



## STRATEGIES OF CHANGE IN TOM STOPPARD'S ADAPTATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

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### Abstract:

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or the Mona Lisa of literature as T. S. Eliot calls it, has constantly been the subject of continuous mythologizing and adaptation in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Adaptation generally deals with the way source texts are transformed from one genre or medium into another for a particular purpose. The adapted text often changes in meaning and is both at home and at odds with its originals. As an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* takes Shakespeare's tragedy to out there, far beyond Elizabethan contexts and fits it into new times and different places. In his play, Stoppard employs a number of tactics and does everything possible to do away with Shakespeare's characters, language and staging in order to reflect the situation of the world in 1960s. This article demonstrates the view that Stoppard's engagement with Shakespeare displays the prominent use of, among a myriad of other tools, the motifs of irony and allegory and displacement and replacement as the "discursive strategies", in Hutcheon's words, he employs to address critical issues.

**Keywords:** displacement, replacement, revision, irony, post-modernism, discourse

If, as Ruby Cohn (1976) once soberly suggested that "*as long as there have been plays by Shakespeare there have been adaptations of those plays*" (32), it is also possible to suggest that as long as there have been adaptations of Shakespeare there have been strategies by which these adaptations transform the original work and make it fit into new times and different places. Hence, the relation between the source text and the new incorporating one is mainly determined by the element parody, with parody meaning, to borrow from Linda Hutcheon, "*repetition with difference*" (69). It is then arguable that Stoppard's strategy of change aimed at transforming Shakespeare operates by re-orienting the original text's language, staging, characters and stories into new usages. In his essay "*The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead**", Helene Kayssar Franke argues:

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"...there is in *Ros and Guil* evidence that Stoppard is not only aware of the play as a set of strategies, but is overly concerned that the audience has this awareness" (22). Bearing Franke in mind, Stoppard is not creating a new performance much than creating a new style to take advantage of an old performance. And though entirely contingent on *Hamlet* *Ros and Guil* is not repetitive or interpretive but rather re-interpretive and innovative.

To an audience not familiar with *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* may not be understood, or its meaning may not be digested. The ironic or perhaps even the absurd manipulation of the source text's characters, language and staging marks the distance Stoppard's play takes from Shakespeare's. Whether Stoppard is changing the tradition which conceives *Hamlet* as a tragedy embedded in the collective memory of even his 1960s (post-modern) audience, or criticizing the play and subverting its canonicity from within may not demean the dominant view that *Ros and Guil* has proper style and special strategy. Stoppard not only widely transforms *Hamlet* by introducing a new meaning to the notion of tragedy, heroism, stage, time, reality and existence, but rather challenges the parodied play by turning it upside down and inside out and subverting Shakespeare's order from within.

The subversive aspect of Stoppard's play is first noted from the choice of the play title. Stoppard uses the last line of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*" as a title to his play and gives a major role to two marginal characters in Shakespeare. Opposing Shakespeare, Stoppard has from an early stage revealed to his audience the outcome of the play and leaves no room for dramatic structure or real plot development. By declaring in the title the news about the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and then going on to depict an absurd coin-tossing game, Stoppard betrays Aristotelian "*complication and unraveling*" (Aristotle, 28) dramatic structure typical of early plays. Besides, in *Ros and Guil* prince Hamlet is supplanted by the two marginal characters of Stoppard's play title who take the lead and become heroes, though, in fact, they are no heroes at all.

Stoppard ironically places the protagonists of his play, once marginalized in Shakespeare's script, in the centre of the stage, making Hamlet, the real protagonist, dwindle from nobility, highness to a humble position. Stoppard locates his comic pair in a bleak situation, making them appear as if they were totally oblivious of the world around them and seeming as if they were not characters brought to the scene from Shakespeare's play. The play opens with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spinning a coin and Guildenstern loses every time. The coin lands on heads seventy six consecutive times in a row which leads Guildenstern to engage in pseudo-philosophizing in an attempt to gain his bearings. He asks a labyrinth of innumerable questions about why the law of probability appears to have been suspended in this game, but the questions often remain unanswered and the protagonists muse over futile explanations that further exacerbate their situation:

*"Guil: (flips a coin) The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their –*

*Ros: Heads (He picks up the coin)*

*Guil: which even at first glance does not strike one as particularly rewarding speculation, in either sense, even without the monkeys." (1.1.3)*

Even the law of probability and the mathematical phenomenon fail to provide an explanation for this repetitive puzzle facing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This is perhaps because there is no self-knowledge to be attained by the end of the road. Instead, self knowledge is substituted by a dull atmosphere subsequently culminating in two inter-related games: a word game and a power game. The world of Stoppard's play is even rendered more absurd when the game of coin tossing is transformed into questions related to existence and identity.

The weight of Stoppard's play is that it turns the global and elevated truth and royalty of prince Hamlet of Denmark to a second narrative of two secondary Shakespearean tramps struggling to grapple with sense in a world devoid of any possibility of meaning. As the conversation between Rosencrantz and the player demonstrates, there is a radical shift from serious action and heroic grandeur in to punning, monotony and repetitive action:

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

*Ros: Tumbler, are you?*

*Player: We can give you a tumble if that's your taste, and times being what they are..." (1.23)*

Stoppard's evocation of the futile life of his comic and probing pair puts into question their obsession with meaning that they vainly try to grapple. He also highlights the loss of the serious and the dominance of the frivolous. This is equally what George Steiner meant in *The Death of Tragedy* bearing in mind his famous claim that "*tragedy is now a noble phantom or dead god irrelevant to modern spirit*" (304), which more revealingly appeals to the situation of the narrative in the postmodern world. Hence, juxtaposing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with *Hamlet* and with classical theories about tragedy is a vantage point for examining the innovative aspect of Stoppard's play.

In *The Poetics* Aristotle defines tragedy as "*an imitation of man in action, an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude which through pity and fear affects the proper purgation of emotions*". With Aristotle's definition in mind, Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though they are heroes, lack the means necessary to perform heroic actions and to escape from the vicious circle of meaningless behaviour to which they are caught. The duo is identityless and too often manipulated by other characters like Claudius and Gertrude. As opposed to Aristotle's definition, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perform ridiculous actions (the coin-tossing event) and muse over why things happen this way (the law of probability). The action here is not

only ridiculous and meaningless but also repetitive and monotonous, which leads the duo to suspect their presence as real characters and to further question their own existence.

When the two plays are further juxtaposed, it is possible to find in *Hamlet* echoes of Aristotle's definition though it is noticeable that Hamlet has little role in pushing the events to the point of denouement. Much of the energy that Hamlet should normally have invested into performative action has been spent on procrastination and a major part of his role has been assumed by Gertrude. In drinking from the poisoned cup meant for Hamlet, Gertrude triggers the final revelations of treachery that goad Hamlet into a mortal assault on Claudius. While this ending of the play is inevitable, it is well noticeable that no character has deliberately contributed to it, not even Hamlet himself. In spite of this, the ending is tragic and endowed with "a certain magnitude" that the audience cannot prevent emotional involvement in what is going on.

As opposed to Stoppard's play, Hamlet's inaction and indecisiveness are meaningful. The act of procrastination involves a certain logic the aim of which is to allow Hamlet more time to explore reasons which would enable him to make up his mind and act both meaningfully and purposefully. Yet, if Shakespeare's audience is confirmed in its expectations and identifies with the tragic flow of prince Hamlet and the characters around him, in *Ros and Guil* the audience is confronted with the unimaginable and its expectations cannot go beyond the mere monotony of two persons delighting in the monotony of a coin-flipping game. The audience also realizes from an early stage in the play that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no future waiting for them but live the present moment haphazardly until they meet their end. Stoppard's strategy is, as we find in Peter Buse (2001), to attribute a new meaning to the notion of death. Death is no longer mischievous or undesired but a relief from the monotony of life.

Although *Ros and Guil* is based for frame and content on *Hamlet*, it is worth arguing that Stoppard, as he enacts inventions within the plot and transforms the focus of the play from royalty to common people, searches for new, generic possibilities. In so doing, he announces the death of the tragedy of *Hamlet* in the terms of the conversation about the death of tragedy between the player and Rosencrantz. The global and elevated truth and royalty of prince Hamlet of Denmark turns out to be a second narrative of two secondary Shakespearean tramps struggling to grapple with sense in a world devoid of any possibility of meaning and purpose. As the conversation between the player and Rosencrantz demonstrates, there is a radical shift from serious action and heroic grandeur to punning, monotony and repetitive action:

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

*Ros: Tumbler, are you?*

*Player: We can give you a tumble if that's your taste,  
and times being what they are..." ( 3. 2. 66)*

This conversation brings to the fore the notion of generic transformation as one of Stoppard's basic strategies of changing Shakespeare's play.

There is evidence in *Ros and Guil* that Stoppard is aware of the play as a set of strategies and of the relation of the events on stage, if any, to an all knowing audience. The audience watching the play with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in mind is directly exposed to changes in the character portrait and in the plot development. Stoppard is also fully aware that his audience will juxtapose his play with its source. That is why his mixing of Shakespeare's material with artistic strategy not only widely transforms *Hamlet* but simultaneously questions the historical, social and political values associated with the play. In fact, Stoppard's separation from *Hamlet* is manifested in terms of his intentional and wary manipulation of the events and persons involved.

If the course of action is destined by the divinity in Shakespeare, in *Ros and Guil* it is Stoppard who controls and directs everything. He has from a very early phase in the plot decided that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must die. He restricts his protagonists' freedom and does not allow them any ability to settle on any substantive justification for the many puzzles they encounter throughout the play. He even blocks their minds and limits their ability to recall past memories. Stoppard's strategy here is to place his protagonists, who are no protagonists all, in an in-between situation of performing their roles in *Hamlet* and not performing them.

Stoppard's play, particularly act I and act II, provide the illusion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern typically perform new roles, delighting and musing over why the coin lands on heads seventy six consecutive times in a row. However, the audience discovers in Act III that the duo is returned to their role in *Hamlet* and that they are servants on a ship going to meet their end. If ever Rosencrantz and Guildenstern desire anything, it is to free themselves from the destiny of death Stoppard unalterably pre-arranged for them. Guildenstern reacts bitterly:

*"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..." (1.1. 90)*

In *Ros and Guil*, everything seems predestined, and the invocation of death figures forth a passage with this issue from an event or a situation specific to particular characters in *Hamlet* to a phenomenon common to all people. Although death is the characters' voluntary choice in Shakespeare (Ophelia drowns, Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup and dies, Cleopatra commits suicide by allowing two asps to bite her, etc.), in *Ros and Guil* the characters are trapped to death and have no escape from it.

We see in *Hamlet* that Shakespeare's pair had no idea of the content of the letter and are therefore startled by their unexpected death. Had they known they would have done anything possible to avert their end. Stoppard's protagonists, on the contrary, are fully aware of the fact that they are delivering their death warrants and make no effort to avoid it. They even try to forget about their situation, "*I don't care*" (3. 1, 54), says *Rosencrantz*". Perhaps the characters' continuous denial of their imminent death is one way by which Stoppard playfully questions the nature of the protagonist's existence in Shakespeare's play.

There is in *Ros and Guil* a radical departure from the conventional norms of character, narrative, dialogue and heroism to some sort of meaningless mixture of metatheatricity and chaos. Stoppard's play capitalizes on the motifs of disjunction, ambiguity and uncertainty which may well reflect the painfully isolated existence of the protagonists. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* do not exist as real characters but as caricatures of shattered characters that rather seem to be out of time and out of place. Their clownish way of appearing and acting, perhaps, allows the reader of the play a chance to fathom the way in which Stoppard makes use of traditional dramatic structure and transforms it into inherently absurd story.

Whereas *Hamlet* is a tragedy that contains elements of comedy, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is more an absurdist comedy that ends in tragedy. Absurdism is generally reflected in terms of the character's' language, dialogue and actions. We see in Act I that *Guildenstern* is tossing the coins absent-mindedly. He observes "with tight hysteria":

*"We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when, and in all that time (if it is all that time) I don't suppose that either of us was more than a couple of gold pieces up or down."* (p.17-18)

The incongruity between both the characters' universe and their expectations is obviously striking. It rather represents an impalpable source of anxiety, fear and powerlessness. Such a situation is exacerbated by the coin flipping game which, instead of being a source of pleasure and re-creation, adds to the characters confusion and frustration.

The sixty seven tossed coins coming on their heads every time are allegorical of the monotonous nature of existence. Even the mathematical formula and the many other discourses *Rosencrantz* applies to understand the law of probability do not work:

*"Guil: "The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (he has surprised himself) ... if six monkeys were... "*

*Ros: " Game? "*

*Guil: " The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air*

*for long enough they would land on their tails about  
as often as they would land on their — " (R & GAD 1. 8).*

The scientific discourse was also a total failure: GUIL: *"The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear"* (2. 11). In fact, Guildenstern's recognition of the inability of science to provide solutions for his problems is a visible witness of the loss of the masternarrative of science in the postmodern world. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean Francois Lyotard describes the postmodern phase of history as the phase reproduction rather than production and re-creation rather than creation. To live in the postmodern condition is to live in the age of deligitimation when old narratives from the past no longer hold sway. Lyotard clearly puts it:

*"The narrative function is losing its narrative  
functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great  
voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in  
clouds of narrative language elements- narrative  
but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive [...]  
Where after the Metanarrative can legitimacy  
reside?" ( 8).*

The answer to this question is that the masternarratives are being replaced by a language game that is reminiscent of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's ceaseless game of questions and coin flipping.

When we examine the psychological state of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, it is their mental and emotional anxiety that is worth underlining. Their mental and psychological disturbance carries diverse connotations. The duo is portrayed like two clowns or fools set in a world beyond their understanding. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to have lost direction and nothing makes sense for them. Thus, they engage in a maddening labyrinth of meaningless questions:

*"Guil: "Oh why? "  
Ros: "Exactly"  
Guil: "Exactly what?"  
Ros: "Exactly why"  
Guil: "Exactly why what?"  
Ros: "What?"  
Guil: "Why?"  
Ros: "Why what, exactly? ". " (R & GAD 2.3. 50)*

Clearly, the decadent psychological state of the protagonists is allegorical of the the apocalyptic situation of the postmodern subject. Such a situation fascinates Stoppard's mood for acute mockery and dead pan irony.

In almost every act of the play there is a scene where irony reaches a paroxysm. In act one Rosencrantz is offended by the royal couple's inability to make distinction between him and Guildenstern. Thus, he regrets his inability to separate his identity from that of his friend. Besides, he loses all sense of direction "*I want to go home. Which way did we come in? I have lost my sense of direction*" (R& GAD 2. 18), which makes Guildenstern try to appease him. In act two after the player leaves to prepare for the "*murder of Gonzago*" Rosencrantz muses over what really happens to a person after he dies or what happens to a dead person in a coffin. Moreover, Stoppard is more ironical in act three when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves on a boat that has already set sail. The pair has no knowledge of how they got there and where they were headed. At first they try to determine whether they are alive or dead or whether it is day or night:

*Ros: "We are on a boat. (dark) Dark, isn't it?"*

*Guil: "Not for night"*

*Ros: "No, not for night"*

*Guil: "Dark for day"*

*Ros: "Oh yes, it's dark for day"*

*Guil: "We must have gone north, of course"*

*Ros: "Off course"" (R & GAD 3. 74).*

Then Guildenstern starts complaining from such an embarrassing situation: "*I have lost all capacity for disbelief*" (R & GAD 3. 75). As a result of being overcome by uncertainty the pair returns to the coin flipping game to forget about their situation.

Stoppard is nowhere more ironical than when Guildenstern becomes totally distraught by uncertainty and loss of sense on the boat (act three). To make him feel better, Rosencrantz pretends to have put a coin in one of his fists- while in fact he has put coins in both hands- so that his partner will win every time- and asks Guildenstern to choose which fist has the coin. This event is intended to put into question the issue of reality in the postmodern period. Perhaps Stoppard here is echoing Jean Baudrillard's theory concerning reality. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) Baudrillard contends that in trying to understand the world we only attain a simulated version of reality. Rosencrantz makes Guildenstern believe this version of simulated reality by putting coins in both fists and making him a winner though he may not be so. This way, Stoppard ironically demonstrates how existence has become monotonous and how such monotony is countered or alleviated by absurd and monotonous behavior.

Although the trope of irony pervades the play as a marker of the distance Stoppard takes from Shakespeare, it is also important to draw on the strategies of displacement and replacement as basic features of the playwright's revisionist position. Displacement and replacement imply the removal of action, dialogue, time or character, etc, from their initial position of meaning and enabling them to express the opposite of what they appeared to mean initially. Stoppard enacts a satirical transformation of Shakespeare's tragedy by replacing the serious, the noble and the high with the



frivolous, the silly and the random. He even opts for minimalism and reductionism to replace tragic heroism.

In *Ros and Guil* there's no traditional plot structure, no complex story nor dramatic situation. The play is made up of disconnected fragments rather than traditional communicative words. The focus is rather on the psychological state of the characters rather than on their actions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enact repetitive rituals that are part of their search for identity. Besides the characters' language is characterized by circularity that it creates a kind of mystery and ambiguity. Almost all the time language is used as a strategy to cover nakedness. Thus the dialogue between the characters is in many ways minimalistic and the exchange between them is made up of disconnected fragments rather than traditional communicative words. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pretend to say everything their parole in fact, mean nothing. The pauses and silences in the dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are perhaps used to highlight the effect of verbal exchange. They simply indicate that the characters have their own fear and want to fill in the gap with language.

In short, Stoppard's re-representation of Shakespeare's revenge tragedy in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reflects him as a craftsman of strategy. Stoppard parodies *Hamlet* but turns it upside down and inside out. He employs a number of deconstructive techniques and capitalizes on a lot of humor to mark his critical difference from his source. In fact, Stoppard's engagement with Shakespeare reflects the former's desire to explore the validity of cultural values over time and to evoke the ideological effects of performing renaissance drama on post-modern stages. By reversing the order of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard formulates his position as a revisionist playwright staunchly concerned with the situation of (Western) Man in the postmodern world. The play (*Ros & Guil AD*) foregrounds a flow of issues against the skeleton of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ranging from the death of the author function, to the interpretation of reality as a function of a language game, to the loss of the narrative function and to the general crisis over legitimacy and representation.

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