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A Theological Reading of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*

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1. Introduction

Through the massive repertoire amassed in a career spanning over several decades, Tom Stoppard's penchant for parody and lingual mischief have been disassociated with discourse of faith or spirituality. The metatheatrical inclinations of this British playwright, always seemingly with a toe in the tragicomic sphere, may read to some as superficial, being accused by early critics as having "absolutely no original ideas of his own" (Dvornichek, qtd. in Nadel 26). Yet in the words of scholar Paul Delany, such suppositions are "ill-founded", and do well to dismiss the depth of nuance of Stoppard's work (Iswarya). It may be argued that Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) embodies a postsecularism in its theological discussion of rational modes of thinking and the relationship between faith and reason, "an image of man surrounded by uncomprehended but comprehensible outer mystery" (14). Says Stoppard with regards to his early play,

> "It would be pointless to deny that in writing the play - in the act of writing it - I was continually confronted by the opportunity to say something which was more than a joke, or beyond a joke. But these opportunities were very welcome as they came along without actually being premeditated." (Funke 221)

One is forced to reckon with the realities of what this "more than a joke" may refer to. The philosophical implications of the arguably poststructural existence of the play has been discussed by scholars with regards to its form and content, Hunter implying that "[i]f Ros and Guil's position is to be taken, as some spectators wish to take it, as in any way allegorical of human life", which it may as well be given the influence of the allegory of *Hamlet,* "then it is allegory not of existentialism, materialism, or chance, but of a fixed purpose, a logic beyond and outside us which we cannot visualise" (170). Beyond logic, beyond humour, the play resonates as a kind of allegory for human search of this "fixed purpose"; Brassell resonates with "the inability of all mankind to understand those forces ultimately in control of their lives and fates" (53) as personified in the titular characters and explored within the play itself, which may elucidate the notion of an agnostic questioning of this fate and previously secularised faith.

Stoppard's relationship with Faith and religious identity rears its head in numerous works, seen rampant in his plays even prior to the revelation of his own religious heritage.

Stoppard has been quoted as identifying as a "a nondenominational theist" or a person whose "moral order [is] derived from Christian absolutes" (Iswarya 50), while being both critical of moral absolutes and being a proponent for relativism, as observed in *Travesties* (1974) and *Hapgood* (1988) (Delaney). Stoppard's focus on death, from his title forward, proves to be a way of asking a question about the existence or the benevolence of God. Examining *Rosencrantz* in light of Stoppard's other engagements with theology emphasises its engagement with related concerns. While there are no direct references to God in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, the play is pervasively theological in both form and content. This paper argues that Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is a religious play.

1.1 Background

In the year 1996, following the death of his mother, the truth about his Jewish heritage was revealed to the Czech-born playwright through family members at the funeral, "almost accidentally" (Nadel 21). While the Sträusslers did not practise Judaism or observe any of the Jewish traditions, this key facet of his early life confirmed for him an inherited religious inclination. In fact, his mother had adopted a Catholic identity after fleeing Czechoslovakia with her two young sons in 1939 from fear of persecution on the back of World War II, and so it was Catholicism that the young Tomáš Sträussler had manifested into a "moral order". At the age of 58, this was now replaced, not only with newfound Judaism, but also the grotesque reality of his kin lost in the Holocaust. Biographer Ira Nadel comments on the possible psychological effects of this revelation, while scholar Eckart Voigts notes "the intellectual cool" having overtaken his "absurdist phase" following the 1990s, targeting deeper emotional responses from his audience (1).While his turn-of-the-century plays— *The Coast of Utopia Trilogy* (2002) and *Rock n' Roll* (2003)— take on a self-referential note, *Leopoldstadt* (2020) stands out in its autobiographical deliberation. Penned twenty-seven years after the realisation of Jewishness, it opens with the lines "[t]hat's mine" (1), running more poignant against the history of belonging and the confusion of origin from which the playwright emerges. Says the playwright himself, "the writing instinct doesn't come out of self-examination, that part of yourself in your work is expressed willy-nilly, without your cooperation, motivation or collusion" (Jaggi), yet refers to the play as "brazen self-pillage" (Dickson). Undoubtedly,

Leopoldstadt is Stoppard in every way, compounded into a five-act play about a Jewish family in Vienna across a fifty-year period. Despite this, Stoppard states he "never got near thinking about my Jewish heritage… [i]t was about ideology" (Dickson).

1.2 Stoppard & Beckett

The unification of self-identity, ideology and religious representation in these recent works forces one to take a look back at Stoppard's career, twenty-seven years prior to his revelation, to the presumably juvenile genesis of the play which ultimately propelled Stoppard into the limelight. Premiering on the same weekend as his debut novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* (1966), *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was a play Stoppard assumes would be "of little consequence" (Delany 15). Stoppard brings to life the side characters of the Elizabethan classic *Hamlet* through existential dread and numerous further literary influences which place the characters inside a sort of Sartrean purgatory, pulling together the hems of Beckettian postmodernism and Shakespearean wit to produce a play that transverses concepts of faith, resurrection and existentialism. The play is about the two side-characters from *Hamlet* making sense of their existence without any knowledge of their purpose or of higher order, who are then tasked with taking Hamlet to England (as in the original play), alongside recurring motifs of questioning, identity and "waiting". Chronologically, the play mirrors Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with some overlapping scenes and dialogue, however, it borrows characteristic absurdist and tragicomic, and arguably theological, elements from *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, in the plot progression, characterisation and the nature of the titular characters' relationship and overarching philosophical discourse.

Initially received as "academic twaddle" (Marowitz 127) and "university wit" (Brustein 26), *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (*Rosencrantz*) could have easily been pegged as "slipping from one sketchy context to another just for the sake of proving their mobility" (James 70), and yet it is this fluidity of form which ends up being Stoppard's comeuppance. The play was a global success, as it played with metatheatre and subversion of classical literature as an existential farce. While Stoppard regards himself as fluid in genre as in ideology, claiming "most of us… are composed of contrary psychologies injudiciously mixed" (Stoppard, 1999, 14), the theism of *Rosencrantz* remains dubious. This "ambiguity" created in where "contexts join" (James 69) bleeds into this play in particular, with the titular characters themselves experiencing literal liminality within the wings of a larger narrative, as well as metaphysical liminality between the wings of birth and death itself. This contextual liminality,

and the weight adhered to it following the Jewish tag, perpetuates the concept of theological "waiting" and a sense of stasiss, almost as if the discovery of his heritage was met with a previous anticipation. Arguably, the play is jaded in its attempt to find explanations, to answer the question of benevolence, or even of the existence of a higher order in the chaos of mortality. While maintaining these suppositions, Stoppard looks to Beckett for a silhouette on which to drape this line of thinking, and in doing so, borrows the anticipation of answers and renunciation of doubt much like Estragon and Vladimir do. The bridge between the philosophic and stylistic implications between the two plays has often been viewed by numerous Beckettian scholars, Cohn referring to the play as an exploration of the intersection of religion and secularism. The source play embodies the now-iconic religious motif of waiting for a higher power or divine intervention, potentially commenting on the postsecular challenges of living deprived guidance of a religious or traditionally theological society. Utilising this notion, the play contains theological concerns of free will & control, presence of divinity, and death and afterlife.

2. Free Will & Control

Fate, faith, belief and destiny are intertwined with the world in which Ros and Guil are placed, seemingly with the coherent knowledge of their place in it, "[o]ur movement is contained within a larger one" (Stoppard 114) toying with the notion of a conscious theology. The extent to which free will is practised by Rosencrantz (Ros) and Guildenstern (Guil) is in the rationalisation of the unexplainable territory which they inhabit. The characters often question whether their actions are predetermined or if they have free will. This theme is closely related to religious ideas about predestination and the role or existence of a God. Within this, we see an intertextual difference between Estragon (Gogo) and Vladmir (Didi) from *Godot* and their devotion to faith, and Ros and Guil's doubt and search for purpose. It is this doubt which is showcased in the play's opening scene, how perception of reality is shaped by beliefs and assumptions. The stage lights up to reveal Ros and Guil in Elizabethan attire, flipping coins to win heads or tails, yet eighty-five times in a row achieve heads. Rosencrantz is oblivious at first, yet it is Guildenstern's existential anxiety which is headed by the narrative of control. To explain the "oddity" of the situation,

> *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.* (Stoppard 1)

In this first scene Ros and Guil are pitted against one another as the "devout (docile) believer" and the "doubter", Stoppard very clearly plays with Guil as a vehicle to make Ros and the audience aware of the surreal connotations of their landscapes. Stoppard's stylistic attempts at a socratic dialogue hone themselves by 1972 in *Jumpers*, where theistic disagreements are resolved through "a thorough understanding of the opponent's point of view and one's own restatement of it at the beginning of any argument, before overturning the position by pointing to flaws in it and proposing another alternative" (Iswarya 53), yet one observes manifestations of this inclination in this early piece. As mirrors, both characters' preoccupations are inverted against the other's, "a confident statement followed by immediate refutation by the same voice" (Hayman 27). "His position of taking no position, of being able to hold contrary points of view without conflict, illustrates a welcoming posture of ambiguity" (Nadel 29) and it is within this ambiguity that Stoppard explores the fallacy of moral extremes, or extremes of any nature. In doing so, Stoppard presents theological considerations against atheistic ones and thereby playing both sets of ideologies, criticising the fickle nature of the devout audience and the ingenuity of the satirist voice. Stoppard uses theological metatheatre to question the efficacy of religious narratives, "participating in a self-consciously deconstructive or destabilising cultural project" (Zapkin 307). This face-paced tennis match creates dualities of personhood within the characterisation of Ros and Guil, as with the Beckettian Estragon and Vladimir of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Emulating the *Godot*-esque dialogue, Guildenstern repeatedly argues through logic and reason to rationalise this situation, pitting his own reason against Ros's "capacity for trust" (5), in this case which we interpret as "blind faith" against Guil's reluctant one. This submission to Fate is furthered by the lack of a "manifest sense of order, plan and predictability" (Egan 59) in the universe of the play, that discord and order present as two sides of the metaphorical coin. Maturing into an adolescent understanding of the universe and fundamentals of an existing ideology, Guil is the first of the characters to recognise his dissatisfaction with the explanation of chance or coincidence. He tries "luck alone" (Stoppard 2) yet is unsatisfied by the lack of control expressed through this explanation and through his lack of faith in it, and so leans to find a stronger and more reliable explanation through science and logic. Through mathematical reality or non-reality, Guildenstern approaches the concept of faith using recurring diction of "The law of probability...", "The law of averages...", "[T]he law of diminishing returns..." and

"calculation" (Stoppard 2-3). Faith here makes its initial debut as a "spell about to be broken" (Stoppard 2).

> GUIL A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability. (Stoppard 2)

The ritualistic coin flipping, over and over, despite the same conclusion like a prayer or worship, is a futile action which bleeds meaning from repetitive acts; the outcome is always heads (or, headlessness), despite "[knowing] better next time" (Stoppard 117), a purgatory-like reincarnation. Stoppard's theatrical narratives tend to subvert cerebral disparity into "dramatic irony" while lifting off circumstantial responsibility from the characters in the play themselves.

> GUIL Is that it, then? Is that all?... Is that as far as you are prepared to go? … No questions? Not even a pause?... Not a flicker of doubt?... Is that what you imagine? Is that it? No fear?
>
> ROS Fear?
>
> GUIL Fear! The crack that might flood your brain with light! (Stoppard 4-5)

Defensively, Guil repeatedly blanches at Ros's lack of doubt and fear, exposing his own fear of existing sans explanation in this world which does not follow mathematical reality and thus exists outside the realm of existential thought. Thus, Guil establishes himself as the "enlightened" character as a parallel to Ros and his darkened brain. It is through these enlightened eyes of doubt and speculation, this "light" which has "flood[ed his] brain", pulls at the loose threads of this embodied mythology, Stoppard allows these characters to question this hostile/illogical environment, through the alternate reality presented through this game. This doubt however is never answered, and the characters are seen to be searching for an explanation throughout the rest of the play. As such, one does not so much view Ros and Guil as antagonists who have condemned themselves to their wretched existence, but rather as - as Bernstein states - "victims-in-waiting"; Ros and Guil are aware of an overseer to their realities, and are both in fear and prostration towards this Fate.

> VLAD Suppose we repented.
> ESTRA Repented what? Our being born? (Beckett 7)

Unlike Gogo and Didi, Ros and Guil are at some level made aware of the abomination of their existences, subverted into this new theological realm where Stoppard resides over them as a fickle entity, both giving them voice yet making them say absolutely nothing at all. Buse observes a similar correlation between *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with *Hamlet*, he states, "there is a sense in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that the plot of Hamlet is almost

tyrannical in its demands. The metanarrative allows for no exceptions; all elements must eventually come under its sway" (58). For Stoppard, the drawing up of this plot by way of a larger theatrical universe requires "alternative descriptive strategies" (Zapkin 309), in a way scripturising the source by way of malicious compliance, "so it is written so it shall be done". Thus, the playwright subverts the expectations of the audience; while *R&GAD* reads as a comedy, the original Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Elsinore are nothing like the Bard's comic relief characters e.g. Bardolf and Gower, or Pistol and Nym. They are, in turn, suppressed and supplicated further, shoehorned into the same prophecy from the outset. Both Ros and Guil know to not "interfere with the design of fate (or even of kings)" (Stoppard 102), yet it is the audience which is plied with theatrics to hope blasphemously of their deliverance, "[b]ecause if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost" (Stoppard 51). Says Brassell;

> What tempers our recognition of the courtiers' amusingly ironic plight is a latent awareness that, like them, we cannot see the "design" behind our own lives…Our sympathies are thus directed towards these two men groping in an existential void which, to varying degrees, may mirror our own. (54)

Self-identification with these agnostic parallels tosses the viewer into a pseudo-spiral which makes one contemplate the question of a spirituality, faith and fate in the postmodern contemporary world. On a literary plane, Stoppard toys with the believer as well as the atheist in this instance, productively exploiting these connections to destabilise the narratives which are an undercurrent of modern western ideology, playing into the contradictory notions of free will and agnosticism.

3. Godot or *Deus Absconditus*

While contrary to the idea of moral absolutes, Stoppard expresses an artistic inclination towards the binary, perhaps extrapolating on the binary enacted by religious tradition. Ira Nadel's biography titled Double Act (2001) itself speaks of the writer's "doublings" (21); unsubtly presented in *R&GAD*, in the play-within-the-play as the Players representing the two, the later sets of twins in *Hapgood* (1988), the dead and alive Housmans in *The Invention of Love* (1997). The not-quite-Beckett-not-quite-Shakespeare-ness of Stoppard's early play asserts at a liminality of form just as much as the "[n]ot-being" (Stoppard 99) of the titular characters themselves, who "are dead" even as they "strut and fret their hour upon the stage" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.25). The "being" and "not-being", whether it is Jewish or Catholic, English or Czech, manifests most extensively through his obsession with this binary. The

marriage of the two in *R&GAD* is exacerbated through repetitive hints drawing from the source material itself frames the play; "There are more things in heaven and earth… | Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5.166-167). Heaven and Earth, life and afterlife, sin and sanctity, permanence of death and eternal reincarnation are all binaries that are thematically influenced by larger institutionalised religious discourse, as well as that of the presence or absence of divinity; whether there is a Godot here on Ros and Guil's earth, or whether like a Deus Absconditus, this world has been abandoned to the machinations of a gone deity.

> In liturgy we grapple in anticipation with, and of, the Deus Absconditus, the hidden and elusive god, posing our existential questions and waiting for the answers in silence. (Cilliers 3)

Ironically, later in the play, Ros and Guil play a game where each question needs to be responded to by another question, exposing how questioning of the fundamentals of faith, fate and existence elucidates more questions than answers. In a unique subversion, in this scene Ros is seen to play against the earlier battle of wits with Guil and come out on top as the expert or the authority.

ROS Is there a choice?
GUIL Is there a God?
ROS Foul! (Stoppard 35)

When Guil questions the existence/presence of "a God" it is Rosencrantz to call foul, as within the parameters of the game, it is a non-sequitur, but within the parameters of a larger theological conversation, it is illogical for Ros (the believer) for there to be a question of the existence of "a God" at all. Yet towards the end of the scene, it is Ros who questions the futility of their questions when all they get are more questions, anticipation without answer.

ROS Where's it going to end?
GUIL That's the question.
ROS It's all questions. (Stoppard 35)

Ros and Guil are unable to communicate with a higher power or deity, and thus we may assume their world to be godless, yet resting upon the machinations such in motion by a previous *Deus revelatus.*

ESTRA Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful! (Beckett 38)

Ros and Guil are starting to question and doubt their messiah where Gogo and Didi never do. "We" says Cohn, "never know more than Didi and Gogo, because Beckett knows no

more. We know much more than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because we have absorbed *Hamlet*" (217). Beckett's play places the characters within a Judeo-Christian landscape, with references to such religion peppered throughout the play, with reference to the Bible, Gospels and Holy Land (Beckett 8), furthered through the blasphemous Lucky's "personal God quaquaquaqua" (40). One may infer that Gogo and Didi defer to a Christian God where Ros and Guil defer to the theism of death, with no reference to a deity throughout the play, seemingly having disappeared. Additionally, Godot is a named entity. Beckett's Godot is this missing *something* which never makes an appearance unto the same plane of existence, allusions here to death are not missed. Gogo and Didi are waiting for the inevitability of Godot; be he a deity or death or self-actualisation. In contrast, Ros and Guil do not know what they are waiting for. They think they know what they are waiting for; Hamlet or entertainment or the nagging want to satisfy their existential curiosity, but nevertheless their anticipation resembles dread of damnation rather than the promise of deliverance, "the dread of something after death" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.86). As is insinuated by Duncan in his essay *Godot Comes,* Hamlet is not whom they are waiting for, but rather "[t]he undiscover'd country from whose bourn | [n]o traveller returns" (3.1.86-87) - except for Ros and Guil who return time and time again and have been for some three odd centuries.

The fiction of Hamlet is undone in a way that Godot's never is. While Godot is symbolic of a future, or The Future, or God or death or "the intervention of a supernatural agency", Hamlet has no revelation upon his entrance. Titular character in his own play, Stoppard's *Hamlet* falls by the wayside not as much of an entity and Godot is made out to be, and a disappointing Messiah compared to what one would assume him to be as a purveyor of the direction of Fate, this same Fate whom Ros and Guil are petrified yet inquisitive of. For the audience, the Socratic exchange throughout the play is rendered ineffectual with this realised-Godot. Judas-like, the Act Two Ros and Guil are quite firm in the carrying out of the letter having therein found their purpose despite the obvious harm to Hamlet, the one for whom they are waiting and the one whom they have found. Yet, they find through their uncritical compliance, that it is themselves they have damned in the betrayal of Hamlet, rationalised as "he is mortal, death comes to us all, etcetera, and consequently he would have died anyway, sooner or later" (Stoppard 101). "We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform" (Stoppard 100), and indeed it is the crux of this blind Faith which is the propellant for the characters' ultimate demise. It is through their defiance of the set moral platitudes for which they punish themselves in sacrifice, foreshadowed by Gogo and Didi;

VLAD …both of them abused him.
ESTR …Abused who?
VLAD The Savior.
ESTR Why?
VLAD Because he wouldn't save them.
ESTR From hell?
VLAD Imbecile! From death. (Beckett 9)

It is believed in the typical Abrahamic religious thought of the afterlife that when "the Messiah will die, as will all humanity" (*Ezek* 7:31 qtd. in Daschke 9), and indeed this is what comes to pass in the play for Ros and Guil. Gruber comments on Stoppard's choice of adding this missing Hamlet scene (the discovery of the letter), shedding away doubt upon the complicity of the Shakespearean Ros and Guil through their inaction (302), Brassell too concurs with regards to Stoppard's selective inclusion of the Shakespearan scenes (53). The murder of Hamlet, like in the garden of Eden, was temptation - in this case "a letter which explains everything" (Stoppard 97). In doing so, an immediate karmic punishment is enacted; like Hamlet in his own play, in his killing of Claudius is damned and thus decides to die, Ros and Guil, in their enterprise to betray their friend, decide to walk into death themselves.

Dwelling on this inaction, one sees not homicidal complicity, but rather a desperate reach for answers regarding the unexplained reality which they are stranded in, of which they "have no control. None at all… (Stoppard 63). William Babula, too, explores the "Play-Life Metaphor" of Shakespeare and Stoppard, asserting that at the theoretical centre of the play is the concern of "conscious theatricality" (279); that the acknowledged performativity of the play surrenders itself to destiny, much in how there is a recognition once again of the lack of control, which the play is self aware of. Susan Newman's argument regarding *Fate and Metatheatre* is headed by the narrative of control, or rather a deliberate forfeit of control, by the titular characters, that "[b]y rationalising to remain in the plot in which they are implicated… the characters are acknowledging their lack of autonomy in the script" (47). In doing so, Stoppard demonstrates this faith in a recoverable reality, seen again a decade later in *Arcadia* (1974), however for Ros and Guil, no amount of rationalising can get them out of their predicament.

GUIL (broken) We've travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation… (Stoppard 112)

"Who are we?" laments Guil, to which he is answered, "You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough". Laments he once more, "[n]o - it is not enough" (112), and indeed the answer which the characters seek to the edge of morality are not found in the Players' responses.

> GUIL To be told so little - to such an end - and still, finally, to be denied an explanation .... (Stoppard 114)

The repetitive notion of the existence of an explanation is something which Guil holds on fast to. He believes an explanation *exists* even though he does not know what the explanation *is*, thus personifying a faith in the unknown and doubly in the unexplained. Guildenstern then seeks self-realisation, or a prophecy, or some lick of divine or karmic or metaphysical revelation, a "telling", like the many agnostics before him. It is this answer that he views as the ultimate prize, and thus the ultimate punishment as he sees it is the deprivation of this explanation, says he, "[i]f we have a destiny, then so had he - and if this is ours, then that was his - and if there are no explanations for us, then let there be none for him-" (Stoppard 114). Undeniably, the randomness and chance for Ros and Guil is fitted into this pre-existing Elsinore of *Hamlet*, the projection of their lives is not governed by "random forces" (Brassell 53), and yet the reader and audience is aware that the method is incomprehensible by the characters, for whom this reality beyond the scope of explanation. Thus Stoppard creates a mythological reality whereby these entities exist in stasis and much like humankind, are unclear of how they came to be in such positions, yet seek out clarity and explanation, a desperation which they acknowledge may be unquenched.

4. Death & the Afterlife

Evidently, this is a play preoccupied with death. One of the primary interfaith discourses centres the afterlife and the "the dread of something after death" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 3.1.86). Death and duality are thematically intertwined in a majority of Stoppard's plays, as there "could hardly be one without the other (Stoppard 16). The death and existence of these characters is explored even prior to the viewing of the play; the title itself implies that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *"Are Dead"*, so the question which arises is whether they are ever alive.

Ros and Guil's primary motivation has been the discovery of purpose, "[t]hen what are we doing here" (10), the fear of "death followed by eternity" (64), and finally a deliberate self-sacrifice, through this exploration discover a purpose in death itself. At the end of the play, the two characters experience the same fate as in Hamlet: they are killed. However, they "are dead"

before the start of the play itself, all during it, implicating the play's pre-life, or post-death reality. Stoppard toys with the idea of a celestial plane whose populace enjoys those souls not yet born or those passed on; it is quite clear through the play itself that this motif of death and the concept of death itself quite tickles the playwright and is deliberately centred as the focus of the play, as is the representation of mortality and the mythology of the afterlife. Stoppard does well to establish a rule or a system as observable in most Abrahamic religions; in Judaism, death is as a way to share unto the divinity of God, "[t]he flock tended by the eternal shepherd could now hope to participate in his eternity" (Greenspoon 36). In participating in this divine eternity, Ros and Guil seem to follow Goethe's Christian principle of "to die and become" (Walling 109), lending a post crucifixion existential anguish to reincarnation after death and in this reincarnation being the full embodiment of the Holy intended self.

The players in Act II, foretell the end of the play, yet Ros and Guil reject this prophecy and so are damned, yet not to heaven or hell.

> *The two SPIES present their letter; the ENGLISH KING reads it and orders their deaths. They stand up as the PLAYER whips off their cloaks preparatory to execution.*
>
> PLAYER Traitors hoist by their own petard?-or victims of the gods?
> -we shall never know (Stoppard 74)

Hypocritically hypercritical of the Player's preoccupation with representation of death, Guildenstern (and presumably Rosencrantz), expresses the want (the need) to maintain Faith in death - or in existence beyond or prior to mortality. Belief in death, or rather, belief in the *performance* of death dictates the character's preconsciousness, "even refusing to die as they feel a theatrical death can never match the importance or poignancy of a real death" (Das 6). There is a lack of perception or even contemplation of life after death as it is seen as life in persistence of or despite death; Death is so depleted a concept for Ros, where he is unable to fathom a post-life existence, "one keeps forgetting to take into account that one is *dead*" (Stoppard 62) bringing to head the titular significance once more. Stoppards' own relationship with death and loss is yet to be compounded at this stage in life, yet there is a sincerity of wit which comes through an examination of the performance of death as opposed to the performance of religion as viewed earlier.

> The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't *death*! (*More quietly*) You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone - it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says - "One day you are

> going to die." (*He straightens up*) You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death? (Stoppard 76)

There is once again a callback to the earlier scenes of the play, where an explanation is resought, this time not of faith and purpose, but of the belief and authenticity of death. Guildenstern rejects an explanation which, like "a thin beam of light… can crack the shell of mortality" (Stoppard 75), as unlike the doubt and fear, "[t]he crack that might flood your brain with light!" (Stoppard 5). As the play progresses, the doubting Guildenstern regresses to a pious entity who cannot poke holes into his mythology of death the way he can into his mythology of faith.

Furthermore, the stage when transformed in Act Three to resemble a boat sparks further juxtaposition with the concept of a mythology, where Guildenstern contemplates:

> I'm very fond of boats myself. I like the way they're - contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all - the question doesn't arise, because you're on a boat, aren't you? Boats are safe… (91-92)

This line of thinking is compounded by Rosencrantz's own contemplation, "We might as well be dead. Do you think Death could be a boat?" (Stoppard 99), unifying the stage as an arena of security as a vessel of Death. The morbidity and sympathizable manifestation of death as a boat, while not nearly novel - existing in mythology as the Greek Charon, Egyptian Meseket - does take a dubious form when recalling Stoppard's own father's death through the bombing of his ship in 1942. In fact, news of his father's death-by-sea was only confirmed to him in 1999 by his father's associate (Lee 15), and so until then, Stoppard himself is relying on the *likelihood* of his death as opposed to any concrete confirmation of it - in other words - having a Faith or belief beyond knowledge, saying "[e]ven now I don't know precisely how he died" (Jaggi). One questions the comfort of the visualisation of his father's death when reconciled by Guildenstern's comfort. Death as a comfort is contrasted with the idea that religion holds death and punishment in the afterlife as leverage over the devout, "[t]hus conscience does make cowards of us all" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 3.1.91), allowing the audience to view the titular characters as those whose anxiety is alleviated through the possibility of death, or at the very least as characters that are conscious of this representation, "[t]hen again, what is so terrible about death?... we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it (Stoppard 102) followed by, "[n]o one gets up after death - there is no applause - there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and *that's* - death - (Stoppard 115)" neutralising death from somewhere between "a release from the burden" (Stoppard 102) and "the ultimate negative" (Stoppard 99). In doing so, Stoppard uses Guildenstern to rationalise death as a testament for the neutrality of "God",

the non-benevolence or non-malevolence of this absent divinity through the reincarnation of the characters and their shifting sentiments towards death and dying, personified from a coffin to a boat to a nothingness. If presence is positive and absence is negative, then repetitive birth-death cycle is presumably neither (or both).

In the Hebrew bible, Ezekiel, judgement is conceived of in a dual sense, taking place in the human realm and through the unfolding of history, not in an afterworld (Daschke 3), yet Stoppard's afterworld *is* the unfolding of history over and over again, repeatedly for eternity. Recursive futility follows the action of the play, with the famous last words, "Well, we'll know better next time" (Stoppard 117), and so death gives way to birth gives way to death with none of the characters being conceived or actually dying on stage. While death and afterlife and judgement are fairly universal concepts in theology, it is the idea of Jewish resurrection which stands to head further at this stage (Daschke 6). Jewish scholarly consensus holds that "[t]he earth will surely give back the dead…; it receives them now in order to keep them, not changing anything in their form" (2 *Baruch* 50:2). As such, Ros and Guil never change form and are resurrected repeatedly. Often, in Rabbinic scripture, this world and the world to come are such distinct and disjunctive realities, one might conclude that entry into the afterworld requires a complete escape from the present one—through temporary elevations out of this world or permanently, through death. (Hayes 70). Ros and Guild consistently experience these " temporary elevations" and yet are perhaps "permanently" within this afterword already. Says Daschke, " those who find favour with God will enjoy a new life without end. Those who do not apparently face eternal shame and contempt" (Daschke 6). In enjoining their eternity, one questions whether Stoppard subjects the, to "life without end" or to "eternal shame and contempt", confined to a "netherworld" (Greenspoon 38). In all their devotion and piety, Ros and Guil are arguably subjected to a time-loop of a purgatory of which it is recognised that all their sins are remembered, their devotion tested, and their Faith challenged in the absence of responsive divinity, thus borrowing major visual motifs from Judeo-Christian templates.

5. Conclusion

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may take numerous monikers into the ether, whether that is as victims (Brassell), culpable traitors (Gruber) or *naifs* (Delany), the judgement placed upon the characters is by no means to acquit or accuse them, but rather to play on the tragicomic drama by which to emphasis the forces which are beyond the realm of their comprehension.

ROS What was it all about? When did it begin? (*Pause, no answer*)

Parody makes sense, by close examination, of those theistic elements which provoke questions as to the dramatic constructs of the world beyond, which is to say, by dramatising belief as an organised forethought, Stoppard iconifies the existing fictions into workable (manipulatable) narratives, Brassell concurring that "the pattern of Rosencrantz is susceptible to allegorisation in quasi-religious terms - that God or Destiny's design does exist" as Stoppard is "bound up with the consequences of a given determinism" (266). In Rosencrantz we can already see the seed of Stoppard's future concerns;

> [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern]make continuous attempts to master the situation and comprehend it with the assumption there is something to comprehend… it is true that I am more interested in the metaphysical condition of man than the social position. (Funke 228)

While admitting the difficulty of rationalising one's existence, Stoppard agrees he is asserting that it is possible "to comprehend ... purpose in life" (Funke 221). Stoppard-playing God-blasphemes against this supposed world order by subverting a recognisable piece of literature into a tragedy traipsing as a comedy, marrying together the sacred and the profane by allowing Ros and Guil to infringe on the theology of fate of *Hamlet*, and the deprivation from actualisation of *Godot*. Stoppard assigns Ros and Guil's world, this wingfeather of Hamlet's, a certain mythic status, undermining the mythology of *Hamlet* through his distrust of history, in doing so flipping the notion of theatricality on its head: is *Hamlet* the reenactment of divine sacrifice, or is it a theatricalised version of the events unfolding in *R&GAD*? "The bad end unhappily and the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means" (Stoppard 72). Certainly, "we'll know better next time" (Stoppard 117).

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