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## The matrix and the echo<sup>1</sup>: Intertextual re-modelling in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*

### Abstract

This article investigates the 'intertextual dialogue' between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. A tangential look is also directed at Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The intertextual relationship between the texts is approached from different angles and different defining concepts are used - Topia's typology (1984), involving the view of both vertical and horizontal perspectives to effect fusion, separation or intertextuality, is used to help determine that Stoppard's remodelling of the Shakespearean matrix results in completely new texts, not merely a 'slightly' distorted text.

### 1. Introduction

In this age of critical diversity, *intertextuality* has often been touted as the panacea of many of the pitfalls in historical approaches to literature. One of the main problems with the concept is, however, that it has evolved from its original meaning and is consequently used in many different contexts without the exact meaning being defined. Plottel and Charney (1978:vii) succinctly summarize some of the various contexts in which the concept is used:

For some authors, the notion of intertextuality opens all cultural facts and artifacts to the internal exchanges between them, or it opens up words to make them yield the 'infinite modalities' of language. Other writers turn to the more discursive and rational dialogue between literary texts. Still others spring free the text itself of its referential bounds, while many read, as the perfectly apt expression goes, between the lines.

This definition implies that the concept can be used as a basis for a reading strategy which will assist the reader to uncover variegated nuances of meaning in the interface between interconnected texts.

This paper will employ the notion of intertextuality (the distinction between the notion of *intertextuality* as distinct from *allusion* is drawn in note 5) as a reading strategy and focus on the dialogue between two literary texts, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, with some tangential remarks addressed at *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Beckett's Waiting for Godot*. However, it is necessary to outline a number of basic methodological assumptions before exploring the dialogue between the texts in more detail.

<sup>1</sup> Part of the title is derived from Topia (1984:103-126).

- \* It is a basic premise of the paper that theoretical concepts and models must assist the reader in uncovering nuances of meaning which might otherwise not have been foregrounded in the reader's consciousness, and in doing so must add to the reader's arsenal of interpretative strategies (cf. Lodge, 1986:17-36).
- \* No theoretical concept or model can be 'applied' in its totality to specific texts. Concepts and notions should be used descriptively, assisting the reader in uncovering possible readings which the reader may not have uncovered previously.
- \* It is possible to 'prove' the success of a particular concept or model, providing one chooses one's text carefully. This process should rather be reversed: the literary text should provide the reader with an indication of which theoretical approach, concept or model would be most appropriate to use in a reading of that particular text.
- \* It goes without saying that no theoretical concept or model can exhaust all possible interpretations of a text. A reading based on a theoretical concept should always be seen as a starting point into exploring the level of meaning obscured by the text. It is important to bear in mind, however, that particular concepts or models will provide a reading which yields far better results than, say, another concept. It is the reader's task to ensure that the most appropriate concept or model be applied to the text in question. (The concern in this paper is with the play as literary text, that is, decoded as a literary text, keeping in mind all the important work done in the semiotics of 'theatre texts' by such authors as Keir Elam, Alexander Serpieri, Césaire Segre and Patrice Pavis.)

Having thus briefly stipulated the basic methodological assumptions of this paper, it is now appropriate to define the issue to be investigated in more detail.

When considering the interdependence between two literary texts, there are actually three texts which come into play - the borrowing text (or bracket text), the borrowed text, and the original corpus from which the borrowed 'text' (seen in the light of Derrida's concept of supplement) has been extracted.

The intertextual problem between these texts can be approached from two perspectives. One might examine the relationship between the original corpus of the borrowed text and the version of the borrowed text as it appears re-modelled in the heart of the new context; or, one can stress the "relationship between the bracket text and the re-utilized fragment in the midst of the new aggregate formed by their co-existence, working from the hypothesis that this co-existence is more than mere juxtaposition and that the encounter of two texts inevitably engenders a new textual configuration qualitatively different from the simple sum of two units" (Topia,1984:105). This paper will investigate both these avenues, and will also attempt to investigate how one's reading of the original text (in this case *Hamlet*) is influenced by the new textual configuration, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* is a play which can with some reservation be included in the mode of the Theatre of the Absurd. It might therefore be apposite to make a few remarks about this mode, and particularly the way in which the play in question might be said to relate to it.

## 2. Man - cut off from his roots ...

"... all his actions become senseless  
absurd, useless ..."  
(Ionesco)

Just as Shakespearean tragedy can be regarded as the dramatic representation of the (often traumatically experienced) dialectic between the breakdown of the theocentric, hierarchically structured and ordered universe of the Middle Ages and the rise of the new scepticism and individualism of the late Renaissance (McElroy, 1973:9-16), so the Theatre of the Absurd can be regarded as the representation of the prevailing spirit of the *Zeitgeist* as it was experienced in Western Europe in the course of what can broadly be described as the post-Christian age.

Ionesco defined the Absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose ... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (*in* Esslin, 1980:23). The heroic Renaissance gentleman who bestrode the new world both physically and intellectually has collapsed into a forlorn, hopeless and alienated creature forever hovering on the brink of the nausea-inspiring void, with his life devoid of meaning and purpose. Communication has broken down, become contingent and fragmented, and it is this sense of alienation and hopelessness, emphasized by Absurdist playwrights, that Stoppard seizes in his play(s). Gesture replaces much of what is usually regarded as meaningful and causal action, and Stoppard creates the same sense of stasis, of a nightmarish sense of paralysis, in the play in question - a stasis broken at times, in true Absurdist fashion, by frenetic farcical activity, which punctuates the seeming seriousness with the quality of black comedy so typical of the genre. Character development disappears, as 'characters' become encodings of certain typifying traits, remaining essentially the same, being subject to the sense of cosmic vertigo. It is, however, in the consideration of language that one has to qualify Stoppard's seeming allegiance to the Absurdist mode, as Stoppard's language is quite the opposite of the stripped bareness of the dialogue of a Beckett and an Ionesco. Stoppard's elegant verbal constructions, however, serve essentially the same purpose of commenting obliquely on the difficulty of meaningful communication - he dazzles and diverts, and succeeds in, as he himself has so succinctly put, "withdrawing with style from chaos" (*cf.* Combrink, 1980:188).

The existentialist foundations of the Theatre of the Absurd dissolved the basic differences between tragedy and comedy. In contemporary terms, both have become visions of despair. The only truth lies in the absurd - "logic is a convenient but invalid pattern imposed upon reality by those cowardly and dishonest minds which dare not face reality" (*Combrink, 1982:4*). This vision has as its corollary that human existence is governed by the irrational and nonsensical.

Comedy essentially deals with the unstable part of man which is easily turned upside-down. It deals with the disorderly and impossible, creating a comedy of the grotesque. The grotesque becomes the mode through which the paradoxical and formless can be embodied. The difference between traditional and grotesque comedy is the awareness of the struggle, the suffering and failure of human existence. Tragedy and comedy have become merely two aspects of the same situation. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* sombre and comic elements are mixed to produce a grotesque effect.

### 3. Loss of (rational) identity

*A poet is the most unpoetical  
of anything in existence,  
because he has no identity  
(Keats)*

Loss of identity is a major theme in both plays. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* reveals an intense anguish about the loss of identity in a (paradoxically) humorous manner which generates a perverse, somewhat frenetic vitality even in the awareness of a gripping sense of despair. The contingent and relative nature of truth and man's need to divert himself from the painful realities hedging him in form essential elements in the play. The dislocation of the comforting dimensions of time and space is intensified by the failure of language to communicate clearly - as it diverts and confuses the issue endlessly, the total inability of the rational mind to adequately explain man to himself and to present a way in which man can live a meaningful existence in a world that makes no sense.

*Hamlet* is imbued with a sense of intense anguish and a mental suffering which are partly the results of Hamlet's incipient sense that he has lost his (rational) identity. When considering the Elizabethan philosophy of the Chain of Being<sup>2</sup>, and concomitant views about order and harmony, with the very strong belief in an ordered and hierarchically structured universe, and the tension generated between this view and the new scepticism and individualism with its diametrically opposed possibilities about the nature of reality, about man's relation to the world and the cosmos, and especially about the value of his actions, the profound effect of this loss gains in momentum. The world of Elsinore has changed radically; the king no longer fulfils his role as God's anointed deputy, but is rather a villainous usurper who has wilfully upset the order and set in motion forces of evil which are actively undermining the whole of 'reality', both political and familial. Hamlet is being sucked into this vortex and has to grapple endlessly with issues centring on his sense of self and his role and place in the kingdom (the play is not called *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* without reason). The altered state of the kingdom, with the threat that this represents to his fastidious, rational view of man and cosmos is expressed graphically:

Am I a coward?

Who call me a villain, breaks my pate across,  
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,  
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat  
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?  
Ha! Swounds, I should take it! Form it cannot be  
But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall  
To make oppression better, or ere this  
I should have fatted all the region kites  
With this slave's offal - Bloody, bawdy villain?  
(II, ii, 513-522)

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<sup>2</sup> Our reference to the Elizabethan concept of the great Chain-of-Being does not imply an ignorance or negation of the work done by New Historicists. We are fully aware of the complexities involved in attempting to define a monolithic 'worldview' or 'spirit of the age'. Our use of the concept implies a general belief in the hierarchically ordered state of nature. McElroy (1973:9-16) offers a useful summary of the various aspects which constituted the Elizabethan worldview, as well as the many (then) new opposing forces which eventually led to the demise of the theocentric worldview.

Hamlet's confusion is so great that he cannot distinguish between the meaning of life and death, leaving him with a profound sense of metaphysical anguish. However, this confusion with his own identity, which is a dramatic representation of the struggle between the questing Renaissance mind, with all the intellectual anguish surrounding that, and the older certainties, and that of his surrounding world changes as the play unfolds and some kind of equilibrium returns to his life, when he ceases the terrifying quest in return for an acceptance of his (intellectual and spiritual) finitude, and an acceptance of the eternal pattern of the cosmos:

And that should learn us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.

(V, ii, 9-11)

Hamlet finds himself in the surrender of his remaining certainties - by relinquishing his relentless quest, and subjecting himself to the forces outside himself - but needs to have this told to the world:

Oh God, Horatio, what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me.

(V, ii, 349-350)

Horatio's final task, for which he has to keep living, will therefore be to re-establish Hamlet's name, the visible representation of his identity (in Stoppard's play, this ritual is enacted through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's names being written in a document, which while being their death warrant, does serve to sustain the fact that they did live once).

Loss of identity in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* is the representation of one of the trademarks of modern man's life. Stoppard investigates the possibility of a determinist universe, governed by a capricious, and sometimes even malicious fate (Grobler, 1988:173). The only course of action for these characters is inaction. There is no sense of security or direction, only chaos and disorientation, reality that is totally and debilitatingly contingent:

Guil: If it is morning, and the sun is over *there* (his right as he faces the audience) for instance, *that* (front) would be northerly. On the other hand, if it is not morning and the sun is over *there* (his left) ... *that* ... (lamely) would still be northerly (picking up). To put it another way, if we came from down there (front) and it is morning, the sun would be up *there* (his left), and if it is actually over *there* (his right) and it's still morning, we must have come from up there (behind him), and if that is southerly (his left) and the sun is really over *there* (front), then it's the afternoon. However, if none of these is the case ...

(Stoppard, 1967:42).

Their names cannot assert their identity; they become faceless and cannot be sure of one another because in their world, one can be sure about nothing. Stoppard has said that his chief objective "... was to exploit a dramatic situation which seemed to ... have enormous dramatic and comic potential - of these two guys who in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they are doing ..." (in Bigsby, 1976:10). This is enacted dramatically by the following farcical movements:

Claudius: Welcome, dear Rosencrantz ... (he raises a hand at Guil while Ros bows - Guil bows late and hurriedly) ... and Guildenstern. (He raises a hand at Ros while Guil bows to him - Ros is still straightening up from his previous bow and halfway up he bows down again. With his head down, he twists to look at Guil, who is on the way up)

(Stoppard, 1967:26).

As the play progresses, these farcical actions become symbolic of their pathetic search for identity. The effect is intensified because of the humorous presentation of this extremely serious matter. Both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have an intuitive awareness that they might find their identities by subjecting themselves to something beyond themselves, thereby emphasising the great metaphysical anguish of modern man devoid of belief in a benevolent and almighty God (in contrast to Hamlet) and emphasising the underlying theme of determinism, of a world visibly controlled by a capricious fate:

Guil: An awakening, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters, our names shouted in a certain dawn, a message, a summons ... A new record for heads and tails. We have not men ... picked out ... simply to be abandoned ... set loose to find our own way ... We are entitled to some kind of direction ...

(Stoppard, 1967:95).

It is also at this point that another intertextual allusion is activated, viz. that of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*<sup>3</sup>. Stoppard's use of dialogue clearly echoes the speech patterns and rhythms of Beckett's characters, and at the same time reinforces the original theme in *Hamlet*:

Guil: Glean what afflicts him.  
Ros: Me?  
Guil: Him.  
Ros: How?  
Guil: Question and answer - Old ways are the best ways.  
Ros: He's afflicted.  
Guil: You question, I'll answer.  
Ros: He's not himself, you know.  
Guil: I'm him you see. (Beat)  
Ros: Who am I then?  
Guil: You're yourself.  
Ros: And he is you?  
Guil: Not a bit of it.  
Ros: Are you afflicted?  
Guil: That's the idea. Are you ready?  
(Stoppard, 1967:33).

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<sup>3</sup> The intertextual encounters between the work of Stoppard and Beckett have been commented on by Gabbard (1982) and Londré (1981) among others and deserve a much more detailed investigation than afforded here. The point to be made, however, is that any intertextual project must remain incomplete as each intertextual reference or set of references will indeed require a full intertextual analysis in itself. This pitfall is succinctly summarised by Derrida (1981:109): "As soon as the supplementary outside is opened, its structure implies that the supplement itself can be 'typed', replaced by its double, and that a supplement to the supplement, a surrogate for the surrogate, is possible and necessary."

While in *Hamlet* the restoration of the equilibrium also results in the re-establishment of identity and a greater sense of integration, the situation in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* remains fluid and uncertain; the balance has disintegrated and seems forever lost.

#### 4. The contingent nature of reality

*Chaos umpire sits,  
And by decision more embroils the fray  
By which he reigns: next him high arbiter  
Chance governs all  
(Milton)*

The recurrent themes of chance, time, divine intervention and the suspension of physical laws are closely related to the theme of loss of identity as they constitute the world which leads to that loss.

In the opening scene the game of tossing coins goes against the laws of probability, creating in the characters a sense of vertiginous contingency which is characteristic of the play and the mode. Guildenstern speculates about the reasons behind the outcome of the game in a way which reveals the convergence of these themes quite succinctly:

Guil: One. I'm willing it. Instead where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in a private atonement for an unremembered past. (He spins a coin at Ros.)

Ros: Heads.

Guil: Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times ... (He flips a coin, looks at it, tosses it to Ros). On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife (Stoppard, 1967:11).

The conflict between appearance and reality is another intertextual link with *Hamlet*. The boundaries between appearance and reality become blurred for a while, and Hamlet is forced to re-establish these boundaries for himself through an agonizing foray into the grey no-man's land between sanity and insanity, through manipulating reality and appearance in, for example, the play scene. As it is also the main source of comic action in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, it is necessary to emphasise some of the basic aspects of comedy which are operative here. The laughter which is a concomitant of comedy originates from the discrepancy between appearance and reality; the comic hero is the cause of these discrepancies as he blunders his way towards accepting that appearance and reality are not synonymous, might in fact be wildly divergent, and ultimately reconciling these two entities by effecting and accepting compromise (though not, in Heilman's terms, surrender - this is a distinction drawn by Heilman between true comedy, which contains a negotiated compromise, and black comedy, in which there is over-acceptance or total surrender [Heilman, 1978: Introduction]).

The discrepancy between appearance and reality is presented functionally in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* in the play scene, the main aim of which is - as is the case in *Hamlet* - to unmask reality. The play is supposed to represent reality but reflects the unacknowledged subterranean reality instead of the smooth appearance of reality which has usurped the place of reality. The possible confusion which arises from the conflict between appearance and reality is clearly delineated when one lists the people and characters (representing people) involved in this binary opposition:

- \* There are real people (the members of the audience) watching actors re-enacting the actions of 'people' (Hamlet, Horatio, Claudius, and Gertrude).
- \* The audience watches actors enacting the roles of actors (the Players).
- \* The audience watches actors enacting the roles of actors enacting the roles of people (the Player King and Queen).
- \* Real people (the members of the audience) watching actors travesty the acts of people, who are represented through the roles of actors (Claudius and Gertrude).

In the utterly confused world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, appearance and reality are superimposed on one another. They are equally insubstantial elements in a world devoid of meaning; there is no fixed point of existence for the characters. The Player confirms this when he says that "... uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special" (Stoppard, 1967:47). In this state, appearance and reality stand in stark contrast to one another, yet are also paradoxically fused, echoing modern man's confusion and the hopeless search for identity:

Player: For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins. (Bows again). Don't clap too loudly - it's a very old world ... (Stoppard, 1967:17).

Guil: Well ... aren't you going to change into your costume?

Player: I never change out of it, sir  
(Stoppard, 1967:25).

Everything, even 'appearance' and 'reality' is relative, underlining the fact that there are no absolutes in the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.

As an interesting sidelight on this play with appearance and reality, one could look at the way in which, in *Dogg's Hamlet*, the playwright allows the world outside the play to appear like complete insanity, with the 'characters' speaking complete gibberish, but 'escaping' into the language of *Hamlet* as soon as they begin a truncated (fifteen-minute) version of *Hamlet*, followed by another version made up of parts left out of the first round. The speeded-up events and the frenetic pace of the performance intertextually activate an awareness of Chaplin films and add to the sense of dislocation created by the way in which Dogg-language uses conventional swear-words as supplanting elements of a language in which only initiates can communicate.



Traditionally, of course, the player in his disguise is regarded as the pretender. In the confused and upside down world presented by Stoppard, this axiom is inverted and the player now becomes the one who reveals the truth and the nature of truth:

**Guil:** We only know what we are told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true.

**Player:** For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions

(Stoppard, 1967:49).

Thus Stoppard, like Shakespeare, uses dialogue, word-games and ambiguities to convey the confusion of the moral world and the conflicts which arise in characters because of a loss of identity and the illusory boundaries between appearance and reality.

The moral visions of both Shakespeare and Stoppard shape their views on the relationship between the temporal and eternal. In the Elizabethan world-view, the temporal and eternal fulfilled specific functions within the vertically-structured Chain-of-Being. This is quite apparent in *Hamlet*. Hamlet experiences an intense and morally physically debilitating conflict between the temporal and eternal. He disregards the eternal world when he attempts to carry the burden all by himself. He tries on the mask of avenger but finds that it doesn't fit. His actions isolate him from both God and man, and this is only rectified once it is too late to prevent his death:

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.

(V,11,190-193)

Hamlet's temporarily blurred vision is refocused when he regains his balance, a moment which represents his integration of thoughts of life and death and eternity. This is emphasised by Claassen: "Hamlet passed safely through the grey zone in which life and death, the temporal and the eternal, appear to be falling into an insubstantial relationship with one another" (1982:32).

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, on the other hand, conveys the Absurdist attitude towards the temporal and the eternal. The eternal is the ultimate absence of significance. The temporal and the eternal are no longer in a vertical relation to one another, but both lie on a continuous horizontal line fading into nothing. "Eternity is no destination but a disappearance, the culmination of the absence of substance and meaning "(Grobler, 1988:175). Death is not a destruction but a disappearance into the eternal nothingness:

**Guil:** Death followed by eternity ... the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought (Stoppard, 1967:54).

Death is as meaningless as life:

**Guil:** (tired, drained, but still an edge of impatience; over the mime): No ... no ... not for us, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be

over ... Death is not anything ... death is not ... It's the absence of presence, nothing more ... the endless time of never coming back ... a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound ...  
(Stoppard, 1967:95).

In *Hamlet* death is real, yet within the framework of his essentially deistic worldview it is not total annihilation, but carries the promise of redemption - especially as Hamlet is ultimately prepared for it. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* it would seem to be as meaningless as life; though it is quite unreal, it is a total annihilation, which makes the recording of their names in some document to essential.

Guil: (broken): We've travelled too far, and out momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation  
(Stoppard, 1967:9).

Both Shakespeare and Stoppard represent the essence of the crisis of the human condition through the relationship between the temporal and the eternal. Order is only restored in *Hamlet* once the temporal and eternal have fallen into their proper place; in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* the fusion between the temporal and eternal results in the total loss of belief, leaving man with no mysteriousness, no more wonder; all that remains is a deep metaphysical anguish, which has been the concomitant of the worldview expressed in the Theatre of the Absurd.

##### 5. The 'moulding' of 'characters'

*O what a piece of work is man  
... how infinite in faculties*  
(Hamlet)

Shakespeare's characters develop within a generally causal framework of plot and sub-plot. His heroes conform to certain traditional patterns. Stoppard's characters are trapped within a hostile and mechanistic world which is at odds with individual aspirations; they are entirely outdistanced by the few facts of their situation and are forced into the Beckettian situation of playing theatre games.

While it is generally accepted that the audience's view of characters is constituted by their appearance, speech and actions, Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's characteristics and speech offer little substantial material from which to draw conclusions.

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet appears at times to suffer from terminal confusion, the inevitable result of the conflict of mind suffered by a fastidious intellectual, a man with a healthy ego (cf. the scene where he demolishes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), a man of thirty who is not sexually naive (cf. his keen awareness of the sexual relationship between his parents, and also between Claudius and Gertrude), a man of irony and polish - who is then confronted with the sleazy world of corruption created by the lecherous, Machiavellian Claudius (and strengthened by the world of nepotism and general political skullduggery that he finds in the 'royal prison' of Denmark).

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* Hamlet is portrayed as a skillful manipulator, a puppeteer who callously uses other people for his own ends. Hamlet's intellectual struggle in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a heroic endeavour. Stoppard uses this very aspect to mould his characters, but inverts it by reducing everything noble and weighty to an absurdity. In Stoppard's play *Hamlet* drifts in and out of the action, only adding to the confusion. Unlike Shakespeare, Stoppard embodies the spiritual struggle and disintegration in a mock-heroic attitude, the disappearance of the supernatural and the consequent void.

Hunter (1982:199) describes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as young men out of the 1950's English novel - university educated, between conservative and radical, decent, lonely, bewildered and innocent. They are different from one another: Guildenstern is the intellectual, fastidious and abstract; while Rosencrantz is innocent and easily confused, although with a salacious sense of humour which causes to snigger (cf. the episode with the Player - Stoppard, 1967:65). The general sense of confusion is intensified because their major characteristics do not enable them to cope with the world in which they find themselves. For example, when Guildenstern uses formal logic in an attempt to interpret his situation it clouds his comprehension and leaves him frantic as his confused and disoriented emotions take control of his reason. This is symbolic of the inability of reason to interpret the modern world. Rosencrantz's attempts to articulate his questions and fears about death only result in meaningless jabber. When they try to trace their identities they cannot remember their names. All their efforts to understand only increase their pain, leaving them with the inevitable void, a nothingness in the place of the mysterious and the beautiful:

Guil: (shaking with rage and fright): It could have been - it didn't have to be *obscene* ... It could have been - a bird out of season, dropping bright feathered on my shoulder ... It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way ... I was prepared. But it's this, isn't it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this - a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes ... (Stoppard, 1967:20).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's actions are pitiful representations of the Absurdist *Angst* about the human condition. They exist on the edge of great events which they cannot understand or control, and which they only perceive as a void and not a pulsing reality.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare provides little information about their past lives and shows little sympathy for them. Stoppard, on the other hand concentrates on their ignorance and impotence but does so in a much more compassionate way than Shakespeare. Stoppard's statement in an interview with Hayman bears repetition at this point: "They [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] are told very little about what is going on and much of what they are told isn't true. So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than a couple of henchmen" (Hayman, 1977:34). One's sympathy is aroused because their innocence is surrounded by a seediness of which they are totally unaware. It might be surmised that Hamlet's treatment of the hapless pair in Shakespeare's play served as a key to Stoppard's interpretation and his representation of the Prince's callous manipulation of the two.

As stated previously, the state of spiritual isolation in which they exist, not only leaves them in a state of perpetual uncertainty but also leads to an absence of absolute commitment on their part. They follow a summons half-heartedly and are therefore unable to discover the

reason for Hamlet's actions. Their actions bear out this indecisiveness and lack of commitment:

Guil: (quietly) Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and the current ... (Stoppard, 1967:93).

Their unresolved questioning and confused reasoning provide one with an idea of their inner perturbation. The only way they can achieve the identity which they desire so urgently, is to comply with the summons to go to England. In this search, Guildenstern speculates about the possibility of their achieving their own identities in a way which not only reveals his philosophical bent, but which also aligns him quite closely with Hamlet's own philosophizing:

Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are ... condemned. Each move is dictated ... by the previous one - that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles: At least, we hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost (Stoppard, 1967:44).

Hayman (1977:41) suggests that this passage reinforces the point that "degrees of freedom cannot be measured as if the angle had nothing to do with perspective. The actor has to make decisions which to him seem very important, but they make little difference to the audience. Everyone's life, like a tragedy written by God, moves relentlessly towards death and it is disconcerting to believe that it does not matter what we do with our circumscribed freedom of choice".

The key-word with regard to their characters is to be found in the title: they are both dead - spiritually, emotionally, and later physically. They are the paragons of the modern anti-hero and their disappearance is symbolic of the insignificance of their lives. Stoppard thus reverses the roles of the original Shakespearean characters to emphasize the insignificance of life as it is perceived to be in the second half of the twentieth century.

## 6. Language and its ambiguous nature

*"Let be ...  
the rest is silence"*  
(Hamlet)

The intertextual dialogue between the original text and the new configuration also includes the very special way in which Stoppard uses language and tone. Hunter (1982:132) summarizes this very important aspect of intertextuality when he states that "allusion and travesty are at the heart of Stoppard's work. They assert irreverence for sacred cows, the artist displaying his freedom; they work by rebounds, one off another; and they are forms of homage."

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* Hamlet not only manipulates people, but he also manipulates words. He is fully aware of the ambiguous nature of language and exploits it

to the full to expose the agents of betrayal. The many intertextual links with *Hamlet* reinforce the interplay between the various implications of the two Hamlets's ambiguous answers.

The use of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's names has a great deal in common with that of the Players: they are all unnamed for a long time, never address one another by name and when the two groups get their names mixed up they are like characters suffering from amnesia. The farcical use of names is a good example of form supporting content as the mistaken identities tie in with the theme of loss of identity.

Their confused identities and the chaotic surroundings soon influence their use of language. In fact, it is the only method which Stoppard has to reveal their perturbed states of mind and he does so by embodying the haphazard and meaningless nature of their existence in their word-games:

Ros: We could play at questions.  
Guil: What good would that do?  
Ros: Practice!  
Guil: Statement! One-love.  
Ros: Cheating!  
Guil: How?  
Ros: I hadn't started yet.  
Guil: Statement! Two-Love.  
Ros: Are you counting that?  
Guil: What?  
Ros: Are you counting that?  
Guil: Foul! No repetitions. Three-love. First game to ...  
Ros: I'm not going to play if you're going to be like that.  
Guil: Whose serve?  
Ros: Hah?  
Guil: Foul! No grunts. Love-one.  
Ros: Whose go?  
Guil: Why?  
Ros: Why not?  
Guil: What for? (Stoppard, 1967:31-32).

The pathetic questioning leads to a complete disintegration of language and even the simplest of questions become a source of perplexity.

Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, they are killed trying to understand why they are alive. The Players survive because they have ceased to question. They do not analyse, doubt or worry ("You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn"). Their attitude to life represents an effective way of coming to terms with a pernicious environment. The irony is, however, that they will remain unfulfilled and their questions will remain in their minds - and this is a fitting dramatic comment on the essential hubris that one could ascribe to Hamlet - his hubris consists in his obsession to know, to encompass the infinity of the known world intellectually, and his failure is graphically expressed in his humbling

acceptance of his finitude, as expressed in the profoundly sad words in the providence speech - 'Let be'.

Shakespeare manipulates language and tone in a very persuasive way. One character manipulates others, and minor characters provide foils for the major characters in revealing the various attitudes which influence the tone of the play. For example, Hamlet's scepticism pervades the tone of the whole play. Stoppard adapts the tone of Hamlet by using subtle innuendoes and by parodying the heroic tone of Shakespeare's play. He mocks the tragic tone of the play, turning it into a tragicomedy, full of paradoxes and confusion. The pathos of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's situation is revealed and intensified by the inversion of and allusion to the characters and episodes in *Hamlet*, and leaves the audience baffled and bewildered, experiencing the same confusion as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

## 7. Fusion, separation, intertextuality

*To conclude or ...  
not to conclude ...*

As stated previously, the notion of intertextuality implies that three texts come into play: the borrowing or bracket text; the borrowed text; and the original corpus from which the borrowed text is extracted. In following Topia's (1984:103-125) methodology used in his analysis of intertextuality in *Ulysses*, the intertextual project can be approached in two ways: one might choose to investigate the relationship between the original corpus of the borrowed text and the 'new' version, re-modelled in the heart of the new text. Or one can focus attention on the new configuration which came into being through the relation between the bracket text and the fragment from the original text.

Before reaching a conclusion, it is necessary to recount Topia's (1984:106) approach in more detail. He states that both these avenues involve the question of paternity.

In the first (or vertical) perspective, it is a matter of analysing the relationship of filiation and analogy (similar to that between a matrix and its offspring which resembles it more or less faithfully) which a slightly re-modelled and distorted text continues to entertain with its origin, and of determining to what extent it survives the remodeling. In the second (or horizontal) perspective, the central question is the homogeneity of the montage: what is the status of the new configuration formed by bringing together two texts (fusion, separation, or intertextuality)?

This paper has attempted to venture into both avenues. It is quite clear that - if one uses Topia's methodology - Stoppard's re-modelling of the Shakespearean matrix is not merely a 'slightly' distorted text, but a completely new text (and in the case of *Dogg's Hamlet*, a bewilderingly new and yet stunningly familiar experience). Its use of travesty and parody provides a new perspective - a Derridean supplement - on the original Shakespearean text, proving ultimately that Shakespeare was - and is - a modern writer, with a deep insight into the human psyche. Stoppard's text in its Absurdist mould creates a modern Hamlet, whose questions do not seem so strange anymore in the original text, but which seem perfectly modern and normal questions to ask in our post-modern world. This modern re-interpretation and eventual reconfirmation of Shakespeare's universality (dare one still use the word!) are emphasized by Brian Murray, the actor who played Guildenstern in the New York production of the play, who stated this much in an interview: "I have been an actor most of my life, and I've played all kinds of parts in the Royal Shakespeare Company, but I

never realized how remarkable Shakespeare is until I saw what Tom Stoppard could do with a couple of minor characters from *Hamlet*" (in Berlin, 1977:271).

But Stoppard's text goes further. Its adaptation and parody of both the form and content of Shakespeare's text also add new concepts to the intertextual arsenal of *fusion*, *separation*, and *intertextuality*, viz. parody and travesty. Stoppard's use of puns, ambiguities, Wittgensteinian word-games and stage-semiotic devices<sup>4</sup> clearly foregrounds Shakespeare's brilliance as an artist of the word, a 'play-maker', and also weaves an intricate intertextual web of multifarious allusions<sup>5</sup>, the main aim of which is to expand the output of the writers involved (Stoppard, Shakespeare and Beckett) by forcing the audience or readers to compare the world-views and semiotic models of the writers.

An intertextual reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* reveals that as Shakespeare presented his vision of mankind, so Stoppard presents a vision of modern man filtered through the eyes of Shakespeare's Renaissance characters. The confusion which arises from this intertextual encounter echoes that of the prevailing spirit in the modern world. Stoppard uses a multi-layered text releasing meaning in a stratified sequence to act as a foil to expose the meaninglessness and fluidity of the postmodern, post-Christian era. By using Shakespeare as a guide to find direction in the modern world, Stoppard's new intertextual configuration underscores the central position still occupied by Shakespeare in our Western cultural heritage.

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<sup>4</sup> It is illuminating to see the way in which the allusions are evoked semiotically: The episode in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* in which they attempt to catch Hamlet and one loses his trousers immediately invokes the mental image of a similar episode in *Waiting for Godot* where in the putative suicide scene (p. 93) Vladimir also loses his trousers.

<sup>5</sup> Ziva Ben Porat (1976) has commented in an illuminating fashion on the use of allusion. Her definition is generally adhered to in this article: Allusion is seen to be a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts. This activation is achieved by means of the manipulation of a special signal: a sign in a given text characterized by an additional larger referent which is always an independent text. Subsequently, the simultaneous activation of the two texts results in the formation of intertextual patterns. (For a full discussion of [literary] allusion, see Swanepoel, 1987, chapter 4.)

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