

# “The Murder of Gonzago”, “Hamlet” and “Meta-Hamlet”

## Ilia Patchkoria

Shakespeare and Hamlet both use existing sources for the plots of “Hamlet” and “The Murder of Gonzago” respectively.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, who is said to have played the role of the ghost of Hamlet’s father at the Globe Theatre, could be regarded not only as the writer but also as the first director of “Hamlet”.<sup>2</sup> Like him, Hamlet is also staging a play in “Hamlet”, and even makes some modifications to it. As Marvin Hunt puts it, “*In contributing ‘some dozen lines, or sixteen lines’ to ‘The Murder of Gonzago’, Hamlet becomes, as it were, a coauthor of ‘Hamlet’*” [Hunt, 2007: 213].<sup>3</sup> However, the idea of staging this play has been hinted to him by the story of the ghost of his father.

After the talk with the Ghost, Hamlet says to Horatio and Marcellus: “*Touching the vision here, / It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you*” [Shakespeare, 2003: 1.5.137-8].<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Hamlet still needs to be fully convinced that the ghost is really his father, and not an evil spirit sent to destroy him. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that Hamlet, who says “*Man delights not me – no, nor woman neither*” [Shakespeare, 2003: 2.2.290-1], suddenly becomes so delighted to hear from Rosencrantz that a troupe of players have come to Elsinore. Now he can have these players enact before the eyes of Claudius something like the story told by the Ghost, and finally establish the truth: “*The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king*” [Shakespeare, 2003: 2.2.557-8].<sup>5</sup>

Besides catching the conscience of the king and the true meaning of the Ghost’s words, the play within the play also has the function of awakening the queen’s conscience. Hamlet tries to help his mother catch her own conscience, and at the same time he warns Ophelia not to become like her.

Thus, Hamlet’s “Murder of Gonzago” seeks to convey the moral truth of its audience as Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” probably does. And it is striking to note that this play within the play also tests its own truthfulness: If Claudius had not revealed his guilt, the story told by the Ghost would have proved false and “The Murder of Gonzago” would have lost its moral validity. Constructing such a relationship between art and reality is Hamlet’s artistic achievement. This suggests Shakespeare’s similar achievement in writing and staging “Hamlet”.

Before the performance of “The Murder of Gonzago”, right before the “To be, or not to be” scene, Claudius and Polonius try to arrange a “chance” meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia in order to spy on Hamlet. On hearing Polonius’s critical remark about this intention, Claudius actually reveals his guilt to the reader and audience:

POLONIUS

We are oft to blame in this:

’Tis too much proved, that with devotion’s visage,

And pious action, we do sugar o'er

The devil himself.

CLAUDIUS (*Aside*)

Oh, 'tis too true.

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

Than is my deed to my most painted word.

O heavy burden! [Shakespeare, 2003: 3.1.46-54]

By the king's words, hidden from Polonius but disclosed to the reader and audience, Shakespeare informs us that Claudius is really the murderer of his brother, and the Ghost is indeed the spirit of Hamlet's father. It is true that Claudius does not mention here exactly what constitutes his crime, but his description of the gravity of this crime clearly suggests that some horrible sin is the case. Later, horrified by the play staged under the direction of Hamlet, Claudius, as soon as he finds himself alone, confesses to the reader and audience that he has really murdered his brother. Then he kneels down and starts to pray. Thus, this issue is definitively clear for the reader and audience. We do not need at all to observe Claudius's face in the "Mousetrap" scene as Hamlet needs this in order to identify the secret of his conscience. What Shakespeare has given us freely is hidden from Hamlet. Therefore, here the question is whether or not Hamlet can be sure of the king's guilt by the result that the staging of "The Murder of Gonzago" has brought about.

Before the performance, Hamlet has a talk with the leading actor of the troupe about the role and function of the theatre. He explains him the real meaning of the stage, that "*the purpose of playing ... both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature*" [Shakespeare, 2003: 3.2.17-19] in order to produce the desired aesthetic result. Hamlet appeals to the players for a kind of moderation: they are obliged to "*[s]uit the action to the word, the word to the action*" [3.2.15], neither shout nor become "*too tame*" [3.2.14]. Besides, they should neither add to nor subtract anything from the script Hamlet has adapted for them, since it must reflect the corrupted world of the Danish court life as realistically as possible. The story of the Ghost should be enacted exactly as it was told by it to Hamlet. And indeed, as John Wilson notes, "*The garden scene, the afternoon nap, the nature of the drug, the method of the poisoning, the wooing of the queen, the seizure of the crown: all are duplicated*" [Wilson, 1951: 140]. The

only significant change Hamlet makes to the story is that the murderer of King Gonzago, Lucianus, is not his brother but a nephew to him. Harold Goddard states about this change: "*Had it been 'brother', 'The Murder of Gonzago' might have retained some semblance of a mirror. By a change of two syllables Hamlet lets the mental dagger become a literal one and finally converts what had begun as an imaginative experiment into a direct threat*" [Goddard, 1960: 367]. Of course, such a decision by Hamlet can be understood as his threat to his uncle, but it should be noted as well that this change is a kind of necessity because if Lucianus had been Gonzago's brother, then instead of catching the conscience of Claudius, the enacted play could have directly blamed him in killing his brother, thus losing its function to find the truth. In such a case Hamlet would have never been able to find out the real cause of the king's reaction to the play: It could have been either Claudius's guilt or just as well his anger at Hamlet's groundless and shameless accusation.

Despite criticizing the solution proposed by Goddard, we do not think that the nephewship of Lucianus does not represent a problem at all. After the performance stopped, Hamlet could ask himself: *Perhaps the king is innocent, and only my threat suggested by the play has scared him?* We will dare to say that it would probably have been better if Hamlet, by Shakespeare's wish, had announced Lucianus not as Gonzago's brother or nephew, but as his brother-in-law or cousin or even son.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Shakespeare has left researchers a puzzle. As it seems, he was very keen that "The Murder of Gonzago", staged by Hamlet, should reveal the secret of the recent past of the Danish court, and the same time anticipate the nearest future of it. In general, correct understanding of the past is a guarantee of correctly planning the future. In this particular case, if Claudius has actually murdered his brother, then Hamlet's killing of him becomes necessary for the future of Denmark. By giving such dual meaning to the performance, Shakespeare demonstrates the creative craftsmanship of his most intellectual protagonist. Furthermore, it should also be noted that Hamlet, as well as Horatio, has no doubt at all about the successful results of the enacted performance: "*O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?*" . . . "*Upon the talk of the poisoning?*" [Shakespeare, 2003: 3.2.260-1, 3.2.263]. And Horatio confirms that he has well noticed everything. Afterwards, the delay of Hamlet's revenge is no longer connected with the ignorance of the truth.

In a few minutes after the cessation of the performance, Hamlet, ready to avenge, finds the king kneeling and praying. It is true that the prince does not hear the words of the praying king, but this sight itself is an additional proof of his uncle's guilt for him, because otherwise it is hard to imagine that after watching the performance, Claudius would desire to kneel and pray.

Thus, from the metadramatic point of view, in "The Murder of Gonzago" the familial connection between the murderer, Lucianus, and his victim, Gonzago, corresponds in "Hamlet" not to the one between Claudius and King Hamlet, but to the one between Prince Hamlet and Claudius. However, the killing method chosen by Lucianus precisely echoes the story of the Ghost, and therefore corresponds to Claudius's deed. "*Let the galled jade winch*" [Shakespeare, 2003: 3.2.220], says Hamlet to Claudius. The enacted play should concern the one whose conscience is not clean, be it either the prince or the king. When Claudius asks Hamlet what the play is called, the prince changes the title of the play and replies: "*The Mousetrap*" [Shakespeare, 2003: 3.2.216]. He explains to the king that the title is metaphorical. It is also interesting to note that this title is used metadramatically as well, since "The

Mousetrap” is not going to catch the conscience of its character, Lucianus, but the conscience of the metadramatic character of Claudius. And the play eventually proves the king to be guilty and the Ghost to be honest. “The Mousetrap” catches the king’s conscience. Now it is not surprising at all that in his quest for truth Hamlet has relied on theatre. He justly believes in the power of art and trusts it as a mirror which can not only reflect the visual reality existing in front of it but can also decipher the conscience of the person looking into it.

The performance of “The Murder of Gonzago” takes place around the middle of “Hamlet”. The stopping of the performance is a decisive moment in the play. From this moment on, Hamlet has to take action by all means and without delay. The Ghost has not proved to be an evil spirit. He is the tormented soul of his father, killed treacherously by his own brother. And indeed, somehow or other Hamlet begins taking action.

“The Murder of Gonzago” is framed by “Hamlet” as a metaplay having similar plot and portraying the same reality. This suggests that “Hamlet” in turn must also be framed by similar reality as a kind of metaplay, which in reality is our reality. We can conventionally call this metaplay “Meta-Hamlet”. The four centuries that have elapsed from the first performance of “Hamlet” have not essentially changed the human world. Our world is as filled with evil as the world of “Hamlet”. “[This] *time is [as] out of joint*”<sup>7</sup> [Shakespeare, 2003: 1.5.189] as Hamlet says it was in Denmark. There is no place on earth you can escape this reality. There is no other time when the reality is different, because “[t]here’s ne’er a villain dwelling in all Denmark / But he’s [was and will be] *an arrant knave*” [Shakespeare, 2003: 1.5.123-4]. “*There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave, / To tell us this*” [1.5.125-6], replies Horatio to Hamlet. And indeed, all this applies to any country, be it Hamlet’s Denmark, Shakespeare’s England, or our Georgia. “*Denmark’s a prison*”, says Hamlet and notes that the whole world is a large prison, “*in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons*” [Shakespeare, 2003: 2.2.234, 2.2.236-7].

In Georgian reality, it is interesting to single out Robert Sturua’s interpretation of the “Mousetrap” scene in the last staging of “Hamlet” at the Rustaveli Theatre.<sup>8</sup> The director offers quite an original solution to this metatheatrical scene, from which we can once again conclude that we are in a kind of “Meta-Hamlet”.

Sturua’s “Hamlet” is divided into two acts. It is exactly the “Mousetrap” scene that marks the boundary between them. When the murder of Gonzago has been enacted, Claudius rises, stopping the performance, and demanding lights. At that very moment, Sturua’s performance also stops; the hall is lit by lights, and the audience also rises. Claudius’s guilt has been brought to light and the Ghost’s words have proved to be right. Hamlet and Horatio have found the truth, and we have also discovered it. By this parallelism the director wants to reduce the metatheatrical boundary between the stage and the audience in order to stress the connection and similarity existing between the play and our reality, that is, between “Hamlet” and “Meta-Hamlet”. After the interlude, the second act of the performance opens with quickly repeating the “Mousetrap” scene, and when the king rises again, the bloody part of the play begins.

Thus, “Hamlet” and the play “The Murder of Gonzago” staged within it express the same essence. The secret murder of King Hamlet, which precedes and determines the events

developed in “Hamlet”, is almost exactly imitated in “The Murder of Gonzago” staged by Prince Hamlet. However, it is noteworthy that the stories of the two plays differ in the familial connection existing between the murderer and his victim, which is conditioned by Hamlet’s decision not to blame his uncle unfairly for the murder, and at the same time to threaten him with revenge, if indeed he is guilty. Since by staging “The Murder of Gonzago” Hamlet exposes the reality represented in “Hamlet”, it is appropriate to think that Shakespeare likewise exposes our reality by writing and staging “Hamlet”. Consequently, our reality takes the position of a kind of metaplay in relation to the play “Hamlet”, which is why we have conventionally called it “Meta-Hamlet”. And Sturua’s staging of “Hamlet” again and again suggests that “The Murder of Gonzago”, “Hamlet”, and “Meta-Hamlet” all depict essentially the same reality.

1 In this case, it is sufficient to imply only the fictitious existence of the source for “The Murder of Gonzago”: As Hamlet informs us in the play, *“The story is extant, and written in very choice Italian”* [Shakespeare, 2003: 3.2.238]. On the actual existence of the potential source for it, see, e.g., Redmond, 2009: 18-23.

2 John Styan notes: *“Shakespeare was not a director of his plays in the modern sense, but if he was on hand, and often on the stage, during rehearsal, this must have placed him in much the same position”* [Styan, 1967: 53].

3 Here and elsewhere, in the Georgian text of this article, the translation of the quoted scholarly critical literature belongs to the author of the article.

4 Here and elsewhere, in the Georgian text of this article, the translation of the quoted text of “Hamlet” belongs to Ivane Machabeli.

5 In these words of Hamlet, a hinted comparison of the king to a mouse is already present. Later, Hamlet calls “The Murder of Gonzago” “The Mousetrap”, thereby suggesting that the king is the mouse that this play is going to catch.

6 In case of son, no one could have blamed Hamlet for killing his father, since at the time of his father’s death he was at Wittenberg. Besides, Claudius, not Hamlet, is the one who benefited from the death of Hamlet’s father.

7 According to Nico Kiasashvili, the original *“The time is out of joint”* [Shakespeare, 2003: 1.5.189] is quite adequately translated by Machabeli as „*დროთა კავშირი დაიწიდა*“ [Shakespeare, 1987: 489] – *The connection between times has been lost.*

8 Here we mean the second version of Sturua’s “Hamlet”, which premiered in November 2006. The first version was staged in 2001.

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