

Remembering *Hamlet: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and the tragic value of *Hamlet*

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Remembering *Hamlet: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and the tragic value of *Hamlet*

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Figure 1: Withnail quoting Hamlet in *Withnail and I* (1987).

Before we read *Hamlet*, we know what it is about. Centuries of performance and critical debate surrounding the enigmatic play, often described as an artistic mess on the one hand and the definitive masterpiece of English literature on the other, have fossilised *Hamlet* in our collective memory. We are familiar with the philosophical questions before we read them in verse. The image of a man pondering death while holding a skull is with us before we learn to trace it back to *Hamlet*. It is synonymous with the best that great literature stands for, and more. William E. Gruber calls it ‘the central drama of our culture’, with a language that ‘shapes our idiom’ and ‘governs the way we think on certain critical matters’.¹ He summarises the cultural impact of *Hamlet* as ‘a belief that the play comes closer than any other to capturing the mystery of human destiny’.² For David Bevington,

¹ "Wheels within Wheels, Etcetera": Artistic Design in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead", *Comparative Drama*, 15 (1981), 291-310 <<http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/41152971>> [accessed 10 February 2013] (p. 292).

² *ibid.*, p. 293.

'the play is central to our ever-changing cultural image of ourselves'.³ Tom Stoppard himself says that this particular work 'is the most famous play in any language' and 'part of a sort of common mythology'.⁴ Margreta de Grazia goes so far as to call Hamlet 'the most valued character in our cultural tradition'.⁵

Hamlet is not only canonical, but iconic. Amongst the diverse cultural references to this play, ranging from the literary to examples in common parlance, one will also come across the parodic. Typing in 'Hamlet spoof' on YouTube will give you close to two thousand (mostly tasteless) results, ranging from 'Ghetto Hamlet' to 'Star Wars Hamlet'. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is an intriguing contribution to modern reworkings of *Hamlet*, but before moving on to consider the place that Stoppard's play has in this vast intertextual network, it is necessary to realise that *Hamlet* is not just a definitive piece of literature, but now also a cultural stereotype, a cliché.⁶ Despite the intellectual depth and the emotional complexity of the play, despite the reasonable foundations for its reputation, and despite its enduring relevance and the interest that it still has for modern audiences, one cannot help but admit that over-familiarity has changed the connotations surrounding the play, setting up a contest between poignancy and platitude. 'To be or not to be' might still be 'the question', but it has been asked too many times.

In a reconsideration of the graveyard scene, Ivan Callus delineates the threat of 'overfamiliarity and easy recognition' that follows our contemporary understanding of *Hamlet*.⁷ He notes that the iconic skull-holding moment has been 'classicised and banalised into triteness', on the brink of becoming a 'dead metaphor' at the cost of its once-captivating power.⁸ Whereas previous critics might have struggled in finding the 'right' way of interpreting the graveyard scene, contemporary critics must find a way of resuscitating its meaningfulness. By extension, contemporary audiences might also have to struggle to experience some sort of genuine reaction to *Hamlet* in general, and particularly to *Hamlet* as a tragedy. Playwrights who choose to actively engage with a play that must cast a very long shadow over drama are equally weary of its weight. Stoppard must face the urgent problem of recovering the play's resonance, and Shakespeare's notorious play comes with a lot of baggage. Even if we move away from the particular implications of choosing *Hamlet* as an intertext, there are other perils involved in intertextuality, at least as

³ David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through the Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 199.

⁴ Giles Gordon and Tom Stoppard, 'Tom Stoppard: Interviewed by Giles Gordon', *The Transatlantic Review*, (1968), 17-25 <<http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/41503694>> [accessed 9 February 2013] (p. 19).

⁵ *'Hamlet' without Hamlet* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

⁶ The full title of Stoppard's play will hereafter be shortened to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Due to the nature of this paper, it has been assumed that the reader is familiar with this play.

⁷ "'This?': Posthumanism and the Graveyard Scene in Hamlet', in *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, ed. by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 213 – 237 (p.216).

⁸ *ibid.*, p.217.

it is understood by Roland Barthes. Does the return to the all-famous *Hamlet* in Stoppard, for example, 'cause a sense of repetition, a saturation of cultural stereotypes, the triumph of the doxa'?⁹ In addition to Barthes's comments on the ennui of intertextuality, there are accusations that postmodern playfulness is merely 'a weakened, irrelevant, and parasitic phenomenon', or 'depthless pastiche'.¹⁰ Robert Brustein has accused Stoppard of 'theatrical parasitism' and renamed *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, 'Waiting for Hamlet'.¹¹

Many critics have of course defended Stoppard. Michael Hindin captures the mood economically but effectively in saying that Stoppard does not 'feed' on his sources, namely Shakespeare and Beckett, but 'dines with them'.¹² This suggests that we should not regard Stoppard's use of *Hamlet* as a mere instigator for a plot engaged in nothing but surface play and irony. Rather than intertextuality being a self-indulgent game of capricious references, it is, in Stoppard's view, 'not only inevitable [...] but necessary'.¹³ In 'dining' with his predecessors, Stoppard is engaging in a meaningful exchange that contributes to both his work and that of the intertext. Fruitful criticism should not restrict itself to tracing Shakespeare in Stoppard. In view of Stoppard's engagement with other playwrights and authors throughout his work, Harold Bloom hails Stoppard as an 'obsessive contaminator', and it is this contamination that makes the interaction between Stoppard and Shakespeare interesting.¹⁴ Although Stoppard comes after Shakespeare, as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* comes after *Hamlet*, we must also reread Shakespeare after Stoppard, and *Hamlet* through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the implications of which will be the subject of this essay. In Stoppard's own words, the new texts that emerge out of the 'convergences of different threads' lead to 'recontextualising and transforming the words of others'.¹⁵ In 'contaminating' *Hamlet*, Stoppard is not facilitating 'the triumph of the doxa'. On the contrary, we can use the usual argument in defence of postmodern intertextuality in Stoppard's favour, thereby showing how his dialogue with Shakespeare is not merely one of uncreative homage, but a playfulness that 'resists and disrupts' the source which it stems from.¹⁶ Stoppard's play serves to change our perception of *Hamlet* as a tragedy, since it 'questions, disturbs, or even subverts the dominance of [...] established forms', the established forms being, in this case, the canonicity of *Hamlet* and the traditional understanding of tragedy.¹⁷ Far from being a mere adaptation or 'another

⁹ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.177.

¹⁰ Allen, p.179, 182.

¹¹ Robert Egan, 'A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"', *Theatre Journal*, 31 (1979), 59-69 <<http://www.jstor.org/ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/3219455>> [accessed 10 February 2013] (p.59).

¹² 'Jumpers: Stoppard and the Theatre of Exhaustion', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 27 (1981), 1-15 <<http://www.jstor.org/ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/441082>> [accessed 10 February 2013] (p.2).

¹³ Kinereth Meyer, "'It is Written": Tom Stoppard and the Drama of the Intertext', *Comparative Drama*, 23 (1989), 105-122 <<http://www.jstor.org/ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/41153396>> [accessed 10 February 2013] (p.105).

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.106.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.105.

¹⁶ Allen, p.179.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.184-5.

version of *Hamlet*', Stoppard's play takes a life of its own in which the influence of Shakespeare might be essential but not detrimental, while Stoppard's own aesthetic and philosophical concerns are dialogic rather than derivative.¹⁸

Gruber states that 'Stoppard's play is not an "interpretation" of Hamlet, if by "interpretation" one refers merely to a modern rendering of a fixed text'.¹⁹ Like Gianakaris, Gruber is defending Stoppard from being associated with derivative dramaturgy, but going beyond Gianakaris, Gruber reminds us that despite *Hamlet*'s canonicity and enduring popularity, Shakespeare's play is by no means hermeneutically 'fixed'. David Bevington, whose *Murder Most Foul* shows how *Hamlet* is in fact a play that is continuously being reshaped by the convolutions of cultural history, states that *Hamlet* 'contributes to cultural evolution' while being simultaneously 'transformed into many images by that ongoing change'.²⁰ Though Stoppard does not merely adapt *Hamlet* for a post-Beckett stage, he most certainly reinterprets it, thereby compromising any notion of stability that we might attach to the play. 'There can be no definitive interpretation of *Hamlet*', states Richard Cuyler in his review of Stoppard's play.²¹ For *Hamlet*—as a text like any other but also as a quintessential text—is not immutable or in possession of a 'stable, unified meaning'.²² The play, notoriously textually unstable, is, in Kristeva's terms, a text in a state of production, an open text that is subject to change. As Margaret A. Rose has demonstrated in her work on pastiche and parody, a play such as Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* can indeed double back on its source to challenge and rework it meaningfully. What is most important about this reworking is the occurring 'change in the views of the reader of the parodied text', and the reader Stoppard has in mind would already be well-acquainted with the parodied text, and therefore, 'in a good position to compare it with its new form in the parody'.²³

The very idea of having a play named after two marginal characters encroaching upon Shakespeare's great work is highly stimulating. How can such a play shed new light on *Hamlet* when Hamlet is prohibited from occupying centre stage? It appears as if Stoppard has in a way anticipated and dramatised the main argument of Margreta de Grazia's *Hamlet without Hamlet*. She explains that the Hamlet she seeks to do without is what she calls the modern Hamlet, the iconic Hamlet as understood outside of the play itself. By shifting her focus away from a modern Hamlet which is 'distinguished by an inner being

¹⁸ See Gianakaris, C. J., 'Stoppard's Adaptations of Shakespeare: "Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth"', *Comparative Drama*, 18 (1984), 222-240 <<http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/41153130>> [accessed 10 February 2013] (p.222).

¹⁹ Gruber, p.295.

²⁰ Bevington, p. 199.

²¹ [Untitled], *Theatre Journal*, 31 (1979), 550-552 <<http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/3219430>> [accessed 9 February 2013] (p.550).

²² Allen, p.36.

²³ Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 38, 39.

so transcendent that it barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges', de Grazia claims to achieve a truly 'sharper vision' of the play.²⁴ She firmly resituates Hamlet within *Hamlet* by analysing some of its neglected aspects. Similarly, Stoppard's play brings two minor characters into the spotlight to replace Hamlet, and *Hamlet* read without *Hamlet*/Hamlet, this time through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, can lead to an understanding that is more attuned to contemporary sensibility. Stoppard's play provides an alternative vision of *Hamlet* which centres on the decentring of the overbearing play. Displacing *Hamlet*/Hamlet through intertextual revision amends the notion of tragedy in order to synchronise it to our post-Beckettian contemporary understanding of it, an understanding which undermines the dramatic grandeur of 'tragedy' while simultaneously upholding and reconfiguring the tragic. To understand Stoppard's contamination of tragedy, one must first assess Stoppard's take on two major constituents of tragedy—that is, agency and death.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle sets the pattern for the liberal humanist criticism of tragedy. He defines tragedy as:

the imitation of an action, and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves – thought and character – are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. Hence, the Plot is the imitation of the action [...].²⁵

Centuries later, A. C. Bradley will reiterate the same link between character and action as the central vehicle for plot in tragedy. He declares that 'the calamities of tragedy [...] proceed mainly from actions, and those the actions of men', and that 'the centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action.'²⁶ Tragic heroes are then agents authoring their own tragedies. Of course, Bradley complicates the wilfulness associated with agency by bringing in the necessities of character, but the principle faith in agency is never diminished. Though *Hamlet* is in some way a play that is already in the process of undoing its own agency through the issue of delay, the play certainly enjoys the buoyancy of liberal humanism and its investments in volition, even to its tragic end.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* delivers a blow to tragic agency. For one thing, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are minor courtiers in *Hamlet*, who are summoned into the play by Claudius and follow his orders throughout the play, their obedience being hindered only by Hamlet's own interference. Hamlet asks them if their being there is 'a free

²⁴ De Grazia, p.1.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), p.11.

²⁶ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919), p.11, 12.

visitation', and it most definitely is not.²⁷ They are almost negligible in Shakespeare, and though they become the lead characters in Stoppard's play, they are not given the means by which to navigate their roles. With predecessors like Estragon and Vladimir, the two courtiers' existence can only be unnervingly bleak. By focusing on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard invests in the condition rather than in the identities of two, and he does not give them the power of determining their lives. Their newly-given identities are limited, since we see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern repeatedly struggling to remember their past, a past before they were summoned by a messenger to Elsinore, a past before the play. They are born into the functionality of their roles, or as Guildenstern puts it, 'Practically starting from scratch.... An awakening [...] A summons.'²⁸ 'Stoppard,' according to Gordon, 'does nothing to fill out their blank outlines' because 'their blankness is the whole point'.²⁹ Crucially, it is not only Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius who mistake their identities. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves have trouble adjusting to the roles they have been assigned, confusing both their names and their physical selves. They play games which involve randomly calling each other to test how 'instinctively' and 'naturally' they have learnt to respond to their names.³⁰ On the ship to England, Rosencrantz pinches Guildenstern's leg after mistaking it for his own in the dark (*R&G*, p.108). With such a hollow background, we can hardly expect self-willed action from the two, since their sense of identity and their sense of purpose are precisely what they are struggling to remember. Hamlet is born to set right 'the time which is out of joint', but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no such self-defining mission (*R&G*, p.227).

Despite their hollowness, Stoppard furnishes the two courtiers with a stage in which they display the facts and details of their confusing and blank existence—an existence that Shakespeare never bestowed upon them—and this brings them to (limited) life. When we read *Hamlet* after Stoppard, Shakespeare and Hamlet's consignment of their fate sounds even harsher now that they are not just names. And yet, despite the sympathetic reality of their existence, such an existence is confined to a stasis that openly alludes to that of Beckett's theatre. In displacing Hamlet, Stoppard chooses to displace agency along with him, so that even as protagonists, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pawns in an action largely unknown to them and most definitively not sensitive to their will or desires. Unwittingly, in a moment of dramatic irony, Guildenstern tellingly states, 'I have no desires. None.' (*R&G*, p.13). In an early review of the play, William F. Thomsen observes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear to be 'perpetual spectators—they never quite participate'.³¹ Over the years, numerous critics have cemented the link between

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, third series, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2006), p.241. Further references will be given in parenthesis in the text as (*Hamlet*, page number).

²⁸ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1985), p.18. Further references will be given in parenthesis in the text as (*R&G*, page number).

²⁹ Gordon, p.17.

³⁰ Refer to Stoppard, pp. 48 - 49 for one such example.

³¹ Thomsen, William F., '[Untitled]', *The English Journal*, 57 (1968), 1234-1236 <<http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu/mt/stable/812507>> [accessed 9 February 2013] (p.1234).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their absurdist archetypes, thereby fortifying the confines of their static existence.³²

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sit uncomfortably with traditional notions of ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic heroes’. There is magnitude in the poignancy of their tragic situation but one would hesitate to call it grand, as one would hesitate to associate the heroic with either character, what with their capacity for self-determination being so clearly diminished. Gordon captures the paradoxical spirit of their centre-stage occupation by saying that ‘their anonymity is magnified’.³³ By focusing on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard chooses to investigate the plight they are in throughout *Hamlet*. The context that Stoppard puts the two courtiers in is less a new context than a more detailed, behind-the-scenes version of *Hamlet*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is referred to as a play that ‘ricochets off the plot “wall” of *Hamlet*’, or an ‘inside-out’ *Hamlet*.³⁴ For Hindin, the experience of watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* felt like ‘watching *Hamlet* from behind the arras’.³⁵ The Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* echoes this by saying that he and his troupe of tragedians ‘do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off’ (*R&G*, p.28). Stoppard even lifts entire sections from *Hamlet* and uses them as stage directions or proper action in the plot. Even though there appears to be literary transgression in Stoppard’s decision to focus on that which Shakespeare left out, this transgression does not lead to any liberty for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are still operating within and according to the plot of the mother play. They are, as Guildenstern intimates but does not fully realise, ‘caught up in the action’ (*R&G*, p.26). Instead of showing any capacity for self-determination, they demonstrate how they are condemned to ‘stick to the script’. The coin-tossing with which Stoppard’s play opens gives ample evidence of this; the result is always heads.³⁶ There is no alternative course of action that can be taken. There is only a decided adherence to the script which must fulfil itself in spite of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves. In trying to make sense of the unlikely probability that the result is always heads, Guildenstern reproduces the philosophical discourse of logic, a discourse which is either ironic given the terribly illogical and non-causal nature of the absurd world they are inhabiting, or on the other hand, strictly logical, in the sense that their lives must follow the strict causal sequence outlined in *Hamlet*. Guildenstern suggests that ‘time has stopped dead’, once again reflecting the still predictability of the *Hamlet* plot, the plot of their lives (*R&G*, p.12).

³² See Gianakaris, p.224; Hindin, p.3.

³³ Gordon, p.20.

³⁴ Gianakaris, p.224; Smith, Kay H., "'Hamlet, Part Eight, the Revenge" Or, Sampling Shakespeare in a Postmodern World', *College Literature*, 31 (2004), 135-149
<<http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu/mt/stable/25115232>> [accessed 10 February 2013] (p.136).

³⁵ Hindin, p.3.

³⁶ The result is tails just before the scene switches to a scene from *Hamlet*, which indicates an alternative interpretation of the coin-flipping. In this view, Stoppard’s play is ‘the other side of the same coin’, the inverse of *Hamlet*. Shortly after, Stoppard uses Ophelia’s description of Hamlet as a stage direction. Whichever way the coin-flipping is interpreted, there is no real textual evidence supporting an interpretation arguing in favour of a proper freedom from *Hamlet*.

Guildenstern, unlike Rosencrantz, seems to understand the implications of the problem of probability, and asks, 'What about the suspense?' (*R&G*, p.8) Indeed, how can there be suspense, when the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is given away in the title of the play itself? More importantly, how can there be suspense considering our familiarity with the plot of *Hamlet*? The fossilised form of *Hamlet*'s plot is, in Stoppard, an opportunity for recasting Beckettian stasis, and consequently, we are reminded of Hamlet's delay. As harrowing as the problem of delay might be for Hamlet, the decision to tarry is his own, whereas for the two courtiers, they do not have such freedom as would allow them the choice of delay. They are under an authorial compulsion to wait or act. Stasis can in this sense be interpreted as a post-humanist blow to the liberal humanist 'delay' of *Hamlet*. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, nothing happens, and when it does, it happens with or without them. In this manner, the familiar plot of *Hamlet* equally enables Stoppard to dramatise movement, but such movement is not that of the Aristotelian and Bradleyite character in action. Movement here is the motion of a puppet on a string. The absurdist character is swept along by indifferent action, with character now referring less to a distinctive personality than to a dramatic role to be played. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wait for orders, daring the other characters to come on stage and do something, until they find themselves following such orders, the orders of the script, into their deaths. Guildenstern senses the woeful nature of their sordid state. He has trouble articulating his frustration: 'We have not been... picked out... simply to be abandoned... set loose to find our own way.... We are entitled to some direction.... I would have thought' (*R&G*, p.18).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's whole existence is a supreme manifestation of dramatic irony. We know they are following a strict direction, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are propelled forward without knowing where they are going or precisely why. They say that they do not know how to act, but this is negligible, because as the Player says, 'It is written' (*R&G*, p.72, 88). Interestingly, this is how Stoppard brings the two courtiers to life. It is as if Guildenstern has suddenly veered off script, allowing a brief but poignant lament to slip out in an expression of spontaneous, though suppressed, resistance. There is in fact suspense here, literally manifested in the points of suspense, which demonstrate that this is not scripted. Sadly, there are only a few moments like this one and they still do not lead to agency. Following Helene Keyssar-Franke's interpretation of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the quote above demonstrates 'the essence of Stoppard's strategy', which is 'to juxtapose scenes in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern operate outside of their roles in *Hamlet* to scenes in which they do enact them', thereby creating 'a sense of the possibility of freedom and the tension of the improbability of escape'.³⁷

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are barely allowed to express any consciousness about their fate, let alone to alter it, are the real victims of existential angst and not Hamlet, who

³⁷ Helene Keyssar-Franke, "The Strategy of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 27 (1975), 85-97 (p.87).

can afford to indulge in philosophical contemplation. It is, after all, Hamlet who reminds Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he knows where the wind is blowing from (as does the Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*).³⁸ He is in charge of his madness and he has a sense of direction, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can neither deduce his meaning nor establish the wind's direction. Unlike Hamlet, they cannot trace where they came from, and they have no idea where they might go. Robert Egan reminds us that Hamlet manages to emerge from his philosophical anxieties into 'an affirmation of an order operating through all things', but this 'order', this 'grand scenario' has nothing to do with the 'welfare' of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.³⁹ They are really and truly lost.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's crisis strikes a chord with modern audiences because of its recollection of the human condition as understood by the theatre of the absurd. The lack of agency foregrounds the inevitability of death, as well as overwhelming any gesture towards individual resistance. In fact, when Guildenstern realises that they have lost their sense of orientation, he reminds us that 'for all the compasses of the world, there is only one direction' (*R&G*, p.78). Keyssar-Franke writes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's discovery in this play is 'that they are not free, that they cannot escape their roles, and that they therefore cannot escape death'.⁴⁰ The deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are insignificant, even though they are the protagonists of the play. Since we cannot call them tragic heroes, because the very notion of a tragic hero is hard to digest after the theatre of the absurd, their deaths are nothing like the death of Hamlet. In *Hamlet*, they are simply two additional deaths to add to the pile of dead bodies which is the last scene of the play. They are physically absent, and therefore anonymous and insignificant even in death. Hamlet might not set his life 'at a pin's fee', but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not given the opportunity to set the value of their own lives (*Hamlet*, p.208). Similarly, Rosencrantz might believe that 'life in a box is better than no life at all', but he has no real say in the matter (*R&G*, p.76). Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy bemoans the loss of resolution, but there was one such resolution to speak of, and though Hamlet is seriously contemplating suicide, he is still steeped in choice as he considers the directions made available to him by agency. The two courtiers' meaningless deaths reflect the absurdity of existence and the fact that any grandeur that we perceive in death is only the projection of liberal humanism. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* helps to show how there is no remembrance for their deeds as there is no remembrance for their deaths. Though Gertrude promises them gratitude 'as fits a King's remembrance', they are in fact neglected and forgotten, especially as we see them in Stoppard's version (*Hamlet*, p.238; *R&G*, p.33). The ghost in *Hamlet* can legitimately remind his son to honour his memory, but death in Stoppard is absolute; it cannot reach beyond the grave and neither would it care to.

³⁸ 'I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.' *Hamlet*, p.261.

³⁹ Egan, p.60.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

A tragedy like *Hamlet* articulates the true meaning of finitude beautifully, but its status as a classical tragedy renders some of its articulations partially inadequate. It is not the content that we are sceptical about. What is no longer acceptable is the manner of representation, the grandeur of tragic verse. Death always 'brings out the poetry' in the tragedians, but this poetry is now suspect (*R&G*, p.84). 'Words, words' become all we have to go on (*R&G*, p. 44). Ironically, Hamlet himself says how 'like a whore' he must 'unpack [his] heart with words' (*Hamlet*, p.277). George Steiner notes that pure tragedy can 'contradict or deconstruct' itself because of its very nature as an aesthetic artefact.⁴¹ He states: 'By virtue of its bare existentiality, the absolute tragic statement implies positive values of survivance, of formal beauty or innovation, of repeatability. In some ways, it cheats.'⁴² *Hamlet* as a tragedy cheats because it is such a beautiful piece of literature, so beautiful as to ensure its 'survivance' and its 'repeatability', as the subject of this very paper testifies to. Hamlet himself says that 'the power of Beauty will sooner transform Honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of Honesty can translate Beauty into his likeness' (*Hamlet*, p.289). Keyssar-Franke takes a similar stance about *Hamlet*, stating that *Hamlet* 'simply does not work for a mid-twentieth-century audience', let alone for a twenty-first century one, and she cites this as the reason for Stoppard's turning away from 'the grand hero to two supernumeraries'.⁴³ This is Stoppard's way of revisiting the play in order to make it more relevant for contemporary audiences. Given the regrettably clichéd status of *Hamlet* for us today, its credibility cannot be taken for granted. It is as if we are Gertrude asking Polonius for 'more matter with less art' (*R&G*, p.244).

Hindin reaches similar conclusions. When considering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their situation, which represents humanity and the human condition, one cannot help but exclaim how *unlike* the gods they are. This exposes the fallacy of the liberal humanist tragedy epitomised in *Hamlet*. In this manner, Stoppard sets about writing the tragedy of those other than the tragic hero, that is, those who *Hamlet* 'has foreordained [...] to manipulated lives and obscure deaths'.⁴⁴ While contemplating human finitude, Hamlet famously makes a crucial shift in comparison, observing that the individual, 'how like a god', is no more than 'the quintessence of dust', but in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's post-humanist universe, there is no such shift (*Hamlet*, p.272). The truth is in 'the quintessence of dust', without the irony of humanity being god-like and the very poetry implicit in that phrase. Hamlet famously laments 'how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable' are 'all the uses of this world', but we know this to be equally true if not truer for the situation of the two courtiers, though the sentiment is never articulated with such poetic sensibility (*R&G*, p.176). Hindin goes on to distinguish between suffering in tragedy and suffering in the theatre of the absurd, outlining the fact that though Hamlet suffers,

⁴¹ George Steiner, 'Tragedy, Pure and Simple', in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. by M. S. Silk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.534 – 547 (p.544).

⁴² *ibid.* Though Steiner distinguishes between pure tragedy and the majority of Shakespeare's tragedies, his comments apply to this particular understanding of Shakespearian tragedy none the less.

⁴³ Keyssar-Franke, p.87.

⁴⁴ Egan, p.60.

‘equilibrium is restored’ at the end due to Hamlet’s capacity for action and due to the ‘illumination’ he seeks and ultimately receives.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the absurd order-less suffering of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern overwhelms that of Hamlet, which ends with ordered closure.

It is within this context that we must understand Guildenstern’s reaction to the tragedians’ repertoire of staging different deaths, a repertoire which culminates in the Player’s own tour de force, a staged death which the audience believes is happening, at least in the world of the play. To begin with, the arrival of the tragedians in *Hamlet* is a source of joy for the tragic hero, and a helpful instigator of the plot since it enables Hamlet to stage the play by which he traps Claudius. But the arrival of the tragedians for Guildenstern is a disappointment as he realises how obscene their solicitous practice has become, with Alfred being the ‘tawdry emblem of their condition’.⁴⁶ Guildenstern’s reaction represents our modern resistance to the theatricality of tragedy, which can be a case of familiarity breeding disbelief, rather than contempt. *Hamlet* significantly turns out to be one of the plays in the tragedians’ repertoire. There are moments in *Hamlet* which suggest a similar suspicion of over-dramatising emotion. Most notably, and ironically, Hamlet instructs the tragedians to avoid histrionics, even though he is himself a natural performer. Soliloquies, which are so dramatically important by virtue of their lofty language, have no place in Stoppard unless they are interpreted by the two courtiers as the ravings of a mad prince. Stoppard foregrounds the performative aspect of his play: Stoppard plays with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the two courtiers play games, there are tragedians within a modern revisitation of a tragedy, there are plays within plays, there is an emphasis on dramatic rhetoric, dramatic irony and double-entendre, and so on. The audience is made to realise that ‘the play is a conscious creation, an illusion [...] and a play.’⁴⁷ This emphasis on performance makes us suspicious of the ability of tragedy to convey real, authentic meaning, especially on the subject of death, and Stoppard recognises that the only way of commenting on tragedy is by exposing its artifice. Otherwise, one might have to deal with a situation as paradoxical as that of *Hamlet*, where the value of tragedy is devalued by its illusion-fabricating artifice. Tragic death in *Hamlet* can only be understood dramatically. *Hamlet* cannot entirely be reduced to ‘the mechanics of cheap melodrama’ but Guildenstern’s critique of tragedy may well strike a chord with modern reactions to *Hamlet* (*R&G*, p.94). The Player, lamenting the tragedians’ failing capacity to enthrall their audience, tells Guildenstern, ‘You should have caught us in better times. We were purists then’ (*R&G*, p.27). Guildenstern’s diagnosis of the great Hamlet as ‘a love-sick schoolboy’, ‘day-dreaming’, ‘stabbing his elders’, and ‘talking to himself’ is obviously crudely reductive, but somewhat legitimate (*R&G*, p.131).

⁴⁵ Hindin, p.3.

⁴⁶ Egan, p.61.

⁴⁷ Keyssar-Franke, p.87.

Death is commodified by Stoppard's tragedians, and the Player boasts of 'Deaths for all ages and occasions!' (*R&G*, p.139) This reflects a particularly cynical understanding of the history of tragedy in theatre, and it captures the incredulity we might feel upon watching *Hamlet*, a play so familiar to our imagination that it prohibits us from suspending our disbelief. However, there is more at stake. What is being questioned here is the very ability of drama, and by extension, of art, to represent the reality of death. The Player states that actors are 'the opposite of people', and by the same token, artifice is the opposite of reality (*R&G*, p.68). This is why Stoppard chooses to make Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths so discreet, in keeping with their original deaths in *Hamlet*. The quiet deaths of the two courtiers criticise the whole history of tragedy, and especially the liberal humanist criticism on tragic death, which holds that the tragic lies in the loss of greatness. Keyssar-Franke observes that 'we do not die with Hamlet' because 'we do not precisely identify with Hamlet'.⁴⁸ We do, however, identify with the two courtiers and their absurd and humble deaths. The tragedians and the two courtiers, their fates partially abandoned to anonymity by Shakespeare, resurface in Stoppard, where they are 'all in the same boat', literally and figuratively (*R&G*, p.127). The audience is there with them.

Guildenstern is tragedy's best critic. In the most important of his unscripted outbursts, Guildenstern has a serious axe to grind with the tragedians, and looming invisibly behind them, the whole concept of tragedy. For Guildenstern, death eludes representation and it cannot be acted because it has nothing to do with 'gasps and blood and falling about' (*R&G*, p.95). Despite the 'thousand casual deaths' that theatre is capable of producing, there is 'none of that intensity which squeezes out life... and no blood runs cold anywhere' (*R&G*, p.138). He accuses the actors of 'dying so many times' that no one can 'believe in their death' (*R&G*, p.94). Simply but crucially, he asserts that 'no one gets up after death', and moreover, 'there is no applause—there is only silence' (*R&G*, p.138). What Guildenstern cannot tolerate is how the tragedians mistake their experience in performed death for a knowledge of death. Death for Guildenstern resists knowledge, and hence the silence that follows, the same silence that the dying Hamlet concludes with in his own gesture towards authenticity. The difference between the real silence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths and Hamlet's articulation of silence is important, because poetry still colours Hamlet's performance of death. Guildenstern is at pains to explain that death is not poetic: 'Dying is not romantic' (*R&G*, p.140). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's anticipated death in Stoppard's play involves no histrionics. They simply disappear or 'fail to reappear', as Guildenstern describes it (*R&G*, p.95). In so doing, Guildenstern kills the poetry but revives the meaning of Hamlet's description of death as 'the undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns' (*Hamlet*, p.286). Death is a stage exit, the end of performing life, and never a performance in itself. It is the end of being in character, unlike the Player who is never out of character and for whom there is no real exist. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* makes the tragedy of death real again, as we gradually realise that human life similarly consists of individuals briefly featuring as the protagonists

⁴⁸ Keyssar-Franke, p.90.

of their own lives, performing according to the absurd script of human existence, until their ‘unobtrusive and unannounced’ exit in death (*R&G*, p.95).

The pathetic tragedy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pawns in an indifferent mechanism and reflects the contemporary sense of tragedy better than *Hamlet*.⁴⁹ They do not have enough volition to be termed anti-heroes, wilfully going against the grain, so they are simply non-heroes accidentally occupying the main roles. They do not have the capacity for profound soliloquy sustained by dramatic verbosity, but this does not mean that their predicament is not deeply engaging. If anything, we are moved more by them because their universality is more applicable to us today than Hamlet’s.⁵⁰ It is not that we can no longer appreciate *Hamlet*. It is simply that our appreciation is framed within *Hamlet*’s cultural reputation and history. If *Hamlet* is the poster-play for philosophical profundity, we cannot react to it with unimpaired openness. Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, on the other hand, succeeds in resuscitating the original lesson of *Hamlet* as a tragedy that centuries of theatre has almost deadened; the disturbing but ‘painfully real’ fact that ‘men are born, live, and die.’⁵¹ Gruber suggests that Stoppard sets out ‘in an honest effort to clarify’ a text that is now deemed ‘invalid’, ‘incomplete’, ‘something to be tested, explored, rather than accepted without proof’.⁵² Tellingly, part of *Hamlet*’s status as a myth involves its regeneration ‘in endless versions of itself’.⁵³ Following the lessons that theories of intertextuality and postmodernism have thought us, we must acknowledge the undeniable fact that Stoppard’s use and abuse of *Hamlet* does not discredit it. It adds a new dialogic level of interpretation that enables *Hamlet* to interact differently with our time. Gruber notes that Stoppard’s play ‘returns us to thoroughly familiar territory’, which is the reconsideration of some of the ‘fundamental perplexities that gave shape and lasting meaning to *Hamlet*.’⁵⁴ Reading *Hamlet* after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* revives Shakespeare’s great tragedy by subjecting it to a modern-day reappraisal. Hamlet’s musing on our return to dust is brought to bear on our existence with more urgency as it is filtered through the predicament of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* certainly makes us remember *Hamlet*, which is in many ways a play about remembering and forgetting. It is under the guise of remembrance of the dead that Claudius leads the court into the amnesiac acceptance of his reign. Hamlet remembers too well, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are forgotten by Shakespeare but remembered by Stoppard. The ghost of King Hamlet haunts the

⁴⁹ The use of the word ‘pathetic’ here refers to the Aristotelian and Bradleyite distinction between pathos and the tragic.

⁵⁰ Thomsen, p.1234.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Gruber, p.295.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p.298.

battlements and the play itself, imploring his son to remember. *Hamlet* the play similarly haunts us, though it hardly needs to remind us to remember it. It is lodged in our memory. Horatio, at the end of both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is assigned the task of 'truly delivering' Hamlet's story (*R&G*, p. 462, p.143). Originally, Horatio had to deliver the story to 'the yet unknowing world', but we now know the tale too well, to the extent that we cannot help but trace the Player's voice (and its implications) in Horatio's summary of the tale, with his emphasis on 'bloody and unnatural acts' and 'casual slaughters'. For this reason, our remembrance of *Hamlet* does not involve the simple commemoration of the honourable dead. It may be a very old and familiar play, but it is certainly not a dead one. We do not remember at the risk of forgetting. In remembering *Hamlet*, as it echoes through a play written centuries later, we pay our respects to it, but we also challenge and revise the reverence we owe it.

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