his
target, paces towards it, and murders Duncan in the second act. After the deed is carried
out, Macbeth ruthlessly concentrates on the next victim and eliminates Banquo as well,
after which Macduff will move into his spectrum but Macbeth never concentrates on an
action until he has carried out the previous one. This is strikingly apparent in his
relationship towards Banquo: although Macbeth is well aware of the dangers his fellow
warrior means to him, he does not even mention these until the beginning of the third act,
when Duncan is already safely in his grave. This tight focus of Macbeth is the reason why
the plot of his tragedy is limited to one overwhelming plotline of Lord and Lady Macbeth
and the other characters in general get far less emphasis than the ones in Hamlet, which is
further emphasized by the length of the respective tragedies: the Prince of Denmark with
his loose scope of action and his close and detailed examination of the other characters in
the play wonders around in a play twice as long as the one in which the Scottish soldier
marches through.
Macbeth’s declarative and practical attitude as opposed to Hamlet’s theoretic and rather interrogative behaviour is also obvious at the very beginnings of the respective soliloquies. Hamlet starts his speech by juxtaposing two different poles in a question, emphasized by the use of the conjunct or: “To be or not to be” and, as we have seen, the two attitudes (i.e. action and contemplation) appear in mutually exclusive ways and can only be reconciled with each other in the theatrical performance of *The Mousetrap*. Macbeth, after making a short remark to the soldiers on stage, starts his soliloquy (more precisely a longer aside\(^{129}\)) also by demonstrating two poles but he does not contrast them as Hamlet did but rather projects them onto each other with the implicit use of the conjunct and: “This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill [and] cannot be good” (I; 3; 129-130). This correspondence of seemingly conflicting poles also refers back to one of the chief motifs of the play: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I; 1; 10), uttered first by the Weird Sisters, whose magic circle Macbeth has just recently stepped in. By such a declaration Macbeth also admits the complex nature of the deed but by using the *and*-structure instead of the *or*-one he aims at grabbing the problem instead of deconstructing it into its elemental pieces and thus stays focused on the action. It is also remarkable that whereas the problem exposed by Hamlet is a *question* (“that is the question” (III; 1; 58), thus moving into several possible ways (potential answers), Macbeth’s problem is *soliciting*, tempting him, the very speaker into a well-defined and focused direction, i.e. to murder.

“Nothing is but what is not” (M; I; 3; 140-141) — Fictionalized reality and realized fiction

Discussing the dramaturgical context of the “To Be Or Not To Be”-soliloquy, it has been pointed out that despite (or exactly because) of its universal nature it might be connected to the Prince’s preparation for the performance of *The Mousetrap*. The main focus of Macbeth’s soliloquy in question is inarguably the murder of Duncan and the range of possible interpretations is much narrower in this case than it was regarding the most famous speech in *Hamlet*, exactly in line with the Prince’s generality concerning the soliloquy and, consequently, of his instructions to the actors as opposed to the specific

\(^{129}\) As Hammond points out, Macbeth exits the stage-conversations several times and withdraws into his own thoughts and at such moments he occupies a certain stage space, shaped by his imagination, which is inaccessible to others. Moreover, this private world of the protagonist exhibits an uncertain time scheme, melting past, present and future into present in new configurations, not necessarily following the everyday logic of cause and effect. Hammond 2009, 126
nature of Macbeth’s attitude regarding the deed. As I think there is a parallel between the “To Be Or Not To Be” and the “Two Truths Are Told” soliloquies, I will also claim that there is a correspondence between the two events they are aimed at, i.e. the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* and the actual realization of the murder of Duncan.

As it was already mentioned, Hamlet’s theatre is very much different from that of Hyeronimo in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, since the Danish avenger uses the theatre for its essential purpose, i.e. representation, as opposed to his Spanish counterpart, who utilizes it as a direct instrument of revenge and, by doing so, his theatre ceases to be real theatre any more. Macbeth does not mention the idea of the theatre at all, he does not think in the theoretical, “mimetic” representation of the deed but concentrates on its actual realization. With *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet creates his *fictionalized reality* on the stage, while Macbeth significantly crafts his *realized fiction* with the murder of Duncan. The deed is significantly both realized and fiction in both cases. Realized, because killing the king does not bear the benefits of fiction: the victim will never wake up unharmed as the Player King does, and the blood tainting the murderer’s hands will be real. One factor that distinguishes the theatrical performance in this case from the actual deed is that the production can be repeated and although complying with the essential nature of theatre, there will never be two completely identical performances, *The Murder of Gonzago* can be potentially repeated several times on the stages of Elsionre. Contrastingly, the performance of Hyeronimo cannot be acted out for the second time (in the “fictional reality” of *The Spanish Tragedy*, of course), as it executes part of its cast *in reality* and neither can the deed of Macbeth be carried out again, as it is an action *in the reality of the play*, and, thus, by definition, irreversible. This irreversibility stands in agreement with Macbeth’s nature as it is further demonstrated by the soliloquies under discussion: Hamlet is thinking in terms of to be or not to be, focusing on diverse alternatives, while Macbeth concentrates on one single way: the soliciting, which is neither ill, nor good, although he is also very much aware that carrying out the deed in reality will not offer the potentially desirable way back. Thus, Macbeth’s deed is emphatically *real* and it is *fiction*, which gets *realized* in the murder, since he makes the prophecies of the witches come true, the truth value of which he cannot take for granted until the very moment the crown is placed upon his head. The contrast between *fictionalized reality* (through the theatre) and *realized fiction* (through the murder) is significant: Hamlet wished to transfer flesh and blood into shadows (note also the secondary meaning of the word in Shakespeare’s time, i.e. ‘actor’), murder into performance, reality into imagination. Contrastingly, Macbeth prefers the other path: he
wishes to give a palpable form to everything and, consequently, turns the prophecies into the blood-covered flesh of Duncan, and, thus, imagination into reality.

Pursuing further the parallels and contrasts of *The Murder of Gonzago* and the murder of Duncan, the double name of Hamlet’s play-within-the play requires observation as well. As we have seen, in terms of Hamlet’s theatre, the show has two titles: it starts out as *The Murder of Gonzago*, originally aimed to be a private show for the Prince and it becomes a metaphorical mousetrap when it is directed at Claudius, the change also expressed in the second title. The act of Macbeth does not have a name, yet it can be described as ‘the murder of Duncan’, corresponding to the first title of Hamlet’s play, although Macbeth himself refers to the murder only as “the deed” (cf. “I have done the deed” (II; 2; 14)) as it is obviously not as public as the theatrical performance in the Danish castle, nor as private as the potential private theatre of Hamlet but it is the very intimate joint action of Lord and Lady Macbeth, which does not require any further and more specific designation. With respect to the production of *Hamlet*, the Prince changes the name of the show in order to represent its new function (“to catch the conscience of the King”) but, more importantly, it will be a mousetrap for himself, imprisoning him into the flow of events, and initiating a series of fateful events. Similarly, the deed of Macbeth also turns into his personal mousetrap in the very moment it is carried out. Initially, before the murder is committed, Macbeth and the Lady wanted it to remain ‘only’ the murder of Duncan, without its serious consequences (cf. the vision on the possible results of the assassination in the “If It Were Done”-soliloquy); they wished to distance the deed from themselves even by attempting to consider Duncan more like a lifeless object than a living person, as it is tenderly expressed in Macbeth’s soliloquy, objectifying the king with the use of the personal pronoun before his name: “this Duncan” (I; 7; 16 – emphasis added). Yet this is soon denied when the Lady mentions right after the murder that the sleeping King reminds her of her father: “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept. I had done’t” (II; 2; 12-13). The way Macbeth refers to the murder after having done it (“deed”) represents the complex nature of the whole enterprise: it is at once a private and personal venture of the couple, which does not need further verbal specification, while it is also something dreadful and terrible, the mere naming of which Macbeth desperately tries to avoid, using the neutral noun to grasp it somehow, as if he attempted to touch the dead body of Duncan with a glove. Already at this point, Macbeth wants something all the Witches will answer to his question when he seeks them on his own accord in Act IV; Macbeth asks: “How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags? What is’t you do?”, and
the witches say: “A deed without a name” (IV; 1; 46-47). Yet, naturally, this does not help him avoiding the consequences of his action, which became his own mousetrap, leading him towards further killings, nightmares and finally towards the concluding fall. A deed does have a name through its results and consequences, even if this name is desired to be used in such a general sense as the Macbeths wish to use it. It is precisely the consequences which Macbeth was richly aware of in the “If it were done”-soliloquy. No deed can be “the be-all and the end-all” (cf. I; 7; 5) at the same time.

However, as opposed to The Mousetrap, which was called a field where theory can mingle with action, killing Duncan is unquestionably an action proper. Although Macbeth initially uses the theatrical metaphor at the beginning of the soliloquy in discussion: “Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme” (I; 3; 126-128), here the use of the word act is crucial as, through its double meaning, it leads us immediately to the idea of real action, which is further supported by the fact that the theatrical metaphor disappears from his sentences. The way Macbeth reveals the complex nature of this action has already been touched upon before; yet, what is really crucial from our point of investigation, concerning the relationship between action and thought in the respective tragedies of Hamlet and Macbeth, is the way the latter describes the ominous nature of the deed he is about to commit:

If good, why do I yield to the suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My though, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (I; 3; 133-141)

The passage above clearly juxtaposes Macbeth’s attitude towards contemplation and taking action. With respect to Hamlet, it has been pointed out that the Prince feels much more at home in the world of thinking and solving problems in the mind as opposed to taking direct action. Contrastingly, Macbeth represents the inverse of Hamlet’s nature: for him action is something with which he would like to replace and erase contemplation. The quoted lines very powerfully suggest that Macbeth cannot bear the meditation over the idea of murder
and wants to get rid of it via actually realizing the idea. Significantly, Macbeth refers to the thought of murder implemented in his mind by the Weird Sisters as the “horrid image” (134), which induces physiological responses in the body, then three lines later it is emphatically repeated as “horrible imaginings” (137), both emphasizing the unbearable nature of the thought. This is further underscored later by contrasting function (‘capacity to act’) and surmise (‘speculation’) and importantly enough, Macbeth here uses a metaphor to shed light on the nature of the two attitudes, which is derived from the scope of the horrid image itself (i.e. murder, as in his imagery thinking smothers action), suggesting that the image in question has already prevailed in his mind. Obviously, the primary impulsive factor for Macbeth towards the murder is the desire to get the crown but it is exactly out of this reason that he cannot endure the image of the murder, representing the wonderful chance and the hideous path towards it, and these highly contrasting values make the idea fair and foul at the same time; or to use Macbeth’s initial evaluation at the beginning of the soliloquy: neither ill, nor good. And it is exactly this complex nature, this duality which his mind is fighting with in horror, seducing and repulsing him at the same time, in a way tearing him apart (“Shak[ing] so [his] single state of man” (139)). He cannot face the problem with the ever-evaluating contemplative attitude of Hamlet but wants to cut himself through the problem with one single stroke, as he did when he defeated Macdonald (cf. Macbeth “unseamed him from the nave to th’chops” — Captain, I; 2; 22), or as he will do when stabbing the sleeping Duncan in his bedchamber.

It is remarkable how accurate a diagnosis is provided by the soliloquy in terms of Macbeth’s attitude. For him, thought is instantaneously translated into action as it is depicted by the metaphors of the first half of the soliloquy. The “horrid image” in the mind has its immediate physical symptom by “mak[ing his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs” (135), thus just as the incorporeal idea is realized in the physiologically quickened heart beatings, the mental representation of the murder will also gain its actual manifestation very soon. The thought of the deed is coming out of Macbeth’s head to find its way into reality because that is the field where the protagonist can handle the problem, while the deed in Hamlet moves inside the protagonist’s head, since it is exactly the inside where Hamlet can deal with questions, dissecting them philosophically as much as he can.

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130 As Curran notes, „Macbeth teaches us not only that power corrupts but also that knowledge corrupts: bad thoughts lead to bad deeds.” Curran 2012, 392
131 The glossary is on the basis of the Norton edition (Greenblatt 2008, 2584)
The concluding lines of the soliloquy (“nothing is / But what is not” (140-141)) is outstandingly dense and complex. In my interpretation, it simultaneously offers two interpretations: one of them being a general reading, while the other is much more focused on the problem of contemplation and action, a similar double meaning that can be attached to the beginning of the “To Be Or Not No Be”-soliloquy. On the general level, the line in discussion might emphasize the loss of stable points of orientation for Macbeth, suggesting that everything turns upside down in a minute and nothing is reliable anymore. Yet, scrutinizing the relationship between action and thought, the lines might be given a reading where “what is not” refers to what is not actually realized, what resides only in the thoughts and does not have a tangible manifestation, and Macbeth is left alone with these depressing and horrible ideas unless he carries out the deed himself and transforms (according to his evaluation) “nothing” into something (i.e. action.). It is further remarkable that this very last line of Macbeth’s soliloquy might be an answer to Hamlet’s initial question of “to be or not to be”, undoing Hamlet’s proposal by the use of the complex self-deconstructive nature of the double negations. Similarly, Macbeth’s naming his story nonsensical in the Tomorrow-soliloquy, at the end of his drama, will negate Hamlet’s evaluation of his own tragedy expressed by his desire to convey his story to others through Horatio, as it will be discussed later. In the first line of his famous soliloquy, Hamlet makes a clear differentiation between “To be” and “not to be”, between existence and non-existence and if Macbeth’s “Two Truths Are Told”-soliloquy is read together with this speech, the Scottish soldier’s answer is that there are no such clear distinctions: when one really wants to grab a point of orientation, there is only “nothing” and that which “is not”. The semantic-syntactic structure of juxtaposing existence with non-existence is deconstructed by the concurrence of the two non-existentials. This view is generated by the overwhelming weight of the “horrid image” implemented in Macbeth’s mind by the witches: he tries to get rid of this image very soon, realizing it in action. Yet, it will be clear later on that it is impossible to erase the thought in question from the mind, since the image of the later realized murder will be eternally present in the ever-persisting vision of blood on the hands and in the visual image of the dead body of Duncan. Macbeth tried to push out the horrid image from his head but instead of being eliminated, the image filtered through the gory skin of Duncan and, having grown even more powerful, it re-penetrated Macbeth’s mind, torturing him throughout the play. Thus, the image does not only dominate the “Two Truths Are Told”-soliloquy but the whole tragedy of Macbeth as well, leading to the protagonist’s already mentioned conclusion at the end: he can find
absolutely no point in his career which would stand in agreement with his observation already at the beginning: “nothing is but what is not”. Therefore: “Life […] is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (V; 5; 23, 25-27).

To conclude, Macbeth’s attitude with respect to action and thought, his remark on words and action: “Words to the heat of deeds cold breath gives” (II; 1; 61) should be revisited, where we claimed that thinking about the deed is essential for him to do it, as opposed to Hamlet, who demonstrates a pattern of either thinking, or acting, the two usually excluding each other. Once an idea is planted in Macbeth’s mind, be it the chance of murdering the king and getting the throne, or the danger Banquo might mean to him, it starts working there, tormenting him and urging him to take action and he aims at exterminating the disturbing thought by realizing it in the deed. Thus both meanings of “Words to the heat of deeds cold breath gives” (II; 1; 6) are true at the same time: on the deeper level thinking is necessary for him to act (since it is through acting it out that he hopes to get rid of the thought), while on the surface level it states that words threaten the realization of the deed, which is exactly what Macbeth is afraid of: that he will be smothered by the thought and will not reach the possible means of escape: action. Thus, in the act of murder, it is function over surmise, or action over thought which gains expression: trying to eliminate the latter with the former, as opposed to the Danish Prince who wishes to present action in the thought or the thought in the action in the production of The Mousetrap. Interestingly, while Hamlet started his soliloquy by contrasting two poles: “to be” and “not to be”, or, in our interpretation, contemplation and action, and arrived at the conclusion of not separating but combining them in The Mousetrap, Macbeth took the opposite direction: he started out from one single field, the thought of action, which is neither ill, nor good, and ended his soliloquy by breaking it down into two factors, wishing to eliminate one (thought) with the help of the other (action).

“I’ll call upon you straight” (M; III; 1; 141) — Professionals commissioned

Hamlet’s idea of the theatrical production was generated by the breathtaking performance of the First Player, one member of the group of actors arriving in Elsinore. Macbeth’s inspiration of the regicide is primarily prompted by the prophecies of the Weird Sisters, who are also members of a certain group and just like the Players in Hamlet, they are identified in the Dramatis Personae with the use of ordinal numbers (First Witch, Second
Witch; cf. First player, Second Player, etc.). However, there is another group of people in Macbeth who are similarly not identified via their proper names but through their profession like the actors in Hamlet, and they are the murderers Macbeth hires to kill Banquo. It is remarkable that both Hamlet and Macbeth want a very important deed to be carried out by professionals. In the Scottish Play, the assassination of Banquo is the next step after killing Duncan, and the fact that a former friend and companion returns in the shape of a ghost haunting the person who masterminded his death suggests that the significance of his murder is very close to that of Duncan. Thus it is not only the regicide, which can be connected to Hamlet’s performance of The Mousetrap but also the act of having Banquo killed by murderers. Similarly to the Duncan-murder, the order given to kill Banquo is also preceded by the tormenting thought of the deed, never letting Macbeth to rest until Banquo is alive, which was importantly not apparent to him when Duncan was still alive, and, consequently, while another thought was occupying his mind. The disturbing presence of the thought of murder connecting to Banquo is very effectively expressed by Macbeth in Act III Scene 2: “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (37 — emphasis added). Therefore, to get rid of it, he hires two murderers to put an end to Banquo’s life. At this point, Macbeth’s position with respect to his own tragedy will be similar to that of Hamlet’s: he wishes to remain an outsider to the second murder, being already aware of the consequences of the regicide he has already committed. He wants to step out from that magic circle and pull the strings from “without” instead of “within”; yet, as the appearance of Banquo’s Ghost will indicate, this is no longer possible. Correspondingly to The Murder of Gonzago, which was transformed into a ‘mousetrap’ not only for Claudius but also for Hamlet, magnetizing him into the centre of events, the murder of Duncan (and later each and every murder) is a mousetrap for Macbeth, never letting him out of the magic circle of blood.

In a theatrical production this hanker of Macbeth to step out from the circle and to watch the events from the outside, being as far from Banquo as possible can be realized during the Banquet scene (Act III Scene 4) by situating the seats of the guests at the front edge of the stage, almost as a direct continuation of the audience. Macbeth’s seat is in the middle (cf. “Here I’ll sit, I’th’midst” (9)) but occupied by the recently entering Ghost of Banquo, thus not letting Macbeth step off his stage and look at it from the outside. When

132 I disregard now such truly supporting characters, found in practically all plays of the age as servants, lords, attendants, etc.
133 Macbeth summons two murderers but at the murder itself is carried out by three murderers. The status of the Third Murderer, however, is not discussed here.
Macbeth starts communicating with the apparition, the Lady and the guests rise, disrupting the pre-arranged process of the feast. Thus it is no longer possible for Macbeth to take a seat among them, although the Lady and he are desperately trying to persuade them to proceed as if nothing had happened. But the guests are already standing and staring at the King, constituting a circle around him, which might coincide with the imaginary stage the Weird Sisters drew up at the beginning of the play. Macbeth is left alone in the circle and the only one entering it is the Lady, trying to calm her husband down this way: by stepping into the circle and sharing the fate of Macbeth resulting from the deed they committed together. Banquo’s Ghost appears for the second time and according to my stage-conception, he should not return to the seat again (which is no longer in focus since no one is sitting on their stools) but enter the circle of the guests to get close to Macbeth. This way the protagonist’s agony is visually represented: he is standing in the area which he can never leave, just as he cannot relate to his tragedy from the outside, and he cannot get rid of the consequences of his deed: he must share this circle in question with the gory figure of Banquo. This further recalls the beginning of the play when in Act I Scene 3 Macbeth and Banquo arrived together into the magic circle of the witches and some gestures or the relative position of the two actors to each other might make the connection between the two scenes obvious. In the first visually represented circle by the Weird Sisters, Macbeth was assigned the role of the active agent, since his own kingdom was mentioned in the prophecy, which he interpreted as requiring action on his part, while Banquo was given the position of the passive patient as it would be not his own but his offspring’s duty and chance to gain the throne. This agent-patient relationship can be mirrored on the stage by the two men reuniting again in the circle of the guests: the active murderer and the passive victim.

So far we have identified three groups of nameless characters in the two tragedies who have important roles with respect to the two deeds under discussion, i.e. the performance of both The Murder of Gonzago and the murder of Duncan (and Banquo). It is noteworthy that the Players in Denmark had a double role, though obviously interrelated: they planted the idea of the theatre in Hamlet’s mind and they also realized the actual production of The Mousetrap. In Macbeth, this double-role is shared by two groups: the idea of murder is generated by the Weird Sisters and although the murder of Duncan is carried out by Macbeth, Banquo is killed by the murderers. A theatrical production might choose to put emphasis on the connection of the Sisters and the murderers by having the
same actors/actresses play the three witches and the three assassins, but Macbeth should not realize this. Such a solution obviously enhances the role of the Weird Sisters like a constantly returning nightmare of the protagonist, or maybe a powerful determining force. Their identification with the murderers has a further significance in the banquet scene: if in the figures of the murderers the three witches enter the stage (although only one murderer is mentioned here explicitly by the text), then the above discussed connection between Act I, Scene 3 and Act III, Scene 4 is even more underscored: the witch-murderers are also there among the guests, constituting the edge of their magic circle just as they did two acts earlier, surrounding Macbeth and Banquo. Thus, by projecting Hamlet and Macbeth onto each other, certain corresponding patterns seem to emerge: the dual role of the Players can give an additional connection between the Weird Sisters and the Murderers. Following this path, one would ask if there is any connection then between the Players and Old Hamlet, which is seemingly not supported by the drama; yet, it has already been pointed out that there is an interrelation between the Ghost and the performance of The Mousetrap, the latter having a similar impact on Claudius than Old Hamlet had on his son. Furthermore, the First Player will indeed identify with Old Hamlet in the performance, as he is going to play the King in the show, most probably meant to represent the previous king of Denmark. This also has theatrical precedent: Michael Boyd in his production of Hamlet (RSC) in 2004 explicitly made the roles of Old Hamlet and the First Player played by the same actor (Greg Hicks). By highlighting the correspondences above, I do not wish to claim that these connections are to be overemphasized: it is always up to the choice of the director which interpretation to strengthen. However, whether the same actors return in these seemingly independent, yet somehow related roles or not, it is worth noting that on a deeper level a certain, perhaps even unconscious, line is running through the respective tragedies connecting certain elements together, and this line might reveal itself for a moment if we observe it in the light created by the two plays juxtaposed.

To summarize the respective attitudes of the protagonists towards action and contemplation, Hamlet wants to transfer action (and thus the whole play) into his mind to solve the problems there, whereas Macbeth desperately tries to get rid of the thought of action and realize it in the actual deed. This contrast is also represented in their relative

134 Or two: depending if Macbeth plays the Third Murderer as discussed in another chapter.
135 In the chapter on transcendence it was claimed that a production might wish to concentrate on the connection between Banquo and the Weird Sisters, which is further enhanced if the witches are present during the banquet scene.
136 Boyd also made Hicks play the First Gravedigger and the actress playing Ophelia was the Second Gracedigger (or “Clown”). (Cf. Bate & Rasmussen 2008, 194)
position to their own tragedies: Hamlet after encountering the Ghost of Old Hamlet, gains a certain outsider position but he cannot stay there, since that is a seat occupied by his father and he has to return to the stage that requires action. Contrastingly, Macbeth upon encountering the transcendental creatures of his play steps into the magic circle and regards the whole play from the internal point of view, being an excellent example of the active dramatic hero, and even though he at one point wishes to leave this circle, it will not be possible for him because the seat is occupied by the Ghost of Banquo. Although Hamlet cannot escape from his drama, he preserves this quasi-outsider position with which he contemplates on the events and observes the other characters of the play. This results in his desire upon his death to make Horatio tell his story to the world (“Report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied” (V; 2; 281-282)) as opposed to Macbeth, who judges his story to be “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (V; 5; 25-27). I consider Macbeth’s fulmination here as a symptom of the ‘mechanism’ of tragedy described by Nietzsche. Nietzsche defined tragedy (especially Greek tragedy) as the combination of Apollonian illusion and a Dionysian type of rampage, in which the illusion makes the storming depiction of the passions and torments of the human being distanced and thus endurable for the audience. Hence, what is “sound and fury” for Macbeth from the inside, does make sense for Hamlet, who is given the possibility to observe his tragedy from the Apollonian distance.

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137 Cf. Nietzsche 2000, 127-130
Chapter Three

“Hie thee hither, that I may pour my spirits in thine ear”138

Women on the edges of the private and the public

Both protagonists of the two tragedies go through their respective paths heavily influenced by women. At first sight it seems that Hamlet is diverted from his final goal, i.e. the completion of the revenge by repeatedly being hindered by the two female characters on his side: Gertrude and Ophelia. The former has a clear relationship towards the Prince, yet Hamlet constantly wants to question the mother-son relationship both socially and emotionally. Ophelia’s status is more problematic. Ophelia is not Hamlet’s wife, or fiancée, and it would also be inappropriate to call her his lover. In the *dramatis personae*, she is designated as “Polonius’s daughter”, which is more than telling: Ophelia is first and foremost present as the offspring of high court-official but also as the sister of Laertes. Thus, she is heavily influenced and controlled by two men in her family, yet, indirectly, also by the King, Claudius. The internal tension of the character primarily lies in the effort to break out of the designation of “Polonius’s daughter” and gain the title of “Hamlet’s bride” (a title posthumously bequeathed on her by Gertrude, at Ophelia’s funeral). Since my approach deals with the plays from the point of view of today’s theatre, I find it the most appropriate to call Ophelia Hamlet’s girlfriend139. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth has a very firm relation with her husband, as it is not only strongly indicated in the list of characters but also in her very name. Significantly, she does not have a name of her own (quite uniquely among the Shakespearean heroines); she is defined in terms of her husband: *Lady* Macbeth, i.e. wife to *Lord* Macbeth. And it seems that just as the strong bond between the protagonist and the chief female character is beyond question, the “chief woman of the play” does not hinder the execution of the deed but urges and supports Macbeth to carry out the murder. However, it is a major theme in both tragedies that seeming is not to be trusted: Hamlet claims at the beginning that “[he] know[s] not ‘seems’” (I; 2; 76) and Macbeth is rich in the experience that a dagger before his eyes can

138 *Macbeth* I; 5; 23-24
139 Wetmore’s radical remark is quite apt here: “if Shakespeare’s Ophelia cannot fit in the contemporary teen world and reflect contemporary teen values, then she must be made to leave.” Wetmore 2011, 385
turn incorporeal, an “air-drawn” “instrument” when one tries to grab it. In the following, I will scrutinize the dramaturgical role of the three women in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, focusing primarily on their relationship towards the respective protagonists.

From a dramaturgical point of view, it is significant how the character in question is first introduced into the play. Interestingly, both plays immediately categorize their heroines: Gertrude first appears as the (new) wife of Claudius and in front of the great public in Act I Scene 2. Ophelia first talks as a sister and a daughter, surrounded, accordingly, by Laertes and Polonius and in an environment of a nuclear family, somewhere between the realms of the private and the public in Act I Scene 3. Lady Macbeth first enters the stage as the wife of Macbeth, reading her husband’s letter in undisturbed privacy in Act I Scene 5. Consequently, the two plays present us three cases: an emphatically new wife, the position of which will be unceasingly questioned by her son throughout the play, a daughter striving to be a bride, and a wife, uttering her husband’s words through a message he has sent her.

“Married with my uncle” (H; I; 2; 151) — Irreconcilable roles of mother and wife

Gertrude’s first appearance is shrouded by silence: she is seen, rather than heard on the stage, becoming part of the spectacular ceremony organized for Claudius’s inauguration. The newly wed royal couple face the court and the queen is first mentioned by the king: “Therefore our sometimes sister, now our queen, / Th’imperial jointress to this warlike state / Have we […] / Taken to wife” (I; 2; 8-10, 14). That she is “imperial jointress” (9) may mean that she is playing a crucial part in the ascension of Claudius to the throne; yet in fact she remains inactive in front of the public and is not more than a silent illustration of the king’s speech. What hides behind this public image remains inaccessible to the audience for the major part of the play, and since Gertrude lacks any soliloquies where she could reveal her true private self, this self behind the public mask can truly manifest itself only in her bedchamber scene with Hamlet in Act III Scene 4. It is also

140 Cf. Jenkins 1982, 434. However, as Haverkamp points out, “[b]oth Hamlet and Fortinbras doubt this joint, irrespective of the “jointress.” The latter, Fortinbras, does so in his unmistakable affirmation of the state of exception, the “warlike state” — which is in turn the reason for Claudius’ haste. The ghost of old Hamlet […] could just as well be the ghost of old Fortinbras, who like Claudius passed on his inheritance to his brother and not his son. […] *Hamlet*, rather than the drama of Hamlet’s revenge, might as well be taken as a shrewd anamorphosis of the revenge of the other prince, Fortinbras.” Haverkamp 2011, 27
worthy of consideration that just as the whole play is dominated by the figure of the already dead Old Hamlet, he is also dominating the scene in discussion.

Act I Scene 2 starts with Claudius’s long speech (which is also his very first speech in the play); he refers to his brother as “Hamlet” (“Though yet of Hamlet....” (I; 2; 1)) but it might be argued that Gertrude’s first words are haunted by the memory of the previous king as well. Her first utterance in the play is: “Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted colour off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark” (I; 2; 68-69)). This is, of course, directed at Hamlet, the son, after the Prince’s witty remarks to the king; she wishes to reconcile the two men. Yet in her lines she does not only say “Hamlet”, but she talks about “Denmark”, too, who, in this context, is the King, Claudius, towards whom Hamlet is expected to feel more sympathetic (or at least should show more kindness). However, precisely because of the context, both “Hamlet” and “Denmark” are dangerously ‘explosive’ names, since, in principle, they both might be proper designations of Old Hamlet, too, who bore the same name as his son, and who, as king, and when he was alive, was addressable by the name of the country under his rule. Thus, it is visible that the “dirge in marriage” (I; 2; 12), the funeral penetrating the joyful ceremony, is indeed present. Yet, whereas this is consciously controlled by Claudius in his inaugural speech, Gertrude – unknowingly, inadvertently, unconsciously – mentions both names. Claudius intends to reconcile the recent death of the previous king and the quickly following marriage with the use of oxymorons, yet Old Hamlet still ominously pops up in the words of his previous wife, as if he were a kind of shadow or ghost of her very speech.

As it has been mentioned, Gertrude is present silently during the long monologue of the King. This dramaturgical construction quickly returns during the second monologue of Claudius, this time addressing Hamlet directly, scorning him for not letting the memory of the dead father go, during which Gertrude falls back into silence. It is noteworthy here, though, that Claudius also makes a remark which might be interpreted as referring to Old Hamlet. Claudius mentions “the first corse” (“To reason most absurd, whose common theme / Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried / From the first corse till he that cried today, / ‘This must be so’” (103-106)), thus evoking the story of the fratricide of Cain in the Bible. And the reference to Abel’s corpse does not only evoke the theme of fratricide but also symbolically recalls the moral dilemma behind the main topic of the play, i.e. revenge, since it was Cain’s murder of Abel when God claimed that only he is to take revenge. The Biblical story is evoked in connection with revenge in Richard II, when Bolingbroke referred to Abel to revenge his uncle: “Which blood, like sacrificing Abel’s,
cries / Even from the tongueless caverns of earth / To me for justice” (Richard II I; 1; 104-106). However, reference to the brother’s corpse has little significance until Claudius’s “prayer scene” and what remains here is the impression of Claudius’s firm control over the situation. Thus, the text suggests that Claudius is in charge of the events and Gertrude assists him: she only adds two concluding lines to her husband’s longish speech, concurring that Hamlet should not go back to Wittenberg. It seems that Claudius wants to keep an eye on the Prince by keeping him in his vicinity: he follows the well-known “maffia” principle: ‘keep your friends close, your enemies even closer’ (Michael Corleone from The Godfather Trilogy). Gertrude, in turn, can this way express her motherly affection, while she is in agreement with her husband’s plan at the same time: this is the position she would like to retain all through the play. The impossibility of this precarious balance will soon unfold when Hamlet delivers the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy a few lines later. Should a stage-director wish to emphasize the Queen’s willingness to support Claudius, some lines of the King’s speech addressed to Hamlet may be given to Gertrude, which may also give a more direct impulse to the Prince’s following soliloquy. Such a solution, of course weakens Gertrude’s endeavour to keep the rightful position of new wife and mother at the same time and dedicates her more to her new husband.

Gertrude leaves the stage as new wife and immediately after her exit, Hamlet makes it explicit that she has failed as a mother. The impulsive force that engenders the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy (I; 2; 129-159) is definitely Gertrude. The speech expresses a deeply claustrophobic, hopeless and sorrowful situation, interrupted by exclamations and interpolations, but the core of the situation is not named until the twenty-third line of the text: “married with my uncle” (151). Hamlet approaches the question of leaving this unbearable world from the point of view of the flesh exactly because the flesh is from the mother and all he wants in his desperate condition is to cut himself loose from Gertrude. Although, on a general level, the speech can refer to the conditions in the court: “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world” (133-134), this is rather a projection of a personal problem onto the surrounding world, just as the “unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (135-137) might not only depict the situation in the court but may more directly refer to the female genital organ of the mother, now in possession of a new usurping master. The jumbled, fragmented syntax of this soliloquy indicates in real time how images of frustration overwhelm the Prince’s mind, and, importantly, it is in the mind that he is suffering, which will be significant in the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy later on (as it was
discussed in Chapter Two). Here the mind cannot get rid of the seemingly happy memories of Old Hamlet and Gertrude’s unity (“Must I remember?” (143)), and the intruding pictures of Gertrude and Claudius being together (“Let me not think on’t” (146)). Hamlet’s disappointment in Gertrude is rooted in the fact that the Prince wants to conserve the mother in an inaccessible statue form, this is why the use of the Niobe-metaphor is so telling in the speech. Hamlet draws a parallel between the Queen’s initial grief over Old Hamlet and the Greek mythological figure: “she follow’d my poor father’s body, / Like Niobe, all tears” (148-149), and although Niobe is remembered first and foremost for her infinite shed of tears in woe, she is also important, from the Prince’s point of view, because she became petrified in her grief. He wants to see her – metaphorically – petrified: cold and unreachable to any other men, remaining forever the wife of Old Hamlet and the mother of young Hamlet. And the two are organically connected in the name and in Hamlet’s flesh and mind: failing to be an eternal wife of the previous king also means a failure in the mother’s role. In Gertrude’s case, the flesh can neither melt, nor turn into solid stone.

On the contemporary stage, one might not automatically expect the whole audience to be familiar with the detailed story of Niobe, yet this reference might be read as a subtle stage instruction to the actor playing Hamlet how to relate to the mother. The most fundamental conclusion of the soliloquy is already reached in the middle: the Prince generalizes his disappointment and widens the scope of his contempt to all females with the often quoted phrase: “Frailty, thy name is woman” (146). Generalization is a well-known device employed by Hamlet: he wants to approach the questions theoretically and philosophically, he strives to understand the “whole world”. However, if the particular, from which he derives his conclusions regarding the general, is so much distorted by emotions as we can observe it in the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy, then the general conclusions will show up a highly imprecise picture about women, to which also Ophelia will fall as a victim.

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141 This is what pre-performance criticism asserted in terms of the semiotics of the theatre based on Kiss’s work. Although an emblematic image or metaphor might have been telling and expressive for the Elizabethan audience, the contemporary audience cannot be expected to understand all of them and, therefore, the director should use something, with a similar meaning, in exchange, or it should simply be omitted. Cf. Kiss 2011, 41-57

142 Elizabeth Klett emphasizes that it might be difficult for a female reader to identify with the protagonist of Hamlet, who exhibits such a contemptuous opinion about their sex. She also states that Hamlet is a good example of a male centred narrative, and criticism often tends to interpret the female characters concentrating on how we can understand the Danish Prince better, instead of putting the women into focus. Klett 2003, 131
"I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (H; I; 3; 104) — Ophelia under the scrutiny of the public eye

Ophelia’s first appearance is not as clearly defined as that of Gertrude. Her first official entrance and speech happens only in Act I Scene 3 but the stage direction of Act I, Scene 2 mentions the entrance of several people, among them many of the chief characters, and although Ophelia is not mentioned here, the stage direction allows that “Others” also enter. If Polonius and Laertes are present at the inauguration ceremony, Ophelia can easily be positioned there as a guest as well. Thus, there are — at least — two possibilities for the director of the production how to introduce the other important female figure in the play: together with the majority of the characters, or — in a more domestic scene — later on. If Ophelia enters the stage during the inauguration ceremony, then, similarly to Gertrude, she is there silently; moreover, she does not speak at all. Instead of her, Polonius and Laertes speak on behalf of the family and although this is justified by the situation (since the question of Laertes’s return to Paris is also discussed here), Ophelia, together with the feeble Gertrude may further emphasize that the female characters — at least initially — are supporting roles This solution also entails that the audience can see Hamlet and Ophelia together on the stage already at the beginning of the play, since they significantly do not have an on-stage conversation up until their famous “Breaking up”-scene in Act III. Such an early introduction of Ophelia urges the director to give hints of their relationship. Whatever happens or does not happen between them on the stage is telling: if Hamlet constantly looks at Ophelia considering her as part of the hypocritical ceremony, or if she is simply waiting for her supporting glimpse is just as indicative as a possible complete lack of eye-contact between the two.

It is left in the dark when exactly Hamlet arrived back from Wittenberg, whether he was there at the funeral of his father and also if he has met Ophelia since his return, and what their relationship was like before she handed over the letters to her father. Many interpretations may work as regards these questions, and this dissertation does not wish to engage itself with any of them. However, a theatrical production is expected to face these questions. What is significant from our point of analysis is that whereas the audience can see a brief but serious confrontation between mother and son, they lack any kind of an encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia; moreover, the director can decide to introduce the character of the girl only in the third scene.
If Ophelia first appears only in her dialogue with Laertes, then, significantly, she enters the stage only after her verdict – in her absence, of course – has already been uttered by Hamlet: “Frailty, thy name is woman”. In such a situation, the whole discussion between brother and sister about the love life of Ophelia and Hamlet may be coloured with an ironic hue in the audience’s eyes. Should this be the first entrance of the girl, we do not first see her as part of a larger ceremony, organized by those officials whom Hamlet so much detests, but she appears in a rather private environment, representing a private sphere where Hamlet might wish to withdraw, which is not yet corrupted like the public ‘arena’ represented in the second scene. Yet, importantly enough, Ophelia is not alone in this private sphere but her stage presence is dominated by monologues of men: first she must listen to the moral lecture of Laertes, and then of Polonius. Both speeches are directed at the very centre of the girl’s private life: Hamlet. As Calderwood observes, Laertes cannot see in Hamlet “the man who loves Ophelia for the prince obedient to his public role”143, thus his point of view foreshadows the alleged impossibility of a possible privacy for Hamlet and Ophelia. Nevertheless, as Calderwood further argues, it is Laertes who cannot escape “the parental shadow of Polonius” and who is “far more ‘subject to his birth’ than Hamlet”144, which is manifested, for instance, in Polonius’s control over him through Reynaldo, the spy. This influence over the family, which makes the child “subject to his [or her] birth” is also relevant for Ophelia, as Laertes’s and Polonius’s subsequent speeches make it clear already at the beginning. Moreover, father and son give the cue to each other. Laertes says farewell to his sister by the following words: “Farewell, Ophelia, and remember well145 / What I have said to you” (I; 3; 84-85), as if he wished his already present father to continue where he stopped. And this indeed immediately raises the father’s curiosity and inclination of control and three lines later, after the son’s exit, he asks his daughter: “What is’t, Ophelia, he hath said to you?” (88). Since Ophelia obediently admits the topic (Hamlet), she is about to face a second turn in her education.

The question of obedience towards the controlling father is seemingly indisputable in the case of Ophelia: she obeys the instructions, hands over the letters, and even refers to a similar past when she claims a few scenes later: “as you did command, / I did repel his letters and denied / His access to me.” (II; 1; 108-109). Such blind submission might also feed the background for Hamlet’s sorrowful remark on the frail nature of womankind.

143 Calderwood 1983, 15
144 Calderwood 1983, 15-16
145 Fathers or patriarchal figures like to bid farewell with “remember” in the play, cf. the Ghost of Old Hamlet: “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me” Exit.” (I;5;91).
Although this is a fairly obvious possibility of interpreting Ophelia, it locks her character up in a simplified box and reduces her dramatic significance. The text in fact does not exclude her being pictured as a more conscious, witty and practical woman, fighting her ’private revolution’ among her unquestionably limited possibilities under her father’s control. Her first remark on Laertes’s lecture on how she should take Hamlet’s approach: “No more but so?” might reflect the naïve revelation of an innocent girl but can also be given an ironic hue, in fact questioning the brother’s eager endeavour to keep her away from the Prince. Yet, her concluding remarks show signs of the latter content, when she first ironically compares the speech to a pastor’s sermon and then turns its focus back onto the speaker, thus slightly deconstructing its seriousness:

But good brother,
Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
While like a puff’d and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede. (I; 3; 46-51)

The tone of such a witty and sarcastic reply cannot be detected in her answers to the father; yet Ophelia’s seeming obedience can still give space to an underlying criticism directed at Polonius, especially if we interpret her lines like “He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders / Of his affection to me” (99-100) and “My lord, he hath importun’d me with love / In honourable fashion” (110-111) as the application of Polonius’s own language against him, communicating what he would like to hear. Still, Ophelia’s strategy fails, since in either case, her father immediately elevates the problematic words in her utterances and starts his own speech with them: “Affection?” (101); “Ay, fashion you may call it.” (112). Moreover, both of Ophelia’s above mentioned replies end in a half line; these half lines are not parts of broken lines but are filled up by Polonius’s iambs: this suggests a certain dynamism of the exchange, but remain shortened lines:

Ophelia: He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me. (I; 3; 99-100)

Ophelia: My lord, he hath importun’d me with love
In honourable fashion. (I; 3; 110-111)
These incomplete iambic pentameters indicate shorter pauses between the speakers. Ophelia’s silence and Polonius’s detecting look also reinforce our impression that Ophelia is in a beaten position, concluding the scene with the words: “I shall obey, my lord” (136). Whether the director allows Ophelia to rebel against her situation (which would nevertheless make both the character and the scene more complex, hence more interesting) or not, it seems that she remains under the paternal control anyway.

So far we have seen that Gertrude was immediately exposed to the public, participating in her new husband’s inauguration ceremony and fulfilling the role of the “imperial jointress” rather silently, not wishing to sacrifice her new position as the new wife but still wishing to retain her original position of the mother. Yet, these two roles prove to be incompatible in the eyes of Hamlet, as it is desperately expressed in the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy. Ophelia is first and foremost a daughter, wishing to be related to Hamlet and these two roles similarly seem to be conflicting ones; yet, not so much in the eyes of the Prince as in Polonius’s view. When Hamlet encounters Ophelia for the first time, after having met the Ghost and having decided “to put an antic disposition on”, Polonius puts the question of the young lovers’ relationship on a higher level, and decides to bring it in front of the King: “Come, go we to the King. / This must be known, which, being kept close, might move / More grief to hide than hate to utter love” (II; 1; 117-119). With this action, he elevates the private problem to the level of the public. And Gertrude, who will also be a representative of the public domain, already knows what it means if personal matters are exposed to the open: the two women share a similar fate already at the beginning of the tragedy, not only in their love towards the protagonist, but also with respect to their fragile private spheres, devoured by public attention.

Strangely, in the scene in question, Polonius arrives alone to see the royal couple, although he expressed it clearly that he wished Ophelia to escort him. Unless we are satisfied with an explanation that it is merely an inconsistency on Shakespeare’s part, we might attribute this phenomenon a greater significance. The fact that Ophelia eventually does not appear in front of the King may indicate her resistance to open her personal relationship in front of the others, and the shame accompanying this event makes her avoid the obligation of physically being present. It is also noteworthy that although she claimed to Polonius that she “did repel [Hamlet’s] letters”, it is a letter which is now in Polonius’s possession, which is either a message dating from before Polonius forbade her to “date” Hamlet, or rather a sign of Ophelia’s minor revolt and disobedience already touched upon above. Handing over the letter to her father might be an act of betrayal – as it would most
probably be regarded by Hamlet – but also a desperate attempt to find a clue to the Prince’s frightening new behaviour, even at the cost of concurring to the father’s demand of public involvement. Yet, Ophelia significantly does not appear in front of the King, nor does Hamlet, of course, but their relationship will be there only virtually, i.e. in Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia: a most private item exposed to and, metaphorically also destroyed by, the public eyes.

“This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness” (M; I; 5; 9-10) — The layers of intimacy regarding the Macbeth-couple

Whereas the letter in Hamlet indicates how the privacy of the protagonist and the woman to whom he addressed the message ceases to exist, in Macbeth it has the opposite role from the point of view of dramaturgy. Lady Macbeth’s first entrance on the stage happens in absolute privacy and with a letter from her husband. Unlike the other two women in Hamlet, she is mentioned briefly by Macbeth immediately before her appearance: “I’ll be myself the harbinger and make joyful / The hearing of my wife with your approach” (I; 4; 45-46), and although she is just mentioned marginally, or rather as an excuse for Macbeth to leave for Inverness immediately, it is dramaturgically telling that she is verbally introduced into the play by Macbeth — unlike poor Ophelia, who is practically not mentioned by Hamlet up until their joint scene in Act III. By reading out the letter of Macbeth, the Lady enters the stage uttering her husband’s words, thus filtering Macbeth’s monologue about the recent events through herself, giving the protagonist’s words a new perspective:

Lady Macbeth: [Reads] ‘They met me in the day of success, and I have learned by the perfectest report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king who all-hailed me Thane of Cawdor, by which title before these weird sisters saluted me and referred me to the coming on of time, with “Hail, king that shalt be.” This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mights not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart and farewell.’ (I; 5; 1-12)
The first part of the Lady’s initial speech is thus the word-by-word reading of Macbeth’s letter; however, the audience is left in doubt whether they can hear the message from the very beginning, which is attributed not only to the lack of a proper opening (which gives the impression that we join in in medias res) but also to the disturbing absence of any kind of reference to Banquo’s presence during the depicted encounter with the Weird Sisters. Still, since it is the Lady who reads out Macbeth’s letter, the way of the theatrical realization on the actress’s part can be significantly indicative in terms of the relationship between husband and wife. As Andrea Fullajtár has claimed, it is not only their affection which might manifest itself in the reading but also the contrast between the two personalities: Macbeth’s enthusiasm over the transcendental episode and the Lady’s more realistic approach to the question. She can rather see a kind of unwary rhapsody in her husband’s behaviour (enforced by such expressions as “rapt in the wonder” (I; 5; 5)), triggered by the questionably miraculous events. Yet, the “Hail, king that shalt be” (8) line functions as a turning point, as it indicates that the possibly long desired advancement in rank is more likely to be achieved: whether the witches mentioned in the letter are real or not, whether the Lady believes in their transcendental power as her husband seems to do so, or she does not, the event described in the message can be used to incite Macbeth to achieve more.

The end of the letter unfolds a new register, which might not even operate consciously in the audience’s mind, yet, it is a significant indication of the tight relationship and love between the couple. From the line on “This have I thought good to deliver thee” (9) it becomes obvious that just as Macbeth immediately thought of the Lady upon hearing the transcendental prophecies and the good news brought by the soldiers about his new title, he can only imagine the imminent glory together with his wife. The ending sentence “Lay it to thy heart and farewell” also touches these tender affectionate accords, which are at least as important as the informative parts of the message.

Both Gertrude and Lady Macbeth attempt to interpret the respective protagonists upon their first entrances. It is more than telling that Gertrude’s strategy to understand Hamlet’s behaviour proves to be a spectacular failure when talking to the Prince, which is especially indicated by the wrong choice of words with which she would like to define Hamlet’s emotional state, and which are resentfully repeated back by Hamlet:

146 Through private communication – she played Lady Macbeth in 2008-09 (Katona József Theatre, Budapest, dir. Gábor Zsámbéki)
Queen: Thou know’st ‘tis common: all that lives must die, 
Passing through nature to eternity.
Hamlet: Ay, madam, it is common.
Queen: If it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?
Hamlet: Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’.

In the quotation above emphasis is added to highlight the words which Gertrude and Hamlet use in different senses: common in the sense of ‘true for everyone’ by the Queen and ‘vulgar’ by Hamlet, and seems as ‘looks’ by the former and ‘pretended’ by the latter.

As opposed to the procedure how Hamlet closes down every way of interpretation towards himself, especially with respect to his mother, Lady Macbeth appears to know her husband better than he knows himself. The Lady gives an exact and precise diagnosis of her husband following the reading of the letter, and whereas Gertrude’s interpretative attempt was directed at the past, i.e. exploring the roots of Hamlet’s behaviour, the Lady’s attention is turned towards the future, i.e. how she should complement the protagonist’s personality in order to drive him to the promised title. She very well knows the enthusiastic nature of her husband and also his inclination to hesitate in a situation which he is expected to get into. The rationality of the soliloquy is striking: Lady Macbeth lists what characterizes Macbeth (“Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition” (16-17)) and what he lacks (the “illness should attend it” (18)) and arrives at the conclusion that she has to push him forward because Macbeth’s strategy (“woulds’t not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win” (19-20)) will not bear fruit. The last two lines are also important from the point of view of their differing personalities. As the Lady expresses, “fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / To have [Macbeth] crowned” (27-28), where “fate” represents the wife’s view who has always claimed that her husband was born for greater titles, and “metaphysical aid” refers to Macbeth’s wonder about the strange creatures, these two now optimally coincide and regardless of the Lady’s belief in such miraculous prophecies, it has to be used.

Yet, not even the Lady would have imagined that the opportunity to grab would arrive so soon: it turns out – when the Attendant brings the news – that Duncan is coming to Inverness. Plotting instantaneously becomes actual business. The cozy space of Inverness, where she was reading the letter, suddenly turns into the expected place of the horrible deed and her first words after the attendant’s exit also refer to this quick change, on today’s stage rather ironically: “The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal
entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements” (36-38). The underlying tone of the following invocation to the dark spirits can vary and should primarily be based on the personality of the actress\textsuperscript{147}. One possible interpretation to pursue is a Lady of very strong character, who utters the lines of transformation as a kind of auto-suggestion, possibly keeping longer pauses after the formulated wishes, indicating that this auto-suggestion is still not enough: more is needed. According to a possible alternative interpretation, the Lady is waiting for help not from herself but from indeed external forces. Yet, in all cases, she wishes to step out of her female role in order to support her husband even more. This female role is importantly the tender woman on the one hand, and the caring mother on the other; yet, importantly enough, these wishes remain on the level of rhetorics and do not take away the femininity of the Lady later on.

The Lady’s position as the tender, loving woman urges a comparison not only with Gertrude but also with Ophelia. The contrast between their respective initial positions can be exposed via the motif of the letter. As it has been discussed above, Hamlet and Ophelia are only virtually present in front of the jury of Polonius and the royal couple, and a private item is attached to the public curiosity. Contrastingy, Macbeth’s letter to the Lady remains in absolute privacy and it is not introduced to the audience through the reading of a third party (Polonius) but by the one who was originally addressed (the Lady). Moreover, the letter Polonius reads out (written by Hamlet to Ophelia) is rather lyrical and emotional (having the love between Hamlet and Ophelia in focus) but at the same time enigmatic, as if, — I would like to claim — there was some practical goal lurking in the background. The enigmatic nature of the letter is very much characteristic of the Prince, who is full of word-plays, mind games and riddles, and a character of such intellectual capabilities might want to test both the addressee of the message, and maybe also the possible voyeurs with a riddle like that. This way Hamlet’s letter is primarily emotional with a practical bent to it. On the other hand, Macbeth’s letter to the Lady is the reverse: it is primarily practical, as it describes the narrative events of the beginning of the play, and its main purpose is to put the Lady into the picture; yet, it is also very emotional for which the exceptionally strong relationship between husband and wife is accountable.

\textsuperscript{147} Andrea Fullajtár, personal communication. See previous note.
Background and foreground dramaturgy

As opposed to the way Gertrude is introduced into the play and even Ophelia’s struggle with the two male members of her family, Lady Macbeth first appears in front of the audience in undisturbed, complete privacy, representing the home, the shelter where Macbeth can return after the war. This private sphere is not destroyed but temporarily violated by the entrance of the Attendant, bringing the news of Duncan’s arrival. This is the moment when the private shelter of Lord and Lady Macbeth is seemingly invaded by the public representatives and becomes the ‘protocol’ place of hosting the King. Yet it is significant that the private sphere surrounding the female figure in this tragedy does not disappear but survives throughout the first part of the play. Just like Gertrude, she also has to participate in a ceremony surrounding a king, but the dramaturgy of Macbeth seems to show the inverse of that of Hamlet in this respect as well. Whereas everything we witness from the character of Gertrude at the beginning of the play is what she manifests during the ceremony, i.e. in front of the public (and this might also be true for Ophelia, if she is introduced in the inauguration scene), when she the place of public ceremony, she simultaneously disappears from the sight of the audience. Lady Macbeth, on the contrary, can only be seen together with Duncan when she greets him in front of the castle; yet otherwise what the tragedy presents is backstage-dramaturgy: we do not see Duncan feasting, and, consequently, we do not see Macbeth and the Lady around Duncan, either; their conversation emphatically takes place tête-à-tête outside of the dining-hall. The play’s focus remains interested in the private sector, whereas Gertrude is unable to address Hamlet without the scorching eyes of the court until the “Bed-chamber-scene”.

A theatrical production can, nevertheless, give visual or audio signs of the feast of Duncan proceeding in the background, thus strengthening the contrast between the private and public spheres but, importantly, it does not directly disturb Macbeth’s solitude at the beginning of Scene 7, when he delivers the “If it were done”-soliloquy. This characteristic feature of the scene can potentially be realized if it is situated in such a private place as the bathroom of the Macbeth residence. (For the sake of comparison: the contrast between the public thoughts and the private plotting in one single speech was expressed by the aid of a restroom in Richard Loncraine’s film version of Richard III, during Gloucester’s opening monologue.) Making Macbeth escape to the bathroom, and especially showing him enter and not starting the scene with him already present and contemplating, can highlight his
urging desire to escape the more and more inconvenient public event and think over the situation. He can cool down his agitated circulation of blood with cold water and look at his own image in the mirror when picturing himself in his thoughts during the murder (“as his host, / Who should against his murderer shut the door, / Not bear the knife myself” (14-16)). An adjacent room for the feast and bathroom also provides the possibility to contrast the two spheres during the scene, especially if Macbeth, during the second part of the speech, describing the reign and person of Duncan, physically goes back to the door, and opening it very slightly, spies out at the celebrating king. This way, the tension is all the more emphasized when the Lady enters the scene and thus collides with the spying Macbeth at the door, as a certain tension is also indicated by the fragmented lines at the beginning of their dialogue. Macbeth listed all the potential tragic consequences of the murder, and what he needs is exactly the support of the Lady in their privacy. This is why the play at this point focuses on the background dramaturgy: what is significant in Macbeth is that the Lady can bring with herself the privacy Macbeth needs, and thus may help him towards his aim, whereas the foreground dramaturgy of Hamlet indicates that Gertrude is deprived of such an opportunity at the beginning of the plot, and Hamlet cannot find a private shelter with Ophelia, either, without having the scrutinizing look of Polonius (or someone else) on them. This privacy is only available for the Lady and Macbeth but importantly only until the murder of Duncan is carried out. The knocking at the door after the deed will indicate how the external world is about to invade the personal sphere of the home and not long after this, the irreversible change from private to public will be represented by the change of castles: the Macbeth couple will leave the privacy of their home in Inverness and move to the official residence of the public roles of King and Queen, Dunsinane.

It is still the presence or the lack of the possibility of privacy which characterizes the communication of the respective protagonists and the female characters at the first half of the play. There is no real communication between Gertrude and Hamlet (apart from the

148 Regarding this scene, Womack emphasizes that the representation of time and space on the Elizabethan stage was rather conventional and fluid. There is a continuous flow of events from the moment Macbeth says good night to Banquo before the murder and when he says good morning to Macduff, thus the whole night is acted out in about twenty minutes. Time can thus be compressed, just like space can be utilized freely, especially on the bare stage: sometimes it denotes an exact location and sometimes it takes place on an undefined level. As Womack aptly puts it: “time and location are not fixed; the actors bring them on with them like props.” Womack 2006, 42-43

149 Bruster and Weimann claim that the three times repeated knocking on the castle’s gate recalls the trumpet blasts that usually precede the prologues of the performances on the Elizabethan stages. Thus the porter of the play “literally ushers the audience, and the play’s characters, across a comedically tinged threshold into the horrifying tragedy of the play’s final acts”. Bruster and Weimann 2004, 130
short and awkward dialogue already discussed above, which is, of course, also telling) but
the audience is informed about Hamlet’s relation to his mother primarily through a
soliloquy (“Sullied flesh”), which is importantly a one-sided form of theatrical speech.
Thus, the nature of their relationship in the present tense of the stage is very well
characterized by the absence of one of the two parties. More strikingly, no relation at all is
expressed on Hamlet’s part towards Ophelia, as she is not even mentioned until an indirect
reference to her is addressed to Polonius inquiring about the mere existence (!) of his
daughter (“Have you a daughter?” (II; ; 182, of course meant sarcastically)). By contrast,
Macbeth and the Lady communicate through longish dialogues in the first act, both after
Macbeth’s arrival in Scene 5, and after the above discussed “If it were done”—soliloquy in
Scene 7, but, characteristically, even the initial soliloquy of the Lady is infiltrated by
Macbeth’s virtual presence both by the reading of his letter in the first half, and by the
constant presence of the second person singular pronouns in the second half of the speech
(cf. “Glamis thou art” (I; 5; 13); “I fear thy nature” (14); “Thou wouldst be great” (16); etc.
— emphases added). Their first dialogue starts on Macbeth’s part with the address: “My
dearest love” (56), which is a striking counterpoint of Hamlet’s remark on the frailty of the
women surrounding him, and on women in general. The importance of the Lady’s
persuasive power is also represented structurally in the respective lengths of the two
characters’ utterances in the consecutive dialogues: in Scene 5, Macbeth hardly speaks at
all: after his greeting he only utters two half lines and this tendency more or less continues
in Scene 7, until in the last eleven lines he will be the dominating speaker, closing down
the scene and also taking up the metaphor of deception so frequently used by the Lady
(“look like th’innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (I; 5; 63-64); “Only look up
clear” (69)) in his closing line: “False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (I; 7;
82). Macbeth welcomes the hideaway of deception offered by the Lady; Hamlet
indignantly refuses the possibility of pretending indirectly suggested by Gertrude,
declaring: “I know not seems”.

“My most seeming-virtuous queen” (H; I; 5; 46) — Gertrude’s thematic
presence in the transcendental account
It is noteworthy that both first encounters between the main characters and the women who
are in a lover-relationship (girlfriend or wife) with the respective protagonists happen right
after the formers’ encounter with the respective transcendental elements of the tragedies,
i.e. the ghost of Old Hamlet and the Weird Sisters (if Ophelia is not introduced in Scene 2). The third important female character, Gertrude, by contrast, meets Hamlet before he encountered the Ghost; yet, from a topical-thematic point of view, she constitutes a major part in the transcendental scene as well. In the longish narrative monologue of the Ghost, a reference to Gertrude immediately appears after the revelation of the person of the murderer:

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Ghost: The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
       Now wears his crown.
Hamlet: O my prophetic soul! My uncle!
Ghost: Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
       With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
       O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power
       So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust
       The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.  
(I; 5; 39-46)
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Interestingly, what is most painful to the Ghost, according to the structure of his narrative, is the loss of the “seeming-virtuous queen”, i.e. Gertrude: Claudius is first and foremost introduced as the “incestuous, that adulterate beast” and not as the usurper of the throne (although his person is revealed by the image of the crown but only in a short remark: “The serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown”). This rank of values rhymes back to the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy of Hamlet, where the Prince placed the marriage of his mother into the focus of the tragic scope and did not even touch upon the fact that Claudius also took the throne, which will not be mentioned by the Prince until the very last scene of the play: “[Claudius p]opp’d in between th’election and my hopes” (V; 2; 65). Thus, it seems that fundamental interest in Gertrude’s “treachery” is unanimously shared between father and son from the point of view of the sexual relationship she has with her present husband. This parallel is reinforced by the motifs of the Ghost’s speech even further: the adjective *incestuous* has already been used by Hamlet to designate the sheets of the newly wed couple (“To post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (I; 2; 156-157)) and the attribute of Gertrude, *seeming-virtuous*, refers back exactly to the verbal clash between Hamlet and Gertrude in their short dialogue in Scene 2 and the immediately following *Seems*-monologue by Hamlet. It is thus suggested as if the Ghost scene grew out of Hamlet’s grief and disappointment, represented in Act 1 Scene 2. The connection between Old and Young Hamlet’s evaluation goes further: the Prince presented a rather
biased comparison between the previous and the present king of Denmark (also to return in his scene with Gertrude in Act 3 Scene 4), comparing the former to the mythological figure of Hyperion and the latter to a satyr (I; 2; 140), which is reinforced by the self-introduction of Old Hamlet referring to the unfaithfulness of Gertrude, comparing his brother to himself: “a wretch whose natural gifts were poor / To those of mine” (51-52). Old Hamlet’s self-evaluation strikingly concurs with Hamlet’s subjective point of view, which might have given rise to interpretations claiming that the Ghost is nothing else but the mere projection of Hamlet’s mind.

Obviously, this interpretation is problematic if one considers that it is not only Hamlet but also Horatio and the guards who see the Ghost; yet, it is only the Prince who hears him talking, except from Old Hamlet’s cry of “Swear” to the soldiers. Thus, one might claim that the presence of the Ghost is real in the world of the play but what he utters is significantly filtered through the personality of Hamlet. An interesting question as regards the point of view represented by the Ghost is how he can report his death from a kind of “camera” point of view, like an omniscient narrator describing his own death and even describing how Claudius poured the venom into his ear. There is no further reference in the play to the claim that the fratricide was carried out this way and it is interesting that the motif of the ear has already appeared twice in the Ghost’s narrative: “this eternal blazon must not be / To ears of flesh and blood” (21-22) and “so the whole ear of Denmark / is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abus’d” (36-38), before it is introduced as the method of the assassination: “thy uncle [...] in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distilment” (61-64). From one perspective, the motif of the ear is tenderly prepared throughout the narrative; yet, from another, one might claim that the speech of the Ghost in no more than Hamlet’s train of thoughts reflecting upon the sin of Claudius (and Gertrude), and the method of the murder: as the Ghost describes it, it only seems to be constructed from the recurring motifs of his previous accounts. However, the sin of Claudius is real and not just imagined by Hamlet, as this is most clearly expressed in King Claudius’s soliloquy (the “Prayer-scene”) in Act III, Scene 3. As it was claimed in the chapter on transcendence, it is significant that the Ghost arrives from the outside and his task stands in far less agreement with the Prince’s inner desires than the Weird Sisters’ prophecies with those of Macbeth. What is significant from our point of investigation is

In her essay Philippa Berry emphasizes “Claudius’ twofold poisoning of the ear of Denmark”, i.e. killing Old Hamlet and deceiving the court, claiming that “Hamlet, the other ear – and other heir – of Denmark, has already begun to hear Claudius’ courtly discourse otherwise – or satirically”. Berry 1997, 59
that Gertrude’s figure, in the description of her former husband, clearly dominates the major transcendental scene of the play and her character is crucial with respect to the Ghost and his narrative: Old Hamlet cannot help repeatedly referring back to his wife and his point of view fundamentally coincides with that of Hamlet, thus giving the son reinforcement and pouring oil on the already flaming emotions against the mother, which was expressed in the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy. Yet, the person of the mother is sacred and untouchable: the task the Ghost ascribes to his son clearly states that Hamlet should not punish Gertrude: “Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (85-88), thus physical punishment is banned and psychological punishment, the torment of guilt is called upon her, which will be enforced by the potential loss of her new husband via Hamlet’s expected revenge. The dominant role of Gertrude is further supported by the fact that immediately after the Ghost’s departure, Hamlet first refers to his mother and only then on the actual target of his vendetta: “O most pernicious woman! / O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!” (105-106). Consequently, although the dramaturgy of the play provided a very short time for Gertrude to appear on the stage at the beginning, and she was rather forced to the background, the following scenes in her absence, both in the soliloquy of Hamlet and in the account of the Ghost, she is brought into the spotlight, and, significantly, the second appearance of the Ghost will also be very much connected to her, when Old Hamlet returns in his wife’s very bedchamber in Act III Scene 4.

“Leave all the rest to me” (M; I; 5; 71) / “I do not know, but truly I do fear it” (H; II; 1; 85-86) — Transcendental encounter and the lovers: inclusion and exclusion

It has already been touched upon that the other two major female characters of the respective tragedies encounter Hamlet and Macbeth right after the transcendental scenes. The juxtaposition of these two encounters might further underscore the contrast between the respective positions of Ophelia and Lady Macbeth. As we have seen above, although the Lady initially appears on the stage alone, her connection with Macbeth is already present through the letter; moreover, the virtual presence of her husband penetrates her soliloquies and her solitude organically melts into her dialogues with Macbeth, who arrives
in the last part of the scene. Her dramaturgical connection with the transcendental apparition seems to be clear: Macbeth immediately informed his wife about the events and then reports the news to her in person and the two discuss together, in their absolute privacy, how they should proceed on the basis of the prophecies. It is more than telling that the first encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia happens offstage and we only hear Ophelia report it in Act II Scene 1:

Ophelia:  My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
         Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac’d,  
         [...]  
         And with a look so piteous in purport  
         As if he had been loosed out of hell  
         To speak of horrors, he comes before me.

Polonius:  Mad for thy love?
Ophelia:  My lord, I do not know,
         But truly I do fear it.  

(II; 1; 77-86)

As Ophelia describes the situation, it turns out that Hamlet presented a so called “dumb-show” in her closet, thus the scene was dominated by action instead of speech, which might provide a surface reason for the lack of its direct representation on stage (although, e.g. in the film-version directed by Lawrence Olivier151, we do see Hamlet and Ophelia perform the scene). Nevertheless, it is dramaturgically significant that according to the script, the event happens behind the scenes. Ophelia’s detailed account of Hamlet’s silent gestures (“He took me by the wrist and held me hard… etc. (87-100) on the one hand advances the Gentleman’s description of the girl in her madness in Act IV Scene 5 (“Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / the hearers to collection. (IV; 5; 7-9)), both apparitions waiting for interpretation both from the other character and from the audience: Hamlet’s ‘show’ is a symptom of a (fake) “antic disposition”, while Ophelia’s indicates real madness on the stage, in front of Gertrude, and later also Claudius. Yet, more importantly, the audience is denied direct access to the only truly private scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, or the other way round: this only private scene is denied access to the audience. In contrast with the phenomenon what we called the background-dramaturgy of Macbeth, the dramaturgy of Hamlet pushes privacy to the background and deprives the audience of witnessing to genuine intimacy, especially because the audience knows that

151 Hamlet (1948, directed by Laurence Olivier)
Polonius and Claudius are spying on the young couple. This is very much in line with the
tendency that the two female characters are incapable of providing Hamlet the shelter of
tranquility, solitude or support. It has already been accounted for that Hamlet does not
mention Ophelia at all up until Act II Scene 2; still, his first ‘performance’ after he has
decided to feign madness is emphatically connected with Ophelia. Thus the question arises
why it is Ophelia who is first exposed to Hamlet’s strange behaviour, why he has decided
to – as it seems – try his new effect on the girl.

The Ghost’s account and task ascribed to Hamlet further isolates the Prince from
the rest of the characters and requires complete secrecy. Emphatically, Hamlet shares his
secret with a male friend, Horatio, which is hardly surprising, considering the image about
the frailty of women still burning in his mind. Thus, Hamlet wishes to cut all the loose
ends, and, as his first move, he separates himself – after he has already done so, to a certain
extent, as regards Gertrude – from the other female character in his life, Ophelia. In a
modern sense, they break up. Simultaneously, with this move, Hamlet also eliminates all
the slight remains of a possible private sphere when he enters Ophelia’s chamber with his
“dumb show”. It is not only that the expected space of privacy is turned by the Prince into
a sphere of alienation but it also ceases to retain privacy when he prompts Ophelia to report
the events to her father, this way stretching limits towards the public domain. This will
eventually result in hoisting the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia to the public eye.
Polonius will show Hamlet’s letter to Gertrude and Claudius, and then the King and
Polonius will spy on their actual encounter in Act III.

To conclude, the milestone of encountering the transcendental forces of the
respective plays proves to be a catalyst in terms of the protagonists’ relation with the
surrounding female characters. Gertrude topically constitutes an organic part of the Ghost’s
account and task assigned to his son, and thus the mother’s character inseparably melts
together with Hamlet’s predicament, and constantly pops up besides or behind the main
task, with Claudius in focus. The respective encounters between the protagonists and the
female characters after the transcendental apparitions indicate the women’s role in the
respective lives of Hamlet and Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is capable of providing the private
sphere for her husband where the plot of the murder can get peacefully engendered, while
Hamlet’s first move is directed at Ophelia, and he himself brings about the gradual
liquidation of their privacy. This, however, does not mean that Hamlet will, or does, lack
privacy: the Ghost-Hamlet and the Hamlet-Horatio encounters are private ones; yet, the
Ghost arrives with the burden of the task and Horatio cannot provide the support as Lady
Macbeth can, either. Hamlet’s privacy lacks the female character and this seems to be significant, especially in the juxtaposition with Macbeth. His privacy first and foremost with Ophelia is sentenced to death in order to bring the private sin of Claudius, the most public figure of the play, into the open. Thus, it turns out quite early in the play that Ophelia will be a hindering factor. Consider that Hamlet will meet Ophelia again when the girl is literally pushed in Hamlet’s way in Act III, whereas Macbeth constantly needs the company of the Lady to gain encouragement. This also contributes to the fact that the execution of the deed in Macbeth, where the Lady pushes her husband forward, already happens as early as in Act II, whereas in Hamlet, where the task is entangled also in the character of Gertrude, and where Ophelia also slows down the completion of the task, it only happens at the very end of the play (which is structurally justified in the case of a revenge tragedy). Until the second act of both tragedies, the complex dramaturgical roles of the female characters are clearly set before our eyes. This is the status quo. However, this relation in Hamlet will further shade as the play proceeds, and, as we have seen, the murder in Macbeth takes place rather soon, and by methodically destroying the private sphere of the Macbeth couple, it will cast different tendencies on the admired unity of Lord and Lady Macbeth.

“It will make us mad” (M; II; 2; 37) — Murder, madness, connection and alienation

At first sight it seems to be rather difficult to project the two tragedies onto each other, if one wishes to scrutinize the relationship between the respective protagonists and the female characters in the light of the events in the play, since in Hamlet the execution of revenge takes place only at the very end, whereas in Macbeth the couple carries out the deed rather early, thus there seems to be no analogous point in the first part of Hamlet, which would influence the relationship between the observed characters to an equal extent. Still, Macbeth importantly does not conclude with Duncan’s murder, since the focus of the play’s structure is, of course, not the same as that of Hamlet. Hamlet, a revenge play following, and, at the same time, diverting from, its generic predecessors, delays the murder until the very end of the play and then concludes with what the Ghost had ascribed to Hamlet: the completion of the murder of Claudius. Undoubtedly, the play does not only concentrate on the mere liquidation of the new King, and Hamlet’s uncle’s death is not the sole source of tragedy, either: there is also Hamlet’s self-exploration, his constantly
fluctuating relation with the surrounding characters, his belief and disbelief in the Ghost, and so on. Equally, the focus of Macbeth is just as complex as that of Hamlet: Macbeth builds up its focal point from the themes of damnation, torment of guilt, the unity and the potential alienation with the Lady, etc. Importantly, both plays end with the protagonists’ and also the major female characters’ death (the former serving, it seems, for Hemminges and Condell as the main, definitive criterion of the genre of tragedy in the First Folio of 1623). In such a view of tragedy in general and of these two tragedies in particular, the two regicides are by definition thematically interrelated. However, from the point of view of the relationship between the respective main characters and the surrounding women, in the structure of Macbeth the murder of Duncan is neither a concluding event, nor a starting point but an important milestone in the history of the unity of the Macbeth couple, tying them even closer. Curiously, it can be claimed that in Hamlet we find the structural counterpart of the Macbeths’ relationship in an – at least seemingly – less important scene, where Hamlet silently acts out the madman in front of Ophelia. Yet this is also a significant milestone in their relation. Furthermore, both events take place in characteristically enclosed, private spaces (Ophelia’s chamber and Duncan’s bedchamber) and they are directly related to the preceding transcendental apparitions: Hamlet takes the “antic disposition” on after he met the Ghost, and Macbeth murders Duncan on the basis of the prophecies. Even more interestingly, both events happen offstage: the audience cannot witness the first Hamlet-Ophelia scene but learn about it through Ophelia’a description, just as the spectators are denied the visual representation of Duncan’s murder as well, and must rest satisfied with verbal accounts.

While the off-stage scene of Hamlet and Ophelia marks a significant point in their alienation, the off-stage scene of Duncan’s murder represents the unity of the murderous couple, although they enter the bedchamber of their victim separately. At the beginning of Act II Scene 2, the Lady is alone on the stage, describing how she prepared the scene for the murder, while Macbeth is behind the scenes, in the room of the monarch, invisible – as it has been pointed out – for the audience. It is noteworthy that some film productions like Roman Polanski’s (1971) and Geoffrey Wright’s (2006) respective adaptations bring the viewer into the bedchamber to witness the bloody deed. However, the murder itself is more ominous and powerful (and avoids any possible comic undertones), if it is not seen directly but only reported by the murderer himself. Furthermore, this way it is again an important combination of words and action: we heard Macbeth talking about the murder beforehand (cf. the “If it were done”- and the “Dagger”-soliloquy), making predictions about
consequences, etc. Now we hear him talking about it afterwards, giving an agitated and horrible account. Yet if the deed itself is not acted out in front of the audience, then it can only be grabbed with, and created by, words: words will give birth to the image of the murder in the audience’s imagination, similarly to the birth of the dagger in Macbeth’s mind.

As mentioned above, it is important that the Macbaths prepare and commit the murder of Duncan together. Yet, it is also symbolic that they enter the bedchamber separately\(^{152}\) (Macbeth to murder the king, the Lady to bring back the daggers and smear the guards with blood), which might tenderly foreshadow how this unity will gradually loosen up in the course of the play, until they are alienated from each other, this alienation contributing to their fall. However, it is crucial that this alienation – I wish to claim – does not mean the lack of love between the couple. They do not stop caring for each affectionately, and their drifting apart makes the process even more painful. The Lady’s care for her husband and the first signs of their unity is reflected in the Lady’s speech when she desires to get rid of her feminine attributes (already noted above), thus being able to support Macbeth’s manhood even more (“Come, you spirits / (…) unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (I; 5; 38-41)).

Although the Lady here wishes to be “unsexed” in order to help her husband, the murder of Duncan bears a significant sexual aspect. In Shakespeare’s time the word *deed* also meant sexual intercourse\(^{153}\), hence Macbeth’s words: “I have done the deed” (II; 2; 14), uttered after returning from the dead Duncan’s bedchamber, connects the murder with the sexual act.\(^{154}\) Macbeth, the man of glory, returning to his wife after his long absence at the battlefield, does not go into their bedroom with the Lady but to Duncan’s bedchamber, so that out of their “nuptials”, sin itself might be conceived and be born, simultaneously. There has been a long controversy over Lady Macbeth’s enigmatic confession: “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me. / I would, while it was smiling in may face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I sworn / As you have done to this” (I; 7; 54-59). The question

\(^{152}\) In discussing the gender roles in *Macbeth*, Howell argues that after the murder of Duncan “[i]n assuming the role of the maternal, [Lady Macbeth] reduces Macbeth to a whimpering child, ordering him to “Get on your nightgown” (2. 2. 85), and attempting to assuage his guilt by suggesting “A little water clears us of this deed” (2. 2. 83.)” Howell 2008, 16

\(^{153}\) Cf. Leggatt 2005, 372

\(^{154}\) As Calderwood remarks, Macbeth “‘falls in evil’ as other men fall in love” (Calderwood 1986, 49) and “in the present case, the metaphorizing of murder as coition deconstructs coition no less than murder, leaving the audience with an unnamable monster.” (138). William Hazlitt emphasized the sexual side of Duncan’s assassination as early as 1817 (Hazlitt 1817, 87).
obviously is where this sudden impulse of inhumanity comes from, and, especially, where
the child is, if the Macbeth-couple is so emphatically childless.\textsuperscript{155} The “baby” (associated
with sin) who is born in the moment of the murder can be connected with the Macbeth-
couple’s never born child (cf. the lines quoted above), whose perspective and motive is
present throughout the play, and who is metaphorically born in the bedchamber of Duncan:
birth is identified with death. (As both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth return with their hands
dipped in blood, which also makes them resemble ‘midwives’ who have helped in the
process of childbirth.) Their ‘man-child’ cannot be a ‘real’ boy; he can only come to
existence metaphorically; becoming one with the notion of sin.\textsuperscript{156}

Obviously, the major part of the argumentation above is based on philology: the
audience in the theatre today cannot be expected to associate the once present sexual
reference of the word \textit{deed}, uttered on the stage. Yet, this reference is not the only way to
attribute significance to this scene in terms of the couple’s unity; this is no more than a
potential message rather for the producer than the audience. In other words, Macbeth’s line
will function more like a stage metaphor than a verbal, poetic one: it may be realized
theatrically by visual representations, ways of acting, etc. Then the unity of the couple is
visually indicated: it is a stage-metaphor as well.

\textbf{“Sweet Gertrude, leave us too” (H; III; 1; 28) — The enforced absence of
Gertrude}

As opposed to the Macbeth-Lady Macbeth and the Hamlet-Ophelia relations, the Hamlet-
Gertrude one seems to lack such a turning point, or, more precisely, it has already
happened before the play starts, i.e. when she married Claudius. The play’s structure,
however, does not wish to depict the first encounter of Hamlet and his mother after the
marriage and in their first joint scene the audience witnesses to a cold and alienated
relation, cold at least on Hamlet’s part. In my interpretation, the play introduces important
turning points only in terms of Ophelia. The Hamlet-Gertrude nexus rather focuses on the
exploration and dissection of an already established and decaying relationship. This way,
the famous encounter between mother and son in Gertrude’s bedchamber in Act 3 Scene 4
is not a turning point with respect to their relationship (it is, however, from many other

\textsuperscript{155} The problem has become almost symbolic since L. C. Knights’ famous essay: “How many children had
Lady Macbeth?” (Knights 1946, 1-39)

\textsuperscript{156} Cf. Szigeti 2009, 39-40
aspects, e.g. because of the murder of Polonius) but a perfect possibility to discuss and analyze an already existing network.

As we have seen, Gertrude wishes to fulfill two roles simultaneously: that of the wife of Claudius and the mother of Hamlet and her complex situation in the tragedy will rise exactly from the incompatible nature of these two. The character of the Queen provides a wide range of possibilities in interpretation as regards her relationship with Claudius: her age and the age difference between her and the King, or Hamlet (consider for example the significantly young Gertrude of Olivier’s film version); whether she is really in love with her present husband, or their marriage is merely a political necessity; her relationship with Old Hamlet, including the circumstances of his death, etc.

There is a wide range of possible interpretations, both in the secondary literature and on the stage, and the text of the play gives us some hints about some of the questions raised above. First of all, there is no indication of Gertrude’s potential knowledge of, and especially not any signs of her participation in Old Hamlet’s murder. As opposed to Lady Macbeth, she is not tormented by guilt (as e.g. Claudius is in the so-called “prayer”-scene). On the other hand, what we know about her relationship with Old Hamlet is what we hear from Hamlet and the Ghost, yet this information comes from a significantly subjective and, thus, unreliable perspective. Nevertheless, even these biased accounts are implicitly revealing: the one and only memory Hamlet recalls from his parents’ private life is that Old Hamlet was “so loving to [his] mother / That he might not beteem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly” (I; 2; 140-142). This might of course indicate a loving and caring relationship but it may also imply the possibility of a disturbing over-protectiveness, admired by the son but perhaps disliked by the woman. Still, what the play presents us with is that Gertrude does not feel any remorse about marrying Claudius, except for its destructive effect on her relationship with Hamlet, and although her heart is “cleft [...] in twain” (III; 4; 158), she does not wish to throw away either part (as Hamlet suggests it to her). Moreover, her situation is more perplexing and the play is thus more powerful if we suppose a genuine attraction to Claudius on her part, coexisting with the desire to reunite with her son as well.

Although it is the privacy of Gertrude and Claudius among the “incestuous sheets” which primarily insults Hamlet, the play depicts little of their privacy and they almost exclusively appear in the company of others. This happened in the ceremonial scene of their first appearance and goes on steadily, while they try to handle the Hamlet-problem. As the play’s focus suggests, Gertrude can hardly discuss the matter of her son with
Claudius alone. She must do so in the presence of others, such as Polonius, or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet, from the dark figure lurking in the background during Claudius’s inaugural speech, gradually becomes a public figure, an eye-sore, ‘everybody’s problem’, whether anyone – including himself – likes it, or not. As Hamlet loses all private footing with Ophelia, so he does with his mother, too; thus, the private discussion between mother and son will significantly be delayed only after Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and finally Ophelia herself have been sent to Hamlet. Even the price of the privacy of the bed-chamber scene will be no less than the death of Polonius, who, up until his last breath posed as the guardian of public control. Curiously, that Hamlet’s figure cannot but be a matter of the whole Danish state, was aptly pointed out by Laertes at the beginning of the play: “[Hamlet] may not, as unvalu’d persons do, / Carve for himself, for on his choice depends / The sanity and health of his whole state” (I; 3; 19-21). Laertes’s remark is especially valid if we take the reference of “state” very concretely, designating the Dane, Claudius, whose personal interest requires that Hamlet be supervised by the public eye as well.

How Gertrude is excluded from ‘the Hamlet-problem’ is nicely indicated not only by the delay of her private encounter with her son but also by her verbal participation in the scenes where the King discusses what to do. By the time the audience can see the Queen after the inauguration, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have already arrived. In their first scene together, the representations of the public and private aspects are clearly visible: Act II Scene 2 starts with the King’s lines, talking to Hamlet’s fellow-students from Wittenberg, clearly describing their official task to spy on the Prince, which is immediately followed by Gertrude’s speech, attempting to move the question back to the private sphere, trying to appeal to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern emotionally, rather than officially (cf. “he [i.e. Hamlet] hath much talk’d of you, / And sure I am, two men there is not living / To whom he more adheres” (19-21). It is symbolic, however, that her perspective cannot last for long and after this shorter intermezzo, she obediently gives back the dominance to Claudius by explicitly mentioning him (and significantly not referring to herself and her husband as we) in her last line: “Your visitation shall receive such thanks / As fits the king’s remembrance.” (25-26; emphasis added). The immediately following phase in this very scene involving Polonius and his view of the Hamlet-matter is also indicative with respect to Gertrude’s attitude: her utterances are getting shorter and shorter until they are limited to half-line interjections. Her opinion on Polonius’s diagnosis of Hamlet’s behaviour is, no doubt, inquired by the King, but rather in an off-hand manner (“Do you
think ‘tis this?” (150)), and her last remark on Hamlet’s habit also described by Polonius (“So he does indeed” (161)) is left without reaction and the two men start plotting together with the complete exclusion of the Queen (cf. Polonius to Claudius: “Be you and I behind an arras then, / Mark the encounter.” (163-164)). This tendency might be further emphasized if a theatrical production makes the King and Polonius discuss the matter close to each other, with a physical distance between them and the Queen. Significantly, Gertrude is always sent away when Hamlet approaches: this time together with her husband by Polonius (“Away, I do beseech you both, away” (169)) and later by Claudius himself before planting Ophelia in Hamlet’s way: “Sweet Gertrude, leave us too” (III; 1; 28). It is indeed the “king’s remembrance”, which takes dominance over her relationship with her son.

“Ophelia, walk you here” (H; III; 1; 43) — The enforced presence of Ophelia

The problem of Ophelia is the reverse: she is dragged back to the Hamlet-matter against her will. First her letters were drawn before the public eye and she managed to avoid the physical appearance in front of the royal couple but only until Act III Scene 1, where she herself is brought to Claudius and, importantly, Gertrude. Apart from Ophelia’s madness, this is the only time when the two major female characters converse. However, this is not the single occasion when Gertrude addresses the girl. Gertrude talks to Ophelia in Act V, Scene 1, too, when the girl is already in her grave, expressing her wish that she should have become wife to Hamlet (“Farewell. / I hop’d thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife: / I thought thy bride-bed to have deck’d, sweet maid, / And not have strew’d thy grave.” (V; 1; 236-239)). It is indicative of Ophelia’s position in the play that in both cases when she is talked to by the other heroine, she is almost (except for one half line: “Madam, I wish it may” (III; 1; 42)), or completely (in her grave) silent. According to the plan of Polonius and Claudius, Gertrude is sent away, and Ophelia remains present, both females against their will. Significantly, the only “private” scene between Hamlet and the girl will only be an illusion: both the audience and Ophelia know that Hamlet and his girl-friend are spied upon. This is the most striking instance when Ophelia’s two major roles, i.e. ‘daughter of Polonius’ and ‘girlfriend of Hamlet’ will collide in an irreconcilable conflict.

It has been observed in the chapter on action and contemplation, that the Hamlet-Ophelia scene importantly takes place right after the delivery of the “To be or not to be”-
soliloquy. Thus, the appearance of Ophelia drags the Prince back to the flow of events, to
the expected area of action from the position of the contemplative thinker. The structure of
their conversation might reveal some interesting aspects of their current relation. As it has
been proposed earlier, Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia, now in Polonius’s scrutinizing
possession, is not only (if at all) an expression of love but a riddle, a test of intellectual
capability. This tendency seems to prevail in their physical encounter, when Hamlet, in his
enigmatic remark, brings the girl’s honesty and fairness together: “That if you be honest
and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty” (III; 1; 107-108).
Ophelia’s answer clearly indicates that she is able to follow Hamlet’s train of thoughts,
which might also make her worthy, ex post facto, of the letters she received from the
Prince: “Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?” (109-110).

Apparently, Ophelia’s apt reply challenges Hamlet’s intellectual vanity and
provides a longish and complicated answer, in the hope of completely confusing his
partner. He does not give a chance to the girl to react but concludes with the painful past
tense of his utterance: “I did love you once” (115) and then its complete denial, but still
referring to the past (“I loved you not” (119-120)). From this point on, Hamlet’s
monologues start to dominate the scene, especially after the question involving Polonius
(“Where’s your father?” (130-131)), to which Ophelia answers with a lie: “At home, my
lord” (132). Here the question arises if Hamlet indeed noticed the spying Polonius
together with the King, and this prompted his question or not. I would claim that Hamlet is aware of
the presence of the others from this point on, which is partly supported by the suddenness
and otherwise out-of-context nature of his question, and it is also supported by the focus of
Hamlet’s monologues in this scene. The centre of Hamlet’s first longer speech in the
presence of Ophelia is the Prince himself (“I am myself indifferent honest…” (122-130)),
the first person singular pronoun appearing five times, followed by the generalization so
characteristic of Hamlet, introduced by the plural we (“We are arrant knaves all, believe
none of us” (129-130)). Hamlet’s inquiry about Polonius’s whereabouts is followed by two
longer speeches dominated first by the second person singular (“If thou dost marry…”
(136)), then the generalizing plural (“I have heard of your paintings well enough” (144)),
indicating that Hamlet’s self-analysis, which started in the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy,
and dominated the first half of his lecture to Ophelia, is suddenly concentrated on the
woman who, in his view, has just betrayed him. The last part of Hamlet’s overwhelming
speech, chiefly highlighted by the plural pronoun you, is thus an extended discussion of the
initial ‘topic sentence’ in Act I: “Frailty, thy name is woman”.

141
Curiously, during the scene in question, Hamlet bids “farewell” to Ophelia twice and only for the third time does he exit. It seems Hamlet feels a constant urge to leave the scene but also a prevailing desire to remain or return. This might give us the impression that Hamlet still wishes to destroy their relationship even further or, if he is indeed aware of Claudius and Polonius’s presence, to fake his madness in front of them to the full. Yet, precisely because of Hamlet’s inability to leave we may conclude that the Prince is waiting for something which he has not received from Ophelia so far: some immediate reaction to the emerging situation, something more than Ophelia’s faint replies, which, after she has denied that Polonius is present, exclusively constitute her utterances, together with some appeals to heaven (“O help him, you sweet heavens” (135); “Heavenly powers, restore him.” (143)). Still, Hamlet does not receive anything: the woman, who initially managed to follow his argumentation, now passively withdraws, and the Prince, after his generalizing judgement on the tendency of womankind to create even more seeming and deception (“I have heard your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another…” (144-151)), does not repeat his verbal farewell but physically exits the stage.

This desperate expectation of the woman’s proper reaction and the painful disappointment in its absence can be clearly contrasted with the communicative strategy between the Macbeth couple: Lady Macbeth constantly supports her husband verbally, knowing exactly what the other needs — sometimes, as we have seen, even better than Macbeth himself. But this harmony between the two characters manifests itself not only in their private dialogues but also in their joint appearance in front of others. Right after Duncan’s murder is revealed, Macbeth returns from the bedchamber of the dead king and starts to report why he killed the guards. However, this report turns into the detailed poetic description of Duncan’s dead body:

Here lay Duncan,

157 The exceptional power of the imagery of Macbeth was first celebrated by the readers of Shakespeare in Romanticism. For example William Hazlitt observes that “[f]rom the strangeness of the events that surround him [i.e. Macbeth], he is full of amazement and fear and stands in doubt between the world of reality and the world of fancy. He sees sights not shown to mortal eye and hears unearthly music” Hazlitt 1817, 89-90. Even according to the New Critic, William Empson, it is not only the case that in every poetic drama images replace arguments but he identifies this exactly as the cause of Macbeth’s tragedy: “he [i.e. Macbeth] feels that the imaginary world has become real and must now be acted upon” but he cannot cope with it. Empson, 1986: 334 Cf. the words of István Géher: “Because the horrid images are poetic images. […] What we find in Macbeth is, unfortunately, not American-made fast-food, synthetic and antiseptic pseudo-horror but real, organic terror: blood-warm, sneakily spreading, sticking and infectious.” [my translation — BSz.] Géher 1991, 231
His silver skin laced with his golden blood
And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature,
For ruin’s wasteful entrance.  (II; 3; 108-111)

Here Lady Macbeth understands that her husband is dangerously under the influence of his sin and that he might fail in the deception, therefore her intervention (the actress usually faints at this point) can be an attempt to attract attention to herself and push her husband out of the spotlight till he can get out of the influence of the deed and play his part properly. And Macbeth receives the hidden message of the Lady and is thus successfully warned: his next lines already indicate a man of practice: “Let’s briefly put on manly readiness / And meet i’th’hall together” (II; 3; 129-130).

Hamlet’s last utterance to Ophelia is the imperative: “To a nunnery, go” (151), repeated here for the fourth time. Whether the reference of nunnery is the same as today (and this should also be considered from the point of view of a contemporary audience), or — as some argue — it rather designated the brothel in Shakespeare’s time, it is definitely a place which involves the exclusion of genealogy, the elimination of the possibility of having (legitimate, wanted) children. This desire of Hamlet to put an end to every possible descent or marriage returns again and again in the scene, with such remarks as “Why, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (121-122), or there are hints at his mother: “it were better my mother had no borne me” (123-124); “I say we will have no more marriage” (149) but it will also characterize his scene with Gertrude: “would it were not so, you are my mother” (III; 4; 15). These remarks tellingly represent the Prince’s relation to the surrounding women: he desperately wishes to verbally deconstruct some major potentials for which womankind is obviously indispensable, i.e. marriage and childbearing. As we saw, the desire of eliminating the feminine features is recalled in Lady Macbeth’s appeal to the dark spirits (“unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull / of direst cruelty” (I; 5; 39-41)) but, significantly, whereas the Lady’s desire is engendered by the wish to support her husband even more, Hamlet’s urge, contrastingly, is directed towards the complete separation from the women characters, both verbally in the above mentioned lines, and physically, in his wish to melt his “sullied flesh” received from his mother. As opposed to Hamlet’s desire, it is characteristic of Macbeth and the Lady’s

158 Lublin claims that nuns were often the subjects of public suspicion. “Ostensibly devoted to a life of celibacy, both the monk and the nun, after the reformation, were figured to be notoriously libidinous behind their cloistered walls, and convents became synonymous with brothels. Thus, when Hamlet tells Ophelia to ‘get thee to a nunnery,’ he is simultaneously recommending to her a life of chastity and one of prostitution.” Lublin 2011, 126
relationship that Macbeth urges the Lady to produce heirs, more precisely male children: “Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males” (72-74). This in one way stands in accordance with the protagonists fear of losing, because of the lack of heirs, the lineage of his reign against Banquo, who was promised to be father of kings, but it also signifies the properly functioning man-female relationship of the main characters.

“And I, of ladies most deject and wretched” (H; III; 1; 157) — Ophelia’s soliloquy

The Hamlet-Ophelia scene in Act III is embedded in soliloquies: it was preceded by the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy by Hamlet and is immediately followed by Ophelia’s one and only soliloquy (or monologue if we consider it being overheard by her father and the King). Again, contrasted with the soliloquies of the Lady, where she reveals her perfect and deep knowledge concerning her husband’s personality and needs, Ophelia can only judge from the surface appearance and laments on the madness of Hamlet. The contrast with the Lady is even more powerful in terms of the women’s knowledge of the respective protagonists, if the following dialogue between Claudius and Polonius is considered: Polonius, in accordance with Ophelia’s remarks, maintains his theory about the Prince’s madness. However, Claudius is not deceived. The King is the only one who can see behind the mask of “antic disposition” and claims: “Love? His affections do not that way tend, / Nor what he spake, though it lack’d form a little, / Was not like madness” (164-166), which further discredits Ophelia’s judgement about Hamlet. Ophelia’s soliloquy is a clear expression of her woe over the preceding scene, starting with the poetic list of losses in the Prince’s personality, concluding in a further reflection on Hamlet’s behaviour but now concentrating on her plight and perspective: “And I, of ladies most deject and wretched…” (157). Her lines are poetic expressions of the emotions evoked by the recent encounter but they lack all the wittiness of Claudius, or the deep insight of Hamlet and its thematic complexity. Dramaturgy sentences Ophelia to simplicity in contrast with the preceding “To be or not to be”-soliloquy. Her whole speech starts with the line “O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!” (152), which makes her soliloquy not just structurally (i.e. in the respective position in the scene) but also thematically juxtaposed to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be”, which raised the question of the nobility of the mind (“Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind…” (57)) right in its second line. Hamlet’s whole soliloquy is dominantly
impregnated by the question about the possibilities of a “noble mind” and about the nature of the mind in general, characteristically not arriving at a conclusion, whereas Ophelia, in a more simplified way, does not question the status of the “noble mind” but daringly attributes it to the Prince. She takes – perhaps superficially – for granted what Hamlet is constantly questioning and problematizing.

A further characteristic feature of Ophelia’s soliloquy is the focus of the lines. It is first and foremost directed at Hamlet, as its first half is nothing else but the detailed description of Hamlet’s seeming state of mind. Also the second part, bringing in a personal perspective on Ophelia’s part, is penetrated by reflections on the Prince’s “noble and most sovereign reason” (159). Hamlet has numerous soliloquies but it can be claimed that they primarily reflect on himself (“Sullied flesh”; “Hecuba”) or on general questions (“To be or not to be”; “What is a man…”). The other character in the play, having one single soliloquy is Claudius, the focus of whose speech is aimed exclusively at the ‘I’, the speaker himself (cf. the initial line as well: “O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven” (III; 3; 36) — emphasis added). In the context of the other significant soliloquies in the tragedy, the thematic construction of Ophelia’s speech is revealing: just as her most private speech (if we accept its status as a soliloquy, as it is not addressed to the other characters) is rooted in the person of the Prince, her whole dramatic existence is based on, gets revealed through, and is related to Hamlet. Ophelia never appears on the stage when she is somehow not present in terms of the Prince: first Laertes and Polonius lectures her on her expected love life, then she reports how strangely Hamlet behaved in her chamber, which is followed by their joint scene under discussion. During the Mousetrap-performance (III; 2; ), Ophelia will be present again related to Hamlet, the two of them having their dialogue during the performance, and Ophelia will have only one single half-line, which is not directed at Hamlet but refers to the actual events: “The King rises” (III; 2; 259). Such a dramatic dependence on the Prince does not characterize the other female character in the play, since Gertrude’s predicament is exactly that she wishes to “cleave her heart in twain”, i.e. to share her love and life between Hamlet and Claudius. The position of Lady Macbeth is much closer to that of Ophelia but Macbeth’s wife, through her practicality and initial control over the situation, does not depend so desperately on her husband. Yet, it is also significant that her sleepwalking scene comes when Macbeth “went into the field” (V; 1; 3) as if it was provoked by the physical (and perhaps emotional) distance from the protagonist. Similarly, the only scene when Ophelia is not directly linked to Hamlet is in her madness, when Hamlet is being shipped towards England. Hamlet’s alienation from
Ophelia, first in their off-stage scene, and now in their dialogue (and potential accompanying action) and, finally, during the Mousetrap-scene means cutting away the woman from the one single point of orientation, which will eventually push her (together with some other factors, of course) into the realm of madness. If this fundamental loss is to be further represented theatrically, Ophelia can be left on the stage after her scene with Hamlet, silently looking at Claudius and Polonius with big, open eyes, aimlessly wandering, playing with her hair, etc. in the background. This might also underscore her lack of importance in the eyes of Claudius and Polonius, who do not reflect on her predicament: she is superficially addressed by her father only once: “How now, Ophelia? / You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, / We heard it all” (180-182), which is significantly left unanswered and the focus of Polonius’s monologue returns to Claudius again.

Ophelia’s complete silence and apparent lack of energy might further be contrasted with Hamlet’s behaviour in the following scene, when the Prince meets the actors again and starts out with giving them instructions. If she is left on the stage, silently arranging flowers in vases, for example, then the stage-director may emphasize her passivity; she is one who lets the scene unfold around her and is dragged into it only when Hamlet decides so, namely when the Mousetrap-scene proper starts. This way, when she finally leaves the stage at the end of the unfortunate show, this exit is at the same time her final one before her madness. Yet, before the concluding madness prevails over both Ophelia and the Lady, an important milestone is situated in terms of all the three women in almost the geometrical middle of the respective plays, both connected to a certain show: the performance of The Mousetrap in Hamlet and the Banquet-scene in Macbeth.

“Madam, how like you this play?” (H; III; 2; 224) — The female characters as audience

It has already been accounted for how The Mousetrap-performance is first and foremost directed at Claudius and Hamlet himself, attempting to reveal the crime of the former but also serving as a test-tube for the Prince to scrutinize his “noble mind”. Yet, the on-stage performance in question also has its own significance in terms of both female characters. The show is a public event in the castle of Elsinore, and therefore Gertrude and Ophelia are also expected to attend (or, if we follow the potential stage representation of Ophelia’s abandonment outlined above, it unfolds around her and, to some extent, it enfolds her). The
performance itself works on two levels: one is the actual show provided by the actors on the basis of the text, while the other is Hamlet’s constant commentary, directed at the stage-audience; at one point, Ophelia aptly remarks: “You are as good as a chorus, my lord” (III; 2; 240). It will be primarily but not exclusively the second layer, functioning as a verbally manifested sub-text, so well-known by stage-directors and actors, which involves the female audience in Hamlet’s mousetrap. The Prince’s attitude right before the beginning of the show is symbolic: when Gertrude asks him to sit next to her (“Come hither, my dear Hamlet, sit by me” (III; 2; 107)). Hamlet’s answer is a refusal and he sits next to Ophelia instead (“No, good mother, here’s metal more attractive” (108)). This move gains its significance from the already observed situation: Gertrude’s sadness is rooted in her constant separation from her son, while Ophelia’s predicament is precisely the opposite: she cannot avoid further and further direct encounters with the Prince. However, Hamlet’s small move from Gertrude to Ophelia at this point is a simultaneous blow for both women. The protagonist’s lewd remarks to Ophelia before the show is, in a way, a continuation of their dialogue in the previous scene but whereas their dialogue preceding the performance is dominated and lead by Hamlet, the conversation during the show is mostly initiated by Ophelia’s questions (e.g. “What means this, my lord?” (134)) and remarks (e.g. “’Tis brief my lord” (148)). As a consequence of this, Hamlet from that moment on will stop initiating topics; he will rather respond and reply. The sudden change in Ophelia’s attitude is explained by her strong need for attachment: although in the Prince’s absence, she wished to stay out of his way; now, perhaps even happy with the advances of Hamlet, she desperately tries to connect to him in conversations.

Since Hamlet chose Ophelia, the two of them probably sit somewhat separated from the other three major characters: the King, the Queen and Polonius. Polonius must be in Claudius’s vicinity, as he confidentially converses with him about Hamlet’s move towards his daughter: “O ho! Do you mark that?” (109). Thus, before the on-stage performance starts, the network of the stage-audience, the “second layer” is also (or even more) significant. Polonius scrutinizes the scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, unflinchingly believing that Hamlet’s madness is rooted in his love towards the girl. Claudius is especially interested in the show, as he no longer gives credit to Polonius’s opinion about Hamlet’s love; for the King, it seems, the performance of The Mousetrap carries the possibility of serving as a tangible key to Hamlet’s ‘true’ intentions. Gertrude is probably also interested in the show as it is at last something Hamlet is genuinely interested in. It seems to be something which might divert his attention from the father’s
memory and may help him to “cast the nighted colour off”. Thus, she is sensitive to the Prince’s every single reaction during the scene as well. On the opposite side, Ophelia, as we have seen, is in constant dialogue with Hamlet, yet he soon targets his mother, with references to his father’s (questionably) recent death: “For look you how cheerfully my mother looks and my father died within’s two hours” (124-125) or generalizing to include both female characters in his insults:

Ophelia:  [on the prologue — B.Sz.] ‘Tis brief, my lord.
Hamlet: As woman’s love.  

There is almost unbearable silence and tension in the air: now it is show-time.

The primary layer of the performance, i.e. the actual show the actors perform is concentrated around the representation of the murder. Yet just as the Ghost’s account and task were inseparable from the character of Gertrude, the performance of The Mousetrap (the connection of which with the scene of Old Hamlet was already outlined in the chapter on transcendence) cannot escape the reflection of the Queen, either. Although some rather obvious hints occur in the preceding dumb-show, it is the verbal part of the performance, which concentrates on the longer description of the marriage between the Player King and the Player Queen that awakens her attention. This structural solution puts the emphasis on the betrayal of Gertrude, (whom of course the Player Queen is expected to represent), and paddles in this theme until it finally moves on to the murder itself and directs its spotlight to the other attentive member of the audience: Claudius. From this perspective, the Player Queen’s longer oath to remain eternally faithful to her husband (“Nor earth to me give food, nor heaven light, / Sport and repose lock from me day and night, / […] If, once a widow, ever I be a wife.” (211-218)) is, at the same time, a curse on Gertrude, addressed by Hamlet and delivered by the actor (actress), stretching the limits of the stage, dividing the on-stage play from its on-stage audience. A tender but obvious glimpse from the Player Queen to Gertrude at the end of her lines, dutifully following Hamlet’s possible directorial instructions might underscore this effect. Hamlet’s intention with the longer, first part of the Mousetrap is not very difficult to comprehend: he immediately addresses his mother after the oath/curse: “Madam, how like you this play?” (224), desperate to make sure that Gertrude has received the message.

The Mousetrap-performance thus functions on two levels, and Hamlet’s constant commentary and more and more active verbal participation is indicative of his position: it
is impossible for him to remain outside of the play, which, in a way, represents the whole tragedy (as discussed earlier). By his remarks he attempts to tie the female characters even more strongly to the play: his primary focus does not concentrate only on Claudius but he wishes to incorporate Gertrude and Ophelia in his plan as well; as usual, he wishes to bring together several factors at the same time, coping with them simultaneously.

By contrast, Macbeth concentrates on one single problem at once: first on the assassination of Duncan, and only then on the elimination of Banquo. Yet, Banquo’s ghost returns after the murder and creates a show in front of the public, and similarly to The Mousetrap, it also represents how a significantly private event (a secret murder) is brought to the public light, this time not in the form of a theatrical production, but in the way a murderer reacts to his or her haunting visions. Obviously, Macbeth does not wish this “show” to be performed, as opposed to the Danish Prince. Macbeth wants to escape from it. Further, the two female characters in Hamlet are dragged into the focus of the play by the direction and, primarily, by the commentary on them provided of the protagonist, while in Macbeth it is the Lady who takes over the narration of her husband’s struggle with the ghost of Banquo, and she attempts to save the situation. Interestingly, Macbeth’s “show” continues where Hamlet’s one ends: at the sudden, enforced interruption of The Mousetrap-performance Ophelia claims that “The King rises” (259), while in Macbeth, it starts exactly when the King “rises”, or, more precisely, does not dare to sit down, his place being occupied by the gory figure of Banquo’s ghost.

The appearance of Banquo’s ghost and his assassination is a further important milestone in the unity of Macbeth and the Lady after the king’s murder. As opposed to the killing of Duncan, which Lord and Lady Macbeth committed together, the Lady is excluded from the murder of Banquo, and she is not even informed about Macbeth’s plan. When Macbeth is talking to his wife about an obscure dark plan (“A deed of dreadful note”(III; 2; 45)) and the Lady asks: “What’s to be done?” (III; 2; 45), the husband refuses to inform her but with some of the most intimate lines of the play: “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck” (III; 4; 46). Macbeth’s decision here, i.e. to exclude the Lady from the murder of Banquo might easily be an attempt to spare her from the consequences of further crimes; yet, as it is characteristic of tragedies, the impossibility of a good decision soon manifests itself. Although Macbeth might wish to protect his wife, he does

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159 Thus it seems that Macbeth’s situation is not about making the right or wrong decision but developing the tragic situation when there is no right decision at all. Considering the nature of Shakespearean tragedy, Eastman claims that „While Gorboduc begins with a clear error in judgement (the decision to divide a
violate their unity which characterized them all through the play until this moment. They emphatically committed the murder of Duncan together, and shared its consequences: both of them appeared with gory hands of a “heavy metaphorical” load. Emphatically, as a result of Macbeth’s decision, the Ghost will only appear to the King and thus he has to suffer the consequences alone. (An interesting question here for the director of Macbeth is whether to depict a fracture between the Macbeth-couple at the end of the Banquet scene or to maintain their intimacy and unity.\textsuperscript{160})

As opposed to the constantly recurring signs of disharmony between Hamlet and the two major female characters of his play, certain traces can be found on the textual level, suggesting the importance of the Macbeth-couple’s unity and acting also for the sake of the other one when murdering Duncan\textsuperscript{161}. Before Duncan’s murder, the word \textit{spur} appears twice in the text, in both cases as part of a metaphor. As the meaning of \textit{spur} often implies metaphorically ‘motivation’, some textual hint might be gained as regards Macbeth’s motives. In the first appearance (“his [i.e. Macbeth’s] great love, sharp as his spur” — Duncan (I; 6; 23)) \textit{spur} is related to Macbeth’s love, while in the second (“I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition” — Macbeth (I; 7; 25-27)) it is associated with his ambition. Although the two quotes originate from different persons, still, the \textit{spur}-metaphor connects them on the textual level and thus we may get closer to the ultimate motivation, i.e. ‘love combined with ambition’. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want each other to be queen and king respectively, or — more precisely — they want to become the royal couple \textit{together}\textsuperscript{162}. This very unity of them is violated in the middle of the play and the fracture between them is strikingly manifested in the fact that Macbeth is performing \textit{alone} when talking to the Ghost, and the Lady is no longer there on the stage with him but she is trying to mediate between her husband and the guests participating as the on-stage audience. However, I find it important to note that in my reading of the play this distancing between Macbeth and the Lady is by no means a result

\textsuperscript{160} In the production of Katona József Theatre, Budapest, first performed in March, 2008, and taken off the repertoire in May, 2009, the ending of the banquet-scene originally saved the unity of the couple; yet, after approximately half a year and the summer holiday, director Gábor Zsámbéki decided to depict the alienation of the two protagonis.

\textsuperscript{161} According to Stanley Cavell, the reason of the murder of Duncan is not outside but inside and emphatically in the Other: both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth believe that the “deed” is important for the Other (Cavell 1993, 2-3). Victor Hugo drew a parallel between the Macbeth-couple and Adam and Eve, emphasizing their \textit{joint} fall and highlighting that Macbeth and the Lady create a new mythology, engendering from their unity (Hugo 1864, 132).

\textsuperscript{162} Cf. Szigeti 2009, 31-32
of the lack of love between them; for example, they do not pick up a fight, they do not start to blame each other. Their alienation in love is the cruel consequence of the murder they committed in Duncan’s bedchamber.

The Mousetrap-scene is the last moment when Hamlet and Ophelia are seen together on the stage, which is rather a concluding point in terms of their gradual distancing. Similarly, the end of the corresponding banquet scene is the last moment when the audience can see Macbeth and Lady Macbeth together on the stage; yet, it is not a concluding phase but a significant turning point: from a dramaturgical point of view, it emphasizes the fracture in the couple’s unity even further. However, I do not wish to claim that Macbeth’s decision to keep the plan of the assassination of Banquo to himself would be a tragic mistake, evoking their tragic fall. Instead, I suggest that Macbeth’s decision is a symptom of his desperate plight resulting from murdering Duncan. The regicide immediately involved the damnation of the culprits (cf. the incapability of Macbeth saying ‘Amen’), and the rest of the play extends this moment to a series of events and depicts the journey to damnation on the stage. And this damnation is clearly, yet, painfully depicted in the fracture of Lord and Lady Macbeth’s unity.

This unity, as it has been discussed, is surprisingly strong, especially at the beginning of the play. The first appearance of the Lady is with Macbeth’s letter and thus the Lady first utters her husband’s very words instead of her own. It was also noted that she does not have a separate name of her own. After the murder, it is impossible for the Lady to remain unstained when Macbeth returns with gory hands: with the “dramaturgical” excuse of bringing the daggers back to the chamber, she also has to paint her hands red in the blood of Duncan. A further instance of their extremely strong connection can be detected in the sleepwalking scene of the Lady. After the assassination, Macbeth reported on the voice promising him the impossibility of sleep (“Still it cried, ‘Sleep no more’ to all the house; / ‘Glamis hath murdered sleep’ and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more.” (II; 2; 44-46)), yet the “curse” somehow transgresses onto the Lady and it will in fact be her sleep which disappears as a result of the murder: she will, as it were, suffer from insomnia, ‘instead of’ her husband (see further below). She will be condemned to walk during the night, tormented by her visions. It is this extremely

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163 It could be objected here that Shakespeare simply followed the common practice of his age in ‘defining a woman through her husband’, yet e.g. in Hamlet, Gertrude, although she is Queen and “imperial jointress” (I; 2; 9), still has a name of her own. Besides, Holinshed’s Chronicle, Shakespeare’s primary source of the story of Macbeth, clearly gives Lady Macbeth’s name: Gruoch, yet it seems Shakespeare did not wish to use it (cf. Braunmuller 1997, 101).
strong unity, which is, in a way, inevitably and gradually violated after the murder of Duncan and it is the symptom of this process that Macbeth does not discuss his attempt on Banquo’s life with the Lady and, as a result, he remains alone in envisaging the Ghost.

The banquet scene might be said to be the first occasion for the Macbeth-couple to enjoy the situation they created with the murder. Macbeth is now King, Lady Macbeth is Queen and most probably Banquo and Fleance are dead. This feast is thus symbolic: if the royal couple cannot enjoy this night, then it might bear an ominous significance with respect to their future. However, the failure of his attempt clearly turns out by the end of the scene, when idyll turns into despair. How even turns into odd is further supported by two utterances answering each other at the beginning and at the end of the scene (emphases added):

MACBETH: Both sides are even; here I’ll sit, i’th’midst. (III; 4; 9)

and

MACBETH: What is the night?
LADY MACBETH: Almost at odds with morning, which is which. (III; 4; 125-126)

Although the Lady desperately tried to reconcile the situation, she is significantly not in the “performance”: she just narrates but since she does not see the Ghost, she is, for the first time, excluded from Macbeth’s world and their plight is reminiscent of the fate Hamlet and his women have to share. It was claimed that both Hamlet and the Lady narrate the events to the others; yet, their respective positions are different: Hamlet is the producer and director of the performance, thus his comments and he himself are, in a way, organic parts of the show, while Lady Macbeth does not belong to the world Macbeth represents in the banquet scene and therefore she belongs to a kind of “audience”. Macbeth is trapped inside the space of the performance together with Banquo’s ghost. Thus, he is separated from the Lady by a similar invisible, yet, all the stronger borderline, which also separates the narrating Hamlet from, among others, Gertrude and Ophelia. This symbolic demarcation line drawn between the respective protagonists and the female characters indicates that although the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia and Gertrude, and the one between Macbeth and the Lady started from fundamentally different platforms, they become somewhat similar by the spectacular events in the middle of the tragedies, from which moment on one of the female characters’ relation with the protagonist will reach its climax,
while the other two will never again appear together with the respective main characters on
the stage, and will be seen again only in their madness.

“Would it were not so, you are my mother” (H; III; 4; 15) — Gertrude’s
“amnesia”

The performance of The Mousetrap, which also brings the lurking intentions of Hamlet to
the public eye of Claudius, the show being an open act of war on the Prince’s part,
quickens up the events. The theatre is hardly over when Hamlet is summoned to Gertrude;
yet, the event which would seemingly provide a long expected private sphere for mother
and son to converse, is at first poisoned by Polonius spying behind the arras. It is Hamlet’s
harsh attitude mingled with blind rage, which literally cuts out this disturbing factor from
the scene, and with sword and blood, the Prince makes a truly private discussion
impossible. Although the majority of the scene (Act III Scene 4) takes place over the dead
body of the state counselor (which might recall the image of Macbeth and the Lady
together, influenced by the unseen body of King Duncan), apart from the early reactions
(e.g. “O what a rash and bloody deed is this!” (III; 4; 27)), the dialogue follow its own
logic, disturbingly independently of the still warm corpse in the speakers’ presence. This
contemptuous disregard for Polonius’s death is a fine indicator of the significance of the
encounter of Hamlet and Gertrude in the Queen’s bedroom: the passion of the scene
washes everything, even a dead body, away.

The very first lines between Hamlet and Gertrude immediately signify the
irrevocability of the disharmony between them. Just as it was forecast in their initial
dialogue in the tragedy (I; 2), when Gertrude attempted to interpret Hamlet’s behaviour
and the Prince attributed different meanings to his mother’s words (“common” and
“seems”), their present conversation is also characterized by the wrong choice of words,
which immediately eliminates the possibility of reconciliation, especially because Gertrude
refers to Claudius as Hamlet’s father:

Hamlet:       Now, mother, what’s the matter?
Queen:       Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
Hamlet:       Mother, you have my father much offended.
Queen:       Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
Hamlet:       Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.       (III; 4; 7-11)
Hamlet constantly fires back with his witty, yet cruel replies to his mother, until the scene seemingly starts again by the repetition of Hamlet’s initial question (“What’s the matter now?” (12)), as if he wished to reach a definitive conclusion as quickly as possible. However, upon Gertrude’s reminder of who she is (or at least should be) in Hamlet’s world (“Have you forgot me?” (13)) the Prince provides an answer, which crystal clearly represents his whole attitude towards his mother: “You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife, / And, would it were not so, you are my mother” (14-15). The various (rather complicated) designations, just as much as their order is highly significant: queen and Claudius’s husband, and only secondly is she the mother of the speaker — a role Hamlet even would like to eliminate, if it were possible (cf. “would it were not so”). The audience has already heard similar remarks from the Prince; still, this is the first time Hamlet tells this into Gertrude’s face.

Gertrude’s appeal to forgetfulness in terms of Hamlet (“Have you forgot me?” (13)) is interesting if we consider that it is precisely she who can be charged with of forgetfulness, since it seems that she has completely forgotten about Old Hamlet. This is immediately indicated at the beginning of the scene under discussion as well: it is obvious for her that the term “father” in Hamlet’s case designates her present husband, Claudius. Gertrude seems to have closed down the “Old Hamlet-case” in the inaugural scene at the beginning, not only in line with Claudius’s oxymorons (the “dirge” quickly evaporating from their “marriage”) but perhaps as early as Claudius’s tentative formulation: “Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death / The memory be green” (I; 2; 1 — emphasis added). Claudius does not say that the memory is green but uses an ‘allowing’ (epistemic) subjunctive: ‘it is possible that the memory is green’, mentioning a colour which is the symbol of life, and is in striking contrast with the black Hamlet is wearing.

Yet, even more significantly, after Act I, Scene 2, there is no reference from Gertrude to Old Hamlet, as if he was completely washed off from her mind. This is what disturbs Hamlet to the utmost, especially when he is constantly forced to remember his father via the task he was assigned, and also by the direct and explicit command of the Ghost: “Remember me” (I; 5; 91). And Hamlet does nothing but remembers, before (in the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy), and after the encounter with the Ghost, the most striking example of which is the staging of The Mousetrap. It has been discussed that Hamlet in his commentaries during the performance also wants to ensure that Gertrude should get his message but her laconic and seemingly diplomatic answer to the oaths of the Player Queen (“The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (225)) indicates the naivety with which she
might be observing the play. Her amnesia is so strong that it might make her blind to see
the connection between herself and her representation on the stage in this matter.

This forgetfulness may also explain Hamlet’s words to his mother before
Polonius’s outcry: “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost
part of you” (18-19). From our perspective, this part of Gertrude, which Hamlet
desperately tries to find is nothing else but his father, which might have left something (at
least the Prince hopes so) in the “inmost part” of the Queen. The desperate attempt on
Hamlet’s part to face Gertrude with the contrasted pictures of Old Hamlet and Claudius
and explain the differences between the two is all the more powerful if it clashes with
Gertrude’s inability to properly remember, as it is indicated by her long silence during
Hamlet’s monologue. Her final reactions referring to her unspecified sin: “Thou turn’st my
eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave
their tinct.” (89-91) or later in Act IV: “To my sick soul, as sin’s true nature is…” (17) is
precisely her realization of her forgetfulness but she does not consider it a sin in
connection with Old Hamlet, the mentioning of whom she continues to avoid later on, too.

This lack of remorse is emphasized by the second half of the scene, when the Ghost
himself appears on the stage but he is significantly invisible for Gertrude. This is at first
disturbing, since it was not only Hamlet who has seen the Ghost but the guards as well,
which raises the question why exactly the wife is the one who is denied a ‘visual’ on the
previous husband of her own. Gertrude’s forgetfulness may explain this, too. As opposed
to her, who needs to be shown a physical picture of the previous king, Horatio, who could
see the Ghost, can very well recall the exact appearance of Old Hamlet to the tiniest detail,
even being able to remember the “sable silver’d” (I; 2; 242) beard characteristic of him.

Just as the Hamlet-Ophelia scene earlier, this scene between the protagonist and the
other major female character is dominated by the Prince’s speeches, and Gertrude’s
utterances constitute a very low percentage of the dialogue. Since she simply does not have
any memories of Old Hamlet, she is unable to properly relate to Hamlet’s passion. Her lack
of verbal responses, as well as her incapability of seeing the Ghost, does not escape
Hamlet’s attention and he turns totally hopeless. All that Gertrude can do in this situation is
to utter the line most characteristic of her position: “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in
twain” (158). However, this is not the direct consequence of the present events but a

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164 As Rebecca Smith points out: “[t]he ghost’s second appearance to Hamlet is prompted by the need for
further defense of Gertrude. […] [Hamlet’s] frenzied attack on Gertrude gains verbal force and violence
(which, on stage, is usually accompanied by increasing physical force and violence) until the ghost
symptom of her position throughout the play, in line with our structural observation that
the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude is not a real dramatic turning point but rather a
deeper diagnosis of their already existing bad relationship. What makes the scene a certain
concluding point in Hamlet and Gertrude’s nexus is Hamlet’s request to the Queen to
choose: “O throw away the worser part of it” (159) for which he gets his answer a few
lines later. With a longer account, Hamlet tells the Queen what she should not do (“Not
this, by no means, that I bid you do: / Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed…” (183-
190), which contains two major requests: one is to abandon the bed of the King, while the
other is not to reveal that Hamlet is “not in madness, / But mad in craft” (190). Gertrude’s
reply is important: “Be thou assur’d, if words be made of breath, / And breath of life, I
have no life to breathe / What thou hast said to me” (199-201). Although these lines are
packed in impressive poetry, the reply responds only to the second request but remains
silent about the first one. The message is clear to Hamlet and he abandons his attempts for
good and diverts the conversation into a completely different direction: “I must to England,
you know that?” (202). The possibility of reconciliation tenderly manifested itself in the
appearance of the Ghost (this being the only moment when the whole family is together in
the play). After Old Hamlet’s disappearance, Hamlet’s pulse, like Gertrude’s, too “doth
temperately keep time, / And makes as healful music” (142-143). However, this elusive
temporary harmony is conclusively over. Finally, Hamlet – as in the scene with Ophelia –
bids farewell (“good night”) several times and drags the dead body of Polonius away. He
most probably exits through the same door he saw Old Hamlet disappear. He follows his
father, wishing to similarly exit from Gertrude’s memory as well.

Gertrude has to face the two ‘pieces’ of her cleft heart in quick succession, for
Hamlet’s exit is followed by Claudius’s entrance, while the Queen most probably does not
leave the stage between the two. The King’s lines here, asking about, and then reacting to,
Hamlet’s deed, resonate the tones of the public speaker: he does not provide the private
situation to discuss the matters with his wife but delivers a monologue, similar to a cunning
speech most probably to be delivered in front of the public: “His [i.e. Hamlet’s] liberty is
full of threats to all— / To you yourself, to us, to everyone…” (IV; 1; 14-23). Their
seeming privacy is furthermore repeatedly interrupted by the appearance of Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern, who are at first sent away by the Queen, eager to discuss the matter with
her husband in privacy (“Bestow this place on us a little while” (4)) but are called back by
the King very soon: “Ho, Guildenstern!” (32). Moreover, the King, hardly surprisingly,
elevates the problem to the public level, referring to “call up our wisest friends”, probably
relating to those whose pieces of advice he acknowledged in his inaugural speech (“Nor have we herein barr’d / Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along” (I; 2; 14-16)). The tendency that Claudius approaches the relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet as the (public) King and not as the (private) husband of Gertrude can be underscored on stage if Claudius delivers his monologue facing the audience instead of the Queen as if he was already addressing the public later on and instead of embracing Gertrude after the unsetting events, he rather sets her hair and dress right in order to prepare her, too for the proper public appearance.

“More needs she the divine than the physician” (M; V; 1; 64) — Madness

Gertrude’s heart is “cleft in twain”, and although Hamlet has made his exit from her life, seemingly forever, she can still rely on the other piece, Claudius. Such a reliable point is not available for Ophelia and for Lady Macbeth, who thus interestingly share a common fate: madness. We have seen how much Ophelia is dependent on her relation towards Hamlet and how this point of orientation becomes unavailable to her. However, it is also worth considering that at the first signs of Hamlet’s madness, she immediately approached her father with the problem. Polonius, besides being an uncomfortable supervising eye, also used to serve as a confidential father to the girl. For Ophelia, it is even more unfortunate that Hamlet’s departure for England coincides with her father’s everlasting ‘departure’ (his death), and that he was slain by her former boy-friend. These must not be disregarded when accounting for the possible reasons for her madness, either.

The Gentleman introducing the mad Ophelia to Gertrude claims that “Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / The hearers to collection. They aim at it, / And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts” (IV; 5; 7-10). One can read these lines as emblematic of the interpretative process of the whole of Hamlet (perhaps as an emblem of all interpretations). Here it is Ophelia who is waiting for ‘being read’, and it seems that in her madness she has reached a level of ambiguity worthy of even Hamlet: she lacks the simplicity so often associated with her. The songs she sings during her first appearance in her madness are clear, and although they lack real ambiguity or poetic force, the improvisational combination of them, also relating to Ophelia’s own story, makes them enigmatic and original. It is indicative of her condition that Ophelia indirectly evokes the figure of Hamlet in her songs, especially in the song “Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day”
about promised marriage and letdown, thus attempting to bring him back virtually to her presence, filling up the tormenting absence.

A similar tendency can be observed concerning Lady Macbeth’s madness as it also happens in the absence of the protagonist: her husband is gone to the battlefield (as it is related to the Doctor by the Gentlewoman observing her: “Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed” (V: 1; 3-4)), and the Lady is seen on the stage during her sleep-walking. These are the two other characters on the stage: the above quoted Gentlewoman (appearing only in this scene) and the Doctor. Both of them are minor characters, which puts the Lady even more into the focus of the scene. Interestingly however, as opposed to the Lady, Ophelia communicates with the surrounding characters rather superficially. The initial appearance of the singing girl reduces the significance of the otherwise major characters (Claudius and Gertrude) to the level of the observers of the Lady, as they are unable to handle the situation properly: they struggle in utmost uncertainty to interpret the behaviour of Ophelia.

The respective absence of the protagonists surrounding the madness-scenes are not just physical absence in the plays’ world but also stage absence: Ophelia’s scene is followed, and the Lady’s is preceded by longer scenes where the otherwise dominating, respective main characters of (Hamlet and Macbeth) do not appear on the stage. However, the two women, whose characters are so much dependent on the protagonists, attempt to bring their missing major partners back to actual stage presence: Ophelia by referring to Hamlet in her songs, and the Lady by constantly talking to Macbeth in her sleep: e.g. “Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard?” (V: 1; 31-32); “Come, come, come, come, give me your hand; what’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.” (57-58)).

Ophelia’s madness-scene primarily exposes her damaged relationship with Hamlet (cf. “Quoth she, ‘Before you tumbled me, / You promis’d me to wed.’ / He answers, / ‘So would I a done, by yonder sun, / And thou hadst not come to my bed.’ (IV; 5; 62-66)). Here it does not really matter whether anything is true of this on the factual level: the point is the harm, be it real or imaginary. The sleepwalking-scene of the Lady is, on the contrary, a symptom of the once prevailing unity of the Macbeth-couple. As it was pointed out above, the curse Macbeth heard after the murder penetrates rather into the Lady, and she will be the one who is seen by the audience suffering from insomnia. It is also important to note the Lady’s very last sentence at the end of the banquet scene, addressed to her husband: “You lack the season of all natures, sleep” (III; 4; 140 — emphasis added). This last word provides the possibility of the following interpretation: the Lady, by sending
Macbeth to sleep so that he could try to get rid of his troubles, wishes to take, as it were, the curse upon herself; she stays awake instead of him, and the scene under discussion, at the beginning of the fifth act is precisely a result of this earlier intention. That she is a sacrifice-substitute is further supported by the Lady’s line during the sleep-walking scene when she says: “give me your hand” (V; 1; 57), which can be interpreted literally (she re-envisages the Macbeth of the night of Duncan’s death, and she wants to lead him to their bedchamber), while it can also be read metaphorically, i.e. the wife wishes to take the gory hand (and thus the torment of guilt, the burden of sin), so to speak, over from Macbeth. This attempt seems to be successful, as her own bloody hand appears to be more and more striking to her: she constantly senses the smell of blood (“Here’s the smell of the blood still” (V; 1; 42)), which is in sharp contrast with the vision of blood Macbeth reflected on right after the murder: “What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes” (II; 2; 57). Here the smell, as opposed to vision, suggests a deeper trace of the sin, and a more powerful conscience of guilt, since smell penetrates the inside of the human body through the nose, and it is much harder to describe it verbally. Macbeth tried to distance the horrid physical image of the bloody Duncan by putting it into poetic metaphors, in order to transform, familiarize and “tame it”: this seems hardly possible for the Lady directly sensing the smell of Duncan’s blood. As whether Hamlet slept with Ophelia in “reality” or not matters little from the point of view the girl’s madness, it is also immaterial whether Lady Macbeth senses an “imaginary” odour or not: for the Lady it is sheer reality itself (like Macbeth’s dagger in the air, for his eyes, which the Lady earlier called “the air-drawn dagger” (III; 4; 61), the “very painting of your [=Macbeth’s] fear” (60)). As regards Act V, it can be concluded that here Lady Macbeth is taking up the role of the ‘substitute victim’ standing (and walking) in the stead of Macbeth, taking away the blood from his hands onto her own. This sacrifice on the Lady’s part is possible via the original strong and affectionate connection between the couple.

The madness of the two women are indicative, from another aspect, of their respective paths throughout the plays, i.e. how the Lady was able to provide the supporting privacy, the “background”-dramaturgy for Macbeth and his plight, and how Ophelia was deprived of such a private sphere with respect to Hamlet. The Lady’s madness happens in complete privacy on the one hand: it manifests itself in sleepwalking, while sleep is one of the most personal domains. She does not talk to anyone else but Macbeth, constantly
relating to their private sin: murdering Duncan. Yet, on the other hand, in line with the sudden collapse of this privacy after the murder, when they are exposed to the public eye first by becoming the public figures of king and queen, and then culminating in the close exposure of their crime in the banquet-scene, she is at the same time seen and heard by two absolutely supporting, minor characters, thus unable to totally escape the curious public eye (after all, the author of the play could have presented her only in the company of the audience as well, as she markedly is when we see her for the first time). In the dramatic present tense of the play, Ophelia is constantly deprived of her privacy and her madness shows no signs of it, either. During her first appearance as the ‘madwoman’, she relates to events in her plight similarly to the Lady but, at the same time, she repeatedly reacts to the surrounding characters and even wants to inform her brother about what happened: “My brother shall know of it” (70). (Curiously, Laertes himself will soon appear after Ophelia’s remark and her exit.) As opposed to the Lady’s private “dream”, Ophelia’s second entrance is all the more public: she wishes to create a public performance of a song together with the onlookers: “You must sing A-down a-down, and you Call him a-down-a.” (169-170). Furthermore, the flowers which she brings and which — according to the then well-known symbolism of flowers — indicate the major characteristics of the recipient characters (Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius), Ophelia turns the current situation around: instead of being constantly observed by others regarding her deepest and most secret emotions, this time she observes the others and makes her own judgements, piercing her eyes into the very depth of their personalities, as if she was giving an emblematic clue to the stage director as regards the “essence” of the remaining characters.

“She should have died hereafter” (M; V; 5; 16) — The dramaturgy of deaths

Both female characters entrapped in their madness escape – most probably, though not unambiguously – through suicide. Seyton, upon laconically reporting the Lady’s death to Macbeth (“The queen, my lord, is dead” (V; 5; 16)), does not give any specific detail of the way of dying; yet, Malcolm in the very last monologue of the tragedy, mentions the “fiend-

165 Russell Davis gives an apt diagnosis for the sleepwalking scene: “The picture she presents in the sleep-walking scene is typical in many respects of an acute reactive psychosis: the obsessive attention to a particular detail, in this case the ‘damned spot’, preoccupation by fantasy and apparent watchfulness, in this case ‘at once the benefit of sleep’ and ‘the effects of watching’. Immersion in a world of fearful fantasy is favoured by the dark, which reduces engagement with the real world — hence her command to have ‘light by her continually’”. Russell Davis 1992, 42
like queen, / Who, ‘tis thought, by self and violent hands / took off her life” (V; 9; 36-38). Ophelia drowns in the river upon collecting flowers and the question of her willingness to throw away her life is also presented in the entertaining discussion of the Grave-digger (First Clown) and his companion: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she willfully seeks her own salvation?” (V; 1; 1). Even the Priest notes that “[h]er death was doubtful” (220). Although in both cases it seems dramaturgically justified that the respective women break away from the encompassing prison of their madness through “self-slaughter”, both tragedies refuse to give an unambiguous answer to the question. The account of Ophelia’s death is interestingly given to the other major female character, Gertrude, who gives a longish description of how the girl gradually sank into the depth of the water (“There is a willow grows askant the brook…” (IV; 7; 165-182)). This monologue has long been surrounded by questions and objections (it is often even left out), since it seems dramaturgically invalid to provide such a detailed description of the slow death while disregarding the question why she was not rescued from the water. Yet, it seems that at this point, the rules of dramaturgy are overridden by the dominance of lyrical poetry. Gertrude’s account is so highly lyricized that it gives the impression that through this medium the two female characters connect in a certain way, when the flow of the tragedy stops for a minute or two (note that we were in the middle of the scene where Claudius and Laertes are plotting Hamlet’s death) and the focus is finally given to Gertrude, the speaker; and Ophelia, the subject of the account. Dramaturgy pauses and the play steps out of its channel to pay homage to its women with such a lyrical phase: this is like a ‘distributed’ swan-song, sung by Gertrude over Ophelia, but in a curious way lamenting Gertrude’s imminent death, too. This ‘intermezzo’ (interlude) might even advance the lyrical pulse of the Chekhovian plays in the 20th century. Yet, characteristically, the monologue also has its dramaturgical function: the report (from the informative point of view) further feeds Laertes’s hunger for revenge. Still, Ophelia’s

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166 It is interesting to note a condemning opinion of Ophelia’s madness and death from the 16th century. Jeremy Collier claims that [Shakespeare] “was resolv’d to drown the Lady [i.e. Ophelia] like Kitten, he should have left her a swimming a little sooner. To keep her alive only to sully her Reputation, and discover the Rankness of her Breath, was very Cruel” (Collier 1698, 10).

167 McGuire claims that the judgement the spectators might arrive at concerning Ophelia’s death is doubtful, as she is not seen dying, it is not performed. This judgement necessarily relies on words of other characters (especially those of Gertrude), therefore it can never escape being “doubtful”. Should a source claim more authority for itself, analogous counter-judgements are expected to be provoked. McGuire 1995, 249

168 In the Hamlet-production of the Hungarian National Theatre (2012; director: Róbert Alföldi), the performance earlier dropped clues concerning an on-going attraction in Claudius towards Ophelia, which was at the same time noticed by Gertrude. Thus in her monologue about the girl’s death, it was unquestionable why she did not do anything to save her.
brother first has to translate Gertrude’s lyrical language to himself: “Alas, then she is drown’d.” (182), this plain, almost stupid-sounding sentence indicating that he has little to do with the poetic aspects of Gertrude’s farewell.

Gertrude does not fall into madness and she does not seem to commit suicide but becomes a victim of Claudius’s conspiracy against Hamlet when she drinks from the poisoned cup. However, just as in the case of the other two women’s suicide, the play leaves the question of Gertrude open as well: her insistence on drinking from the cup might also be interpreted as a deed in the exact knowledge of the cup’s content, realizing the real intentions of her husband. Gertrude – as indicated, for example, in the Olivier film-version – might realize that she has lost Claudius, having already lost Hamlet. So why should she stay behind Ophelia, in this world?

Dramaturgy was merciful as regards Ophelia’s death, yet it is much less attentive with respect to Gertrude. As we have seen, Hamlet’s girlfriend was given a long and lyrical lament; furthermore, she is also provided a separate scene of burial and farewell. Gertrude’s death becomes one among the others in the slaughterhouse of the very last scene, lacking a proper reaction. Hamlet’s attitude over Ophelia’s death was marked by his jumping into the grave and crying: “I lov’d Ophelia” (V; 1; 264), whereas Gertrude’s collapse is faded by the imminence of the end of his own, and is concluded by the single remark: “Wretched Queen, adieu” (V; 2; 338). Hamlet’s farewell from the two women is characteristic of his attitude to them: their lack of privacy becomes almost palpable. Gertrude dies in front of baffled and gazing onlookers; Ophelia dies alone and she is ironically given some privacy only in the private nature of the hurried and not wholly proper burial, which wishes to avoid a highly uncomfortable public protocol.

The text of Macbeth, on the contrary gives the possibility to the director to provide the protagonist a proper private manner to react to Lady Macbeth’s death. In Act V Scene 5, after Macbeth is reported the news by Seyton, only one character speaks apart from the protagonist himself: the Messenger, who appears only when he is summoned after the “Tomorrow”-soliloquy. Thus, the text makes it possible to withdraw all the characters after Seyton’s report to leave Macbeth alone on the stage in his complete privacy to deliver the “Tomorrow”-soliloquy.

Nevertheless, Döring observes that unlike earlier revenge plays, Hamlet does not display so much blood and onstage murder. The onstage fight of the last scene starts as a formal duel: violence is ritualized and controlled by rules and after the king breaks these rules it results in only four corpses. Before that the only visible violence is Polonius’s death, yet it takes place significantly behind the arras, otherwise violence usually happens offstage. Döring 2006, 103.
A sign of the reunion of Lord and Lady Macbeth in death is remarkably depicted at this point. Here Macbeth’s reaction to the news of the Lady’s death is surprisingly laconic: “She should have died hereafter. / There would have been a time for such a word” (V; 5; 16-17) and much depends on the actor uttering this line170. Does he do it in complete ignorance, indifference? Or does he indicate that he is moved and desperate, having heard the news? One possible solution is that the actor utters these words exactly in the same manner as he said: “Duncan is in his grave” (III; 2 22), still to the Lady. In the same monologue he said: “Better be with the dead, / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In reckless ecstasy” (19-22). Then Macbeth’s words about his wife’s death in Act V may underscore that he is totally alone: right now he can share neither the “peace” of death, nor the “reckless ecstasy” of life with his Lady, since he has been left on this “bank and shoal of time” (cf. I; 7; 6).

According to some interpreters, the first line of Macbeth’s reaction in Act V might indeed refer to his blasted hope for mutual perish with his wife, the reunion before death, and dying together171. Moreover, the knowledge of the Lady being dead also foreshadows his own imminent downfall through their close connection. Finally, the most striking factor that disproves a supposed ignorance on Macbeth’s part is that these lines are immediately followed by one of the most powerful monologues of the whole play, the Tomorrow-monologue172.

It is important to note that in the sleep-walking scene, the Gentlewoman tells the Doctor that the Lady is writing in her sleep:

Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her nightgown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon’t, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed, yet all this while in a most fast sleep. (V; 1; 3-7)

170 John Russell Brown analyses the dramaturgical consequences of pauses preceding or following the given line. Brown claims that if the pause follows the line “She should have died hereafter”, it indicates a transition to a more general remark (“There would have been a time for such a word”, finally leading to Macbeth’s own consciousness and the Tomorrow-soliloquy. Yet, if the pause precedes the line, it might indicate the distance Macbeth needs to travel in his mind to “hold on to the thought of his wife’s death and his own inadequacy.” Brown 2005, 50-51

171 Cf. Kállay 2006, 378

172 Concerning the Tomorrow-soliloquy, Fox claims that the actual player playing the role of Macbeth in the theatrical production comes to the foreground and “[t]he effect of Macbeth’s most famous speech is to stop the forward movement of the plot and connect the audience to the representing actor within the represented role, in contrast to dialogic speech that, however long, remains contained within the illusion of ‘the events portrayed’ and adds to the momentum of the represented action” (Fox 2008, 220).
Interestingly, though, there is no further reference to this writing-activity. Hence I suggest a possible reoccurrence of the letter, precisely at the moment of the report on the Lady’s death. Such an interpretation might bring back the motif of the letter into the play’s thematic structure, where it served as a sign of the couple’s unity at the beginning, and which might thus provide a final reflection of their strong connection in the moments of farewell. Furthermore, the use of the Lady’s writing mentioned by the Gentlewoman dramaturgically cuts the loose end of the potential disregarding of this activity, the significance of which would otherwise remain questionable. Although it is not mentioned in the stage directions, we might presume that when Seyton tells Macbeth that the Queen is dead, he hands to his King precisely the letter in question. Hence the first lines of the Tomorrow-monologue might be interpreted as being written by the Lady and read out by Macbeth. The closing line might be: “Out, out, brief candle” (V; 5; 22), referring to the candle burning in the Lady’s hand during the night, as it is mentioned by the Gentlewoman, and which the Lady (when she composed the letter, whenever it was) needed to see to write. The second half of the monologue, in turn, can be read as Macbeth’s answer to his wife. If this hypothesis makes sense, the beginning of the monologue most probably only quotes the end of the letter, and the whole writing corresponds to the fragments told by the Lady in her sleep-walking, i.e. the murder, the reckonings expressed in her incoherent images, which is at the same time the ‘sujet’ of the Macbeth-tragedy. Thus Macbeth reflects on his own life written down on a piece of paper when he says that “[i]t is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (V; 5; 25-27) but at the same time it is also a reflection on his path which finally concludes in the loss of Lady Macbeth.
Chapter Four

“We with wisest sorrow think on him together with remembrance of ourselves”

The aspects of regicide regarding Claudius and Macbeth

Some of the similarities and the contrast between Hamlet’s and Macbeth’s respective attitude towards the execution of the murder have already been pointed out. However, the fact that Macbeth does the “deed” early in the play and commits regicide in order to gain the throne draws an obvious parallel between himself and Hamlet’s chief antagonist in the play, Claudius. In what follows, I will be projecting Claudius’s and Macbeth’s careers upon each other, observing their attitude towards the regicide already committed and their strategy to preserve their rule. It is apparent that whereas there is an obvious battle between Hamlet and Claudius, Macbeth does not have such a strong opponent in his tragedy and, therefore, his major conflict takes place within himself, inside. In the course of the investigation, I will argue that Hamlet’s and Claudius’s battle takes place on two levels: one is the level of the conventional revenge tragedy (a person murdered someone and the other person tries to, and eventually does, kill the murderer), while the other is a contest to establish an intimate relationship with the audience. A popular interpretation of soliloquies is that these are not thoughts overheard by the audience but in them a character directly addresses the spectators. This approach entails that there should be a direct relationship between certain characters and their audience, and this approach will be my starting point when observing the above outlined second level of the contest between Hamlet and Claudius. Macbeth, on the other hand, does not need to fight for this stage dominance with anyone, as he himself is the “poor player” who keeps the focus of the play on himself and, as a consequence, is never really capable of stepping off his own stage.

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173 Hamlet I; 2, 6-7
174 Cf. Martin White’s claim that “[i]t is common in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays for the actors to interact in some way with the audience to acknowledge its presence as an audience.” White 1998, 61
“Now I am alone” (H; II; 2; 543) — The possibility of soliloquies

The first scene of *Hamlet* is set amidst the gloomy bastions, where Horatio and two other soldiers, Marcellus and Barnardo encounter the Ghost whose resemblance to the recently deceased king, Old Hamlet is immediately apparent to them. This scene also caters for several dramaturgical needs, since it provides the bare minimum of necessary information for the audience (e.g. the conflict between Denmark and Norway, going back to the reign of the previous king). However, its primary importance lies in the setting of the atmosphere. Before the audience faces the glimmering spectacle of Claudius’s court and the King himself at the zenith of his career, we are introduced to something dark, misty and nasty, which later on also turns out to be connected to Claudius in a highly significant manner: the Ghost is nobody else but the consequence of the present king’s way to the throne, the price paid for the feast of the second scene. Although in the very first scene the audience does not know what Claudius has to do with the death of Old Hamlet, after witnessing this cold, foggy and ominous introductory scene, they transform themselves into the crowd present at the new king’s inauguration with a bitter taste in their mouth.

When Claudius first appears on the stage in act 1, scene 2, he is the one who speaks the first lines there; more precisely, he starts with a long monologue. This seems to be an obvious dramaturgical solution, as he is the one who is in charge, who controls everything and, by his first appearance, he wants to persuade the court (and, with equal importance, the audience) that he is the proper person to lead the country and the play. In my interpretation, this duality, i.e. courting the graces of the Danes and at the same time, of the audience, is an important feature of the play: this is the first time that the battle between Claudius and Hamlet can also be seen as a battle for the audience.

Hibbard suggests that the structure of the first part of Claudius’s speech, including conjuncts like “Though yet […] Yet […] Therefore” is similar to the structure of Gloucester’s opening lines in *Richard III*, as both characters’ aim is to justify their present state, i.e. being the new monarch (Claudius) and being a villain (Gloucester). Yet, a further similarity and difference may be added: both villainous monarchs start their presence on the stage with these monologues and, by doing so, they turn to the audience, while the difference is that whereas Gloucester stands alone on the stage and has a private conversation with the spectators, Claudius addresses them only *indirectly*. Gloucester can indeed make a *direct*, intimate and honest confession to the audience, while he also

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175 Hibbard 2008, 42–43
promises (as a good Prologue should do) to entertain them and he will do exactly that throughout the play. Claudius, in terms of directness, is addressing the court, which obviously does not allow him a Gloucester-like honesty and self-revelation. Claudius has to be more cunning: he has to playact in front of the Danes in order to hide the fact how he really got to the throne. Thus, with respect to the relationship with the audience, Gloucester is in a much better position: he is the one who starts the play, while Claudius is preceded by the Ghost; furthermore, Gloucester can immediately turn to the spectators and ally with them, while Claudius’s potential conversation with his audience is – in this sense – “overheard” by the court (in fact, it is addressed to them), thus he cannot establish such a connection. As I will argue later on, his one and only possibility to do so is in the prayer scene in Act III, Scene 3 but until then someone else has already approached the audience in his soliloquies and petitioned for their sympathy, and this is, of course, Hamlet.

In this respect, Macbeth has a similar position to Hamlet: both protagonists are given plenty of possibilities to explore their inner thoughts via soliloquies. The Scottish soldier is indeed surrounded by other characters in Act I Scene 3, after the Weird Sisters’ prophecies and the news that he is the new Thane of Cawdor. However, despite the presence of Banquo, Ross and Angus, he can deliver his first soliloquy freely, as an aside. (“Two truths are told...” (I; 3; 126-146). The status of this speech throws light on the contrasting positions between Hamlet, Claudius and Macbeth. Hamlet is several times given the opportunity to remain on the stage alone and contemplate in an undisturbed state. As we have seen, Claudius, in strong connection with his position as a public figure, is hardly ever given such an opportunity (the only exception being the prayer scene) and this is already visible in his opening speech in Act I, Scene 2. The “Two truths are told”-soliloquy of Macbeth is often interrupted by either his own comments to the awaiting lords (“I thank you, gentlemen” (128)), or by Banquo talking to the other two characters. This double-layered feature of the speech indicates how Macbeth is given the opportunity to remain a public figure in relation with the other characters, while at the same time he expresses his thoughts in soliloquies in an almost undisturbed way. This dramaturgical sign projects forward the availability of soliloquies for Macbeth in the future, since he will also occupy the public position of the king.

176 In discussing their dramaturgical status, Hirsh distinguishes three-types of soliloquies. One is the interior monologue, where the character does not risk the chance of being overheard. Another kind is the self-addressed soliloquy, which is a projection of outward behaviour, yet still very private. The third kind, and the one I observe these speeches in this chapter is the audience-addressed soliloquy, which is an overt relationship with the spectators and thus very public. Cf. Hirsh 2003, 13-18
Macbeth’s initial soliloquies (Two truths are told”; “If it were done”; “Is this a dagger”) are about contemplating on the future murder of Duncan. However, importantly enough, the audience cannot see Claudius before the murder: old Hamlet’s brother is not given possibilities similar to that of Macbeth, or even Hamlet to explore the nature of the deed in soliloquies in advance. In a similar way, the audience can hardly see Hamlet after the murder: the Prince almost immediately dies after taking revenge on Claudius and thus cannot reflect on his action. Macbeth, in this sense, merges the contemplations of the two antagonists of the play called Hamlet, as he is constantly reflecting on, and trying to relate to, the assassination of Duncan and his predicament both before and after the murder.

“There’s blood upon thy face” (M; III; 4; 11) — Sin and glamour

Thus, the first time the audience can see Claudius, he has already committed regicide. Or, in other words, Claudius’s success is fully realized: he gained the throne and the Queen. In his prayer scene in Act III, Scene 3, he marks these two factors as his motivation for becoming a murderer (“for which I did the murder — / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (3.3.54–55) but we will never know for certain which the primary motivation was. The portrayal of Claudius on the stage might highly depend on emphasizing one reason over the other but neither of them will cut a straight and unambiguous path for the actor. His desire to become the number one person in Denmark may make him a careerist and ambitious pusher, hungry for power, or even someone who is convinced that he can lead the country much better than his brother. Similarly, his devotion to Gertrude can range from deep love to unleashed lust and since any combinations of these are permitted by the text, it is the actor’s and the director’s duty to find their own way into the character. In his inaugural speech, he aims at reconciling the contradictions the situation involves verbally with his phrases (oxymorons) like “defeated joy,” “auspicious and a dropping eye,” “mirth in funeral” and “dirge in marriage” (1.2.10–12) and also proves his competence in leadership by being generous to Polonius and his son and by being up-to-date and tactical in foreign affairs when handling the Fortinbras plea. So far everything seems to be perfect from Claudius’s point of view and should the events flow in the way he hopes for, he would enjoy happily what he gained, for the rest of his life.

Macbeth has a similar spectacular event after the regicide: the Banquet-scene in the middle of the play (Act III; Scene 4) where, together with his wife, he has the possibility to appear in front of the court in glitter and glory. However this happens not only after the
murder of Duncan but immediately following his order to kill Banquo. The way of these two murders represent two extreme methods, whereas Claudius’ act follows the path of a kind of *aurea mediocritas*. Macbeth murdered Duncan with his own hands, stabbing the daggers into the old king’s body and returning with his blood on the murderous hands. Contrastingly, Claudius uses poison instead of daggers: a more delicate way of murder, the symbolical significance of which is to be discussed later. Yet, it is important to note here that his hands will not be literally stained by Old Hamlet’s blood. In the case of Banquo’s elimination, Macbeth falls into the other extreme, and instead of pushing the blade into his former friend’s body, he already learnt the price of personally carrying out a bloody deed and therefore he hires murderers in the second round.

Emphatically, the third act starts with the lines of Banquo as his figure will be in the focus of Macbeth’s attention during this part of the play, i.e. from the scene when he talks with the murderers about Banquo till the banquet-scene. Banquo’s character comes forward, so to say, suddenly: although he was with Macbeth at the meeting with the Weird Sisters and the strange creatures involved him in their prophecies, the former fellow-hero was temporarily simply forgotten and moved out of the spotlight. Yet, after being crowned, Macbeth starts to pay attention to previously ignored factors and hence Banquo should be taken care of. His figure is too dangerous to the newly anointed King: Banquo knows about the prophecies of the Weird Sisters (at the beginning of Act I, Scene 2, he even made sinister references to the Sisters when talking to Macbeth, perhaps foreseeing Macbeth’s plans) and this way he is a threat to Macbeth’s present situation, while his descendants were also promised the kingdom, which is a further threat directed at Macbeth’s future, i.e. to the succession of his (presently non-existent) children.

The short talk between Banquo, Lord and Lady Macbeth is proceeding on three levels simultaneously. On the surface, the royal couple welcomes their friend, ask him about his ride, invite him to the banquet and Banquo answers them politely. On the second level, however, this is already part of Macbeth’s plan and the majority of his questions are to prepare the attempt on his former friend’s life. For instance, it becomes obvious for the viewer that Macbeth is making his inquires about Fleance because he wants Banquo’s son also to be dead, thus preventing Banquo’s line to replace his on the throne. Nevertheless, this multilayered conversation also has a deeper third level (a real ‘sub-subtext’), highlighting certain meanings which probably not even the characters are aware of. In

177 “I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.” – Banquo says – “To you they have showed some truth” (II: 1: 19-20)
knowledge of the events that happened previously, or are yet to come, some stick out from
the text and gain extra importance.

Lady Macbeth greets Banquo as “If he [i.e. Banquo — B.Sz.] had been forgotten, / It had been a gap in our great feast” (III; 1; 11-12). This sentence is a polite welcome on
the first level, a device to pretend friendship and to ease suspicion on the second, while on
the third it is an honest confession of the de facto situation: if Banquo is forgotten, like he
has been up until that moment, and if the danger he means is not handled in time, then it
would seriously break the expected peace and happiness (the feast) of the couple. Not long
after this, Banquo claims that to Macbeth his “duties / Are with a most indissoluble tie / Forever knit” (III; 1; 16-18). On the third level of interpretation, these lines also gain even
more ominous importance: the fact that Banquo is “forever knit” to his King will clearly
manifest itself when even after Banquo’s death, his ghost will appear at the royal banquet.
Similarly, his answer after Macbeth’s request that Banquo should not miss the feast: “My
lord, I will not” (III; 1; 30) is a promise the obedience to which, with utmost tragic or even
black irony, will not be thwarted even by his death. Furthermore, Banquo names the period
of his ride as a “dark hour” (“Go not my horse the better, / I must become a borrower of
the night / For a dark hour, or twain.” (III; 1; 26-28)), thus using the same expression
Macbeth will use for their assassination when talking to the murderers (Fleance “must embrace the fate / Of that dark hour”(III; 1; 138-139)).

After Banquo and Lady Macbeth are gone, two murderers appear on the stage as if
they were recently born from the mere thought and need of the King: they come when
needed and disappear afterwards (the parallel Macbeth draws between their humanity and
dogs is quite apt): they came to get the order to assassinate Banquo. However, at the
murdering of Banquo, a Third Murderer appears on the stage who claims to be sent by
Macbeth himself to bring the necessary details. The Third Murderer’s figure has been hotly
debated in the secondary literature on Macbeth and there arose the possibility of Macbeth
himself being the assassin arriving unexpectedly. Henry Irving, for instance, discussed the
identity of this mysterious character in a whole article. According to Irving, the idea that
Macbeth might be the third one was brought up in the September 11 and November 13
issue of the journal Notes and Queries but he does not name the author. Nevertheless,
Irving finds it more likely that the Third Murderer is one of the servants. Goddard calls
attention to the fact Macbeth tells the two murderers, in various ways, severally that he

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178 Irving 1877, 147
would soon be “with them”, so it is very likely that, after all, it is indeed he who is the murderer, if not even in the physical sense (since he is at the banquet) but in line with the logic of poetic drama, “virtually”\(^{179}\).

Here I accept Goddard’s view and I attempt to argue further for Macbeth’s possible identification with the Third Murderer. We may find further support for this assumption if we closely observe the utterances of the character in question. Emphatically, the very first sentence he utters (even if it is an answer to a question by the First Murderer: “But who did bid thee join with us?” (III; 3; 1)) is “Macbeth” (III; 3; 1), in my interpretation in a way also identifying himself, at his first appearance, with the murderer. Secondly, he is the one who is aware of the habits of Banquo, who knows him well (as Macbeth’s once best friend and co-soldier): “he does usually, / So all men do, from hence to th’palace gate / Make it their walk” (III; 3; 12-14) and it is him who finally identifies Banquo when he arrives: “‘Tis he” (III; 3; 14). Furthermore, the Third Murderer reflects first on the escape of Fleance (“There’s but one down. The son is fled.”(III; 3; 21)), this way calling attention to the fact which is (or will be) of primary importance and reason for future worries in the eyes of Macbeth. It is also noteworthy that the Third Murderer does not appear before, or after, the scene of killing Banquo: he is missing from the discussion when the murderers are assigned their job and it is not him but the First Murderer who reports the result to their principal (“boss”). In other words, he never appears on the stage together with Macbeth. Additionally, Macbeth’s association with the Murderer would also strengthen the “indissoluble tie” between Macbeth and Banquo: it is not only Banquo who, via this strong connection, will appear at Macbeth’s feast in the form of a ghost but Macbeth, too is tied to his victim and has to be present during his assassination. As it was pointed out above, poetic drama provides the possibility for a character to be virtually present at different places simultaneously, and the presence of Macbeth at the place of the murder and at the banquet at the same time mirrors the structure of the multilayered dialogue with Banquo at the beginning of the third act: on the surface level Macbeth is holding a feast in his castle, greeting the guests and acting like a polite host, while underneath (in the ‘subtext’) his thoughts are somewhere else, together with Banquo in his death. And the great failure of Macbeth in the banquet-scene will exactly be initiated by the confusion of these levels.

The initial lines during the Banquet-scene suggest that Macbeth is desperately trying to enjoy the revelries. He is emphasizing his position as a host and concentrates on

\(^{179}\) Goddard (1951: 280)
politely welcoming the guests (“Ourself will mingle with society / And play the humble host” (III; 4; 3-4)): the whole event is ceremonial (since it is a royal feast). Yet, as we have seen in connection with the Third Murderer, this is only the surface and his mind is together with the murderers at the attempt on Banquo’s life. The procedure of Macbeth’s failure will start when the two levels, in a way his split-up personality (the glamorous lord and the surreptitious murderer) will be mixed with the entrance of the First Murderer, not long after the banquet has started. From a dramaturgical point of view, it is emphatic that the murderer does not come when the feast is over, or does not even send a message in, but he himself enters the hall full of guests and starts to talk with the King. Moreover, he literally brings the blood of Banquo to the feast, thus breaking the superficial gloss of the event:

MACBETH [To First Murderer] There’s blood upon thy face.
FIRST MURDERER [aside to Macbeth] Tis Banquo’s then. (III; 4; 11-12)

Macbeth’s despair starts when he gets to know that although Banquo is already lying dead, his son, Fleance has escaped (the importance of which was first emphasized by the Third Murderer, as it was noted). After the murderer leaves, Banquo is planted in Macbeth’s mind as if the part of his personality which manifested itself as the Third Murderer now merged into him again, bringing the corpse of Banquo with himself inside Macbeth’s mind. Before the murderer came (though it was only a short period but still) the King did not mention Banquo, but after his emissary left, he cannot resist uttering his name. Although the stage direction of the text says that Banquo’s ghost appears earlier, not long after the murderer’s exit, he is not noticed for a while, hence it might be claimed that he appears as a result of Macbeth uttering his name:

Here had we now our country’s honour roofed,
Were the graced person of our Banquo present (III; 4; 39-40)

as if the protagonist was practising a kind of necromancy: he is trying to get rid of the Banquo in his mind, thus uttering his name, in a way “spelling him out”, which will result in the actual appearance of the ghost. And the ghost’s entrance terrifies Macbeth to such a great extent that the carefully built up glory of the ceremonial feast collapses in a minute.

Claudius managed to keep the two layers separately: the gloomy atmosphere of the bastions together with his victim’s death and the glorious inauguration do not get mixed in
one single scene but are separated in time and place: the formers will not disrupt the glittering of the latter. Claudius also has to utter his victim’s name; moreover, he starts his very first line in the play by referring to the previous king: “Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death / the memory be green” (I; 2; 1-2) but it does not happen out of a personal need to exorcise the haunting memory of the victim from the mind but out of sheer political necessity: to react to the new state of affairs. The Danish king is not like Macbeth in this respect: although Claudius committed regicide, moreover, he killed his own brother, he will not have nightmares (that we know of) of his victim; furthermore, while Banquo’s Ghost appears to Macbeth right after the murder, the Ghost of Old Hamlet never appears to Claudius. In Claudius’s mind, Old Hamlet is buried deep down and, as opposed to Banquo, he will not “rise again, / With twenty mortal murders on [his] crowns, / And push [him] from [his] stool[s]” (Macbeth, 3.4.79–81). However, Claudius has a different Ghost, which will not bring him torment of conscience but the danger of external impeachment and threat on his life. Claudius’s ghost is there at the feast in the form of a flesh-and-blood Prince, in a black suit, thus mourning the recent death of the previous king, and bearing the same name Claudius’s victim had: Hamlet. What triggers the play is precisely the real Ghost (that of Old Hamlet) meeting up with the private ghost of Claudius (i.e. young Hamlet): this will set events into motion.

“His title hang loose about him” (M; V; 2; 20-21) — Replacing the previous king

As we have seen, Claudius wishes to demonstrate his capability to handle each and every situation he is expected to take care of as the new ruler, and after he has gained encouragement from the smoothness and swiftness he has tackled the matters of Polonius and Fortinbras, he turns to the most problematic aspect of his reign and addresses Hamlet. It might appear to be strange that foreign affairs, and even the permission of Laertes’s journey to Paris precede the King’s words to the Prince but it can also be considered as leaving the most difficult encounter till the end. Claudius has created his own world by murdering Old Hamlet, becoming the King, marrying Gertrude and building the court around himself, and he wants to give a part to Hamlet too, to build him into his arbitrary
world as “cousin […], and [his] son” (1.2.64). Yet, with the famous contradictory responses with which he goes against Claudius’s attempt to reconcile the paradoxes, Hamlet refuses the position he is offered and it is clear he does not look at the King as others do.

Interestingly, in the eyes of the other characters Claudius seems to replace Old Hamlet in a perfect fashion. As if the title of the King was just a role and instead of a certain actor (Old Hamlet) a new one (Claudius) took it over. In performance, should another actor take the role of Claudius over, the rest of the company should of course continue playing their roles as if nothing had happened. Claudius, like a replacing actor (an “understudy”), puts the costumes of the previous King on (and, most importantly, his crown), which has all the more importance in the Elizabethan theatre where costumes, as it is well-known, had great significance, indicating even gender roles. Additionally, it has frequently been observed that Claudius is never mentioned by this name in the text and we only know his “real” name from the Dramatis Personae. By this example, Old Hamlet might never have been called “(Old) Hamlet” if we had seen him on stage as acting the monarch but he might have been referred to as King (or Dane, Denmark), too. This way, with respect to the names, the two “actors” might exclusively be identified by their titles, these titles being the same. As it is apparent from the second scene, everybody accepts Claudius as the new king, as the unbroken continuation of the previous one to such a degree that Gertrude also regards him as her husband. Hamlet is the only character who is not willing to accept this continuation, this seemingly perfect replacement, and his “Seems-monologue” can also be considered as his reply to the above outlined stage-logic. When he claims “I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76) he denies the possibility of any judgement based on surface features, such as the costumes (or the name) one has.

It seems, however, that the whole Scottish nation shares Hamlet’s point of view regarding the new king. Whereas, as we have seen, Claudius managed to build up his own

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180 Mehl point out that the way Claudius reacts to Hamlet’s attitude, regarding it only as a pose is reminiscent to how Feste mocks Olivia’s stubborn dedication to the dead brother’s memory in Twelfth Night. Mehl 1986, 34
181 Cf. Calderwood 1983, 8
182 Hamlet stubbornly remains in the role of remembering his father, similarly to how the Prince wishes to be remembered after his death. Identity can only survive via the act of “remembering”, no matter if it is personal or national. Cf. Liebler 1995, 194. Yet, while Hamlet constantly wants to remember, Macbeth and especially the Lady are seeking a way to forget. In her sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth is suffering from the inability of forgetfulness: her visions are created by her memory. Cf. Bristol 2009, 35
183 According to Kiernan, Hamlet’s Seems-monologue, together with the whole play named after him, advertises the impossibility of representing truth, and thus the playwright disassociates his play from all other artistic manifestations that pretend to represent it. Kiernan 1996, 122
new world, and all the others were happy to take part in it, in the unfolding of his play, Macbeth has to face newer and newer enemies, until it seems that the whole world is revolting against him. He could not fit into the “costumes” of the previous king in the eyes of the other characters as it is directly expressed by the invading army in Act V Scene 2: “Now does he [i.e. Macbeth] feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief” (Angus - 20-22). The relation between the rulers and their state seems to be the consequence of the relationship between the murderers and their deed. Claudius can keep the two layers separately, as it is shown in the first two scenes of the play and does not allow them to mingle. Therefore, he can properly concentrate on political business as it is already manifested in his first monologue, discussing the foreign affairs and Fortinbras. Contrastingly, Macbeth does not manage to keep the images of death and his public appearance apart, and it appears that his rise to the throne also involved the rise of fear and mistrust in the whole country, as if he brought all the horrors with himself to the public sphere. Importantly, he does not need an external agent like Hamlet to bring in the memory of his victim to his spectrum and thus combine the private and the public, but he himself joins these spheres, which is further supported by the fact that only Macbeth can see the ghost of Banquo: he does not deal with external enemies at this point but he has to face the tormenting images of his mind’s eye.

It is also remarkable how the Macbeth-couple lack any specific plan of preserving the throne and leading the country. There is no guarantee that the two sons of Duncan would flee the country and nobody would suspect the Macbeths of the crime, especially because the murder took place in their castle. They just commit the deed, and concentrate on the very present without reckoning with further perspectives. Claudius, however, concentrates on nothing else but his future. It is also telling, from a dramaturgical point of view, that his murder is not represented directly in the framework of the play, as in his case it is more interesting how he manages to keep the throne and how he is pulling the strings in the court. What he has are plans, everything is calculated. His wife is not an accomplice but an “imperial jointress”, a strong bond tying (“joining”) him to the throne. There is only one factor which brings confusion in his precise calculations, and that is his nephew, as it is already obvious during the inauguration scene.

Claudius is a good politician and immediately reacts to the situation, created by the resistant behavior and replies of Hamlet, and delivers, as an answer, a speech which is approximately as long as his first monologue was. This is again a doubly targeted speech: while he directly addresses his nephew, it is also a gesture towards the court to demonstrate
his goodwill, confidence and power. At the end of this longish speech, he expresses his desire that Hamlet should remain in Elsinore (most probably to keep an eye on him) and finally he returns to the shaky grounds of offering roles to Hamlet as “Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son” (1.2.117). Obviously, the last part of his sentence is the most problematic unit again. When he earlier offered the role of the son, Hamlet wittily refused him (Claudius: “But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son…” / Hamlet: “A little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.64–65)) and Claudius must very well be aware that his nephew’s attitude has not changed within a few minutes; yet, he takes the risk of repeating his offer. But he is not a person who boldly takes unnecessary risks. Therefore a theatrical production has to pay attention to create a situation where Claudius can be sure that his previous fiasco will not happen again, either by suggesting to Hamlet during his long reply that it is in Hamlet’s best interest to avoid further confrontation, or by using Gertrude as a go-between. It is again a question of production how and why Gertrude joins in the conversation because after the problematic utterance of her new husband, she is the one who takes up the thread of the conversation. Does she feel the danger of another verbal battle between the two men? Or is it by some of Claudius’s gestures to her which prompt her to act? Or is it just a natural expression of a mother’s desire to keep her son close, and at the same time to side with her husband? Should we drop all suspicions of any strategy in her move and leave all the tactics to the King? Be it in any way, the Queen’s two lines (“Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. / I pray thee stay with us, go not to Witenberg” (1.2.118–119) are highly significant dramatically, as Hamlet clearly says to her and not to the King: “I shall in all my best obey you, madam” (1.2.120, emphasis is mine — B.Sz.), though her two lines of persuasion are just a short coda upon Claudius’s speech. Claudius is happy with the situation for the time being: the effect of Hamlet’s words is only a matter of presentation; the King may think (or create the belief that he thinks) that if he labels the Prince’s words as “a loving and fair reply” (1.2.121) and a “gentle and unforc’d accord of” his (123), then they will most probably be interpreted exactly that way by the court. After giving the impression of handling also Hamlet’s case successfully, he brings the focus back to himself and with glorious and ceremonial words he leaves the stage.

As we have seen, there are several possibilities of presenting Claudius’s strategy against Hamlet but the bottom line is that his political skills proved to be successful and he won the first round over his nephew. However, by leaving the stage together with the whole court, he leaves Hamlet behind and alone, and the Prince can now turn directly
towards the audience in the “Sullied flesh” soliloquy and open their eyes (if they had been too much dazzled by the glory of the King) to see that something is very much amiss here.

What becomes clear to Claudius (or maybe it was clear to him earlier as well) after Act I, Scene 2 is that Hamlet is to be reckoned with, although the King does not yet really know the danger the Prince can represent. Polonius suggests that Hamlet’s strange behavior is rooted in his love towards Ophelia but the King is less and less convinced about this and suspects something more ominous. Finally, Hamlet is heard to prepare a play with the recently arrived players and the King is about to attend the performance, probably in order to gain some more information about Hamlet. After the court-scene discussed above, Act III, Scene 2 is the next scene when Claudius and Hamlet meet again face to face.\textsuperscript{184} Up until now, besides the most famous “To be or not to be”-monologue, Hamlet has delivered two great soliloquies: the “Sullied flesh”- and the Hecuba-speeches. These two are important milestones from the point of view of Claudius’s knowledge. The “Sullied-flesh” soliloquy (1.2.129–159) describes Hamlet’s claustrophobic condition in a world where he has no place at all and his reasons for despair are obvious: the death of his father and the quick marriage of his mother to his uncle, whom he considers to be a beast-like man, as opposed to a god-like father (“Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.140)). It is again a matter of interpretation whether Claudius more or less corresponds to this description but the play (which is, at least on the most visible level, primarily built on the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius) is, I think, more effective if this is only Hamlet’s private view and the new king is a worthy adversary. The sorrow which is articulated in this speech of Hamlet is roughly known by Claudius and he largely builds on this while trying to figure out the strange behavior of the Prince. From this point of view, the Hecuba-soliloquy (2.2.525–582) is important because it contains precisely those pieces of information which are unknown to the King, and thus he cannot take it into consideration. Claudius committed the so-called “perfect murder” and the only thing he does not (and, of course, cannot rationally) count on is that his victim will be a witness against him, passing this information on to Hamlet. Claudius is a realist and a politician and thus he cannot and will not reckon with the appearance of ghosts who order their sons to take revenge.

\textsuperscript{184} They are also on the stage simultaneously in Act III, Scene 1, during Hamlet’s encounter with Ophelia but here Claudius is hiding together with Polonius.
As it was mentioned at the beginning of the first chapter, Old Hamlet and Claudius represent two different traditions. Old Hamlet was the chivalrous knight king, who defeated the Norwegian monarch face to face in a duel-like “combat” (cf. 1.1.85–98), one reminiscent in kind of the duel Hamlet will be fighting with Laertes at the end of the play. A Ghost (also prompted by the revenge-tragedy tradition) has the obvious duty to return from the dead and visit the son to urge him to take revenge as a good son is expected to do. Claudius is, on the other hand, a politician, in a way the representative of a new way of exercising power, who relies much more on diplomacy (see his use of Polonius, Cornelius and Voltemand, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) than on his sword and this is further emphasized by the way he murdered his brother: not by stabbing him (obviously this has a dramaturgical function besides the symbolical one as Old Hamlet’s death cannot be sold as “natural” if he is stabbed) but by pouring poison into his ear: a much more delicate way, also connecting to the verbal poison Claudius constantly pours into the ears around himself (consider especially the scene with Laertes in Act IV). Thus this politician did everything within his range to avoid suspicion but the previous tradition has means he could not possibly dream of (i.e. someone returning from Purgatory). Should Claudius overhear the Hecuba-soliloquy, he would be surprised to a great extent.

“Frightened with false fire?” (H; III; 2; 260) — Confrontation with the deed

Still, Claudius has not overheard Hamlet’s speech telling himself off for his inactivity, mentioning the ghost and his duty to take revenge for his father and expressing considerable verbal aggression against his uncle. Thus, the plot that will come to life in front of Claudius in the Mousetrap-scene (Act III, Scene 2) will strike the King like a bolt of lightning. We have seen that Claudius’s inauguration scene (I; 2) and the banquet-scene in Macbeth (III; 4) can be contrasted with each other as both occasions represent the first public appearance of the recently invested rulers in the play. This contrast represents how

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185 The contrast between Old Hamlet and Claudius is a recurring motif in the play (cf. Hamlet’s juxtaposition of the two brothers in the “Sullied flesh” soliloquy (Act I, Scene 2) and in his mother’s bedchamber (Act III, Scene 4). Jenkins also argues that the “moral and dramatic structure” of the play is significantly characterized by the antithesis between the brothers: “Before we behold the reigning king, the dead king has already been presented, through the Ghost, as a man of heroic valour; and as soon as the new king has left the stage, the first of Hamlet’s soliloquies explicitly contrasts them. And then, the soliloquy dividing and yet linking the two halves of the scene, our attention swings back to the former king as the watchers duly come to ‘young Hamlet’ to report the apparition.” Jenkins 1982, 129

186 For more on Early Modern revenge tragedy see Kiss 1995
the recently committed regicide can or cannot let the respective kings control the state of affairs and appear in front of the court as legitimate and strong monarchs. Yet, Macbeth’s banquet can not only be juxtaposed with the first appearance of Claudius in the play but, as it has been discussed in the chapter on transcendence, there is an inherent relationship between the banquet-scene and the performance of the Mousetrap. Interestingly, the Ghost does not appear to Claudius to haunt him, as, contrastingly, in the case of Banquo’s ghost, the victim visits the murderer and nobody else, to drive him mad. It has also been touched upon that Claudius has his own symbolic ghosts: in the inauguration scene it is Hamlet himself who (in complete solitude) represents the memory of the victim, i.e. his father; yet Claudius, without any apparent sign of remorse, tries to integrate the Prince into his new world. The second event that functions as a symbolic ghost to Claudius, again strongly connected to Hamlet, is the staging of The Mousetrap, where he can visually face his own deed in the here and now of the theatrical performance. Both scenes where the respective heroes have to encounter the frightening consequences of their deed indicate how the fundamental reason of their eventual fall penetrates their freshly constructed worlds. In Macbeth’s case, this is an internal factor, i.e. his own consciousness. The fact that not a flesh and blood character of the play but a gory vision disturbs his feast indicates that his chief enemy is not an external one but he has to suffer the consequences of an internal punishment. A similar inner despair accompanied the murdering of Duncan (cf. the metaphorical significance of the blood on his and his wife’s hands). The chief enemy is not coming to him but is incubated within him and, in the figure of the Ghost, he has to face himself, as it is not Banquo’s hideous look which would frighten the experienced soldier but the very knowledge that he himself is the cause of what he has to see. The tendency how Macbeth has to gradually count with a growing external enmity (cf. the invading forces of England and the Scottish rebels) is indicated by the dramaturgical solution that this scene does not happen privately but in the company of other noblemen, who willingly or unwillingly become witnesses of the strange behavior of their new king. Analyzing Hegel’s concept of sin, László Tengelyi points out that the sinner is deluded when committing the deed, as (s)he believes that (s)he harms the life of a stranger, whereas (s)he poisons, and kills part of, his/her own life, too. “The dead spirit of the harmed life rebels, 187

Contrasting the Shakespearean plays with history, Orgel claims that in reality Duncan was known as the usurper; Macbeth was the popular hero. This way the plot of the Shakespearean tragedy replaces history. Yet, interestingly, for many spectators, the plays constitute a transparent glass through which they expect to see real life of the characters in history. Importantly, though, for Shakespeare’s Hamlet, theatre is rather reflective than transparent: it shows the present instead of the past and significantly not the other but the self. Orgel 2003, 37

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‘takes arms against’ the deed, just as Banquo, who came to Macbeth as a friend but was not erased by the murder but soon occupies Macbeth’s place — not as a dinner-guest but as an evil ghost.”\(^{188}\). This concept of sin also underscores that Macbeth primarily has to face himself in the appearance of the victim’s Ghost.

On the other hand, Claudius has to encounter an external factor in the person of Hamlet, who explicitly has his hand in the performance of *The Mousetrap*, and who seems to impeach the King for something which is supposed to be buried deep down with the corpse of Old Hamlet. Here the dramaturgy also indicates how the dominating external impeachment mingles with the undertone of internal punishment. Whereas Macbeth had to face a vision coming from himself, created by his “mind’s eye”, Claudius watches a show created by Hamlet, yet the following soliloquy of the King (III; 3) gives the potential of a possible sign of torment of guilt if one decides to interpret it so. Yet, in the following, I will argue that the soliloquy in question is much more dominated by a will of negotiation than actual remorse. It is further noteworthy that in our juxtapositions of the respective scenes, it is one single scene in *Macbeth* which is discussed in relation with both the inauguration and the theatre scene in *Hamlet*. This shows that the investiture of Macbeth is immediately followed by the evoking of his internal torments, and thus it is impossible for him to enjoy what he has achieved. Claudius, by contrast, is first capable of enjoying what he has created and his world only starts to shake with the external intervention of Hamlet. Moreover, this almost concurrence of being crowned and haunted also indicates the rapid dramaturgy of the Scottish play: as if the blood of Duncan was floating quickly through the tragedy, sweeping away and finally drowning Macbeth in his final fall.

So far we have seen that Claudius can hardly be characterized by an overwhelming presence of remorse, and what functions as a ghost for him is the theatrical performance organized by his nephew. Before the King is faced with *The Mousetrap*, he believes that he has control over everything and although suspects something ominous behind Hamlet’s behavior, he would never have thought (obviously, he cannot even imagine it) that the murder, which apparently has been buried as deep in the murderer’s conscience as he thought that his brother’s body was, will suddenly be reenacted in a theatrical production. Here I will not provide a comprehensive analysis of the scene\(^{189}\) but from Claudius’s point of view it is important to consider the fact that the murder is depicted twice (once in the dumb show and then in the verbal scene) and the King only stands up during the second

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\(^{188}\) Tengelyi 1992, 45-46  
\(^{189}\) For a detailed discussion of the Mousetrap-scene, see Kállay 2010
one. Productions can solve this problem by making Claudius not pay attention during the
dumb-show but it seems much more obvious that the King is cold-blooded enough not to
jump up and thus reveal himself when the stage poison is poured into the Player King’s
ear, although he is stunned by the revelation that his secret is probably known by Hamlet.
This means that his standing up should be triggered by something else than the mere
representation of the murder.

In my interpretation, it is Hamlet’s encroachment into the story which is the
evocative factor. This may manifest itself by Hamlet calling Lucianus, the murderer
“nephew to the King” (3.2.223), thus offering a reading to his uncle that the victim does
not correspond to Old Hamlet but to Claudius himself, and then Hamlet might be the
murderer, which means that the play is not a representation of the past but a prognosis for
the future, and this way an open threat to Claudius. However, we have plenty of references
in the text of the Player King (e.g. “Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart gone round /
Neptune’s salt wash and Tellus’ orbed ground / [...] Since love our hearts and Hymen did
our hands / Unite commutual is most sacred bands” (3.2.139–140, 143–144)), which
suggest that the performance is about Hamlet’s parents. What may count as Hamlet’s —
more and more aggressive — intervention may also be his constant and loud interpretation
of the performance together with his comments and addresses to the spectators, with which
he himself gets deeper and deeper into the fictitious story, hysterically working himself
into it, as if he were indeed looking for a role in this story, as he does in the whole play, in
the “new world” created by his uncle. The two men can be seen as competing now for the
plot of “The Mousetrap”: the story which originally Claudius thought to have under control
so perfectly that nobody else on earth may know about it, is not only put on display in front
of the court, in the public arena by Hamlet but the Prince also claims it to be his and only
his, and intrudes the private work and world of the King as well.

Should we choose either this or that interpretation, it is Hamlet’s disturbing
presence in Claudius’s story which makes the King leave the show. Hamlet is now most
probably certain that Claudius is guilty and Claudius is most probably certain that Hamlet
knows about his deed. However impossible this seems to the King, he has to face this
situation. As we have accounted for it already, Claudius did everything possible to keep his
sin a secret and it would have been ridiculous on his part to worry about supernatural
forces. In a realistic world, Claudius would survive the play and live happily ever after. By
introducing the Ghost of his victim as the only supernatural element in the play — in the
tradition of the conventional revenge play, the one the *Ur-Hamlet* most probably had been — the author was simply not fair with Claudius.

However, the author’s duty was to please his audience and thus he needed to set things in motion. So he invoked the Ghost, also complying with the already existing *Hamlet* tradition. Moreover, roughly in the middle of the play, he approaches a seemingly climatic point when he brings the two chief antagonists, Hamlet and Claudius together in a situation where Claudius’s guilt is revealed in front of Hamlet and Hamlet’s knowledge is revealed to Claudius. Now they can put their cards on the table, and their playwright seems to be generous enough to bring them together immediately after the player-scene. Yet, in this odd situation what the audience gets are two consecutive speeches with the lack of proper action. Hamlet does not want to kill Claudius because he is in a praying posture and the Prince fears that this way Claudius’s soul might be saved.

“Pray can I not” (H; III; 3; 38) — Help expected from heavenly forces

Interestingly, after the juxtaposed scenes discussed above, i.e. when Claudius and Macbeth have to face the very consequences of their deed, both heroes need an immediate consultation with the transcendent. Macbeth decides to visit the Weird Sisters to ask for guidance, while Claudius remains alone on the stage and tries to communicate with God in his prayer scene. It has already been noted that the transcendent does not appear to Claudius: he does not see the ghost of his victim and cannot consult with witch-like women about his reign as Macbeth can. Importantly, Claudius’s approach towards the transcendental is a soliloquy: a one-sided way of communication, lacking any kind of proper answer. By contrast, Macbeth’s second encounter with the Weird Sisters, this time

190 Of course, several metaphorical-symbolic interpretations of the Ghost may be and have been given (the Ghost is either Hamlet’s or Claudius’s unconscious, it is the symbol of conscience, he represents the missing masculinity in Hamlet, etc.) especially to make sense of a supernatural creature for a modern audience no longer reckoning with ghosts as “reality.” My main focus is on the dramaturgical-theatrical function of Old Hamlet, whom David Scott Kastan, discussing the role of religion in *Hamlet*, also carefully distinguishes from “the Ghost”. Carefully studying when “the apparition” is referred to with it or with the third person masculine pronoun *he* or its variants, Kastan claims that Hamlet’s problem in the first half of the play is identifying the Ghost as his father. Kastan writes: “Hamlet’s notorious delay may be attributed as much to his resistance to accept his imitative relation either to the ghostly simulacrum of his father, who urges him to revenge, or to the smiling villain of an uncle, who would be its object, as to his uncertainty about who or what has prompted him to it in the first place. He is ultimately unable to act on the word of the Ghost, because he has no way of knowing what it is. He can *call* it ‘Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane,’ but it is always an ambiguous ghost, whose nature is not confirmed nor is it confirmable by any theology the play has to offer” (Kastan 2014, 141, and see 121-133).
right after the banquet, is a dialogue with the creatures, who, in advance, explicitly promise the protagonist the answer to his questions:

Macbeth: [A]answer me
       To what I ask you.
First Witch: Speak.
Second Witch: Demand.
Third Witch: We’ll answer. (IV; 1; 59-60)

This contrast between the two auditions in front of the transcendental is in agreement with the general pace of the respective tragedies, already forecast by the dramaturgy of the initial appearance of their transcendental forces: the witches’ speeches were dominated by the dynamism of short lines (cf. (I; 1), while Old Hamlet’s ghost communicated in longish monologues (I; 5). Whereas the Scottish demands direct answers (which eventually turn out to be anything but direct), the Danish does not expect feedback for his soliloquy and in the following I will argue that his prayer has two aims at the same time: he wants to negotiate about his position in front of the transcendental power, whose might he now acknowledges to be greater than his own, while he also wishes to establish connection with his audience.

To be precise, Claudius’ speech is seemingly anything but a prayer. Rather, it seems to be a hopeless preparation of a politician to pray, claiming right at the beginning that “Pray can I not” (3.3.38). But this soliloquy gives him the opportunity which he never had so far, i.e. to establish an intimate relationship with the audience. We have seen that he did not have the possibility to do so at the very beginning of the play because, first and foremost, he had to address his court. On the other hand, Hamlet has opened up his mind in front of the spectators several times, just as Macbeth did in his own play. Now it is Claudius’s turn. Therefore I would suggest that this soliloquy is still a prayer but not primarily to God (remember: “Pray can I not”) but to the audience: an intimate confession.

This speech had only one single and short precedent, namely in Act III, Scene 1, when, while Polonius was positioning Ophelia in her place to use her as a bait in the hope of revealing the real cause behind Hamlet’s seeming madness, in an aside the King reacted to Polonius’s utterance (“with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / The devil himself” (3.1.49–51)) with:

O ‘tis too true.
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.
The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden. (3.1.51–56)

As it is well known, in the play these lines are the first indicators of the King’s guilty conscience. Yet, this does not mean that his conscience would be gaining control over him, threatening to destroy him, as it happens with Macbeth. Macbeth’s destiny is immediately more or less clear to the audience right after his committed crimes: following Duncan’s assassination, he has visions about the blood of the previous king stigmatizing his hands, and, after Banquo is killed upon Macbeth’s order, the ghost of the previous friend immediately appears to him. We cannot detect such signs of guilty knowledge on the part of Claudius, and his four and a half lines of confession in Act III, Scene 1 does not diminish the feeling of his being in control of everything after having killed his brother. It is only dramaturgically that this is the first “real” proof of the King’s guilt provided by the best authority: himself (especially if we consider the unreliability of the Ghost) and also this is his first turn towards the audience. It is as if he were striving for an audition (and absolution), but cannot confess his guilt, since he is surrounded by other characters and Hamlet is expected to arrive in any minute. So he has to be satisfied with this short outburst of honesty and move on to handle the situation but, as it turns out later, these lines serve as a dramaturgical preparation for his great soliloquy.

It is important to note, however, that although the King’s aside in Act III, Scene 1 and his soliloquy two scenes later, breed from the same guilt, they originate in quite different impulses. The aside’s cue is a simile devised by Polonius when comparing their act of spying on Hamlet to putting sugar on the devil, and this focus on hiding some nasty business with a glorious surface triggers the confession. On the other hand, the initiator of the soliloquy after the Mousetrap is not a generalized verbal expression but the direct facing of a theatrical production about murder, and Claudius cannot react to this impulse with an aside while moving out of the scene of the performance, or while making arrangements with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (III; 3; 1-26), or with Polonius (III; 3; 27-35). Claudius has to appear alone and give free way to his thoughts.

In his soliloquy, Claudius demonstrates to the audience his impossible situation in which he is attempting to make a deal with heavenly powers like a good businessman.
What he has is glory (the crown), and a possibly happy personal life (the Queen). What he needs is salvation. The existence of the first two and the absence of the last one originate from one single deed, namely that he murdered his brother. This brought him the glory on earth and this will push him out of heaven after death. The question arises why this is the time when this problematic situation moves this much into his spectrum. Obviously, he has known about these all along. It might be claimed that seeing his deed in the Mousetrap-scene brought out his guilty conscience but this supposition is made invalid (in my interpretation) by the most important line of his speech: “Yet what can it [i.e. repentance do] when one cannot repent?” (III; 3; 66). In other words, if he had the chance, he would most probably do the deed again. Then why must the soliloquy importantly be where it actually is, i.e. after the Mousetrap-scene? The answer coincides with the possible interpretation I offered concerning why he leaves Hamlet’s Mousetrap-performance, namely that it is not because of what he did to Old Hamlet that he goes out but because of what Young Hamlet is doing to him. The Prince of Denmark is now an obvious threat to Claudius’s life, especially if he interprets the show as being a declaration of war by Hamlet calling the murderer “nephew to the king.” And if Hamlet kills Claudius, then everything he gained through his murder will be gone, and the question of afterlife will be highly relevant for him. This means that after a few weeks or months of enjoying the goods he collected he will be tormented in Hell. And then it will be all for nothing. Consequently, a good businessman like Claudius is expected to negotiate a better position for himself, he is expected to make insurances on his soul.

His uneasy situation is reflected already in the introductory lines of his speech as he delays the naming of his sin. He first calls it in general terms as “my offence” in the first line, then in the second line he identifies it — referring to the Biblical story of Cain — as the “primal eldest curse,” and it is only in the third line where he decides to tell the exact nature of his crime: “a brother’s murder.” Should the soliloquy be only a private stream of thoughts overheard by the audience, then this attempt to actually name the deed would not be important and the first line would do the job. Yet if we consider the speech as turning directly towards the audience, naming the sin — however difficult it might be for the speaker — is an attempt to gain the goodwill of the listeners by talking frankly to them. The same motivation appears behind the following short statement: “Pray can I not,” i.e.

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191 John D. Cox emphasises that “without Claudius’s admission of guilt, the principal question in criticism of *Hamlet* would not be why Hamlet delays but whether or not Claudius is guilty. Claudius’s obvious statement of his guilt is arguably the most important passage in the play.” Cox 2007, 159
Claudius wishes to demonstrate his impossible situation: his soul is burdened by guilt, and the only remedy, i.e. prayer is not available for him. The following four and a half lines also show a person who approaches his sin much more rationally than emotionally:

Though inclination be as sharp as will,
   My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
   I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
   And both neglect.  

These are not Macbeth’s words, who approaches his deed emotionally and aesthetically when for instance he describes visions about the dead Duncan:

His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
   And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature
   For ruin’s wasteful entrance. There the murderers,
   Steeped in the colours of their trade, their daggers
   Unmannerly breeched with gore.

Claudius’s lines are a logical representation of a difficult situation, the rationality of which is further emphasized by the starting conjunct though (compare the very beginning of Claudius’s first monologue: “Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother’s death / The memory be green” (1.2.1–2)) and the appearance of the word business in line 40. As it has already been mentioned, Macbeth visualized the blood of Duncan eternally painting his hands red (“What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes. / Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No” (II; 2; 57–59) and this vision has seemingly corresponding lines in Claudius’s account:

What if this cursed hand
   Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood…

Yet, the nature of the King’s sentence unambiguously points to the difference between the two men’s attitude. Macbeth can see the blood on his hands and is certain about its eternal stigma, while Claudius’s utterance is emphatically a conditional, starting with “what if.”

Business in Shakespeare’s time primarily meant ‘deed,’ ‘mission’ and ‘important matter, serious concern,’ yet it could also communicate that the person feels uneasy, is in distress – it is this, latter semantic field which Claudius here seems to evoke, cf. Crystal & Crystal 2002, 59
His blood on the hand is only an alternative with which he would like to test the forgiving capability of Heaven, together with the three questions following the conditional, in order to know what he can expect. The above mentioned feature of his thoughts proves that Claudius’s interpretation of his guilt is quite far from that of Macbeth, and he discusses the guilt from a rational point of view, never losing his sober logic. Claudius is very well aware of the price of his possible salvation, he actually names it:

I am still possess’d
Of those effects for which I did the murder—
My crown, mine ambition, and my queen.  (3.3.53–55)

Crown and ambition (these two can generally be considered as one unit) plus Gertrude: these are his gains and the King can see the problem, i.e. until he gives them up, his soul cannot be redeemed. He knows that a simple verbal apology will not do, and mentioning the commonplace “Forgive me my foul murder?” as searching for possible ways of praying sounds absurd to himself, too. The conclusion is there: earthly and heavenly glory cannot be reconciled with each other; he either sacrifices the first and gains the second, or the other way round. The metaphorical scale he wished to maneuver with right at the beginning of his appearance on the stage (“In equal scale weighting delight and dole” (1.2.13) is not functioning in this situation. It turns out that it is simply impossible to reconcile the paradoxes he tried to overcome and transcend in his speech and with his attitude in the first act. The “prayer” is Claudius’s second long speech in the play: the first one was, as we remember, the monologue in front of the court, now the second is a soliloquy alone, directed towards the audience, the basic aim of which is to deconstruct the first. In fact, the surface of Act I, Scene 2 was already scratched by Hamlet’s behaviour, and, for the audience, by seeing the Prince’s point of view right after the ceremony in the “Sullied flesh” soliloquy. Now, in the “prayer,” Claudius’s inaugural speech is being completely deconstructed by the King himself. The irreconcilability of Claudius’s earthly and heavenly welfare is further expanded in his contrasting the two realms to each other depicting this world in the following way:

In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft ‘tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law.  (3.3.57–60)
This world is Claudius’s realm: everything is under his control and he can easily manage any kind of business. Here, in this passage the language of business so characteristic of his attitude returns with words like *currents* or *prize*. The adjective *corrupted* might also bring in the taste of self-irony, indicating that it is his power, the guilty person of the very king representing the whole country which makes this world sullied. But the passage also indicates that Claudius is not afraid of facing responsibility in this world: for one reason, he took care of everything to avoid suspicion, and, for another, his power can make him escape from any uncomfortable situation. The only person he has to fear is Hamlet, who apparently cannot be bought (consider the attempt on Claudius’s side to include Hamlet in his plans at the beginning of the play) and who means a possible threat to Claudius’s life. This threat brings the realm of afterlife into the King’s speech, where his power is no longer valid:

But ‘tis not so above:
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In the true nature, and we ourselves compell’d
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. (3.3.63–64)

The way of contrasting the two worlds in this second passage clearly points to the main difference: whereas the first one works with the imagery of a business trade where Claudius can feel himself at home (“Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice,” etc.), the second one is more about a trial where the King finds himself in a position of the accused, deprived of all his previous power.

The opposition between the situations in these two worlds described in these two passages may correspond again to the relationship between Claudius’s monologue in Act I and his soliloquy now. In his monologue, the King faced the representatives of the earthly world and could successfully use his power to manipulate and “buy them.” During his confession in his solitude, he is more in the second position: alone, facing his guilt in the face of divine judgement, and talking to the audience as if they were a kind of jury gathered to pass judgement on him.

His final conclusion in evaluating his own situation is what I claimed to be the key sentence in his soliloquy: “Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?” (3.3.66). Claudius
knows well that he is unable to let his possessions go and face the consequences of his murder, i.e. to go public with it. This is too much a price, it is something he cannot pay. The following self-abusing utterances (e.g. “O bosom black as death!” (3.3.67) are just the acknowledgement of his situation. He will never be able to make the deal he wanted. As a last resort, he decides to try to pray: maybe for the grace of being able to repent or, what is more likely for Claudius, to achieve salvation without renouncing his glory. He can lose nothing with this attempt, and this opinion stands behind the last sentence of his soliloquy: “All may be well” (3.3.72).

Ironically enough, as a response to Claudius’s hope, it is Hamlet who enters the stage with his sword. But their encounter does not bring open conflict between them and Claudius does not know anything about Hamlet’s presence. By the time he is done, his nephew is already gone. Claudius has finished his attempt, which proved to be unsuccessful: the businessman could not make a connection with the authorities above. His final words are characteristic of the soliloquy as a whole:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.
Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (3.3.97–98)

Again, we have the antithesis of up and below: the words going upwards, i.e. his desire is directed to the realm of Heaven, while his thought, his concern is connected to mundane prosperity. And his attempt to separate the two: to treat worldly life independently and thus without consequences in the afterlife, to separate his words from thoughts entails the non-admittance of his words into Heaven but also the non-admittance of himself.

From one perspective, the King was unsuccessful. He wished to bring two worlds together and wanted to transfer his power from one realm to the other by negotiating his salvation. Claudius’s problem is that he observes the question of afterlife from the perspective of his present life, realizing that, from a human standpoint, this is the only possible way to treat this question, since one has “real” experience only from the existence of his or her own. This way Claudius approaches a question just as Hamlet did in his famous “To be or not to be”-soliloquy when the Prince contemplated upon the nature of

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193 For a detailed analysis for the postponement of Hamlet’s revenge in the Prayer Scene see Kéry 1989, 199–206
194 Kent Cartwright also calls attention to the parallel nature of Claudius’s soliloquy and Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy: “Like Hamlet, immobilized in the choice of being or not being, Claudius is a man to a double business bound, snared between consciousness of sin and desire of forgiveness. Both seek a certain oblivion.” Cartwright 1991, 122
life after death and realized that it is only possible to talk about the “undiscover’d country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (III; 1; 81–82) in terms of the metaphors of the known realm, i.e. of our life. This way the two great soliloquies of the chief antagonists correspond to each other in several ways: both men try to approach the nature of afterlife but whereas Hamlet does this with the method of a philosopher (and that is why his contemplation is far more in general terms), Claudius tackles the question with the inventory of a businessman (and will be very personal), while he is totally familiar with the relevant theological issues. As I suggested previously, it is not precisely Claudius’s facing his deed again which generates his speech but the fact that the question of ‘what happens to us after death’ becomes highly relevant for him in the course of the play. Yet, on the whole, Claudius is a man who throughout thinks that his best counselor to himself is himself: he does not remain open to the “real” threat of another world barging into his own; he asks his questions and he immediately provides the answers. One may call this “the lack of humility” but the point is that he is ultimately the exact opposite of Hamlet. For Hamlet, nothing is ever certain, for Claudius there are clear causes and clear effects, even his “undiscovered country” is modeled after this structure: one gets what one deserves, there is no incalculability, there is, ultimately, no room for skepticism. A realistic politician can hardly afford skepticism of any sort. Yet it is not only in thwarting skepticism that Claudius is successful; he succeeds from another perspective as well. It has already been mentioned that this is his great opportunity to make private contact with the audience, and try to get closer to them, while Hamlet has already invited them to observe the events from his point of view in his numerous soliloquies. Although on one level Claudius did not manage to solve his problem concerning salvation, on another layer the King was able to demonstrate his complex and impossible situation in front of the spectators indeed, and could break the “monopoly” situation of his nephew. It might also be suspected that the King’s soliloquy, though unsuccessful in its (seemingly) most important purpose, thus has a kind of cathartic effect on him: when we see Claudius again, we do not see a desperate, hopeless ruler but the previous confident politician, who wants to keep everything that happens within the castle of Elsinore under control.
“How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!” (M; IV; 1; 47) — Help expected from demonic forces

Whereas around the middle of the play, both Claudius and Hamlet attempt to approach the question of afterlife in their respective soliloquies, Macbeth has already tackled the question early in the play in the “If it were done”-soliloquy (I; 7; 1-28), where he briefly juxtaposed “this bank and shoal of time” with the “life to come”. Yet, he does not go into the dissection of the nature of afterlife with the methods of a philosopher or a businessman. Rather, with the vehemence of the soldier, he wants to cut himself through the question (in a way, he wants to “carve out his passage again”), making the problem “the be-all and the end-all”. His conclusion is simple and fundamentally different from that of Claudius. “We’d jump the life to come”(7) — says Macbeth, who is apparently ready to sacrifice his salvation in order to secure a comfortable position for himself in this world. He longs to have those conditions which Claudius already has: secure power and lack of torment of guilt. This, as we have seen, is not enough for Claudius, who also wants to secure his salvation regarding the afterlife: his demands reach over the borderlines of death. What Macbeth wishes to have is exactly what Claudius might want to lose: lack of repentance. Yet, the Scottish soldier knows already before the murder that his punishment is to be faced in the present life:

But in these cases,
We still have judgement here that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague th’inventor. This even.handed justice
Commends th’ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. (I; 7; 7-12)

We have seen how Claudius’s lines juxtaposed his mundane power, where everything was under his control, afterlife included, represented by the simile of a trial in Heaven. The image of the trial returns in Macbeth’s speech but it emphatically penetrates into this life. This fundamental difference described in the respective soliloquies is what makes Claudius competent to control the court during his inauguration and what brings in the Ghost of Banquo to confuse Macbeth’s public feast. Claudius’s situation is characterized by the often quoted “Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?”. It seems that Macbeth would give anything to be able to utter this sentence. However, what can he offer in exchange
when he has already sacrificed everything? He has already willingly forsaken his salvation, he had his “eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man” (III;1; 69-70) and does not expect to gain it back: all he has is this life and part of his tragedy is that even if he sacrificed everything for it, it is still contaminated by the deed. Since Macbeth very soon excludes heaven from his perspective, it is not surprising that he never turns to God like Claudius does but when he needs consultation with the transcendental, he visits the so-to-say demonic creatures, the Weird Sisters to help his welfare in this worlds, the only thing he is left with.

Macbeth now meets the Weird Sisters for the second time and this time he visits them intentionally. His firm position as a powerful leader and organizer is shaken by the appearance of the Ghost and unexpected events start to occur which seem to be more and more out of Macbeth’s control. The protagonist’s surprise upon this and his failure is expressed during the banquet scene when reflecting on the apparition of Banquo:

The time has been
That when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns
And push us from our stools. This is more strange
Than such a murder is. (III; 4; 77-82)

It is also interesting that Macbeth’s words here implicitly and delicately refer to the murder of Duncan, too. The expected end following the murder connects back to the “If it were done”-soliloquy: “that this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all” (I; 7; 4-5), when Macbeth contemplated on the assassination of Duncan and also the word crown, here used to designate the head of the victim, evokes the kingdom for which the old king was sent to death.

We have seen that Claudius explicitly mentions his chief motivations for the murder: “My crown, mine ambition, and my queen”. Considering some observations made in the chapter on the female characters, Macbeth has very similar motives to murder Duncan: the primary impulsive force pushing him towards the murder was the crown; yet, it also implied another factor, i.e. the Lady. Although as opposed to Gertrude, Lady Macbeth has already been the wife of the protagonist; still, Macbeth’s deed can be interpreted as a gesture towards his wife to please her and make her queen of Scotland on his side.
As it has been discussed, Macbeth has to face himself (*via* his own deed) in the banquet scene and the dominance of the *internal* punishment, i.e. his torment of guilt significantly indicates that he is entrapped in a world overwhelmed by his “horrid images”: he is the captive of his own mind. This makes him confused in his own play as he desperately tries to grab something stable and find guidance for himself from an *external* point of view. Consequently, he decides to find the Weird Sisters who first prophesized him the title of the king and ask for answers and further direction. However, he will be disappointed — although he does not realize this until the very end —, as it will turn out that nobody would instruct him what to do, and everything is dependent on *his* interpretation of his play, the play supposedly “his own”. The first sign of this occurs immediately in the locution of the Weird Sisters, answering Macbeth’s question:

MACBETH: What is’t you do?
ALL THE WITCHES A deed without a name. (IV; 1; 65)

The sisters’ joint reply provides a theatrical metaphor for Macbeth’s plight. What they can provide is only the text of the play, the drama, i.e. the deed (cf. the original meaning of the of the word *drama* [Gk. *dramo* ‘to do’, and also Macbeth’s ominous line after the murder: “I have done the deed” (II; 2; 14), a typical theatrical “tautology”]). Yet, it is here that it becomes clear that the performance has to be realized by Macbeth himself, giving it a shape, a name, more precisely the name of his own, just as the title of the play is *Macbeth*. In other words, it is nobody else but Macbeth who can and has to interpret his play and instruct himself accordingly, which will be manifested when he has to decipher the prophecies. Thus, Macbeth, in a way, again has to face himself in the Weird Sisters when seeking external guidance and his lack of an external viewpoint will result in misinterpretation and, thus, will lead to his final fall.

The First Apparition says: “beware Macduff, / Beware the Thane of Fife” (IV; 1; 87-88), yet, Macbeth almost immediately extinguishes its ominous shadows with the light of the far more pleasing prospects the Second Apparition offers: “laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (IV; 1; 95-97). The Third Apparition cries: “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him” (IV; 1; 108-110) and appears, according to

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195 Traub notes that Macbeth has „a paranoid flight from femininity. Assured that he will die only at the hands of a man “not born of woman” (…), the hero indulges is a fantasy of male identity uncontaminated by uterine birth.” Traub 2001, 139
the stage direction of the Folio, as “a Child crowned, with a tree in his hand”, the tree of course referring to the true meaning of the prophecy. However, Macbeth does not take this into consideration and simply interprets the last two visions as indicating that he should fear nobody and will never be defeated (“That will never be” (IV; 1; 110)), while by “projecting” the first (Macduff), and the second (of woman born), onto each other, he, at least in principle, could gain some knowledge of the danger. Still, he seems to believe that the actual meanings of the two prophecies are just rhetorical ornaments, which could have been said otherwise, denoting simply ‘never’, whereas it is the word-by-word meaning of the visions which comes true, and this would have warned the king when (when Birnam wood seems to crawl to Dunsinane) and by whom (by a person ripped off from his mother’s womb, i.e. Macduff) he will be conquered. Nevertheless, by ignoring this interpretation of the prophecies, the King can feel his position strengthened to the utmost and this hubris might contribute to his final end196.

Interestingly, the figure of Banquo is so much connected to the Weird Sisters (as he was also present during the first encounter) that he cannot stay away from the second meeting between Macbeth and the strange creatures, even if he is dead. The “indissoluble tie forever knit” (III; 1; 17-18) between the two men manifests itself again when Macbeth asks the apparitions whether Banquo’s descendants will reign in Scotland. As an answer — again according to the stage direction — eight kings appear on the stage together with Banquo’s ghost, haunting Macbeth even after the banquet scene. The protagonist’s reaction here is closely connected to his attitude concerning the interpretation of the previous apparitions. Macbeth constantly tried to attribute convenient meanings to the prophecies but in the case of this last one it is simply impossible to do so: he just simply wants to get rid of the “horrible sight”.

Macbeth wished to have answers from demonic forces, who, in a dark ritual, prepare their magic brew to literally give rise to the prophecies: he approaches hellish creatures. Claudius, on the other hand, appeals to heaven and its inhabitants, cf. “Help, angels!” (III; 3; 69). Macbeth does not need to ask questions, since the Weird Sisters so fundamentally dominate his mind that he is instantly provided with the answers: “He knows thy thought; / Hear his speech, but say though nought” (IV; 1; 68-69). Claudius has not the least intimate relationship with the heavenly forces, and he just speaks but without

196 According to G. Wilson Knight’s classic book, Macbeth’s tragedy primarily springs from the fact that he wants to think rationally in and irrational world; yet this world was largely created by himself (Wilson Knight 1930, 237).
any palpable answers. Macbeth tries to prevent the punishment in the afterlife from penetrating into his present life, while Claudius wishes to make his mundane powers penetrate into his afterlife as well.

The respective scenes under discussion also shed light on the fundamental nature of the two kings’ conflicts. Claudius’s soliloquy is immediately followed by Hamlet’s entrance and soliloquy, as a memento of the external conflict, while Claudius’s nephew is the flesh and blood source of the King’s fear and, thus, of the whole soliloquy; the Prince is able to bring the perspective of afterlife close indeed, for instance with his drawn out dagger behind his kneeling uncle. Macbeth’s chief enemy is himself and his visions, and while the latter is represented in the appearance of Banquo, together with the eight kings (and, significantly, as opposed to the verbal prophecies, the last one including Banquo is a visual one), the former, i.e. the enemy inside manifests itself when Macbeth is thwarted by no one else but himself when he wrongly interprets the prophecies.

While Claudius’s conflict is formulated with respect to Hamlet, Macbeth’s inner conflict also gradually formulates throughout the tragedy in terms of himself, which might be characterised as the process of self-alienation. The regicide immediately involved the damnation of the culprits (cf. the incapability of Macbeth saying ‘Amen’), and the rest of the play extends this moment to a series of events and depicts the journey to damnation on the stage. The most characteristic signs (even milestones) of this journey are the symptoms of alienation of the protagonist from himself (and, thus, from his wife). First, as we have noted previously, right after returning from the bedchamber of Duncan, Macbeth starts to talk about himself in the third person singular (“‘Glamis hath murdered sleep’, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more” (II; 2; 45-46)). Later on, a more striking instance of this process was witnessed when the alienation of Macbeth from himself was portrayed visually, exploring the possibilities of poetic drama, i.e. when he “appeared as the Third Murderer” at the slaughtering of Banquo, while he was at the same time also there in his castle, holding a banquet. Claudius, however, does not go through such a self-alienating process, as the consequences of his sin are not internalized but brought to the surface by external forces: the Ghost brings it from the depth of his grave and realizes it in the assignment of Hamlet’s revenge.
“O yet defend me friends” (H; V; 2; 329) — Battle for and against stage dominance

Yet, we have argued that the conflict between Claudius and Hamlet does not only proceed in the plot of a revenge play but it also unfolds in another perspective, i.e. fighting for the favour of the audience. When Claudius and Hamlet first appeared on the stage together in Act I, Scene 2, the battle between them was won by the King, who gave evidence of his perfect capability of handling problematic situations. Yet, on the other hand, Claudius could not confide in the audience directly and intimately but it was Hamlet who had the possibility to address them first. The second time they met, during the Mousetrap scene, their respective secrets and purposes became much clearer for each other. The third opportunity may make the audience expect an open confrontation between them, yet they get two soliloquies instead, basically independent of each other: Claudius’s prayer and Hamlet’s speech behind the kneeling King, unable to fulfill his revenge. From the perspective of establishing a relationship with the audience, it is noteworthy that right after Claudius delivers his one and only soliloquy, Hamlet immediately enters the stage and tries to draw the attention from his uncle back to himself, as if he were highly alert not to let Claudius get too close to the favour of the spectators. From the revenge plot’s point of view, obviously their last encounter (Act V, Scene 2) will be the concluding one, when finally both of them die. However, from another perspective, a much earlier scene will be the culmination of their battle.

Right after visiting Claudius in the prayer scene, Hamlet appears in his mother’s bedchamber and kills Polonius, who is hiding behind the arras. Claudius, being informed about the event, can consider himself to be in a victorious position: he has now the opportunity to get rid of Hamlet as a murderer and send him to England with a letter that contains a death-warrant. However, before Hamlet is sent on his journey, Claudius and Hamlet encounter each other once more to present their greatest verbal battle in the whole play. The witnesses to this scene (Act IV, Scene 3) are attendants together with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: none of them is a decisive factor in the play, it is barely important for either the King or Hamlet to impress them, thus the witty dialogue between uncle and nephew is directed more towards each other and towards the audience to please them.

The scene starts with a seemingly obvious representation of power relations: Claudius is in the role of authority in front of whom the accused has to answer for his deed,
whereas Hamlet enters the scene surrounded by guards. However, he is still not willing to comply with the relationship Claudius would like to impose on him. With his initial question “Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?” (IV; 3; 17), the King starts the conversation (or the interrogation) as the person now absolutely in the higher position, and he does not offer roles to Hamlet like he did at the beginning of the play (the role of the son, etc.). Now the new situation allows him to push, even to force his nephew into a different role. The tone of the King’s above quoted first utterance to the Prince can vary on the stage from an almost jovial and seemingly kind inquiry to a rigorous questioning in a prison-cell but either way it has to suggest that Claudius can feel he is in command and is relieved from the threat which Hamlet meant to him, and which triggered his confession in the prayer-scene. Yet, just like at the beginning of the play, Hamlet does not accept this role offered by Claudius either, and enters into a strange conversation with his questioner by starting with his first answer: “At supper” (VI; 3; 18), i.e. that Polonius is at supper.

Hamlet’s rejection of the role of the entrapped accused connects this scene with Act I, Scene 2 but the main difference between their two encounters is that in this latter one, both of them are aware of the other’s clear intentions. Yet, while the first encounter was altogether controlled by Claudius, here he slowly gets entrapped in Hamlet’s game without even realizing it until the game is in fact over. To use a commonplace, in this scene it is Claudius who “asks the questions”; yet, by doing so he precisely becomes a partner (or victim) to Hamlet’s answers and intentions. With each of his questions, the King gets deeper and deeper into the realm Hamlet guides him towards, which first seems to be utter nonsense, until finally, like a sudden flash of lightning, Hamlet gets to the point: “Nothing but to show you how a king may go a process through the guts of a beggar” (IV; 3; 30–31). Thus, it turns out that the Prince’s previous seemingly mad ravings in this conversation had a specific intention indeed, i.e. to prepare this sentence in which “a king” denotes a very specific one: the present king of Denmark. By bringing the end of the king’s life into focus, Hamlet does not do anything else but returns to his point which he probably suggested already in the Mousetrap scene as well, so now Claudius is caught again. He is caught from the point of view of Biblical wisdom (that even kings will be dust and ashes) but also in terms of bringing the material consequences of death into consideration, thus implying both a King who is already dead and a King who will be dead. From the “deadly” perspective of Hamlet, the throne is empty: his father is no longer, while Claudius has never been, King, in the sense of non-usurped power. For Hamlet the “king “ is indeed “a thing... of nothing” (IV; 3; 26-27).
The change of the King’s temper at this point is indicated by his reaction: he no longer responds to Hamlet’s previous utterances but returns to his initial question as if he wanted to forget what had happened so far and start the whole conversation anew; he asks again: “Where is Polonius?” (IV;3; 32), probably with a much more aggressive or frustrated intonation. But by this time Hamlet is already in the leading position and strikes at the King for the second time: “In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i’th’other place yourself” (IV;3; 33-34)). It is only at this point that the King decides to take the role of the initiator of the conversation over again (partly because Hamlet have finally revealed the place where he hid Polonius’s body, partly because he have realised the danger of following Hamlet’s thoughts) and makes an attempt to climb back into the saddle of the confident ruler. Claudius in fact changes the subject when he announces the decision (the sentence) on Hamlet’s destiny and sends him to England. Yet, Hamlet grows more and more sinister when making references to his knowledge of the King’s real purposes of sending him to England (it is all the time uncertain how Hamlet really knows that his journey also contains taking a death sentence on him to the English monarch) and he finishes the conversation with another enigmatic sentence, calling Claudius his mother. This is in a way a twisted version of the family ties Claudius wished to offer him at the beginning but also an ominous reenactment of the marriage between Claudius and Gertrude (“Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh; so my mother” (IV;3;53–54), which, repeated not by a priest but by Hamlet entails not the reinforcement of the connection but casting some dark clouds over it.197 Even further, it is a twisted recollection of Act I, Scene 2 again, when Hamlet was practically only talking to his Mother.

Although Hamlet is guarded by soldiers and is about to get on the ship which is expected to take him to his execution, he has undoubtedly won this battle.198 Claudius is left alone on the stage and is desperate and outraged. He delivers a speech, which, although no one is around, is not a soliloquy but a dialogue where the other party is missing: he is

197 Calderwood connects Hamlet’s statement about marriage to Claudius with the one to Ophelia (“I say we will have no more marriages” (3. 1.46–147) and contrasts it with God’s establishment of marriage, where man “shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24), claiming that Hamlet here “seems possessed of the Uncreating World. But the discreations in Denmark are owing not to Hamlet but to Claudius.” (Calderwood 1983, 62).

198 Kottman calls our attention to Claudous’s horror over the events in this scene. There is something horrific in Polonius’s murder and Hamlet’s behaviour afterwards, which affects Claudius’s behaviour. The King even tries to avoid the actual naming of the deed, and asks twice emphatically about the whereabouts of Polonius, instead of the body. Hamlet is sent away from Denmark, having become intolerable in the community. Cf. Kottman 2009, 51-52
addressing the English king, and his words are likely to be the ones in the letter he is about to send to the other monarch. Again, we do not have unequivocal indications of the tone of his speech; yet, expressions as “like the hectic in my blood he [i.e. Hamlet] rages” (4.3.67) or “[t]ill I know ‘tis done, / Howe’er myhaps, my joys were ne’er begun” (68–69) suggest a frustrated position he got into.

What is more important is that Claudius will not have the opportunity to strike back in the battle of wits and to defeat Hamlet in front of the audience. The battle of masterminds is finished at this point. What follows is barely more from this specific point of view than the representation of how the dramaturgy of the revenge tragedy defeats Claudius. This is the same force which brought out the Ghost from its tomb to present him as a witness in an otherwise perfect case of murder (ghosts, after all, are usual devices in revenge plays, like e.g. in Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy) and this very force is responsible for the end of Claudius’s career. There is nothing necessary in his death: it is not necessary that Hamlet may return from the ship, that Laertes may not fulfill his duty, that Hamlet may not drink from the poisoned cup, etc. It is only the revenge-play dramaturgy that makes the death of Claudius necessary; it is, in a way, a series of accidents that leads Hamlet to finally take his revenge, since it is not obvious that he arrives at the fencing contest with the plan of killing the King on this particular occasion. If we consider Hamlet’s and Claudius’s battle from the perspective of the audience then Claudius most probably lost the match (“most probably” because finally it is always the actual audience that decides this question) not only by having less occasion to get close to them in soliloquies but also by being defeated by Hamlet in Act 4, Scene 3, where he simply let Hamlet enter his mind and dictate the tempo and direction of the conversation. This scene sheds light on the dual nature of their contest: while on the one level Claudius had the “upper hand” throughout the scene as it was Hamlet who was escorted in and out by guards as a prisoner, on another level Hamlet was the one who left the stage as the victorious party. Although Claudius was defeated on this second level, he still could have remained a winner on the first one: his only problem is that he happens to be the chief, “Machiavellian” antagonist in a revenge play and this is the one and only cause of his fall at the end. His fall strangely refers back to his first appearance on the stage when he utters his last words after Hamlet stabs him: “O yet defend me, friends. I am but hurt.” (V; 2; 266). In his ultimate line he obviously addresses the court to ask for help, while at the same time the indirect addressee of this is the group he has been trying to move onto his side as his friends: the audience.
The two layers of the conversation between Claudius and Hamlet — one dominated by the King in terms of the formation of the plot, the other dominated by the Prince in terms of impressing the audience —, is somewhat reminiscent of the several layers of the already discussed conversation between Macbeth and Banquo in Act III, Scene 1, where Macbeth had a confident dominating position in the first and second layers over his victim-to-be, similarly to his Danish colleague. The problematic underlying layer is characteristic of Macbeth’s predicament, too. Here, he is not meta-theatre defeated by Banquo (as Claudius is defeated by Hamlet) but the victim’s replies become important without the actual knowledge of the speaker. Again, Macbeth does not need to face another character in the play who might be a serious threat to the king (as the target of the plot will indeed be slain) but Banquo’s replies about the “tie forever knit” between them and his promise not to miss the banquet in the evening will gain significance through Macbeth’s receptivity (as a consequence of his conscience of guilt) to let the horrible visions in.

As we have argued, there is nothing necessary in Claudius’s final defeat but it is the conventional plot of the revenge tragedy that makes him fall. Macbeth, on the other hand must fall. An essential feature of his tragedy is that he is lost in the moment he murders the king: he immediately knows that he is damned and wants to undo the deed (cf. “Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst” (II; 2; 77 – in the very scene of the murder), he had already known it beforehand (cf. the “If it were done”-soliloquy), still, he did it and even tries to create and illusion for himself that he can escape the inevitable fall, as at the beginning of the banquet-scene, or in his misinterpretation of the witches’ prophecies during the second encounter. In Hamlet, partly through the stage-dominance of the Prince and his victory over his uncle in this respect, as discussed above, it is Hamlet who sets the standard for the tragic situation: his perspective dominates the play, it is his preparation for the deed and his contemplation the audience is presented with: he is the tragic hero of the play. Claudius cannot become a tragic hero, not even in his prayer scene, which is enlightened by the fact that his fall is not necessary as opposed to that of Macbeth, who does become a tragic hero by murdering Duncan.

Claudius has to fight for the favour of his audience with his external opponent, Hamlet. In line with Macbeth’s plight, the Scottish king’s tragedy is exactly that he himself dominates the stage and cannot step off from it. The promise of the eternal lack of sleep (“Sleep no more: / Macbeth does murder sleep” (II; 2; 33-34)) he heard after the murder emphasizes the irrevocability of the deed: Macbeth merged with the tragic role of the murderer so perfectly that from that moment on he cannot step out of it. Sleep is associated
in his speech with “[t]he death of each day’s life” (II; 2; 36) or with the “sore labour’s bath, / Balm of hurt minds” (II; 2; 36-37), etc., i.e. with a state when something ends temporarily and a person can gain energy after some exhausting activity, like the moment when the actor can get rid of the costumes and the role when stepping off the stage. This ‘sleep’, this ability of taking off the role became impossible for the protagonist — he cannot strip his clothes off because he has become his role (in a way he is too good an actor in a meta-theatrical reading). However, he desperately tries to rip off the ‘costumes’ from himself, attempting to distance himself from his role when he talks about himself and his ‘titles’ (“title-roles” in this sense) in the third person singular: “‘Glamis hath murdered sleep’, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more” (II; 2; 40-41). Yet, the more roles he tries to get rid of, the deeper the curse will penetrate until it reaches the ‘core’ of his personality (“Macbeth shall sleep no more”): Macbeth is now one with Glamis, Cawdor and also the King-to-come and the impossibility of sleep applies to all of them, indicating that Macbeth can never step off his stage.

The ghost of Banquo’s entrance also indicates this entrapment of Macbeth and, at the same time, his impossibility of being a member of the audience instead: Macbeth initially hopes that he can sit amongst his guests (“here I’ll sit, i’th’midst” (III; 4; 9)) and that he might temporarily be among the others and not in front of them, constantly acting on the stage (“Ourself will mingle with society”(III; 4; 3)). The most obvious sign of the situation he desires is to sit down on the chair that is preserved for him, enjoy the feast and maybe watch a performance himself (for instance, that of jesters, or a ‘group of players’, as in Hamlet) during the meal. Yet, his seat is occupied by the Ghost and there is no place for him to sit down (“The table’s full” (III; 4; 45)). Consequently, he has to stay in front of the others and must play-act himself: he will perform a monodrama, talking to an apparition the others do not see; he is not able to get out of the spotlight, he is not able to step off from the stage. The Ghost’s presence thus is an ominous sign, indicating that it is impossible for the protagonist to become just an “ordinary” member of the audience.

The Tomorrow-soliloquy at the end of the play explicitly strengthens this meta-theatrical reading of Macbeth’s career. In the second half of his speech, he associates life with two images, which at the same time, might refer to his wife and himself respectively. Life as “a walking shadow” (V; 5; 23) refers back to the Lady in the sleepwalking scene, who with the candle burning in her hand during the night might exactly evoke the image of the walking shadow. The other image: “a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more” (V; 5; 23-25) refers to Macbeth’s position: he is
captured by the stage of damnation. At the end of the play and on the threshold of his death, he can finally reflect on his own performance. Importantly, Macbeth’s already quoted negative evaluation of his story (“a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (V; 5; 25-27)) might also suggest the ‘death of tragedy’ itself as the whole story that was performed in front of the audience of Macbeth is claimed to be nonsense by the protagonist himself. Yet, it has been observed in the chapter on action and thought that in line with Nietzsche’s interpretation on tragedy, what is seeming nonsense for Macbeth from an internal point of view, in the crossfire of spotlights of his stage, can be, at the same time, a great tragedy performed in front of the audience sitting in the Apollonian distance. Finally, it is also noteworthy that the characters of the Macbeth-couple are connected also by the shadow-metaphor as the word shadow also meant ‘actor’ in Shakespeare’s time. As a result, the seemingly different images like the shadow (connected to the Lady) and the player (related to Macbeth) are only the different realizations of the same meaning (‘actor’), thus even further emphasizing, the strong unity of Lord and Lady Macbeth, furthermore, exactly via a meta-theatrical image (actor).

Thus, while in the perspective of the actor-audience relationship, Claudius has to fight for attention with his nephew, who dominates the stage-presence throughout the plot as the tragic hero of the play, Macbeth’s predicament is exactly that he cannot shake off the burden of stage dominance and with his constantly returning meta-theatrical references, he underscores how the world of the tragedy, which he created by the murder and of which he is supposed to be the protagonist (together with his wife and importantly not against her as Claudius is protagonist against Hamlet) gradually digests him through the internal torments, where the external conflicts with the “redeeming” army are only a scenery in the background.

Claudius and Macbeth both committed regicide but as it has been observed, their respective attitude towards the deed itself and the tragedy induced by it is fundamentally different. Just like Macbeth is seen in preparation for the murder but not during the murder itself, Claudius is only seen in preparation for the prayer, discussing the conditions of the speech act but he never actually starts this activity. Hamlet scrutinized the conditions of being and not being, of contemplation and action in the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy. Macbeth, on the contrary, does not discuss the conditions but actually executes the deed together with the Lady and they significantly lack any specific plan regarding the life after

199 Cf. e.g. the 1st meaning (‘image, likeness, portrait, semblance’) and the 9th meaning (‘fictitious name, invented man’) of the words shadow in Crystal & Crystal 2004, 394-95.
the murder, i.e. their joint reign. Macbeth frighteningly concentrates on the deed, to explore his own determination, strength, whether he “dare[s] do all that may become a man” (I; 7; 46). Claudius committed the deed in a “by the way”-fashion, as a necessary means leading to his desired goal: he is not interested in the very nature, or even the mythology or metaphysics of the murder. One of his problems during *The Mousetrap*-scene, among the ones we enlisted earlier, is that the deed, which he supposed to have left behind (and this never happens to Macbeth, who always has his sin in focus) is brought back into his perspective. Macbeth is aware of the consequences of the murder: his only question is if he will have the strength to endure them. And he does not have it eventually. Defeated by the Prince of Denmark and the “Torment of Guilt”, both kings demonstrate different paths from murder to the final fall.
Conclusion

Drama is a Janus-faced rebel in the world of literature. It belongs to several fields, among them eminently to the world of literature in its classical sense, concentrating on the written text and its interpretations; and the world of the theatre, interested in the living performance. These two fields stubbornly claim their (almost) exclusive rights to this volatile wanton called drama and tend to talk about, or work with her disregarding the other disciplines. However, the number of theoretical methodologies interested in drama more as a genre oriented towards, or even attracted by, the living theatre has recently increased. If one takes a bit of the meta-theatre, elaborated by James L. Calderwood, one may see that the plays themselves contain overt or hidden references to the theatrically constructed structural features of their own; they reveal their own disposition towards theatrical performance and sometimes also give the learned reader directorial hints for staging the work. Or one can take the “presence”- theory of Gumbrecht and see that the meaning (in our case, the theoretical analysis of plays) prevails over the physical side of the work of art and that this presence-aspect could be taken into consideration again. From this claim it is only one step to acknowledge the physical presence of the actor in the specific costume, in front of a specific scenery as important factors of meaning. One may take then the idea of presentness discussed by Cavell, which mingles nicely with Gumbrecht’s theory and advertises that the audience share the same time with the actors: every single action is taking place in the extreme form of the present continuous, in the present (and presence) of the spectators. This already provides a possible foundation for a theatrical ontology. Finally, one may consider the phenomenology of action discussed by Rayner and then one may see how drama forms action for the theatre to visualize action on the very stage: while “to act” is determined by the context of action and “to do” is just the deed in itself, “to perform” is the one that really brings the aspect of the theatre into the game. The claim of “to perform” is that via the public nature of the “playhouse” it presupposes that a particular action (speech, gesture, movement etc.) is presented for an audience — this process highlights how meaning turns into presence and thus complements the respective theories of Gumbrecht and Cavell. However, there is performance-criticism, which already concentrates on realized performances. If one looks at the semiotics of the theatre on the basis of Kiss, one will see how the understanding of the four hundred-year-old emblematic meanings is highly relevant for any interpretation.
Even further, if one reads into the vast literature of performance criticism, an astonishingly thorough and long catalogue of already existing performances will unfold, discussing performance histories or reviews of specific productions. Weimann and Dessen even observes plays via semiotics based theatrical approaches and contextualize the relation between text and physical performance in the construction of meaning. Furthermore, it is not only the theoretical field that is winking towards stage-realizations: directors and actors sometimes also tend to consult academics in building up a scene or role.

It seems, therefore, that there are already reaching outs towards each other from the two, seemingly opposing competitors for the grace of drama. What my dissertation wishes to provide is an approach which, while reading and studying Shakespeare’s two “great tragedies”, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, links these theatre-related fields and creates a bridge between the written text of the plays and their potential representation on the stage. I call this approach *pre-performance criticism* and use it so that it accepts, acknowledges and even respects the fact that the genre of drama belongs to both, yet they should not compete with, but reinforce, each other, leading us to a different understanding of drama. Hence, the focus of this work is twofold: first it provides theoretical interpretations as regards both plays, revealing new layers of meaning by projecting these works on each other, and then it accounts for how these previously established readings can be communicated to a potential stage audience in stage realization. This means that as opposed to performance criticism, it is not interested in particular existing performances but rather in potentialities the dramas and their interpretations offer. This reading method does not wish to provide a coherent concept for theatrical productions but deliberately preserves a mosaic-like structure to illustrate how different theoretical interpretations may manifest themselves in several stage representations. In the introductory chapter of the dissertation I outline the foundations of this new approach, discussing the above mentioned theories in detail but the real nature of *pre-performance criticism* unfolds in watching it “in action”: in the chapters concentrating on specific aspects of comparison.

The first analytic chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the scrutiny of the dramaturgical roles of the transcendental creatures in the respective tragedies, namely to Old Hamlet and the Weird Sisters. In discussing the visual representation of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, I relied, as a starting point, on the description provided by the characters. Old Hamlet is reported to appear in full armour, which has its own significance in the context of the other characters. As opposed to Claudius, he is a representative of old chivalric values and methods, relying on face-to-face duels rather than diplomacy or political
assassinations. Yet, the use of the armour also means the lack of intimacy with respect to his son: he does not arrive primarily as a father to Hamlet but as a deceased ruler, eager to urge revenge. While possible deviations in the stage representation are also discussed, the use of armour and the corresponding absence of this intimacy is elaborated on, as it may also convey the meaning that the task assigned to Hamlet is not a shared business of father and son but rather a burden imposed on the Prince of Denmark, which he is obliged to cope with, even if this stands in contradiction with his own personality and vehemence.

It is not just the outward appearance of the Ghost that emphasizes this burden of the task but the way he communicates with his son. Their conversation is a dialogue only on the surface since it disregards Hamlet’s emotional comments and turns out to be a long monologue of the Ghost reflecting on three major topics: the description of his torments in Purgatory, the account of his death, and, finally on revenge. None of these is about Hamlet but about the Ghost, the speaker. As opposed to this, the Weird Sisters of Macbeth first appear with short, dynamic dialogues as if the initial appearances of the transcendental creatures were also indicative of the speed in which the events unfold. Indeed, the Ghost in his play – where the fulfillment of the murder takes place only at the very end – appears with longish, slow monologues, whereas the witches seducing Macbeth to commit the worst criminal act takes place not long after their prophecies are heard, told with relatively high speed, in short, dynamic sentences. Moreover, they emphatically do not talk about their status but when asked to identify themselves they characterize Macbeth instead, calling him Thane of Glamis and Cawdor and, finally, King. The fact that Macbeth immediately thinks of murder suggests that the Weird Sisters uttered and idea which might have occurred to Macbeth previously and this way they just provide an external reinforcement to an inner thought and, therefore, are much closer to Macbeth’s inner desire.

Here I turn to the question how these interpretations might be communicated through the stage and what dramaturgical consequences these potential directorial solutions might have later on in the production. In the case of Old Hamlet’s Ghost, the disharmony between the task he represents and its recipient is already emphasized by the use of armour. Moreover, a significantly taller actor impersonating the Ghost can give an impression of a father enforcing something on a visibly smaller child, a task which the son is reluctant to identify with. I discuss the dramaturgical consequences of a particular idea, i.e. that the Ghost may give a dagger to Hamlet as an instrument to do the deed. This way it is not only a constantly present memento of his task but it might represent the father during
Hamlet’s monologue behind the kneeling Claudius when he is not willing to take the opportunity to take revenge and if he kills Polonius with this dagger in the following scene, the reappearance of the Ghost gains extra meaning, reproaching his son because the instrument was not used according to its intended purpose. Finally, under this interpretation, it is also significant that the actual revenge is not carried out with the weapon from the father but with the poisoned sword, as if the murdering of Claudius was primarily to satisfy Hamlet himself and only marginally his father.

The motif of the dagger explores further meanings in the correlation with the other tragedy, where Macbeth delivers the dagger-soliloquy before entering Duncan’s bedchamber to kill him. Since the Weird Sisters’ prophecies stood in harmony with the protagonist’s desires, Macbeth does not need a memento to remind him of his “task” but his dagger is already planted in his imagination and all he needs to do is to realize it by drawing a real one to commit regicide. In his case, the appearance of the transcendental creatures is even more frightful: they are withered women with beards, which also has to be taken into consideration for directorial purposes. The scary appearance may symbolize the frightful nature of the news connected to murder. The meaning of the bearded women on the emblematic stage of the Elizabethan age is also to be investigated but the actual use of it in contemporary productions might bring forth different (and comic) effects. Yet, should a production wish to concentrate on the desirable nature of the news and represent the Weird Sisters accordingly, they can appear as attractive, seductive women, or even the prophecies themselves might be heard in Macbeth’s and Banquo’s own voice.

Regarding the transcendental elements, two further scenes are also discussed, which do not directly involve the ghost or the witches, yet they turn out to be closely related to them and both take place in the middle of the respective dramas: the Mousetrap-scene in Hamlet and the appearance of Banquo’s ghost in Macbeth. With respect to the performance of the Mousetrap, I establish the interpretation that the non-verbal part might refer to the death of Old Hamlet, while the “sounding” one is about the possible future of Hamlet taking revenge on Claudius. This way, the performance is the translation of the Ghost’s words into stage images: the first part presenting Old Hamlet’s monologue about his death, the second about the task of revenge. Moreover, Hamlet and the Mousetrap will have a similar impact on Claudius to the one Old Hamlet and his story had on Hamlet. In Macbeth, the appearance of Banquo’s ghost is, similarly, a public event, the sight of which the king is unable to bear. Banquo’s relation with the Weird Sisters is discussed in much detail and the conclusion is that he has a remarkably inherent connection with the sisters
and therefore some parallels can be drawn between the first encounter with the witches and the entrance of Banquo’s ghost. In the respective subchapters, certain possible solutions are offered to emphasize further possible connections between these scenes and the transcendental creatures in terms of staging, lighting and also playacting.

The second chapter concentrates on the major motif of the two tragedies, i.e. the deed of murder and the protagonists’ respective attitudes towards it. In both plays I concentrate on one specific soliloquy, where I find Hamlet’s and Macbeth’s attitude towards the action and the accompanying contemplation typical and revealing. I claim that in *Hamlet* this is the “To be or not to be”-speech, which I observe in its immediate dramaturgical context and thus interpret it as a continuation of the preceding *Hecuba*-soliloquy; in the latter, the idea of staging *The Mousetrap*-performance is formulated. *The Mousetrap*-performance is, in itself, a special field where action and thought may combine and is, therefore, an optimal solution for Hamlet, who wishes to initiate action but is afraid of it at the same time. Yet, there is an apparent time discrepancy in the *Hecuba*-soliloquy, since by the time Hamlet comes up with the idea of staging the murder for his uncle, he has already asked the players to prepare for the *Murder of Gonzago* for the following night. However, this might suggest that the two plays are not the same: the Prince first wishes to have a private performance for himself, observing and experimenting with the murder he is expected to execute without serious consequences and only later does he turn to the idea of using it as a trap for Claudius and go public with it. His decision marks the point where the originally intended *Murder of Gonzago* turns into a different play, *The Mousetrap*.

Since *The Mousetrap* is about the execution of the murder, either or both (depending on one’s interpretation) parts deal(s) with the past (i.e. how Claudius killed Old Hamlet) and/or with the future (how Hamlet will kill Claudius). The *Gonzago/Mousetrap* scene is absolutely central to the play and thus Hamlet’s attitude towards it is going to be similar to his attitude towards the whole play called *Hamlet*, of which he is expected to be the protagonist. Therefore, it is no longer surprising that the two speeches he delivers in relation to the performance are similar and this way highly general: both the “To be or not to be” and his instructions to the players (“Speak the speech I pray you…”) lack any kind of specific reference to the play-within-the-play, although their immediate dramaturgical context would desire otherwise. This phenomenon might indicate that Hamlet wants to approach his own story and, consequently, *The Mousetrap* from the outside, remaining on the universal level, distancing it from himself, as he wants to deal with the problems theoretically, remaining in the framework of his mind. Therefore, I would claim in
accounting for possible staging solutions that productions having Hamlet play the murderer Lucianus in the play-within-the-play goes against this attitude of the Prince, who desperately wants to relate to the story externally and tries to avoid involvement as much as he can. Yet, it turns out for him that he cannot remain a total outsider: just as in the course of *The Mousetrap-*performance, he is more and more involved via his comments on the action, he cannot escape his own tragedy, either, as the outsider’s position is already occupied by the Ghost, and Hamlet is thus pushed onto his own stage with the duty of impersonating the avenger.

In this light, I interpret the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy as contrasting action and thought. Taking action, of course, involves the possibility of death, which gives rise to the middle part of the speech discussing the nature of death but the soliloquy itself eventually returns to the main predicament of Hamlet. For him thinking kills action, and indeed: whenever the Prince has an opportunity to think an act over beforehand, he fails to carry it out (cf. not stabbing the seemingly praying Claudius), yet when he does not consider something carefully, he acts (cf. the murder of Polonius). This seems to be different with Claudius and Macbeth: Claudius’s speeches are usually performatives, actions themselves, while Macbeth seems to need thinking in order to initiate action. Hamlet’s desire to occupy a quasi-outsider position in his story might be represented by bringing him off-stage during the “To be or not to be”-soliloquy, the dramaturgical prerequisites and consequences of which are discussed in the chapter. This way, it will be even more apparent how the temporary opportunity of contemplation is ended by Ophelia’s entrance, which drags Hamlet back to the expected area of action (i.e. the stage), and the frustration resulting from this might also explain his attitude towards the girl.

Macbeth proceeds in the opposite direction: he is not put into an outsider position by the transcendental creatures. He is drawn into the Weird Sisters’ magic circle, which he will not be able to leave any more. I find his speech corresponding to Hamlet’s “To be or not to be”-soliloquy, i.e. dissecting the relation between action and thought is functionally similar to the “Two truths are told”-soliloquy in Act I, Scene 3. Yet, unlike the Danish Prince, who elevates the problem onto a philosophical level, Macbeth focuses on the very deed, naming it as “murder”. The basic difference in the respective protagonists’ attitude also reflects the contrast in the dramaturgy of the two tragedies. Hamlet is a student from Wittenberg, a scholar, and his attention usually lacks focus and, therefore, it considers the other characters and concentrates on problems to a great extent, whereas Macbeth is a soldier, who is focused on one action at a time, and executes it.
As we have projected the two above mentioned soliloquies onto each other, we might find some correlation between the two events these speeches refer to in this interpretation and noteworthy connections seem to emerge between The Mousetrap and the murdering of Duncan. Hamlet’s performance is fictionalized reality, i.e. it transforms reality (the murder) into fiction, evolving on the stage where the victim can eventually rise after the show is over. For Hamlet, this is the optimal borderline between contemplation and action. Macbeth’s deed is, on the contrary, realized fiction as he takes the elusive prophecies of the Weird Sisters and realizes them in the actual gory corpse of King Duncan. As it turns out during the course of the plays, both methods are “mousetraps” for the creators: it drags Hamlet into the whirlpool of events, including murder and never lets Macbeth escape from the blood on his hands and its consequences.

As opposed to Hamlet, who wants to solve everything in his mind and for whom contemplation kills action, Macbeth desperately wants to erase contemplation with action proper. As the “Two truths are told”-soliloquy also suggests, he tries to get rid of the “horrid images” planted in his head via the seductive words of the Weird Sisters by realizing them in action. While Hamlet constantly aims at internalizing problems, Macbeth always externalizes them, just as the soliloquy shows how the thoughts in his head immediately produce “real”, physical symptoms, actions in his body.

Finally, it is worth considering how two important actions, i.e. The Mousetrap and the murder of Banquo are executed by “nameless” professionals: the Players and the Murderers. By hiring these murderers, Macbeth tries to gain an external position for himself as well but it turns out to be impossible by the appearance of Banquo’s ghost, indicating that he cannot escape the consequences of his bloodshed, just as he cannot escape the magic circle. Pre-performance criticism here accounts for staging possibilities for emphasizing this effect and also accounts for the dramaturgical results of having the same actors (actresses) play the Weird Sisters and the Murderers: this might strengthen Macbeth’s entrapment in the magic circle. By the same token, the effect of Old Hamlet playing the Player king is also taken into consideration.

Chapter three investigates the role of the female characters and concentrates on their relations towards the main male characters. Gertrude’s main predicament is that she tries to reconcile two roles, i.e. the mother of Hamlet and the new wife of Claudius, which turn out to be irreconcilable in Hamlet’s eyes. In the “Sullied flesh”-soliloquy Hamlet applies the method of generalization, so characteristic of him, and arrives at the conclusion “Frailty, thy name is woman”. Thus, by the time Ophelia first appears and speaks on the
stage, her verdict has already been uttered. I elaborate both on the possible loci of her first entrance, as well as potential interpretations of her obedience towards her father, yet the outcome in the play is the same: she cannot represent a private shelter Hamlet can withdraw into but these are overshadowed by Polonius’s and Laertes’s pieces of “good advice”. As a result, the letters between her and the Prince, supposed to symbolize the privacy of a relationship, are exposed to the public scrutiny of first Polonius and then of the royal couple as well.

This privacy of a letter is emphatically preserved in the Macbeth-Lady Macbeth relationship, where the Lady does not only read it in her solitude but she enters the stage for the first time, uttering her husband’s words. After having done so, the author of the message appears himself, so the audience can see the couple together. The letter is supposed to inform the Lady about the encounter with the witches but it is more than that. On subtle layers, Macbeth’s message contains the tones of deep and affectionate love. It is also noteworthy that after reading the letter, Lady Macbeth provides a detailed and accurate analysis of her husband’s character, as opposed to Gertrude, who seems to be constantly misinterpreting Hamlet’s behaviour. So does the confused Ophelia, who understands Hamlet even less after their encounter in Act III, Scene 1 (as opposed to the eavesdropping Claudius). In line with the aims of pre-performance criticism, possible interpretations for the Lady’s character, in connection with the actress portraying her, are also provided.

The private sphere untouched by the public eye is preserved by the Lady, even when their castle becomes the home for a public event, i.e. the arrival of King Duncan. This reflects one of the most significant features of the play’s dramatic representation, which I call “background dramaturgy”. This means that the audience can primarily see the Macbeths when they are alone, or when they exit a public event, like the feast of Duncan. Contrastingly, Hamlet exhibits a “foreground dramaturgy”, where the Prince cannot find a private shelter with the women he is involved with. We mostly see them when they are in the company of others: Gertrude disappears from sight when she exits the inauguration ceremony at the beginning, and Ophelia’s main encounter with Hamlet is spied upon as well. A potential stage realization for the emphasis of the “background dramaturgy” of Macbeth is offered in situating the scene of Macbeth’s escape from Duncan’s feast and the “If it were done”-soliloquy together with the following dialogue with the Lady into a bathroom. However, it is important to note that this strong privacy of the Macbeth couple can only prevail until the murder of Duncan: from that moment on it starts gradually
dissolving just as first the knocking on the gate indicates how the outside, public world wants to penetrate into their private shelter.

The roles of the female characters can also be illuminated by their indirect relationship with the transcendental elements. As a considerable part of Old Hamlet’s accusing account is centered around the Queen, it distances Hamlet even further from his mother. After encountering the ghost or the witches, both protagonists approach their “lovers” first, but with different intentions. Macbeth tells the news to his wife and is happy to gain her support. Hamlet, on the other hand, cuts himself away from Ophelia, who will not be a supporting but a hindering factor in his career.

The projection of the two plays onto each other gives us new perspectives for the discussion of the dramaturgical role of Gertrude, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth. When Hamlet’s visit in Ophelia’s chamber with his pretended madness is juxtaposed to the murder of Duncan, similarities occur. Both take place in enclosed, private scenes, unseen and only reported to the audience, and both are causally related to the transcendental visits. Yet, while it provides a milestone for Hamlet’s alienation from Ophelia, it marks the unity between the Scottish couple, also in a sexual context. However, the fact that they enter Duncan’s bedchamber separately, foreshadows their slow alienation as well, which will gradually unfold after the murder. Also further parallels can be witnessed in the careers of the heroines: while Gertrude is constantly sent away from Hamlet’s presence, Ophelia is always forced to be present against her will. Hamlet repeatedly tries to deconstruct the potentials of procreation (e.g. sending Ophelia to a nunnery), while Macbeth urges the Lady to “bring forth manchildren”.

The two major public events in the middle of the respective tragedies already discussed, The Mousetrap—performance and the Banquet-scene, are also revealing in terms of the female characters. While observing the production of the players, Hamlet talks to both women, indicating that not just the performance is important but another level of the dramatic events. With his remarks, the Prince tries to tie the women to his play as well, and thus he cannot remain outside of The Mosuetrap, either, but becomes part of it. During the appearance of Banquo’s ghost at the banquet, the narration is provided by the Lady, who tries to save the situation of her husband’s scandalous behaviour and this is already a sign of the couple’s tragic alienation: since Macbeth decided to plot the attempt on Banquo alone, he himself has to face the apparition alone, while the Lady is outside of the circle and she is only mediating between him and the on-stage audience, the lords. But the borderline of this “acting area” separates Macbeth from the Lady, just as it separates
Hamlet, who, by his commentaries, became part of his show, and is thus alienated from the female characters. And importantly enough, these respective scenes are the last ones when Hamlet and Ophelia plus Macbeth and the Lady are seen together on stage.

If one observes the soliloquies of the heroines, it is revealing that those of Ophelia and the Lady are very much reliant on the male protagonists who constitute the major themes of these speeches. Therefore, it seems that the respective personalities of these two women are very much reliant on Hamlet and Macbeth, respectively, which might explain why they both fall into madness when the main characters disappear from their lives. Both Ophelia’s madness and Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking occur when their loved ones are absent both physically and emotionally; moreover, both mad scenes make an attempt to bring the males back: Ophelia metaphorically refers to her relationship with the Prince, while the Lady is constantly talking to her husband in her sleep. Their madness is also indicative of their overall relation to privacy: Lady Macbeth is alone and is tenderly witnessed but not disturbed by supporting characters; moreover, she remains in the private realm of sleep, while Ophelia is always talking to others and, eventually, she produces a singing performance with them. Gertrude’s heart is “cleft in twain”, therefore Hamlet’s disappearance does not affect her to the extent that she would be chased into madness or suicide (unless we interpret her drinking from the poisoned cup otherwise). Finally, Hamlet’s farewell from Ophelia and Gertrude are shown in public scenes, while Macbeth reacts to the Lady’s departure in one of the most powerful speeches of his play, the Tomorrow-soliloquy.

Chapter Four is primarily a case study of the two monarchs, who seized the throne via regicide: Claudius and Macbeth. I pursue this character analysis primarily via the meta-theatrical reading of the plays by observing the pattern how the respective tragedies reveal anything about their own working mechanisms as plays. Claudius’s plight is first and foremost characterized as a conflict from the outside, since his major opponent is Hamlet. Their “duel”, I claim, proceeds on two levels: one is the traditional plot of a revenge tragedy, while the other is a meta-dramatic combat for the favours of the audience. The most significant way of establishing this relationship is with soliloquies, yet whereas Hamlet is given many of them throughout the play, Claudius has only two long speeches, the first one of which, i.e. his inaugural speech is not a soliloquy but a monologue, thus he can only address his real audience indirectly, via talking to his on-stage audience, the Danish court. Macbeth, on the other hand, does not need to compete with anyone for stage dominance, since the source of his conflict is not coming from an external person but
originates internally, and his problem is exactly his overwhelming stage-dominance: after
the murder, he can never put down the role, the costumes of the “murderer”. In a way, he is
too good an actor, identifying with his role perfectly and thus this role will devour him
eventually, leading to his final fall.

Macbeth represents a case study of the murderer blending the respective evolutions
of Hamlet and Claudius. While the audience cannot see either Claudius before committing
the murder, or the Prince after it (disregarding his few lines before his own death),
Macbeth displays the murderer preparing for the deed and later trying to cope with it. Yet,
as opposed to the Danish king, he cannot do this successfully. Claudius handles the
political matters with efficient diplomacy during the feast after his coronation, yet,
Macbeth is unable to enjoy the crown, since the ghost of Banquo, whom he wanted to keep
distant by hiring murderers to kill him, pays his visit and represents those nightmares
Claudius never had with respect to his brother. Claudius does not see the Ghost of Old
Hamlet, he is not tormented by conscience of guilt; yet he has his own private ghost:
Hamlet, presenting him the performance of *The Mousetrap*, bringing the story of the (or a)
murder to light. Macbeth, contrastingly, does not need another character to punish him: his
demon is coming from himself, letting in the ghost of the victim.

Importantly enough, after the two central events of *The Mousetrap* and the
Banquet-scene with Banquo’s ghost, both rulers seek the guidance of transcendental
powers: Claudius turns to heavenly forces in his prayer, while Macbeth visits demonic
forces in the characters of the Weird Sisters. Claudius’s soliloquy is hardly a prayer proper,
since he establishes his inability of doing so, and expresses his lack of remorse. What he
wants, rather, is to negotiate a position for himself so that after his death he would not burn
in hell. The language of the speech is not indicative of a man tormented by his conscience
but exhibits traces of business language. As opposed to Macbeth, who approaches his sin
emotionally and aesthetically, I argue that Claudius discusses his deed rather rationally.
Yet, the painful conclusion for him is that in the lack of repentance he would certainly
commit the murder again and thus he is unable to transfer his earthly welfare to the realms
of afterlife. Similarly to Hamlet in his “To be or not to be”-soliloquy, the Dane discusses
the nature of afterlife but, as opposed to the Prince, who did so with the inventory of a
philosopher and thus employed general terms, Claudius does so as a businessman,
concentrating on specific matters. Macbeth, on the other hand, exhibits the vehemence of a
soldier and does not choose the one-sided communication of a prayer but has a dialogue
with the Weird Sisters, demanding immediate answers. What he wants is exactly what
Claudius wishes to lose: lack of remorse. He knows he has sacrificed everything by murdering Duncan, therefore heaven is excluded in his view, so he turns to the demonic forces in a desperate need of gaining external orientation. Yet, it turns out he himself has to interpret the prophecies but he goes fatally wrong, causing his own downfall.

The endings of the respective tragedies are characteristic of their overall predicament: Claudius is defeated by Hamlet, another character in the play, while Macbeth’s loss is generated by the wrong interpretations of the prophecies and his own sense of guilt, coming from the inside. There is nothing necessary in Claudius’s fall, whereas Macbeth is already lost in the very moment he stabs the sleeping Duncan. Metadramatically, Claudius fights for stage-dominance and is beaten by Hamlet, while this stage-dominance for Macbeth is a nightmarish burden he wants to get rid of but he cannot step off his encompassing stage, since even sleep is unavailable for him as a means of leaving the world, in which he is expected to act as a tragic character, behind. He becomes one with his role, never letting him escape.

In this last chapter, pre-performance criticism primarily functions not via actual theatrical elaborations of dramatic scenes but concentrates on character exploration, while it pays homage to its most immediate theoretical predecessor, the meta-theatrical reading of the plays. Meta-theatre explores the patterns hiding in the plays, which reflect on the very nature of the theatrical context these tragedies may function in, both on the Elizabethan stage, or in contemporary theatres. However, the preceding three chapters demonstrate how the actual reading method of pre-performance criticism functions, by translating the theoretical findings into stage metaphors, movements, costumes or scenery, by translating meaning into presence. I started the dissertation with the title: “We’ll hear a play tomorrow” (II; 2; 530) and through preparations, elaborations, and virtual rehearsals, we have hopefully arrived at the present tense of our dramatic presence: “There is a play tonight before the King” (III; 2; 68).
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