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An Analysis of Narrative Identity in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

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An Analysis of Narrative Identity in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
Dead*

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Dr. Walter Foreman (chair)
Dr. Jonathon Allison
Dr. Arnold Farr

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Introduction

The opening lines of *Hamlet*¹ — “Who’s there?”—immediately opens the theme of identity in the text. According to Ricoeur, the question “who is there” must be answered in a narrative because that is the only way to reveal one’s identity; Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity is based on the belief that identities are constructed through narratives. Shakespeare, although he was not privy to Ricoeur’s philosophy, builds a story around this question—who’s there? —as a way to answer it. From the second line of *Hamlet*, which is “Stand and unfold yourself,” the audience patiently awaits to discover the identities of those on stage. It takes the entire play to discover Shakespeare’s characters (or realize that some characters are not fully

¹ The three early texts of *Hamlet* (Q1, Q2, and F) question which is the true narrative of *Hamlet* and implicate the identity of Hamlet. Historians and literary critics still debate over which text is closest to what Shakespeare intended it to be. This ambiguity surrounding the text generates three possible narratives for *Hamlet* and questions which narrative best exemplifies Hamlet’s true identity. Historians continue to debate which text is the *Hamlet* that Shakespeare intended and have developed many theories behind which text is more ‘accurate.’ The truth is that we may never know (we most certainly do not know now) which one reflects Shakespeare’s final version.

The first quarto of 1603 is usually considered to be a memorized reconstruction of the play. It only contains 2,154 lines (Edwards 9), which is about 1000 lines shorter than the other two texts. The second quarto was published either in 1604 or 1605 and was copied from Shakespeare’s own ‘foul-papers.’ His writing and revisions on these papers are believed to have been hard to decipher, leading to the inconsistencies in some of the lines between the Q2 and the Folio. Many of the differences between the first folio and the second quarto are simply spelling differences or one-word differences in a line, which Edwards believes are simply the publisher’s copying errors. While these small variations do not affect the narrative of the text that much, there are passages that are completely missing in each text: “A number of passages found in the second quarto, amounting to 222 lines, are omitted, but five new passages totaling 83 lines, are added, giving a total for the play of 3, 535 lines” (Edwards 9).

It is important to keep in mind that many changes could have occurred during the rehearsal of the play. There is a “possibility that the variations in the text of *Hamlet* are not alternative versions of a single original text but representations of different stages in the play’s development” (Edwards 8). Since the text is intended to be performed, it continues to change in the live performances: directors and actors can interpret lines however they see fit. Thus, the play continues to change and grow as it continues to be performed. There is not enough space in this paper to discuss the subtle nuances of the different texts of *Hamlet* in this paper. So, unless otherwise stated I will be working with a conflated text, the combined version of the Q2 and F texts of *Hamlet* in Philip Edwards’ *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

revealed). Every moment of *Hamlet* is an opportunity for characters to “unfold” their selves to the audience. Two of the characters who do not get to share their story with the audience are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Their identities had been subject to and limited to Shakespeare’s play for years, until Tom Stoppard’s play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, was staged in 1966. Stoppard, acknowledging these two characters’ limited identities in *Hamlet* and giving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the main stage, frees them from Shakespeare’s restrictive script and gives them a narrative identity. Stoppard’s use of characters from *Hamlet* and parts of Shakespeare’s plotline to create a background story for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern allows Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity to be appropriately applied to this play. To understand more clearly the connection between Stoppard’s and Shakespeare’s plays, it is important to have a general knowledge of Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity.

Paul Ricoeur, in his three volume work *Time and Narrative*, gives a detailed account of his notion of narrative identity, which has its origin in Aristotle's idea of plot in *The Poetics* and Augustine's idea of time in *Confessions*. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses what makes a mythos (or plot) excellent and moving. Aristotle claims that Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is the quintessential plot. The importance that Aristotle places on the plot inspired Ricoeur to investigate how a plot functions and how a plot relates to identity. According to Ricoeur, the plot unifies multiple, seemingly unrelated events into one successive narrative. The incidents of an individual’s life are a series of discordant events, but the individual experiences them as concordant due to the imposition of a plot, which establishes causality between events. Narratives, since they are organized into a beginning, middle, and end, often contain a consequential order. This order can appear as a necessary timeline, but it is not. It is only the act of narration that imposes this order onto the events. Yet even though narrations deceivingly make events appear sequential and more

concordant, they are essential to establish meaning and identity: “by telling stories and writing history we provide ‘shape’ to what remains chaotic, obscure, and mute” (Ricoeur “Human Experience of Time and Narrative” 115). The identity that arises because of a narrative is therefore created by the author (it is not contained in the events themselves). Since the plot contains two opposing forces (unrelated events and a unifying story), the plot is simultaneously discordant and concordant. The plot gives order to the series of episodes, but can only do so inside an aspect of time.

The three distinctions of time (present, past, and future) demonstrate the inconstancy of human time against the background of divine time. Human time is always changing: the present moment continuously becomes the past and the future continuously becomes the present. Divine time, witnessing past, present, and future at once, maintains an unchanging nature and thus possesses a stability that is out of the reach of human time. Time helps to create a space for narratives, while at the same time, narratives aid in stabilizing the mercurial nature of time. In every story, there are two types of time taking place. The first kind of time that is established in a story is a successive type of time: this happened, then that happened. It provides an order for the incidents in the plot. The second type of time is the "integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration" (Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* 22). This type of time entails the entirety of a story, the beginning and ending, and separates it from other stories in our lives. It is the time that allows the story to "endure and remain across that which passes and flows away" (22). Narratives produce a sense of security and completion that the reality of an ever-changing time can never give.

Narratives are capable of creating a concordant order and a sense of culmination because they are told after the end of the story or telos is already known—thus, an interpretation of the

beginning can be told that will make it more cohesive or foretelling of the conclusion. As Aristotle states, every story has a beginning, middle, and end, and it is knowledge of all three of these, knowledge only privy to those operating in divine time, that gives a plot an overarching theme and cohesion. A narrative appears to be simply a recollection of events, but narration is always a way of interpreting events. It is the prior knowledge of the end (access to divine time) that allows the narrator to pick and choose freely events that will support the narrator's particular interpretation, which in turn influences how the audience sees the individuals in a story.

Depending on what events are told, a different perception of the characters in the story can be conveyed. Furthermore, in the very nature of telling a story, the author must choose what to include and what to exclude (it is simply not possible for every detail that happens in reality to be retold); the authors therefore create a specific text to portray characters in a certain manner.² The freedom to choose how to tell stories is where the art of fiction begins. Authors, operating in divine time, possess this freedom, which allows the narrator to portray characters differently, since the plot, which the narrator develops, gives characters their identity.

Ricoeur believes that "action . . . aims at being recollected in stories whose function it is to provide an identity to the Doer, an identity which is merely a narrative identity" (Ricoeur "Human Experience of Time and Narrative" 115). This aim thus is fulfilled in narration: characters themselves are the plot of the story because it is through the organization of the action in the plot that their identity is revealed. Thus, an individual's experiences, which are a series of discordant events, are assimilated into a coherent narrative, giving that individual an image of his or her identity. Identity is the primary goal and result of a narrative. David Wood, a Ricoeur scholar, explains that "[o]ne of the central products of narrative is to allow us to construct a

² Since the two texts I am dealing with are both plays, this issue is slightly complicated because the plays can be performed differently based on the interpretation of the director and actors. However, I will be dealing solely with the texts (unless otherwise stated) and not a specific performance of the plays.

narrative identity” (Wood 4). Although Ricoeur’s theory relates predominantly to human experience, Ricoeur’s narrative theory can easily be applied to literature.

Fiction is a narrative with a plot that forms the identity of characters; the result of fiction, like other narratives, is narrative identities for the characters involved. The details and actions that the author chooses to tell create an image of each character just as the details an individual tells to others develops an identity for himself or herself; the addition and subtraction of details can significantly alter the identity of the character that is portrayed to the audience. Authors are much more capable than humans of writing a story because they can operate in divine time and outside the time of their story (since the story is most often an invention of their imagination and the characters do not act outside the timeline that the author constructs). In the following pages, using Ricoeur’s theory, I analyze the narrative of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and the characters that the two narratives create. I believe that the two narratives do not necessarily contradict each other, but rather Stoppard, utilizing Shakespeare’s characters as a foundation, expands *Hamlet*’s depiction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The plot in *Hamlet* shows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as two flat characters, while Stoppard creates more complex characters. Stoppard also connects his play with Shakespeare by exploring similar themes, e.g. fate versus chance, identity, acting and role-playing. The consistency in themes helps create a sense of cohesion between the plays. The themes, also important to Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative theory, are another facet of these plays that I will investigate in relation to his notion of narrative identity.

The intricate details of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* make it difficult to explain and comprehend exactly how Ricoeur’s narrative identity works in the two plays, especially if one is unfamiliar with narrative identity. A simpler story, which also has had

a narrative extension told from a different perspective, is the “Three Little Pigs.” One may have thought one knew the story of the “Three Little Pigs” and correctly classified the wolf as the “big, bad wolf” until the publication of Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, which tells the story from the point of view of the wolf, and realized that the wolf only looked big and bad from the pigs’ perspective. This story, like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, is founded on a pre-existing narrative and works to expand the confines of the original narrative. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, the wolf, telling the story from jail, explains that he went to the pigs’ homes simply to ask for sugar and that his “huffing and puffing” was due to the sneezes caused by his cold—he accidentally brought down the pigs’ homes with his powerful sneezes. The pigs were killed in the destruction of their homes and, rather than let meat go to waste, he consumed them.

This narrative drastically changes our conception of the wolf’s identity from a malicious villain to an innocent wolf, who has been punished for no legitimate reason—the audience even feels pity for the wolf, who has been unjustly punished. The story, relying on our prior knowledge of the original “Three Little Pigs” plot and the wolf’s evil character that develops from it, inverts the popular identity placed on the wolf by undermining this pre-existing story. Scieszka and Smith’s story questions the folktale and causes the readers to question the veracity of the original narrative and the wolf’s identity as the “big, bad wolf.” However, at the same time, the original folk story provokes the readers to question the authority of Scieszka and Smith and the authenticity of their story. These two narratives, exhibiting the tension as well as the complementary connection that can be present between texts, question each other. Neither the original narrative nor the wolf’s narrative is necessarily false; the conventional folktale, depicting the view of the three little pigs, is essential to Scieszka and Smith’s story but the new

narrative reveals the limited perspective of the original story's narrator. *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*' revelation of a restricted narrator portrays not only the limited scope of the original story, but also urges the audience to ask how limited all stories are and how this limitation can create deceptive views of others.

Like these two versions of the "Three Little Pigs," the coupling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* stimulates the audience to question the connection between identity and narrative because the stories, although entangled with each other, present significantly different identities for the characters. The entanglement of stories, generated from the same events to produce different narratives, is vital to Ricoeur's narrative identity. Ricoeur discusses how all actions are interactions with others because no action can be isolated from others and thus will affect others in some way. The interconnectedness of action makes it possible for two narratives to overlap. Different perspectives generate different narratives because multiple narratives can be strung together from the same events. These different narratives can create varying identities of the same person. This "makes identity somewhat unstable, insofar as many stories can be woven from the same material. Ricoeur treats this not as an objection but as a limitation" (Wood 4). Ricoeur believes that despite the fact that there can seem to be inconsistencies between a character's identity in two narratives, but these seemingly inconsistent identities are merely a product of limited narratives. These inconsistencies show the need to have multiple narratives to form a more complete identity of a character. Shakespeare and Stoppard wrote plays that are entangled together because the plays contain some of the same basic events and that produce varying identities for Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. The appearance of inconsistencies in the characters' identities is produced because the narratives, while using some of the same scenes, follow slightly different

paths. These surface inconsistencies rather than destroy the constancy of these characters' identities show the need to use both of these plays to expand their narrative identities.

Entanglement in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

These two plays exemplify the entanglement of one's narrative identity with other narrative identities: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped in both of these stories. The story of Hamlet is entangled with the story of Guildenstern & Rosencrantz. Because of this interconnectedness, when Hamlet's story is told, part of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's narratives is told. In *Hamlet*, a limited side of these two characters is revealed; in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, more of the complexities of their characters are exposed. *Hamlet* establishes a narrative identity for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, since Hamlet is the tragic hero of this play, the plot revolves around him; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only introduced because they enter into Hamlet's narrative, because they are connected to his story. Therefore, the identity that *Hamlet* creates for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may differ from the identity that would be established when a greater extent of their story is told as is the case in Stoppard's play. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, however, the frame of the story centers on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, forming a different narrative identity for them. Simultaneously, Stoppard's play, since it does not focus on Hamlet, offers a narrower view of Hamlet's identity than Shakespeare's play does. Stoppard's play supports Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity by illuminating Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's narratives. By inserting scenes from *Hamlet* into his play, Stoppard shows how Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's stories are embedded in the story of Hamlet and shows his reliance on *Hamlet* for a background story for his play. Without the narrative of *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* could not be fully understood: the two narratives are inseparable. Likewise once someone has seen *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, it is impossible to watch or read *Hamlet* without consciously being reminded of Stoppard's play. Stoppard's play becomes just as necessary to

understand *Hamlet* because it insightfully informs the audience about details that Shakespeare leaves out. It answers questions that Shakespeare's play leaves unanswered.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is telling a story that only happens behind the scenes of *Hamlet*. In the chapter on *Hamlet* in her book *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, Marjorie Garber discusses the frequency of "unscenes" in Shakespeare's works, scenes that the audience does not see on stage, but that are "evoked so particularly and meticulously by a dramatic speaker that we seem to see it, and to see an actor or character within it" (221). Stoppard's play focuses on one of the most notable unscenes in *Hamlet*, namely the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Garber argues that "[t]he whole of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is an unscene *seen*, the backstory only" (221). She believes that this style of narration (telling the backstory) is an aspect of modernity that Stoppard adopts. By telling the backstory, Stoppard is answering the audience's curiosity about the "unscenes" involving Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's story; he presents this story through its connection to *Hamlet*.

In his own play, Stoppard incorporates scenes of *Hamlet* that contain Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. By embedding parts of the actual text of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard shows the interconnectedness of his own play and Shakespeare's play. While Stoppard's play encourages the audience to question the authority of narratives simply by extending Shakespeare's popularly known version of *Hamlet*, the content of Stoppard's play also contemplates the entanglement of narratives. Guildenstern acknowledges the interconnectedness of all action by his words: "Your smallest action sets off another somewhere else, and is set off by it" (39). This phrase shows Guildenstern's awareness that the world is a place of interaction. Even the "smallest action" sends out a ripple and affects the people that surround Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; simultaneously, they too are impacted by other people's actions. When they let

others buffet them, they give up their capability to control their own lives—their lives are heavily influenced by the motivations of Claudius and Hamlet, who sends his two friends to their death because he believes they are betraying him. Thus, their death, which is sanctioned by another character, displays how other characters affect Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's lives. No action, no narrative can be entirely isolated from others. Each individual's narrative, entangled in many other narratives, reveals the instability of identity, which can be seen in Stoppard's work.

Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's Identities in *Hamlet* and
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

From the very beginning of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the audience questions who is on stage. The opening scene begins with two men on stage flipping a coin, but the audience is not given their names. By hiding their identity Stoppard invites the audience to ask the question, "Who's there?" By invoking this question, which is the opening line of *Hamlet*, Stoppard demands that the audience relate the question of identity in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* to the question of identity present in *Hamlet*. The audience, not told the names of the characters on stage, wants to shout, "Stand and unfold yourself." Although the audience may not know that these lines are in *Hamlet*, Stoppard, perhaps unknowingly to the audience, forces them to ask the questions that initiate Shakespeare's play. By doing this, Stoppard links the plays in an unpredictable yet poignant manner, reminding us of the power of Shakespeare's play—how it permeates the way the audience will perceive Stoppard's play and how it runs through the lines of his play.

This uncertainty of identity, which Stoppard's opening scene prompts, mimics Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's own blurred understandings of their identities. By hiding their identity, Stoppard allows the audience to question their identity, which is vague, multi-layered, and obscure just as that of each of our own identities. As Homan asserts, "[o]ur upturned expectations—are they Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?—mirror their own divided state" (Homan 108). Throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, several people, including the King and Queen, refer to Rosencrantz as Guildenstern and Guildenstern as Rosencrantz. They cannot distinguish the two from each other. The characters' inability to differentiate between the two, mimics the indistinguishable quality that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern possess in Shakespeare's

play. On several occasions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern demonstrate confusion concerning their own identity by introducing themselves incorrectly, mixing up their names like other people in the play do. When Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz, during the question and answer game, “Who do you think you are?” (Stoppard 44), they confirm that they do not know who they are and lament that they do not have the power to establish who they are (Shakespeare stole their authority to tell their own story). In Act Three, after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that they are bearing a letter that calls for Hamlet’s execution, Guildenstern, distraught over how dire their situation is, wonders how they have come to be in a situation they never expected to be in and asks who they are that they must suffer such an end. Guildenstern’s consideration shows how he links their narrative with their identity; he is unable to comprehend how his narrative has put him in this situation, questions his own identity.

Despite being unsure about who is on stage in the opening scene Homan asserts that the title of the play allows us to assume that the two characters testing the probability of flipping a coin are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (108), yet we cannot be sure who is who. The opening scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which leaves the two protagonists unnamed and undifferentiated, allows the audience to participate in the confusion of identity that is experienced on stage by other characters. Stoppard’s allusion to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the title of his play gives these two characters an identity before the play even begins: the reference invokes the image of Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the audience’s minds. The audience is reminded of these indistinguishable and seemingly unimportant characters, who, when asked by King Claudius to spy on Hamlet, agree to betray the trust of their friend. Stoppard’s narrative cannot escape the constructs formed by the audience from Shakespeare’s play, giving Stoppard’s characters a pre-existing identity. In fact, someone who has not seen nor

read *Hamlet* could not adequately understand Stoppard's play. The way in which Stoppard intersperses scenes from *Hamlet* requires prior knowledge of the overall plot of *Hamlet*. Tom Stoppard therefore relies on both Shakespeare's plot and characterization; the title of his play alludes to this—he will be using Shakespeare's telos, in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. The power of Stoppard's play is in the audience's knowledge of this telos, Aristotle's term for the end of the story: the title gives away the conclusion of the plot, reminding the audience that they know the outcome of the story they are about to watch or read—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *are* dead at the end of *Hamlet* and they will be dead at the end of Stoppard's play, as well. Additionally, using the same conclusion allows Stoppard to convey the entanglement of these two plays and show how answers about Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's identities can be learned from another side of the story.

Despite Stoppard's reliance on *Hamlet*, there seem to be inconsistencies between the two narratives. Jenkins claims that “in making his pair so likable Stoppard has been unfaithful to Shakespeare's concept” (42). However, I disagree, arguing that Stoppard's expansion of their character enriches rather than undermines Shakespeare's characters. Stoppard cannot be accused of contradicting Shakespeare, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are hardly given enough lines in *Hamlet* for the reader to develop a well-informed identity for them. Jenkins' evidence for his claim is that “[i]n *Hamlet* they [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] are mere henchmen who betray their past friendship with the Prince, though they are too transparent ever to pose a threat to him” (42). Although this may be true, I do not see how it is contradictory to Stoppard's conception of them: they still can be viewed as henchmen of the King and they still do not pose a threat to Hamlet. The only thing that has changed is that they are no longer transparent characters; the audience becomes more attached to them because more of their personalities are exposed. John

Fleming, rather than stating the opposition between Shakespeare's and Stoppard's characters, points out that there are simply many "layers" of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's identities (49): they function as Shakespeare's characters and as Stoppard's characters. He opines that there are clear distinctions between Shakespeare's and Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but not necessarily inconsistencies:

While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are simultaneously Shakespeare's characters (they speak Elizabethan verse and participate in *Hamlet*), Stoppard's characters (who use contemporary English as they spectate, comment on, and ruminate about the implications of the events transpiring around them), and have a metatheatrical existence (they espouse lines that indicate their awareness of the live audience), they are, I assume fundamentally seen as characters whose experiences have some relevancy to those of the viewers. (53-54)

Fleming makes it clear that Stoppard's play combines multiple understandings of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's identities and does not attempt to create a unified identity for them: Stoppard even keeps Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speaking Shakespearean dialogue in the scenes from *Hamlet* while using modern dialogue for the rest of the play. This difference in languages possibly suggests the inconsistency in character between Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Stoppard's. However, it also gives the audience a way to distinguish which scenes are present in *Hamlet* and which are not.

Even if one believes that there are inconsistencies, this only makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern more human. For, as Ricoeur writes, differing narratives about similar events depict people differently. Thus, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been initiated into the realm of inconsistent narratives. The inconsistencies in the two works make the characters feel more real,

more human. Fleming sees fit to treat them as “emblematic of ‘ordinary’ people who play many roles in life” (54). A similarity with real people allows the audience to empathize more easily with these two characters because he makes them feel more real than the flat characters in Shakespeare. The two narratives reveal the multiple roles that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play and pronounce them as real people “whose experiences have some relevancy to those of the viewers” (54). The two narratives (Stoppard’s and Shakespeare’s) show the multiple perspectives that exist for every person. Although the audience may not be in the play, everyone that is an audience member sits in a different seat and sees the play from a different angle. This metaphor can be extended outside of the play: everyone sees others from a different angle and thus has a different perception of each other. It is this real life experience that Stoppard creates for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The human qualities that Stoppard bestows on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cause the audience to empathize with Stoppard’s characters. The audience also believes in Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because he creates characters that do not contradict the Shakespearean characters, but rather simply extends their identity. If he did contradict Shakespeare’s play, no one would believe that the two plays were entangled narratives. As the Player explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “[a]udiences know what to expect and that is all they are prepared to believe in” (Stoppard 84), so Stoppard had to create characters that the audience would expect or else they would not believe his play, he had to sculpt characters that fit with the mold Shakespeare had already formed. To understand how Stoppard builds off of Shakespeare’s foundation, it is important to understand Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s identities in *Hamlet*.

In *Hamlet*, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are reduced to the social roles that they play: they appear as inferior and subservient men. After Queen Gertrude asks Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to discover the source of Hamlet's sorrow, Guildenstern replies, "we both obey, / And here give up ourselves, in the full bent / To lay our service freely at your feet, / To be commanded" (II. ii. 31-34). Here we see the two of them appeasing the Queen and King; the inferiority of their role dictates how they act. The two men "give up themselves"; they give up their power to choose, but in doing so they choose to obey the instructions of the King and Queen. They allow themselves to become instruments used by others. They are bound not only by the plot, but by their social class: their social class forces them to bow to the King and Queen, bending their backs and choices to the King and Queen's wishes. Thus, in *Hamlet*, the audience views Guildenstern and Rosencrantz as two men who function similarly, equating their identities with the roles they play. In 4.1, after Hamlet kills Polonius, the King orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out from Hamlet where he put the body (IV.i.34-38). He refers to them as "friends," and this general greeting, although it may appear to show his respect for them, in fact does not. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not even given any lines here: they are ordered to do something and expected to do it, without any input of their own. Their wills are aligned with the will of the King. Hamlet even refers to Rosencrantz as a "sponge . . . that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities" (IV.ii.12-14). In the same speech, Hamlet, using the sponge analogy, explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what will happen to them after they have done what the King asks of them: "[w]hen he [the King] needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and sponge, you shall be dry again" (IV.iii.18-9). The sponge comparison has a dual function because it additionally exemplifies how the King uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as sponges to soak up information for him. The fate of these two friends is also

foreshadowed in this simile: sponges are discarded after use. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, allowing themselves to be used however the King demands, reduce themselves to puppets for the King and Queen.

Since their actions are congruent with the desires of the King and Queen and not their own, they, giving up their freedom, allow the King and Queen to determine their lives. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first arrive at the court of Denmark, the king admits to them, “the need we have to use you did provoke our hasty sending” (Stoppard 35), making it clear that they intend to solicit the two gentleman for a self-serving reason, i.e. to help to determine the cause of Hamlet’s change in character. Not only does the narration show this social hierarchy, but this social hierarchy drives the plot. Thus, the plot seems to be enforcing a sense of determinism—a hierarchical determinism, in which those on the higher end of the social sphere determine the lives of those below them.

In Shakespeare’s play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were not the prominent characters in the play. However, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, they take on the main stage and this allows the audience to develop a clearer, more precise view of their identity. Homan writes that in *Hamlet* they “were at worst functionaries, at best indifferent and hence unaffected observers; Stoppard’s pair . . . evolve into the play’s chief actors and therefore into significant beings” (107). Stoppard’s extension to their narrative gives the audience a fuller, more complete image of them. Anthony Jenkins argues that these two men in *Hamlet* were “[s]o expendable as to have been omitted from some productions of the play, so colourless as to have become theatrical bywords for anonymity” (42). Since they only occupy such a small space in Shakespeare’s script, they appear as if they are “expendable” characters; moreover, they appear as two characters that are indistinguishable from one another. Levin states that “their roles are

interchangeable,” describing them as “twin characters” (51). Stoppard resurrects them and shows how crucial they were to the inner workings of the story of *Hamlet* and presents them as separate individuals rather than two identical characters.

Stoppard writes a script in which Guildenstern and Rosencrantz talk to each other (something that is not done in *Hamlet*), enabling the audience to better differentiate the two men. Their dialogues allow the audience to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as two different individuals as opposed to two characters acting as one, like in *Hamlet*. The stage set-up at the beginning of Stoppard’s play distinguishes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

The run of ‘heads’ is impossible, yet ROS betrays no surprise at all—he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note.

GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it—his character note. (11)

Stoppard shows that he wants these two characters to be differentiated—he gives them different character notes! These varying attributes continue throughout the play, especially in the first scene. Guildenstern contemplates the meaning of 85 consecutive heads and the consequence for the meaning of probability, while Rosencrantz, concentrating on flipping the coins, remains unsurprised by the results. Their first actions are also opposite of each other: “GUIL sits. ROS stands (he does the moving, retrieving the coins). GUIL spins. ROS studies coin” (Stoppard 11). When the two friends are interacting with each other only, the audience sees the differences between the two because they are acting differently. However, when they are encountered together in a scene with others, they often play a similar role and it becomes harder to distinguish

the two. Simply by giving the two their own scene (something Shakespeare does not do) Stoppard gives us a better sense of their individual identities.

Stoppard gives Guildenstern and Rosencrantz monologues where they reveal their deep thoughts to the audience, making them appear more realistic. Reflecting on how past actions become memory, Guildenstern says, “[w]e cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered” (Stoppard 47). This sentence is very elevated and poetical, and is juxtaposed against some of their comical, more clownish parts of the play. It shows Guildenstern’s astute insights from the world in which he lives. Rosencrantz, in Act II, describes his ideas about death (54) in a very unique fashion that shows that he is a thoughtful man, not only a subservient one. In another instance, Guildenstern reflects on the meaning of the past and says that “[e]ach move is dictated by the previous one—that is the meaning of order. . . . 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” (46). This not only shows Guildenstern’s insightful thoughts, but also displays questions about the role of determinism and chance in his life.

In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s deaths are barely acknowledged. In Shakespeare, although the audience may be curious as to what happened to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the audience quickly dismiss them just as the Ambassador does. However, the audience attachment, which Stoppard’s play invokes, is exemplified in this line— “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” (126). At the close of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern disappear and the final scene of *Hamlet* is being performed on stage, Jenkins believes that the audience members “care nothing about those noble corpses and are angered by the final two Shakespearean speeches in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are

dismissed in a single line” (43). Stoppard’s play evokes empathy from the audience that is not present in the Shakespearean interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The audience is haunted by the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and fears that they may discover the same meaninglessness that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover in their death. The audience, after watching Hamlet, may wonder what the fate of these two characters were, but they would not have the same emotional ties to the characters that they feel after watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Thus, after seeing Stoppard’s play, it seems impossible to see these two characters only as the way they are depicted in the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet's Identity in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's identities may be more complex in Stoppard's play, but Hamlet's character is given few appearances (a mere six) and very few lines, cutting the complexities of his character. Most of Stoppard's audience's view of Hamlet is formed through secondary sources—when Claudius and Polonius are talking about him, or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are talking about him. Just as most of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's narratives are an unseen scene in *Hamlet*, most of Hamlet's narrative becomes an unseen scene in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Thus, there are parallels between how Stoppard treats Hamlet and how Shakespeare treats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

If one were to see only Stoppard's play, Hamlet's character would be very elusive compared to his presence in Shakespeare's tragedy. For Hamlet does not even show up until the end of Act I, and, even when he is on stage, he is given very few lines. Much of his characterization is actually learned from other characters' conversations about him. For instance, the audience's first perception of Hamlet is given when Claudius explains his lunatic behavior to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's objective of course is to glean what afflicts him. However, the reasons for why he might be acting strangely are unknown to the audience (they have not witnessed or heard the Ghost's summons or Hamlet's affliction over his mother's marriage to his uncle). Other important plot developments in *Hamlet* are learned through others in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: the audience learns about his love for Ophelia through Polonius and the Players and the audience learns that his father has died and his uncle has married his mother through Guildenstern and Rosencrantz.

In Stoppard's play, Hamlet's motives are unclear, making him more mysterious and elusive. The beginning scene where Hamlet is given a supernatural sanction from the Ghost to

avenge his father is never seen or mentioned in Stoppard's play. The lack of mention of the Ghost perhaps reopens the question as to whether the Ghost was truly an apparition or simply a hallucinatory vision. However, Hamlet's mission, whether sanctioned by the ghost of King Hamlet or not, is essential to understanding Hamlet's drive throughout the play. His actions in the play (acting mad, killing Polonius, his treatment of Ophelia, his treatment of his mother and uncle, and his decision to host the Murder of Gonzago) are deepened when doubled with his accepted mission. The Ghost's command haunts and conflicts Hamlet, influencing his external actions, while causing inner turmoil.

As a result of the absence of the Ghost's command in Stoppard, Hamlet loses his hesitant, contemplative, and conflicted nature that is so prominent in *Hamlet*. Much of his apprehension is a consequence of the situation thrust upon him by the Ghost. Thus, without the Ghost's request, Stoppard dismisses the lines that outline Hamlet's struggle. None of his soliloquies, which often express his emotions, frustration, and uncertainty toward his supposed duty, are performed in Stoppard's play. He is used more as a time marker; his lines give the audience clues as to the internal time relationship between Stoppard's play and Shakespeare's play.

Another very important scene that is not present in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is the performance of the Mouse Trap and Claudius' reaction to the play. The results of this test are also important for proving the King's guilt in murdering his brother, the former king of Denmark. The King's guilty response also gives evidence that the Ghost's testimony concerning the death of the King Hamlet was correct. This scene, providing Hamlet, who now is fairly certain that his father was murdered, with more determination to take revenge, is pivotal in the progress of *Hamlet*, but nonetheless Stoppard completely omits it.

Another aspect of Hamlet's identity that is not present in Stoppard's play is his contemplative personality. Death, which plays an important part in the identity of these characters, is constantly in their minds. Throughout these two plays, Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern all meditate on the ultimate uncertainty, i.e. death. Hamlet describes death as "an 'undiscovered country' whence 'No traveller returns' (III.i.79-80)" (Levin 41). In one of his soliloquies, he questions what the sleep of death is like: will he be able to dream when he is dead? His contemplation of death is mirrored in Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's contemplations of the end of life. Rosencrantz ponders whether death would be like sleeping in a box (Stoppard 71). These thoughts on death suggest the important role that death plays in the minds of these characters, but also their consciousness about their future and inevitable death. In Shakespeare, Hamlet contemplates death in a number of his soliloquies; these ponderings about the after-life are not seen in Stoppard's play, creating an image of a non-meditative Hamlet. So just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not appear as thoughtful characters in Shakespeare's tragedy (though they are thought-provoking in Stoppard's theatre), Hamlet does not appear as insightful in Stoppard's play, although he appears keen in Shakespeare.

The scenes, in which Hamlet is present, distort his Shakespearean characterization. Many of these scenes focus on Hamlet's strange behavior and suspected madness: Claudius and Polonius try to diagnose his state of madness and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to gain an understanding of what is causing his abnormal mood. The prominence of his lunacy is a result of the focus on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are appointed as the King's spies to learn the cause of Hamlet's madness. Their intersection with Hamlet revolves around his illness. Not only does the audience view the beginning inquisition into his illness, but they are also privy to the progress of the search, when Claudius and Polonius question the authenticity of his madness:

Polonius comments in an aside that he believes that “though this be madness, yet there is method in it” (Stoppard 52) and Claudius states that “what he [Hamlet] spake, though it lacked form a little, / Was not like madness” (III.i.175). Claudius, not deceived by Hamlet’s performance of insanity, believes that Hamlet has a scheme up his sleeve and decides to send him to England. Exposing the fact that people thought his state of madness was a façade helps the audience understand the rationale for Hamlet’s exile to England, a plot action vital to the boat scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Hamlet’s friendship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is also questioned in Stoppard’s play. There is not much information about the friendship between these characters in *Hamlet* and Stoppard takes this lack of a concrete past between them as an opportunity to doubt the authenticity of their relationship. The strength of their companionship is presented as incredulous the first time that Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern interact in Stoppard’s play: Hamlet misidentifies Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, showing that he is not even capable of distinguishing his friends. This introduction suggests that their relationship is precarious and perhaps not as close as one would presume from reading Shakespeare. He calls them by the incorrect names another time in the play, as well. His inability to distinguish Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mocks their interchangeability in *Hamlet* and aligns Hamlet with the King and the Queen, the other two characters who cannot remember their names correctly. This connection places Hamlet in a position of power over Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet also functions similarly to the King and the Queen because he uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; he uses them to replace him in the death sentence. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel that they cannot change the course set for them by higher powers, they are referring to the King and Queen, but also to Hamlet. Hamlet, although he has reason to condemn those who have betrayed him, has

authority over Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (he is still the Prince of Denmark) to use them how he wishes. This power dynamic obstructs the certainty of their friendship.

The uncertainty regarding their friendship implicates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's betrayal of Hamlet (spying and agreeing to deliver the letter sentencing him to death) and Hamlet's betrayal (sentencing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death). When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that their release relies on Hamlet's death, Rosencrantz, distressed over the situation, tells Guildenstern that they are Hamlet's friends. However, Guildenstern responds by asking Rosencrantz how he knows that they are indeed Hamlet's friends and tells Rosencrantz that he has "only got their word for it" as proof (Stoppard 110). Guildenstern's words show that he does not necessarily count Hamlet as his friend, but rather the King and Queen have only told them that they were friends. This perspective on their friendship is one that Stoppard develops and that is not present in *Hamlet*, although it does not conflict with Shakespeare's play.

These differences between Hamlet's, Rosencrantz's, and Guildenstern's identities in these two plays show the complexities of narrative identity. While Shakespeare's play gives a better depiction of Hamlet, it does not give an adequate view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and while Stoppard's play gives a fuller picture of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, it reduces Hamlet, the tragic hero, to a flat character. Thus, each play relies on the other to fill in the gaps of their stories. This is why, as Ricoeur discusses, the compilation of different narratives often allows for a better understanding of an individual.

Fate and Chance in Narratives

Stoppard cleverly builds on themes already present in *Hamlet* to establish a cohesive link with his own play. I have already discussed how he elaborates on the theme of identity and how narrative identity and the entanglement of stories explain how Stoppard's play interacts with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Additionally, Stoppard, building on the themes of fate versus chance, role-playing versus reality, and uncertainty—themes that are pervasive in *Hamlet*—establishes a thematic foundation consistent with *Hamlet*. This relationship between themes unifies the two plays and links them with Ricoeur's discussion of narrative; Ricoeur believes that these three themes (fatalism, role-playing, and uncertainty) are common to the creation of narratives. First, I will discuss how Ricoeur's analysis of narrative aids in interpreting the theme of fate in these two plays.

Ricoeur warns that narratives often create a feeling of necessity: narratives can make acts seem as if they rely on each other and must happen in the order they happen. However, as discussed earlier, behind every narrative is nothing more than a series of discordant episodes, which the author links together through a plot, to develop a cohesive and meaningful story. The contingent events at the core of identity are often mistaken to have happened by fate instead of by choice: “[b]ecause of the concordant-discordant synthesis, the contingency of the event contributes to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character” (Ricoeur *Oneself as Another* 147). The plot that the narrator develops makes action appear as if a character's identity had to be the way it is presented; however, one must not forget that the narrators are the ones who created the plot: narrators give the actions their meaning by making them appear necessarily so. Ricoeur clearly states that humans have the ability to act in addition to being acted upon by the society: “I never forget to

speak of humans as acting and suffering” (145). Therefore, humans do not solely suffer the narrative given to them by others or that they develop themselves, but have the ability to choose the future acts that will be placed into their narrative. However, characters do not have an existence outside of the plot that narrator writes. Thus, while humans have the ability to demonstrate agency in their lives, characters do not—they are always confined to the script.

The topic of fate and chance in narratives is a theme that Ricoeur discusses and is a theme that is conveyed in both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Hamlet*. Actors of course do not have the ability to choose their future. So, ultimately the actors in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are in a world that operates by fate alone. The Player acknowledges the deterministic world of the actor. When Guildenstern asks the Player who decides who dies in a play, the player responds that no one decides, the actors “follow directions—there is no choice involved” (Stoppard 80). The Player’s words reach the heart of what it means to act: to follow the script written for the play. This assertion comments on the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as actors, also have no choice but to follow instructions. The Player’s positive attitude toward theatre articulates that the written script provides order for the actor—a sense of order that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot find. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s frustration over a lack of order shows that although actors are subject to a script, the characters within the play are not aware of the script. Thus, characters, although determined by fate, have reason to wonder whether destiny shapes their lives or not.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet are conflicted over whether they truly control their lives or if fate is responsible for dictating their lives. All three of them are given a mission: Hamlet by the ghost and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the King and Queen. Both of these callings make all three characters feel as if they do not control their own lives, but rather are

required by fate to complete the tasks that they are given. Hamlet, after being told by the Ghost to avenge his father's death, cries out "O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (I.v.189-90). This lament expresses Hamlet's feeling that he was born into his situation and is called to avenge his father's death, regardless of his own sentiments over the matter. The Ghost calls on him to take revenge because avenging his father is his familial duty—a duty that has more traditional authority than Hamlet's own decision and thus, a duty that Hamlet feels is dictating his life. Hamlet contemplates whether he should go through with this revenge and whether or not the Ghost's accusation of his uncle is true. His contemplation and deliberation over how to act (whether to take revenge or not) displays a longing to possess agency. However, despite his wish to choose, his situation is out of his control: he was born into it.

Hamlet, who wishes to exhibit agency, confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who possess a compliant nature toward fate and an unwillingness to assert their own agency, about their attempt to deceive him: "Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me" (III.ii.334-6). In denying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the power to "play" him, he affirms his desire for agency. Speaking of Horatio, Hamlet proclaims "blest are those / Whose blood and judgment are so well commedled/ That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger/ To sound what stop she please" (III.ii.58-61). Hamlet praises those who do not have to succumb to Fortune, but rather have the ability and power to create their own narrative. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are excluded from this praise because they are not given the same circumstantial empowerment as Horatio. Ironically, however, Hamlet, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is not among this privileged group either: he too surrenders to a higher power, i.e. the Ghost and the playwright.

The only time that Hamlet seems to assert his own agency is in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's passiveness appears to be juxtaposed to Hamlet's agency while they are on the boat. Hamlet's decision to switch Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's names for his own in the letter to the King of England seems to display his agency and his unwillingness to be manipulated by others, especially when it is contrasted with Rosencrantz' and Guildenstern's reactions to their discovery of the switched letter. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not change the letter (at least this action is not shown) when they realize they are bearing a letter that will bring them to their death. Thus, while Hamlet appears to take his life in his own hands, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both let fortune pull them where it will. However, reflecting on Shakespeare's play, the audience remembers that Stoppard, in an effort not to contradict Shakespeare, must have Hamlet save himself in order to return to the court of Denmark. Thus, Hamlet only appears to be expressing agency; in reality, he is only following the fate that the script assigns to him.

Hamlet, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is restricted by the plot of the play and his position as a son to the murdered King of Denmark. In the beginning of *Hamlet*, the Ghost demands of him to uphold his filial duty and avenge his father's death, "if [he] didst ever [his] father love" (I.v.23). This makes the audience recall ancient Greek tragedies in which sons were expected to avenge their father's death. Hamlet immediately accepts this normalized duty: "Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge" (I.v.81-83). Thus the Ghost not only represents his father but also represents the past and the social norms that the past upholds. The Ghost becomes a representation of Hamlet's conscience, formed from the social contexts of his time.³ The Ghost

³ The Ghost's voice echoes Nietzsche's notion of "Bad Conscience," the social norms that press on people and that no one can escape.

demands Hamlet adhere to these ancient principles and Hamlet accepts but later he contemplates whether it is the right action to take. In his famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, Hamlet asks, “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,/ And by opposing end them” (III.i.57-60). These words suggest that Hamlet thinks that the ultimate assertion of control may be to end the sea of trouble, which would be accomplished by killing himself. Without committing suicide, he believes that he is only “suffer[ing] the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”; this is definitely a proclamation of the fate that rules his life.

Despite his understanding of the role of fate in his life, Hamlet questions the authenticity of the higher authority of fate by testing the truth of the Ghost’s testament to the King’s murder. He contemplates how to respond to the Ghost’s words throughout the play and does not take revenge until after Claudius reacts guiltily to the Mouse Trap (III.ii.243). Hamlet’s caution of undertaking a mission from a dominant figure exemplifies his attempt at agency, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s adherence to the King displays both their lack of control due to their oppression, their indifference to clarifying the substantiality of the superior’s request, and their passiveness to staking claim to themselves.

In Stoppard’s play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern acknowledge the role of fate in their life and, unlike Hamlet, do not try to demonstrate any agency. The King sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a letter that sanctions the execution of Hamlet. Upon discovering the contents of this letter, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel that they are destined to deliver it. Rosencrantz exclaims, “we are little men, we don’t know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels. Etcetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings” (Stoppard 110). They feel that their telos has already been written by forces larger

than themselves and that they are not at liberty to author their own lives. Their reference to “wheels within wheels” reminds us of the wheel of fortune that people have no control over. The plural use of wheels and the fact that Rosencrantz mentions both fate and kings suggest that Rosencrantz believes that there are more than one wheel acting on them—and there are! Their lack of social power and their role as actors are two ways that control is bereft of them.

It is significant that they single out kings; they feel that kings—those in higher authoritative position—have more control over their lives than they do. They view themselves as “little men” in comparison to the King’s power because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not free to rebel against the King’s wishes even when they must betray the trust of their friend and send their friend to his death. After Gertrude and Claudius flatter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in an attempt to get them to agree to spy on Hamlet, Rosencrantz replies. “Both your majesties / Might, by the sovereign power you have of us, / Put your dread pleasures more into command / Than to entreaty” (Stoppard 36). Rosencrantz astutely points out that the King and Queen have authority over Guildenstern and himself and that they do not have a choice in the matter. The King and Queen use flattery and politeness in their request in order to conceal the reality that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must obey the demand of their King and Queen regardless of their desires and ambitions. This scene is present in both Stoppard’s and Shakespeare’s plays, so even in Shakespeare they are aware of the fact that they do not have control of their situation.

While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on their way to the Danish court, Rosencrantz, upon wondering why they are traveling, concludes that “[w]e were sent for. . . . That’s why we’re here” (Stoppard 19). They do not know why they are ordered but they know that they were ordered to help the King and Queen and so they travel to them. This is similar to the end where they do not know the content of the letter that they are delivering, but they intend on delivering it

nonetheless. In both instances, they are asked to betray Hamlet. Although spying on him is less severe than sending him to his death, in both instances, they acquiesce to the King's orders without question.

The other social role that restricts the freedom of these characters is their role as actors. Since these characters are in a play, which they cannot narrate (Stoppard already did), their bemoaning comes across as thoughtful irony. The characters are oppressed by the plot of the play. The telos of the plot (in Stoppard's and Shakespeare's plays) is a fate, which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot escape. Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's social roles as actors and subordinate subjects create a powerless identity for them. Because of the roles prescribed to them, they are at the mercy of the King of Denmark and the British playwrights. Rosencrantz feels that, although they have the ability to choose, "wheels have been set in motion and they have their own pace, to which [Guildenstern and he] are . . . condemned" (Stoppard 60). The term "condemned" articulates the extremity of their situation: Rosencrantz feels that they have unfairly been placed in a situation where they are not at liberty to change the course on which others have placed them.

Guildenstern, contemplating the outcome of the coin tosses, evaluates possible reasons for the number of consecutive heads. One explanation is that if each coin flip is viewed independently of the one before it, the eighty-five consecutive heads do not seem as odd (Stoppard 16). With each coin flip being no way dependent on the coin flip before it, each coin has a fifty-fifty chance of landing on heads or tails. When this notion is used as a lens to view Guildenstern's own life, it magnifies Guildenstern's belief that the present action is not decided on by his prior actions. However, despite their acceptance that the past does not dictate the future, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz appear to want necessity to determine their lives so that

they do not have to choose. After reading the letter that orders the King of England to execute Hamlet, Guildenstern states that they are too inferior to interfere with the work of the gods or kings (Stoppard 86). They desire to exchange their freedom for fate and, in doing so, they desire to surrender their responsibility. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern allow themselves to be played on by others, in particular the King and Queen, but Hamlet refuses to allow others to use him.

However, in the end, Hamlet, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who accept their death because they believe the sentence came from a superior force than themselves, concedes to a higher authority. Mack, discussing *Hamlet*, similarly argues that the pirate ship's unanticipated entrance shows that the characters do not entirely have control over the course of their lives. The lucky arrival of the pirate ship, which aids Hamlet's plan to save his life, shows that "the roles of life are not entirely self-assigned" (Mack 59). After Hamlet returns to Denmark, he acknowledges this fatalistic outlook when he tells Horatio, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.10-11). Hamlet believes that fate has influenced his situation. As Edwards argues:

In the all-important colloquy with Horatio at the beginning of the final scene, Hamlet tells him of the strong sense he has that his impulsive actions on board ship were guided by a divinity which takes over from us 'when our deep plots do pall' and redirects us. This is a critical juncture of the play, implying Hamlet's surrender of his grandiose belief in his power to ordain and control, and his release from the alternating belief in the meaningless and mindless drift of things. (Edwards 56)

In this moment, Hamlet endorses the fateful world, to which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves subject. Edwards states that fate gives Hamlet a sense of meaning, but I do not

believe that is the case: Hamlet accepts his fated mission, but he grieves that he must endure his fate. He finds that at the heart of fate is meaninglessness.

Like Hamlet's situation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's situation also suggests determinism as a force in the world and that determinism does not give meaning to their lives. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, one mechanism that portrays the operation of fate is Guildenstern's test of the probability of flipping coins. In the opening scene, while the audience is curious to see whether the coin lands on heads or tails, the audience does not know the outcome of each toss. The ninety-two coin flips that result in ninety-two heads (a seemingly unlikely outcome) makes the audience question whether chance is actually functioning in Stoppard's world. After eighty-five coins land on heads, the audience begins to suspect the coins will continue to land on heads. As Garber insightfully notes, coin tossing in Stoppard's play is "the modern, probabilistic version of the theme of fate in *Hamlet*" (222). The coin toss shows how the prior belief that probability or chance ruled the events in the world is replaced by a surprising discovery that some form of fate, rather than probability, may have caused ninety-two coins in a row to land on heads in a row. The audience comes to believe that the outcome of the coin-tosses may be due to fate and can predict the outcome of each coin toss. Another way that fate is apparent in this play can be seen through the audience members' knowledge of the outcome of the play—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die. The telos of the play is already known before the play begins, taking away all suspense from the conclusion of the play and making the play feel determined. Through the coin toss and the telos of the play, the audience, as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, come to believe that fate is ruling the play's universe.

As Guildenstern ponders the outcomes of the coin tosses, he questions the trust he had in the "harmony" and "reassuring union which we recognized as nature" (Stoppard 18). The

unending sequence of heads in the coin toss disrupts this harmony and makes them question their “faith” in his certainty of the probabilities of nature. He also notes that “[t]he scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear” (17). Faith in nature eases his fear by giving him a secure certainty rather than an unpredictable uncertainty. While Guildenstern may remain unbothered by the coin toss, he is afflicted by their death sentence in the end of the play—this sentence unlocks his fear and disturbs his notion of the natural flow of the world.

The coin toss not only shows the lack of security of their world, but also their inability to distinguish fate from chance. At one point in Stoppard’s play, Rosencrantz holds out two closed hands in front of Guildenstern, gesturing for Guildenstern to choose in which hand he has hid a coin; Guildenstern chooses the hand that he believes the coin to be in. Rosencrantz opens the hand that was chosen, revealing its empty contents. However, then Rosencrantz opens up his other hand, showing Guildenstern that both of his hands were empty. What appeared to be a guessing game with a fifty percent probability of guessing correctly was not a matter of chance; Guildenstern’s incorrect guess was determined by Rosencrantz’s act of not placing a coin in either of them. When Rosencrantz interfered with the normal circumstances of this guessing game, he made it fated that Guildenstern would lose. However, Guildenstern was under the impression that one hand did hold a coin and thus he had a fifty percent chance of guessing correctly. Their conflicting perspectives show the deceptive nature of fate and chance. This simple game reveals Guildenstern’s inability to perceive what is fate and what is chance.

Rosencrantz’s ability to deceive Guildenstern relates to Ricoeur’s discussion of the deceptive nature of fate. Ricoeur, in his writings on narrative identity, discusses the reality of chance in our lives that the illusion of determinism hides: “by telling stories and writing history

we provide ‘shape’ to what remains chaotic, obscure, and mute” (“Human Experience of Time and Narrative” 115). For Ricoeur each episode is like the flip of a coin and in no way is restricted by the flip before it. However, as mentioned previously, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as characters, do not have the ability to make decisions for themselves. So, unlike the way Ricoeur’s theory describes how stories relate to people, the narrative in the plays does not only appear to be deterministic, it is.

Guildenstern’s discussion about the probability concerning the coin toss applies to the probability of Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s lives: Guildenstern is asking if probability is a factor in his life. Guildenstern asserts that the probability averages allow humans to feel as if they can predict things, as if there is a steady force that permeates their lives, i.e. nature and natural forces (Stoppard 13). He assimilates the sun always going down to the probability of a coin landing fifty percent of the time on its heads—the knowledge of the past allows for an amount of certainty regarding the future. This certainty brings comfort—the same comfort that is established by a narrative⁴ and the sense of fate that narratives bring. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, seeking this comfort, passively accept the orders given to them by higher authorities.

The coin tossing scene in Stoppard’s play represents the lack of stability and the entrance of improbable chance in society. Shakespeare’s Denmark, like Stoppard’s world, suffers from disorderly events that instigate inquiries into the stability of order in society. For there is something rotten in the air in Denmark— “[t]his world, in Hamlet’s opening description, is ‘an unweeded garden’ (I.ii.135). Well-tended gardens always stand for the norms of nature in Shakespeare’s imagery; here the blight is traceable not merely to neglect, but to a kind of

⁴ According to Ricoeur, one of the main functions of narratives is to form a sense of cohesion, which offers comfort and stability.

perverse cultivation” (Levin 53). The “unweeded garden” refers to the disorder of the body politic: Hamlet’s mother has married his uncle, who is the murderer of the King. Edwards describes this disorder in his Introduction to *Hamlet*: “Shakespeare movingly presents the beauty of a past in which kingship, marriage, the order of society had or was believed to have a heavenly sanction. A brutal Cain-like murder destroys the order of the past” (60). In *Hamlet*, therefore, it is the murder of the King, not the unprecedented string of coin tosses landing on heads, that exemplify the instability of the world that the characters thought they knew to be a stable one. The world in the beginning of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is also “an unweeded garden” in which the probabilities of coin tossing seems to be overturned, disenfranchising the security that probabilities endorsed.

Uncertainty and Meaninglessness

The instability that pervades these two plays corresponds to a theme of uncertainty, a shared theme that creates an additional correspondence between the two plays. Edwards recognizes that part of what makes *Hamlet* successful is Shakespeare's use of uncertainty:

The play of *Hamlet* takes place within the possibility that there is a higher court of values than those which operate around us, within the possibility of having some imperfect communication with that court, within the possibility that an act of violence can purify, within the possibility that the words 'salvation' and 'damnation' have meaning. To say that these possibilities are certainties is to wreck the play as surely as to say they are impossibilities. (61)

Stoppard's play brings uncertainty, doubt, and mystery to the surface, but these themes were already an underlying current in *Hamlet*. Maynard Mack notes that the first scene of *Hamlet* at the guards' post "creates a world where uncertainties are of the essence" (48). There are twelve questions queried in the dark of night, while the guards attempt to decipher the identities of those approaching (including the ghost). The prominent question of identity in the play is evidence for the theme of uncertainty.

This uncertainty goes hand in hand with the prevalence of questions in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Maynard Mack said that the play of *Hamlet* was "preeminently in the interrogative mood" (46). There is not only a high frequency of questions in the play, but also some of the most provocative and powerful lines are questions: from the opening "Who's there?" to the famous "To be or not to be." Stoppard recognizes the theme of questioning and also uses questions to progress his plot. The most provocative example is the interrogative tennis game that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern create in Act I, in which one is

required to only ask questions and respond to all questions with a question. This game evokes some very deep questions: “Is there a God?” (43), “Is there a choice?” (43), and “Who do you think you are?” (44). However, since the rules demand that only questions are uttered, none of the questions posed are actually answered. All the questions raised, because they remain unanswered, only increase the uncertainty in the air. This uncertainty does not go unnoticed by the two protagonists. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern recognize the lack of answers in their lives. They are constantly questioning what happens around them because they do not understand why things are happening the way that they are. In the final scene, Rosencrantz expresses frustration that there are no explanations for their lives or deaths.

Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s frustrations are duplicated by the lack of answers regarding their past. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard uses Rosencrantz’s forgetfulness to relate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s lack of narrative past to the audience. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to remember their own past. Rosencrantz laments that, in the past, “people knew who I was and if they didn’t they asked and I told them” (38). The comfort of knowing things for certain in the past has disappeared. This mirrored loss of identity is illustrated when characters, throughout the play, interchange Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s names and then, toward the end of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern even misidentify themselves. People’s inability to identify Rosencrantz mirrors his own inability to remember his personal narrative and his own identity.

The loss of identity and past obstructs any sense of security or stability. For a narrative acts as a consolation against the fear of chaos by establishing a sense of identity just as nature acts as a solace against the fear of chaos and uncertainty. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are stripped of the comfort of harmony in their own lives, because the natural rules of probability

seem not to be working and because they cannot remember their past, which indicates their inability to have a cohesive narrative (since they have no beginning to their story). Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern, “Which way did we come in?” (Stoppard 39) and wonders what direction they were headed. These characters, unaware of which direction they were going, display a loss of both their physical direction and narrative direction. Without a concept of their direction and current location, they cannot have a clear concept of who they are. Without a memory of their past, Ricoeur would agree, they have no knowledge of their narrative identity. This presentation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is completely in line with Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s inability to distinguish themselves comically exposes the undifferentiated identities of Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose character, Levin claims, “is to have no character” (29). Yet while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may not be aware of their own character, by the end of the play, the audience is. Since they cannot remember their narrative past, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may not be able to recognize their own identities, but throughout the play, they still are building narrative identities that the audience perceives.

However, without an understanding of who they are or where they come from, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern convey a sense of being lost and wandering, both physically through their drifting in and out of the scenes of *Hamlet* and existentially through their uncertainty of identity. Thus, Rosencrantz shows that what he truly desires is an identity. He mourns the loss of his identity, which would provide security and certainty, while simultaneously mourning the loss of his life. Rosencrantz’s desire for an identity is a result of his inability to remember his narrative past; for a narrative gives the characters within it a stability of order and identity, and the lack of identity offers only an overwhelming sense of uncertainty.

The pervasiveness of uncertainty in Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays culminates in endings drowned in uncertainty. In both plays the audience are left wondering what happened to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whether Hamlet was right to take revenge on Claudius, and whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserved their death for betraying their friend. The power of these endings lies in leaving the audience unsettled. Edwards, discussing *Hamlet*, states that "[t]he silence of the Ghost at the end of the play leaves the extent of Hamlet's victory or triumph an open question. To answer it needs a knowledge that Horatio didn't have, that Shakespeare didn't have, that we don't have" (61). Likewise, the lack of straightforwardness concerning the meaningfulness of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's lives invites the audience to query the outcome of the play. To answer the inquiries raised by the play would require knowledge that Stoppard and the audience do not have.

Guildenstern's and Rosencrantz's meaningless deaths reveal the lack of control they have over their own fate. After discovering that the letter orders their own execution, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are faced with death. Instead of fighting their sentence, they accept their death, showing that the only way they can find comfort is in the certainty of their demise. Rosencrantz even dreams of jumping out of the boat and dying because "[t]hat would put a spoke in their wheel" (Stoppard 108). His comment suggests that he believes that death is the only way to revolt against others' control over their lives.

However, even the certainty of death as an escape from fate is meaningless because, despite the certainty of their death, they do not understand why their lives are ending the way they are. The realization of the meaninglessness of their deaths is displayed in Guildenstern's attempt to kill the player; as he runs a sword through the Player, he shouts "if there are no explanations for us, then let there be none for him" (Stoppard 96). The only meaning given to an

action is the meaning that they place upon it in the context of their narrative story and the history of their society. They are faced with uncertainty when necessity is extinguished from their lives. The only thing certain is that they will die, at some point. On the boat, they can “move . . . but [their] movement is contained within a larger one that carries [them] along as inexorably as the wind and current” (122). Although this statement fits their situation—they are on a boat, which is taking them to their death—it also is a metaphor for every man’s life. All men are born and can move about, but are always headed toward an inevitable death. This insightful analysis of life references Heidegger’s description of a being-toward-death. In anyone’s life, “[t]he only beginning is birth and the only end is death” (30). Birth and death are two of the limits of life with which every man and woman is faced. Birth and death allow for a narrative to take shape between them. Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s representations of everyman and everywoman help to portray them as endearing, because the audience can see aspects of their own lives in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: the audience also faces uncertainty every day of their lives.

Since a personal narrative begins with a birth and ends in death, it is not until the end of Stoppard’s narrative that the audience are given the whole narrative of Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s lives; the end reveals the full sculpture of their identity. Felicia Londre supports this view: she believes that Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s acceptances of their deaths “[do] not make tragic heroes of them, for their deaths are still meaningless, but it does give them, at last a kind of identity’ (33)” (qtd. in Fleming 64). Their identities are complete because their story ends and the audience can no longer compile information about them, but have a complete story (with a beginning and end), from which the audience can derive identities. Their acceptances of their death also show their acceptances of the social roles in which they are placed (they do not see how they can question the commands of someone in a position of higher

authority than their own). Their compliance conveys their identities as heavily constricted by their social roles. The audience knows that they see their lives are meaningless because they are not controlling them; the audience knows they are operating in a world where the supernatural force is the playwright. Even in this restricted world, however, they are able to form identities for themselves.

Just as it is at the end of the play that the audience comes recognize the identity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play, Levin argues that it is in the fifth act of Shakespeare's play that Hamlet establishes a new identity: "[t]he Hamlet that emerges to dominate the Fifth Act is a new man. . . . He has achieved a sense of his own identity, and he proclaims it from Ophelia's grave: 'This is I, / Hamlet the Dane.' (v.i.280-81)" (94). Levin believes Hamlet has claimed the throne back and acted as a king here, supported by the fact that he used the seal of his father when he wrote the letter sentencing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death. This is a very interesting claim seeing that many critics claim that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern earn a sense of identity in the final stages of Stoppard's play. Yet, I would argue that in Stoppard's play Hamlet is bereft of an identity, and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bereft of an identity in Shakespeare's play.

Although the deaths of these characters finalize their identities, one cannot forget that Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths are uncertain. Since neither Shakespeare nor Stoppard incorporate Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths into the action of their plays (the audience only hears about their death), the audience is left to wonder whether they actually died or not. The audience never sees their physical deaths, allowing the audience to hope that they chose to not follow the fate given to them by Shakespeare and found an escape from their sentenced death.

Reality versus Role Playing

The theme of role-playing versus identity is one that Maynard Mack perceives in *Hamlet*; he describes the theme as “the problematic nature of reality and the relation of reality to appearance” (48). Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity formulates how acting relates to one’s identity as well; he asserts that people are the narrators of their identities, but they are also the characters of the narratives that establishes their identities. Thus, life takes on a performative nature—people are the plot that they form. Thus, a person’s outward appearance becomes a person’s identity or reality. This philosophical idea is pervasive in both Shakespeare’s and Stoppard’s works.

As Maynard Mack asserts, the relation between appearance and reality is central to *Hamlet*. Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft” (III.iv.188-9). Thus, Hamlet is acting like he is mad when he is not, in order to deceive the King and Queen. Hamlet’s action brings to mind whether deception plays a role in developing identities. For some may believe that Hamlet is truly going mad and associate lunacy with his identity because they do not know that he is faking. Perhaps it is quite obvious that Hamlet is taking advantage of the way that people see others. Hamlet, aware of the fact that people base identities on how others act, acts differently to give himself the identity of a lunatic.

Another time acting is brought up in *Hamlet* is in the very beginning, when the Ghost steps on stage. The identity of the Ghost is a complete mystery, yet so much in the play relies on the Ghost’s conversation with Hamlet. Just as the guards question the identity of the ghost, the audience cannot help but to doubt the authenticity of the Ghost and wonder if it was truly an apparition of Hamlet’s father. Hamlet himself does immediately believe the Ghost’s claim, but then hesitates, realizing that “the devil hath power / T’assume a pleasing shape” (II.ii.552-3).

Recognizing the devil's ability to fool him, Hamlet tests the legitimacy of Ghost through the Mouse Trap. Hamlet, knowing that acting can deceive others, is skeptical of the Ghost's true identity.

In addition to this example of role-playing in Shakespeare's play, there are also many references to acting and the theatre. When actors in a play recognize that they are acting, they are creating a level of metatheatre. When Hamlet meets the Players, he advises them on how to act well by saying "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (III.ii.15). Ironically, Hamlet, as an actor, must follow his own advice. In Edwards's footnote, he writes that "Hamlet finds it easier to order things in the theatre than in his own life. He has the greatest difficulty in acting in accordance with the 'word' he has been given (1.5.110), and in suiting his words to what he has to act (e.g. 2.2.535-40)." Thus, Edwards believes that Hamlet struggles to obey his own expectations of what makes a good actor and instead finds acting as someone else perhaps easier than "suing the action to the word and the word to the action" in his own life. When Hamlet proclaims that it is better to have actors think highly of you than have an impressive epigraph on your gravestone, his words inform his own situation: as an actor, he is creating an identity for Hamlet, an identity that the audience will remember. Stoppard's play expounds upon the metatheatrical theme of Hamlet by extending the scene with the Players and through Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's discussions on their confinement in the world.

Stoppard's play also directly addresses aspects of theatre and acting. While Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are trying to discover the cause of Hamlet's ailment, Guildenstern, mimicking the Lord's Prayer, says "[g]ive us this day our daily mask" (Stoppard 39). This intercession suggests that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wear a mask every day in order to conceal their true identity. Both Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put on a type of acting in order to hide

what they are actually doing and ergo who they are. Ironically, Rosencrantz is a character and thus his comment also refers to actors wearing masks in order to portray characters on stage.

Fleming writes that one of the philosophical questions that Stoppard's work raises is "role-playing versus identity" (53), which is discussed directly by the players. The Players in the play reiterate this point. The Player claims that actors are "opposite of people" (Stoppard 63). But in actuality they are metacharacters and so are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "they exist both inside and outside the text of *Hamlet* and at times they also acknowledge the presence of the theatre audience, thereby suggesting what film director John Boorman called 'a present-day identity, as actors caught and trapped within their roles (Letter to Stoppard)'" (Fleming 53). The Player asserts that he is "always in character" (Stoppard 34). The player never has to change his costume because he never changes out of it (33). This blurs the distinction between acting and living. The Player and his troupe are metacharacters inside the play, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern operate as metacharacters. Sidney Homan even shows that the audience becomes an actor in the play as well. The audience becomes a supernatural force who allows the outcome of the coin toss to be believed through the suspension of disbelief: "No less than the playwright or the two actors, we are the 'un, sub, or supernatural' force allowing for the improbable to occur, to seem real. In this way, the play as an inevitable bonding of actor and audience is predetermined" (Homan 111). The continuous sequence of heads is unrealistic; it requires the suspension of belief of the audience to believe the strange occurrence. Thus, the audience is taking part in the action of the play; they are not mere spectators. This extension of acting blurs the distinguishing line between performance and life. No longer can the two be thought of as separate: living is acting and acting is living. By breaking the fourth wall, this play demonstrates how the role of actor and person are blurred. Furthermore, "[t]he Player's witty 'every exit being

an entrance somewhere else' reveals that theater and reality are merely reverse images of each other, a level of relativity originally denied by the conscious, absolutist mentality of the play's two central figures" (111). The audience's own life is a stage, where they are performing the story of their own lives.

Like the Player who claims that truth is relative and dependent on the times and place, Guildenstern proposes that reality only needs a few witnesses to dilute the horrid nature of the truth and that reality is nothing other than what people come to agree. To illustrate this viewpoint, Guildenstern uses the example of people seeing a unicorn: if all who saw the unicorn, decide it was really a deer, then they all will believe that what they saw was a deer and this then becomes their reality regardless of whether it reflects the truth of what they saw (Stoppard 21). This illustration shows that truth becomes whatever people agree on, like the Player asserts. In order for the truth to be considered reality, people must bear witness to the truth. Likewise identity in order to be considered true must have people bear witness to it. Thus, identity is simply what people observe and simply what people have concluded and agreed a given person's identity to be. Identity is not based on an inner quality that resides on an individual; identity relies on external perception. To establish any sort of identity characters rely on an audience to observe them and perceive their identity.

Hamlet acknowledges that identity requires an audience when he sees the players' performances; he, praising their skill, says that "they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live" (II.ii.481-483). The players' acting is so powerful that if they perform plays against someone's reputation, people will believe their depiction of that person. Thus, identity is left in the hands of others, taking away the absolute nature of truth—truth is whatever the audience believes.

The Player's assertion that actors are the "opposite of people" (Stoppard 63) because they rely on an audience is proven false, because everyone needs an audience, not just actors.

In an interview, when asked why he has characters confuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Tom Stoppard notes that he does not believe that Shakespeare necessarily meant for Gertrude and Claudius to mix the two attendants up, but Stoppard felt that interpreting the lines this way shows that one forgets one's identity when those around him or her forget his or her identity ("Interview with Tom Stoppard"). Thus all identity relies on an audience.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern demonstrate their own need for an audience and, in doing so, expose the audience's own reliance on an audience.

The actors' need for an audience extends to the audience itself, blurring the distinction between acting and reality and creating another level of metatheatre in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. When the Player and his entourage perform the murder of Hamlet's father, Claudius realizes that they are in fact acting out the true story of his brother's death. In this instance, the action of the play leaps off the stage and into the mind of Claudius; demanding the actors stop, he enters into the play—the onstage fourth wall is broken. However, in Stoppard's play, when the players act out Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's upcoming deaths, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not recognize themselves in the play. This scene parallels the scene of the Mouse Trap in *Hamlet*. However, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch the players act out their upcoming death, they cannot discern why the two actors dressed like them appear so familiar. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are blind to the truth of their situation while Claudius is not. Stoppard even allows the audience to participate in the metatheatrical aspect of the play: since Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's stories represents the situation of every person, the audience is compelled to realize that they, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are also

participants in the play. Just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern believed that they were primarily spectators, but suddenly realized that they too were actors, the audience must ask if they too are actors, even when they believe they are merely spectators, watching a play. Thus, by paralleling the audience to actors on the stage, Stoppard invites the audience to become a metacharacter.

Additionally, the Player's staged death in Stoppard's play attests to the fact that only an audience is necessary for people to believe that acting is reality. Garber writes about the appearance of staged death and real death in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: these "two kinds of death, 'stage death' and 'real death,' will come together in the closing moments of the play" (229) —in the instance that Rosencrantz stabs the Player and Rosencrantz believes the Player's staged death to be a real death. In Shakespeare's tragedy and Stoppard's play, the distinction between appearance and reality is unclear. The relationship between this theme in these two plays is strikingly demonstrated when the players faking death are in the same positions that those in *Hamlet* are in when they die in the final showdown. Garber also argues that ultimately it is stage death that wins, since the deaths in both Stoppard's and Shakespeare's plays are stage deaths and the audience believes them both. Thus, what is necessary for something to appear true is an audience who is willing to believe it. Thus, both stage death and real death rely on an audience.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur stresses the importance of a narrative's audience; the readability of a text is vital because it is in reading a text that it is examined. He compares this examination to the examination of which Socrates spoke ("The unexamined life is not worth living"). It is in writing a story that it becomes able to be examined and once written, a story requires a reader for it to be examined. For a composed narrative that is not read communicates nothing and thus does not serve its function properly:

The process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative. I should say, more precisely: the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the *intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*.

The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. (Wood 26)

A reader is necessary for both a fiction narrative and a life narrative. For Ricoeur, reading a text is where the examination of life takes place; it is in analyzing a text that the audience reflects on the narrative and comes to understand themselves. The big difference between fiction and life is that in fiction the author is the narrator, but in life, “we can become our own narrator . . . without being able to become the author” (Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* 31). In fiction the characters do not have the opportunity to narrate their stories, they are confined to the script that is written by the author. However, in real life, people are the ones writing and acting their own narratives. The collaboration of the reader and actor is present in Stoppard’s piece through the use of metatheatre.

These examples of metatheatre question where the performance ends: whether the performance ends with the actors on stage or extends to those in the audience as well. The performativity and reliance on an audience that Stoppard’s world endorses brings into question the role of observer and participant. Is the audience in the play simply an observer or are they an active participant? The invitation of metacharacter already discussed attests that the audience is actively participating in the play as much as the actors on stage. The distinction between spectator and participant is a distinction that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover makes no true separation.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were employed by the King and Queen to discover the cause of Hamlet's odd behavior, but, in their search, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become concerned for their own loss of identity. During the questions game that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern develop, they continuously respond to each other only in questions. The final question that they stop on is "Who do you think you are?" (Stoppard 44). This powerful question makes them realize that "[t]he object of both their speculation and search will be not Hamlet but themselves, that very 'portrait' of men searching for an image or identity. The more Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to retreat to the old role of cynical observer, the more they are drawn into the action of the play" (Homan 110). They try to claim that they are merely spectators, but the final letter sentencing them to death obstructs their ability to pretend any longer. With the present concern of being put to death, they no longer can fool themselves into thinking they are merely spectators watching a play, like they may appear to be doing in *Hamlet*. They have their own narrative unfolding in which they are actively participating. What they discover is that there is no such thing as a mere observer. Homan's article proposes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover in Stoppard's play that "to observe is to participate" (111). These two men, who play more of an observing role in the beginning of the play, become the central characters. Even though they attempt to remain as spectators, other people perceive them as participating in the story and they end up being sentenced to death—an action that demands a very physical participation from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They lament at the end of the play because their roles as participants require them to be subject to the rules of life, i.e. death.

Conclusion

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and *Hamlet* both support Ricoeur's claim that all narratives create an identity for the characters within them. *Hamlet* focuses on the characterization of Hamlet and only gives a limited view of Hamlet's two friends. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a narrative that is intertwined with the narrative of *Hamlet*, extends the identities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, while narrowing the identity of Hamlet. By building a wider scope of their identity, Stoppard stimulates the audience to empathize more with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and see their situation as one of every person.

Levin claims that "our interest in the protagonist [Hamlet] is a self-involvement; that we are Hamlet. His circumstances are ours, to the extent that every man, in some measure, is born to privilege and anxiety, committed where he has never been consulted, hemmed in on all sides by an overbearing situation, and called upon to perform what must seem an ungrateful task" (Levin 43). Stoppard builds a play that places Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a similar desperate situation. They are placed in circumstances toward which they openly express discontent, and they, like Hamlet, are called by a higher authority to accomplish a task which they would never choose for themselves. By focusing on their situation, Stoppard reveals their endearing qualities, enticing the audience to feel the same self-interest for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they did for Hamlet. Since much of Hamlet's and Rosencrantz' and Guildenstern's lives reflect on dynamics such as fate, role-playing, and identity that are present in all narratives, their stories remind the audience of their own narratives. In this sense, all three characters represent the everyman and everywoman, which evokes empathy and interest from the audience.

While both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* contain similar themes, Stoppard's play, embedded in the plot of *Hamlet*, exposes the audience to new ways to think about Shakespeare's play. As Garber notes, "[r]eading *Hamlet* inside out [the way Stoppard

makes us read *Hamlet*] does not, so much, make it a different play as show us the existential, postmodern repetitions that are embedded in the play we thought we knew” (228). Shakespeare’s play gives the audience a limited view of the world; it represents one story. Stoppard’s play reminds his audience that *Hamlet* is not the whole story, only the story that people have been told. Stoppard’s play reminds his audience that for every story told on stage there is another story hiding behind the curtains.

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