

## The Spectre of Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

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All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.<sup>1</sup>

The modern literary landscape has been, and continues to be, dominated by the figure of Shakespeare. Such is his literary status that Shakespeare has been metamorphosed into a mythical being whose persona represents the pinnacle of cultural achievement.<sup>2</sup> One consequence is that Shakespeare can tend to subsume the cultural space within which later writers may work.<sup>3</sup> Finding a locus within 'Shakespeare' the cultural site can be a means of overcoming this cultural inertia surrounding the figure, and of facilitating participation in the cultural domain. By appropriating Shakespearean scenes, and reproducing them within a contemporary dramatic work, modern writers are tapping into Shakespeare's cultural momentum, and appropriating significance from it.

This article will suggest that Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* employs just such a tactic, and further, that the play may be interpreted as a dramatisation of the relationship of the late twentieth century individual to Shakespeare. Section I will look at the way Stoppard uses Shakespeare as a starting point, capitalising on the reservoir of shared ideas and conventions surrounding him. The focus of his

<sup>1</sup> *As You Like It*, II. vii, 139-40 (Arden edn., ed. Agnes Latham, London and New York: Methuen, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the 'Shakespeare myth' see, e.g., *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990) and Peter J Smith, *Social Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Shakespeare and cultural space in relation to several works including *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, see Alan Sinfield, 'Making Space: Appropriation and Confrontation in Recent British Plays', in Holderness, *The Shakespeare Myth*, p. 130.

## *Sydney Studies*

play, it will be posited, is on the attempts of Ros and Guil to come to terms with 'Shakespeare', and section II will examine this troubled relationship in detail. The ghost of Shakespeare constantly haunts Ros and Guil. They struggle to act independently of Shakespeare's plot, to operate outside of Shakespearean boundaries, and much of the play centres on the dramatic potential of the limitations imposed by Shakespeare. Set against these characters are the tragedians, who, as will be seen in section III, are more at ease with their own relationship to Shakespeare. Section IV will analyse the way in which Stoppard marshals Shakespeare's scenes constantly to frustrate the desire of his two characters to break free, focussing on specific examples of the interface between Shakespeare's text and the contemporary components of Stoppard's text. The pattern that emerges will be characterised as a dialectical one. The intertextuality is agonistic. Within the play there is a conflict of styles and language. Ros and Guil's endeavours to relate to Shakespeare are competitive. These attempts to confront the Shakespearean world, however, never rise above the level of skirmish. Though games and play dominate the text, they are games that Ros and Guil must inevitably lose. One important conclusion that will be drawn from the dialectic between the Elizabethan and the modern relates to the identity that each assumes. Shakespeare's scenes appropriate the cultural high ground, whereas in contrast Ros and Guil employ lower cultural forms such as vaudeville, burlesque, parody and farce. Thus an opposition between high and low cultural forms is established, around which much of the play revolves.

Finally, in section V, some conclusions will be offered. In *Ros and Guil* Stoppard shows us ourselves, struggling to act in a predetermined cultural hierarchy. The play simultaneously evokes our doubts as to the relevance of Shakespeare in the contemporary world, and confirms that it is Shakespeare who has defined that world. 'It is *written*', declares the Player, when

*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

asked why Shakespeare makes the rules.<sup>4</sup> Stoppard, however, has been able to play with the rules, and to exploit the gaps and disruption he creates in what is written. The play has been described as having been written in the margins of *Hamlet*, and performed in its wings; as 'the not-said of *Hamlet*, its other, or unconscious'.<sup>5</sup> It provides an illustration of the difficulties for a contemporary dramatist in finding space in which to write. If all the world's a stage, then Stoppard's point is that that stage is Shakespeare's. Ultimately his play reveals that the space he finds belongs to Shakespeare.

I

The idea for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* came from Kenneth Ewing, Stoppard's agent, who had long been interested in which of Shakespeare's kings ruled in England when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrived on their mission from Claudius.<sup>6</sup> Stoppard developed the idea into a short burlesque Shakespearean pastiche for a young playwrights' colloquium in Berlin in 1964, and then later into the final three act version of 1966.

Stoppard's reasoning behind his choice of *Hamlet*, and of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is particularly revealing:

They chose themselves to a certain extent. I mean that the play *Hamlet* and the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the only play and the only characters on which you could write my kind of play. They are so much more than merely bit players in another famous play. *Hamlet* I suppose is the most famous play in any language, *it is part of a sort of common*

<sup>4</sup> *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber, 1967), p. 56. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are incorporated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Sinfield, 'Making Space: Appropriation and Confrontation in Recent British Plays', *The Shakespeare Myth*, p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> Jill L. Levenson, "'Hamlet' Andante / 'Hamlet' Allegro: Tom Stoppard's Two Versions", *Shakespeare Survey*, 36 (1983), 21. Ewing believed that the monarch of the day was King Lear, and speculated that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may have found him mad and wandering at Dover.

*Sydney Studies*

*mythology*. I am continually being asked politely whether I will write about the messenger in Oedipus Rex, which misses the point.<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added)

Originally the play was to involve Shakespeare's characters in England, but Stoppard realised that the interesting dimension was Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *within* their play:

if you write a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in England, you can't count on people knowing who they are and how they got there. So one tended to get back into the end of *Hamlet* a bit. But the explanations were always partial and ambiguous, so one went back a bit further into the plot, and as soon as I started doing this I totally lost interest in England. The interesting thing was them at Elsinore.<sup>8</sup>

Though it is ostensibly an explicit attempt to re-work *Hamlet*, to re-contextualise it and to challenge its canonical position, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* ultimately demonstrates the impossibility of denying literary influence. Not only does Shakespeare's text control Stoppard's, but Stoppard's style derives from Samuel Beckett and T. S. Eliot.<sup>9</sup>

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* does not offer any serious literary criticism of *Hamlet*. Instead Stoppard's purpose is to exploit the expectations and preconceptions of his audience regarding Shakespeare's play. Shakespeare, and in particular *Hamlet*, presents Stoppard with the starting-point of a rich vein of ideas and conventions shared with his audience. He assumes *Hamlet*'s status as the epitome of Shakespearean

<sup>7</sup> Extract from interview with Giles Gordon in *Transatlantic Review*, 29, 1968, 17-20, cited from *Tom Stoppard: A Casebook*, ed. John Harty (New York: Garland, 1988), pp. 64-5.

<sup>8</sup> Extract from interview in R. Hudson, S. Itzin and S. Trussler, 'Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas', *Theatre Quarterly*, 4:14, (1974), 5-6; cited from *Tom Stoppard: A Casebook*, pp. 64-6.

<sup>9</sup> Stoppard has stated that: 'There are certain things written in English which make me feel as a diabetic must feel when the insulin goes in. Prufrock and Beckett are the twin syringes of my diet, my arterial system': Ronald Hayman, *Tom Stoppard* (3rd edn., London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 4.

*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

tragedy, as the play which has 'an archetypal significance' and which represents Shakespeare to the majority of non-scholars:

Stoppard's strategy is to exploit the gaps between the folklore status of *Hamlet* as archetypal 'Shakespeare tragedy' and the orthodox academic interpretations of *Hamlet* as an intricately wrought and subtly articulated text which expresses a complex set of reflections on human actions and motives. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* flatters an uneducated audience into thinking that they know *Hamlet* better than they do by building up a seemingly coherent image of the *Hamlet*-world which Stoppard is simultaneously in the process of deconstructing.<sup>10</sup>

The play situates its protagonists in the crossfire of Shakespearean power politics.<sup>11</sup> The overall structure and architecture of the play, as well as its line-by-line progression, is dialectical. Much of the conflict is stylistic. Stoppard's parody of theatrical styles generates conflict on stage. Parody and travesty alternate, interact, and eventually collide theatrically in a manner that is itself under dramatic scrutiny:

The dramatic impact of such imaginative 'leap-frog' results in a verbal overkill which suggests that everything that can be said about the human condition appears to have already been said and – in the grand style of writers like Shakespeare, Beckett, Pirandello, or Wilde – said most persuasively. The only problem is that we, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, don't know which ideas still have a bearing on the present.<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere is the dialectical process more evident than in the linguistic transitions. The shifts from Shakespearean to Stoppardian language involve shifts in perspective:

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, in *Tom Stoppard: A Casebook*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Enoch Brater, 'Parody, Travesty, and Politics in the Plays of Tom Stoppard', in *Essays on Contemporary British Drama*, ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Hueber, 1981), p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121. See also Normand Berlin, 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: Theatre of Criticism', *Modern Drama*, 16 (1973), 269-77.

## *Sydney Studies*

In moving from Shakespearean language to Stoppardian, or from the tragedy to the down-at-heel tragedians, or from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they present themselves at Elsinore to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they present themselves to us, we are not so much moving from one level to another as from one sphere to another which is either encasing it or encased within it.<sup>13</sup>

This movement creates a confrontation between contemporary and Elizabethan English, but far from generating any real conflict between the two, Stoppard indicates that Elizabethan English has cultural priority by the manner in which Ros and Guil defer immediately to Shakespeare. Their modern vernacular and idiom pales in comparison to Shakespeare's 'poetry' (though Stoppard noticeably omits *Hamlet's* most 'poetic' passages) in accordance with this pre-ordained cultural hierarchy. The twentieth century is represented as halting and inarticulate. It is not without significant irony that Stoppard's appropriation and reproduction of scenes from *Hamlet* creates an effect where the poetic language of Shakespeare's characters makes them appear to be moving purposefully toward a tragic climax, whereas the modern colloquialism of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shows them to be mired in inaction.

## II

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* commences with the apparition of the ghost of Hamlet's father, which then becomes the motive force of the play. Similarly, Shakespeare is the ghost (dead but not absent) that haunts Stoppard's work (and by implication the work of all contemporary dramatists), and that forms the controlling influence of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Stoppard's play opens with a coin-tossing ritual that continues, in various forms, throughout the play. The probability of the coins so consistently coming down heads is small: what is dramatised is the extent to which the odds are against Ros and Guil, and by implication, favour 'Shakespeare'.

<sup>13</sup> Hayman, *Tom Stoppard*, p. 40.

*Tom Stoppard's* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

*(GUIL takes a third coin, spins it, catches it in his right hand, turns it over on to his left wrist, lobs it in the air, catches it with his left hand, raises his left leg, throws the coin up under it, catches it and turns it over on to the top of his head, where it sits. ROS comes, looks at it, puts it in his bag.)* (p. 12)

These slapstick attempts to break the run of heads are highly theatrical, but Ros and Guil come no closer to disturbing the Shakespearean order.

The reactions of Ros and Guil to this abnormal, if not paranormal, sequence differ from Hamlet's to the apparition of his murdered father. For Hamlet the event is deeply disturbing. The ghost is a strange, terrifying, and ominous figure. But the violation of the laws of probability in the run of heads in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* does not alarm the characters in the same way. Though it creates anxieties, there is a sense that things have always been this way, and there is no questioning provoked of the cultural hierarchy analogous to the questioning of the political hierarchy in *Hamlet*.

That 'Shakespeare' is the ghost haunting Ros and Guil and controlling their destinies is emphasised by their imperfect recollection of why they are where they are. Their reconstruction—'There was a messenger ... that's right. We were sent for'—does little to dispel their bewilderment:

ROS: That's why we're here. *(He looks round, seems doubtful, then the explanation.)* Travelling.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: *(dramatically)* It was urgent - a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked - lights in the stableyard, saddle up and off headlong and hotfoot across the land, our guides outstripped in breakneck pursuit of our duty! Fearful lest we come too late!! *(Small pause.)*

GUIL: Too late for what?

ROS: How do I know? We haven't got there yet.

GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself.

ROS: You might well ask. (pp. 15-6)

*Sydney Studies*

The force that brought them there seems like a Shakespearean ghost:

GUIL: A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit half-alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names. *He was just a hat and a cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath*, but when he called we came. That much is certain - we came. (pp. 29-30, emphasis added)

The fate of these characters has been decided long ago. This fact is well known to the audience, who are reminded of it by the title of the play, and by the consistent and ruthless punning and word play with respect to the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's text. All the recurring jokes at their expense have sinister implications.

Stoppard's anti-heroes are increasingly aware of a desire to act independently from Shakespeare, and of the impossibility of that occurring:

ROS: Shouldn't we be doing something - constructive?  
GUIL: What did you have in mind? ... A short, blunt human pyramid ...?  
ROS: We could go.  
GUIL: Where?  
ROS: After him.  
GUIL: Why? They've got us placed now - if we start moving around, we'll be chasing each other all night. (p. 31)

Later they express similar sentiments:

ROS: ... (*Shiftily*) Should we go?  
GUIL: Why? We're marked now. (p. 38)

The pair struggle fruitlessly in the morass of another's plot. 'This is all getting rather undisciplined', frets Guil, and he declares 'we must not lose control' (p. 78). His imperative implies that at one point they had control, which, as Stoppard meticulously emphasises throughout his play, was not the case. They can do no more than operate within the boundaries that Shakespeare has set for them. Guil, in an exchange that hints at



*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

the difficulties of writing in Shakespeare's presence, is critical of Ros's lack of originality:

- GUIL: (*Turning on him furiously*) Why don't you say something original! No wonder the whole thing is so stagnant! You don't take me up on anything - you just repeat it in a different order.
- ROS: I can't think of anything original. I'm only good in support.
- GUIL: I'm sick of making the running.
- ROS: (*Humbly*) It must be your dominant personality... (p. 76)

Once again resistance is contemplated as a challenge to Shakespeare's order, but that resistance is futile. Indeed, so comprehensive is Shakespeare's influence that one cannot even be sure when one is resisting:

- ROS: I wish I was dead. (*Considers the drop.*) I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.
- GUIL: Unless they're counting on it.
- ROS: I shall remain on board. That'll put a spoke in their wheel. (*The futility of it, fury.*) All right! We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform. But a line must be drawn somewhere, and I would like to put it on record that I have no confidence in England. Thank you. (*Thinks about this.*) And even if it's true, it'll just be another shambles. (p. 79)

Throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Stoppard seems to exploit the dramatic potential of the limitations imposed upon movement by the boundaries of the stage. Stoppard also employs the footlights as a form of objective correlative for the metaphysical and epistemological limitations and uncertainty of Ros and Guil, and their inability to transcend Shakespeare's parameters:

- GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself.
- ROS: You might well ask.
- GUIL: We better get on.
- ROS: You might well think.

*Sydney Studies*

GUIL: We better get on.

ROS: *(Actively)* Right! *(Pause)* On where?

GUIL: Forward.

ROS: *(Forward to footlights)* Ah. *(Hesitates.)* Which way do we- *(He turns around.)* Which way did we- ? (p. 16)

Ros and Guil regularly move to the perimeters of the stage. In Act II Stoppard elaborates the metaphor of limitation when the pair resolve to seek out Hamlet. They proceed to criss-cross the stage (and each other), reaching the wings and then turning around, before eventually meeting centre stage in the same positions they started from. This vaudeville routine employs the physical limitations of the stage to embody the restrictions imposed upon later writers by Shakespeare. It is a powerful image of individuals trapped in a Shakespearean landscape (for which the stage provides physical boundaries). Moreover, it shows the resort by these trapped characters to tactics usually employed in 'low' culture.<sup>14</sup>

The control 'Shakespeare' exercises is evident in the letter-swapping episode. The letter itself can obviously be taken to stand for the script. On discovering what it contains Ros and Guil are faced with the dilemma of how to respond. By now they are convinced of their insignificance, and resolve to do nothing:

GUIL: Or to look at it another way - we are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera - it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave well alone. Tie up the letter - there - neatly - like that - They won't notice the broken seal, assuming you were in character. (p. 81)

<sup>14</sup>An opposition between concepts of 'high' and 'low' culture emerges in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Stoppard utilises tactics and forms in the contemporary component of his play which might be regarded as 'low', falling below the work of 'Shakespeare' (by definition 'high') in the cultural and/or canonical hierarchy.

*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

This leads them to claim 'we are on top of it now', an assertion of control. As these words are uttered, Hamlet, acting as the ghost of Shakespeare, blows out the lights and mysteriously switches the letter while Ros and Guil sleep. Just as Shakespeare's text had acted to head off any positive action by which this pair sought to gain some control over their destiny, so too it now moves to prevent them gaining control by inaction.

III

Set against Ros and Guil (and their troubled relationship with Shakespeare) are the tragedians, and in particular the Player. The appearance of the tragedians adds another dimension to the theme of the contemporary individual's relationship to the Shakespeare myth. They are figures in tune with, but dependent on, 'Shakespeare'. Their greatest fear is the absence of Shakespeare. Tragedy is their trade, but only tragedy of the 'blood, love and rhetoric variety'. Their demeanour exploits popular expectations of, and associations with, Shakespearean tragedy, for example after their introduction they all 'flourish and bow'. The Player has unusual acumen regarding Shakespeare. He is not wholly a Shakespearean character, but differs from Ros and Guil in that he knows what is going on and seems perfectly aware of the nature of their context:

GUIL: Where are you going?  
PLAYER: I can come and go as I please.  
GUIL: You're evidently a man who knows his way around.  
PLAYER: I've been here before.  
GUIL: We're still finding our feet.  
PLAYER: I should concentrate on not losing your heads.  
GUIL: Do you speak from knowledge?  
PLAYER: Precedent.  
GUIL: You've been here before.  
PLAYER: And I know which way the wind is blowing.  
GUIL: Operating on two levels, are we? How clever! I expect it comes naturally to you, being in the business so to speak. (p. 48)

Though the Player has no more control over his fate than Ros and Guil, the crucial difference is that he is aware of that fact, and has come to terms with it: 'Oh yes. We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not' (p. 20).

If the tragedians do not practise their art it disappears, just as the Shakespeare myth is sustained by the regular performance of Shakespeare:

PLAYER: Why, we grow rusty and you catch us at the very point of decadence - by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew. That's a thought, isn't it? (*He laughs generously.*) We'd be back where we started - *improvising*. (p. 17, emphasis added)

To improvise is to perform without a script. It is to create spontaneously, and extemporaneously—that is, to operate in the absence of Shakespeare. The improviser has ultimate control over his or her destiny and the narrative that is created. Improvisation is the very capability for which Ros and Guil yearn.

#### IV

Stoppard carefully mobilises Shakespeare's scenes to frustrate the desire for freedom from the ghost of Shakespeare and the desire to improvise. Transitions to Shakespeare's text are used by Stoppard as the front line in the clash between him and Shakespeare, the contemporary and the canonical. They serve as powerful illustrations of the dominance of Shakespeare. In contrast to the immobility of Ros and Guil, Shakespeare's characters seem to be in perpetual motion. All of them enter and exit at speed. Each of the scenes chosen by Stoppard is of the public life at Elsinore, scenes pared and trimmed to achieve a focus and a direction that is entirely at odds with *Hamlet*.

All of the transitions occur at crucial moments in the text. On each occasion Shakespeare's characters enter at a point where

*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

the narrative of *Hamlet* is threatened with rupture. Consequently they perform a policing function, designed to ensure compliance with the script.

GUIL: As soon as we make a move they'll come pouring in from every side, shouting obscure instructions, confusing us with ridiculous remarks, messing us about from here to breakfast and getting our names wrong.

(*Ros starts to protest ...* (p. 63))

The transition that occurs at this point is only long enough for Guil's theory to come true. It lasts a matter of lines but ensures Ros does not protest. Shakespeare's scenes are pre-emptive, and deny Ros and Guil independent momentum. There is 'circumscription of initiative', both of Ros and Guil and of the contemporary playwright.<sup>15</sup>

The manipulation of Ros and Guil by Stoppard's Shakespearean scenes is direct. What little direction Ros and Guil do have is always derived from these scenes. Moreover, the level of (textually prescribed) physical control and manhandling of Ros and Guil by Shakespeare's characters is both surprising and vitally significant, providing a visual and physical dimension to the linguistic, narrative and cultural dominance of Shakespeare.

The first transition to *Hamlet* occurs midway through the first act of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. It is no coincidence that the exact moment Shakespeare's play intrudes is after the one hundred and first toss of the coin has come down tails, breaking the chain of heads. As the coin is caught there is a lighting change and an alarmed Ophelia runs on stage followed closely by Hamlet (the stage directions for him mirror almost exactly Ophelia's speech).<sup>16</sup> Ros and Guil are not

<sup>15</sup> Neil Sammells, 'Giggling at the Arts: Tom Stoppard and James Saunders', *Critical Quarterly*, 28 (1986), 74.

<sup>16</sup> See *Hamlet*, II.i, 77-83, (Arden edn., ed. Harold Jenkins, London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

*Sydney Studies*

present for this episode in Shakespeare's play, but in Stoppard's work they are observers. During the highly ritualised action of the mime Ros and Guil are frozen, awe-struck.

As soon as this mime has finished Ros and Guil endeavour to exit, but once again *Hamlet* ensnares them. Claudius and Gertrude enter, and the scene sweeps up Stoppard's pair both dramatically and linguistically as they suddenly slip into Shakespearean language and perform their allotted roles within Shakespeare's text. Moreover, the sense of entrapment of the characters within a Shakespearean world as well as within a Shakespearean text is further developed by Stoppard's insistence that Ros and Guil should not leave the stage. Instead of exiting, as Shakespeare's script requires them to do at II. ii. 40, they are stopped by Polonius as he enters. They bow to him, and then turn and watch as he hurries upstage to Claudius. Once again Stoppard has contrived that his two heroes are voyeurs of the Shakespearean scenes in which they do not appear, which has the effect of blurring the distinction between participant and spectator, and contributes to the general effect of the identification of late twentieth-century man with Ros and Guil, and their relationships to Shakespeare and the Shakespeare myth.

The pattern continues for the duration of the play. Even the most explicit and forthright challenge to Shakespeare, and the narrative of *Hamlet*, is summarily extinguished in the same fashion.

ROS: ... (*He breaks out.*) They're taking us for granted!  
Well, I won't stand for it! In future, notice will be  
taken. (*He wheels again to face into the wings.*)  
Keep out, then! I forbid anyone to enter! (*No one  
comes - Breathing heavily.*) That's better ... (p. 53)

No sooner has Ros said this, than 'a grand procession enters', which represents a pointed show of force. After it has exited, Ros's rebellious intent continues to seethe, but again Hamlet enters just as a moment of discontent threatens to rupture the dominance of Shakespeare. There is further variation on this

*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

theme of control when the tragedians surround Ros as he attempts to leave.

While within *Hamlet* Ros and Guil seem confident and assured, secure in their scripted lines. Once outside the boundaries of that script, as soon as the Shakespearean cast has exited, they revert to their previous apprehension and trepidation:

ROS: I want to go home.  
GUIL: Don't let them confuse you.  
ROS: I'm out of my step here-  
GUIL: We'll soon be home and high - dry and home - I'll-  
ROS: It's all over my *depth*-  
GUIL: - I'll hie you home and-  
ROS: - out of my head-  
GUIL: - dry you high and-  
ROS: (*cracking, high*)-over my step over my head body!- I  
tell you it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a  
depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead  
stop-  
GUIL: (*the nursemaid*) There! ... and we'll soon be home  
and dry ... and *high* and dry ... (p. 29)

Their communication has become fractured and fragmented, just as the scenes from *Hamlet* have. This fragmentation may be a legacy of those Shakespearean scenes.

'Shakespeare', in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, is a world that is viewed from the outside. The segments of *Hamlet* that are presented to us are so regulated by Stoppard that the audience is denied any meaningful relationship with them in isolation from his play. Their role is no longer to develop their own narrative, but rather to further Stoppard's. Consequently they lose the contextual significance and narrative meaning that they possessed in *Hamlet*, a loss that is accentuated by the ham acting, exaggerated tragic performance, and parody in the staging of these scenes.

The encounters with Shakespeare are distinctly competitive, and this agonistic intertextuality characterises much of

*Sydney Studies*

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.<sup>17</sup> Ros and Guil's reactions to their exchanges with Shakespeare are an example of Stoppard's dramatisation of the significant disadvantages faced by contemporary dramatists in their rivalry with Shakespeare:

(*ROS and GUIL ponder. Each reluctant to speak first.*)

GUIL: Hm?

ROS: Yes?

GUIL: What?

ROS: I thought you ...

GUIL: No.

ROS: Ah.

(*Pause*)

GUIL: I think we can say we made some headway.

ROS: You think so?

GUIL: I think we can say that.

ROS: I think we can say he made us look ridiculous.

GUIL: We played it close to the chest of course.

ROS: (*derisively*) 'Question and answer. Old ways are the best ways'! He was scoring off us all down the line.

GUIL: He caught us on the wrong foot once or twice, perhaps, but I thought we gained some ground.

ROS: (*simply*) He murdered us. (p. 41)

This section of dialogue is an example of the dominance of Shakespeare. Hamlet, and by implication *Hamlet*, has completely routed potential foes in the dramatic arena, 'scoring off us all down the line' of literary history. The metaphoricity of games, play and sportsmanship all contribute to the sense of challenge involved in Ros and Guil's task. They are completely bewildered after this round, made to look ridiculous, and Ros's conclusion that 'he murdered us' is an ominous pun not only for these two characters but also for any playwright who

<sup>17</sup>An obvious connection can be made here with Bloom's theory of *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom has characterised Stoppard's anxiety of influence by using the Roman stage trope of *contaminatio*, or the interlacing between an old play and a new one: see *Tom Stoppard*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986).



*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

endeavours to confront the Shakespeare myth. The murder that has taken place here is a verbal one: Shakespearean idiom has met and defeated its contemporary counterpart in an explicit agonistic engagement. Even attempts to side-step the position of Shakespeare are doomed to failure:

GUIL: What about our evasions?  
ROS: Oh, our evasions were lovely. 'Were you sent for?'  
he says. 'My lord, we were sent for ...' I didn't  
know where to put myself. (p. 41)

Just as their linguistic battle with Hamlet fails, so does their comical ploy to trap him by holding their belts taut across stage, for Hamlet easily evades their efforts. Encounters such as this slapstick ambush suggest that attempts at confrontation with 'Shakespeare' can never progress beyond the level of burlesque and farce. 'There's a limit to what two people can do', declares Guil as the pair pull their trousers up and re-fasten their belts: ensnaring Shakespeare seems beyond that limit. The only weapons by which to take on Shakespeare are Shakespearean. This episode is a perfect example of an opposition between a Shakespeare that is the epitome of grave, serious high culture and a contemporary narrative that defines itself against this by embracing lower cultural forms. Though Shakespeare's texts include word-games, punning, and clowning, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* these attributes are noticeably absent from 'Shakespeare', and exclusively associated with the contemporary dimension to Stoppard's work.

It is left to the tragedians, representatives of Shakespeare's art, to prompt the final realisation in Ros and Guil that they cannot escape their fate. Significantly, the band of players forms a menacing circle around the unhappy pair reflecting the way Shakespeare's script is closing around them. In one final desperate attempt to take the initiative, Guil stabs the Player. There follows a dramatic death. But 'Shakespeare' cannot be killed, destiny cannot be avoided, and the Player rises again to the applause of his troupe. The end of Stoppard's play confirms that the last word is Shakespeare's: the words themselves are a summary of the play we have just witnessed.

It is easy to characterise *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a play within a play, but much harder to nominate which play is within which. Certainly Stoppard may be said to have conquered Shakespeare's text of *Hamlet*, but he definitely has not conquered 'Shakespeare'. In disrupting Shakespeare's text, Stoppard challenges the text. It is a play both about the murder of Hamlet, and the murder of *Hamlet*.<sup>18</sup> By disturbing the play's formal sequence, and reproducing select passages, many of which are not among the more famous of *Hamlet*'s scenes, the character of the play has been altered. The familiar relationship established between the play, and the audience experienced in watching it, is deconstructed. Similarly Shakespeare's tragic hero of inaction is displaced, and his attributes (in bastardised form) of indirection and indecision are transferred onto Stoppard's substitute anti-heroes. Ostensibly this recontextualisation and re-orientation of Shakespeare's work does undermine and parody it. But the traditional assumptions associated with Shakespeare and Shakespeare's text also form the basis for Stoppard's play, which both confirms and challenges them.

Alan Sinfield has offered a useful analysis of this aspect of Stoppard's work. Stoppard does not allow any discourse to be simply dominant, and Sinfield observes that:

Stoppard's play seems to present a double alienation effect, for it disrupts the experienced audience's relationship with the text of *Hamlet*, and disrupts also its own surface by playing incessantly with audience expectations of character and narrative.<sup>19</sup>

The theme of disruption is involved in this process, as well as specific ruptures. The disturbance of *Hamlet*, and by implication Shakespeare and the canon, becomes what the play

<sup>18</sup> Axel Kruse, 'Tragicomedy and Tragic Burlesque: *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 1(1975-6), 91.

<sup>19</sup> Sinfield, in *The Shakespeare Myth*, p. 131.

*Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

is about. Stoppard is invoking a metadiscourse, and more specifically the metadiscourse of metadiscourse.<sup>20</sup> *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a drama about the dilemmas and anxieties of the composition of drama. In this sense the play is also metadramatic. In depicting the dialectical tension between two narratives, one contemporary, the other traditional, one assuming low cultural status, the other high, the play depicts the competitive engagement with tradition that later writers must participate in if they are to make space for themselves. It dramatises the cultural position of Shakespeare, and the inability of contemporary writers to confront that status in any meaningful way as it has become the normative standard for theatre, and therefore defines the standards by which we assess it. We no longer have the freedom to create in isolation from Shakespeare:

GUIL: Is that what people want?

PLAYER: It's what we do. (p. 25)

Though he challenges the Shakespeare text, Stoppard does not challenge the Shakespeare myth. His play is about the impossibility of challenging it. In fact the two serve each other in a symbiotic relationship. As Stoppard plays with the myth, he creates space in which to write. In disintegrating Shakespeare's text through his appropriation and reproduction, the aim is not to destroy the text, but rather to manipulate it and re-orient it so as to make space for the new work within and around it. Stoppard constructs a facade of Shakespearean scenes, and builds his own play in the cracks and fissures of that facade. The Shakespeare myth for Stoppard is both a springboard for, and a limit to, his play. His play's identity, like that of Ros and Guil, is created and defined in relation to, not independent from, Shakespeare. Though Stoppard succeeds in carving out space within the Shakespearean cultural landscape in which to write, the ultimate effect is further to enhance and entrench the Shakespeare myth. Individual interpretations and traditional associations may be altered, but the myth continues

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

*Sydney Studies*

undiminished. New readings simply add to the existing sedimented layers of interpretations. Paradoxically, interference with the Shakespeare myth serves to sustain it. Cultural authority is not dispersed, but rather further collected around Shakespeare. In appropriating significance from him, one must concede significance to him.

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