

**Acting Out Meaning: Role-Playing, Agency, and Meaning Production  
in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead***

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Although it focuses on some of *Hamlet*'s most minor characters, Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* nevertheless echoes both the themes and the journey of William Shakespeare's original work. In Shakespeare's play, the tragic hero seeks to avenge the death of his murdered father, and Stoppard establishes this plot as the fabric of the world into which he throws his own title characters, who suffer confusion about their position and fate throughout the course of the work. Both plays take up questions about the differing roles of agency and fate, the nature of role-playing and acting, and the extent to which death may destroy or allow for meaning. In addition to continuing the thematic questions of Shakespeare's work, Stoppard also parallels the protagonist's journey in his own play, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,<sup>1</sup> like Hamlet, find themselves – somewhat reluctantly – taking on a role that carries them to their deaths. Ultimately, then, although *Hamlet* appears as a force of limitation in his work, Stoppard echoes its framework of characters who move from positions devoid of meaning to positions where meaning restoration appears possible through the opportunity to fulfill a role, one that upsets the characters, limits them, and ends in their meaning-ambiguous deaths. Stoppard's work diverges, however, in the consequences it portrays for this meaning-seeking journey; although Shakespeare shows the possibility for Hamlet to retain some agency and direct his own meaning within his fulfillment of his role, Stoppard appropriates the theme of the theater to construct for his own characters an almost-complete lack of control in the roles they are thrown into, and a limited degree of meaning that ultimately stems from this journey.

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<sup>1</sup> These characters will hereafter be referred to as Ros and Guil, respectively.

Shakespeare establishes in the opening act of *Hamlet* a setting where, in the wake of his father's death, Hamlet finds himself thrown into a world that is meaningless. This death, for which he lacks an explanation, led to the marriage of Claudius, his father's brother, to Gertrude, his mother, something Hamlet describes as "incestuous," not only unnatural but immoral (1.2.157). The hyperbolic descriptions that juxtapose Hamlet's father and his uncle, as he portrays Claudius as "no more like my father/Than I to Hercules," and claims that in marrying Claudius, his mother has done what even "a beast that wants discourse of reason" would not have done, paint a landscape in which concepts such as love and marriage no longer carry any meaning (1.2.152-153, 150). Hamlet is unable to return to the frameworks that had made up his life before his father's death even in a return to school, as he agrees to comply with his mother's wishes that he "stay with us, go not to Wittenberg" (1.2.119). In light of these circumstances, Hamlet consequently suffers despair and wishes for suicide; Shakespeare directly connects this desire with Hamlet's new sense of meaninglessness when Hamlet cries out to heaven, "O God, God,/How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (1.2.132-134).

The transition away from this state of meaninglessness comes in the form of Hamlet's interaction with his father's ghost, in which he receives meaning-restoring explanation and a meaning-giving role. First, Hamlet's conversation with his father's ghost gives him some degree of explanation for his father's death – murder by Claudius – that allows for a recontextualization of his mother's act of incest with his uncle. This knowledge allows Gertrude's marriage to gain some meaning as it appears as a reflection of Claudius' criminal nature. Shakespeare makes this link apparent in the ghost's association of Claudius' wooing of Gertrude with dark magic, a description that aligns with his immediately preceding description of Claudius as a murderer.

After calling him a “serpent,” the ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius “won to his shameful lust/The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen” using “witchcraft of his wits” and “traitorous gifts” (1.5.36 and 39, 45-46, 43). The second vital thing that Hamlet receives from his father’s ghost is the role of avenger through a personal mission to achieve revenge for his murder, something that gives Hamlet a purpose resulting from his father’s death and brings meaning to his own existence through something he must do before he dies. Shakespeare invokes the concept of fate to suggest that, in addition to providing meaning within the context of Hamlet’s specific situation, this role may be the one for which Hamlet was created as Hamlet tells his father’s ghost, “O cursed sprite,/That ever I was born to set it right!” in reference to his new mission (1.5.188-189). This role becomes the foundation for the rest of the action of Shakespeare’s work, as Hamlet strives until moments before his death to fulfill the role his father’s ghost has placed him in.

Although Ros and Guil begin their work facing a different conflict than does Hamlet, Stoppard echoes the framing structures of *Hamlet* in the opening act of his own play. In doing so, he constructs its central focus within the same framework of meaninglessness to meaning-making, even as his protagonists’ roles and actions are very different. Like *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* begins with the protagonists in a place that seems to lack meaning, having ended up there because of something that had occurred before the play started. Ros and Guil begin the play in a place they have stopped while “[t]ravelling,” having been called by a foreign man to “a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons” before the play began (19). Like Hamlet with his father’s death, Ros and Guil do not know the meaning of this event that has brought them to their current situation – there were to be “no questions asked” of the messenger who summoned them – and their position at the play’s opening is within a bleak framework that

usurps normal definitions of meaning (19). The pair are in a sort of nowhere land, “*a place without any visible character*” where there is “*nowhere to go*” but there is an “*environment or lack of it*” (11, 12). This setting lacks the ability to possess its own meaning through distinguishing features, but Stoppard also portrays a lack of meaning, as Shakespeare does, via loss, through the fact that in this space, Guil has tossed almost a hundred coins in a row and every one of them has come up heads, something that is technically possible but that would not occur in a normal situation and defies the constructions of any system of meaning Guil can think of. Stoppard frames Guil as Hamlet’s double in being in deep dismay at the strange situation he has ended up in, although, while Hamlet contemplates suicide, Guil tries to make meaning out of this unexplainable coin-tossing situation, as he considers “the law of probability,” a “[l]ist of possible explanations,” and a “[s]yllogism” and progresses from “*aware but not going to panic*” to “*angry*” to a state of “*fury*” to “*tight hysteria*” (12, 16, 17, 11, 14, 15, 17). Guil’s reaction of seeking explanation and meaning opposes Hamlet’s reaction of wanting death because there is no meaning, which allows Stoppard to focus more heavily on the significance of meaning production than Shakespeare, even as he uses the framework Shakespeare’s work provides to do so.

In his reflective portrayal of the potential for meaning in role adoption that follows, Stoppard appropriates the theme of acting from Shakespeare’s play to frame this role theatrically. The moment in which meaning is presented to Ros and Guil occurs after they are suddenly transported to the court of Claudius, the King, but immediately before this entrance, the emptiness of Ros and Guil’s void begins to dissolve with the entrance of a band of tragedians. Zoran Milutinović incorrectly describes the moment Ros and Guil are transported to Claudius’ court as occurring immediately after the tragedian’s Player tells the pair that he does not need to

come onstage because he already is on, but he does aptly argue that the Player and tragedians “are the sign that shows the way and leads into the world of drama” for Ros and Guil (355). This moment Milutinović describes occurs as the tragedians are about to put on a performance for Ros and Guil, and this performance, he claims, is actually the rest of the play, with Ros and Guil as characters in the tragedians’ performance (355-356). This claim is supported by the Player’s warning to Ros and Guil only a few pages before that “[i]t costs little to watch” the tragedians’ performances, “and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action” (23). Although this claim on face value appears to refer to the sexual entertainment the Player is offering Ros and Guil, when seen within the context of Milutinović’s claim, it also reveals that Ros and Guil have, in fact, gotten caught up in the action of the tragedians’ act.

What Milutinović does not discuss in relation to this construct, though, is the suggestion of meaning inherent in it. Stoppard’s construct of a play within a play here appropriates Shakespeare’s own, and it therefore draws us back to *Hamlet*’s play within a play, which Hamlet took to carry deep meaning, as he saw it as able to confirm whether Claudius was in fact a murderer. Hamlet’s imagination of his own triumphant action within his claim that “The play’s the thing/Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” indicates that, in theory, at least, a play within a play offers the opportunity for something of deep significance to occur or be revealed (2.2.616-617). Stoppard also portrays more directly the potential meaningfulness of his play within a play through what occurs between the Player’s announcement that he already is on and Ros and Guil’s transportation to Claudius’ court. In this time, Ros approaches the Player, gets him to “*lift his downstage foot,*” which “*was covering GUIL’s coin,*” and takes the coin (34). The coin, we learn, “was tails,” something that Ros identifies as “lucky” but that actually represents a shift, an exit from the world of meaninglessness, in which all coins come out heads for no

explainable reason, to one where they may be tails again, a world where it appears that meaning may be regained (34). This discovery of the coin occurs immediately after the Player's announcement that he already is on – an indication that the tragedians' play is about to begin – and immediately before Ros tosses the coin to Guil and the two “[s]imultaneously” are transported to Claudius' court (34). It thus suggests that the world of the tragedians' play is one where some semblance of meaning may be returned immediately before Ros and Guil enter into the role and setting that present that possibility for meaning.

For Ros and Guil, as for Hamlet, this possibility comes in the form of their adoption of an assigned role. The pair's transportation to the court of Claudius immediately throws them into their new roles, and their mission. Stoppard keys us in to the parallels here between Hamlet's adoption of a role and Ros and Guil's impending role adoption immediately after they arrive in the castle, when we witness Hamlet acting strangely to Ophelia and sending her into fright (34-35). In Shakespeare's play, this action is the first we learn of Hamlet's changed behavior aimed toward fulfilling his role and the first time we see Hamlet after he receives his role, and its presence as the immediate prologue to Ros and Guil's receipt of their own mission creates a parallel between Hamlet's role-receiving and the role-receiving Ros and Guil are about to take part in (Shakespeare 2.1.74-100). After the two suddenly arrive in his court, Claudius greets them, then tells them that “Moreover that we did much long to see you,/The need we have to use you did provoke/Our hasty sending” before giving the two a briefing of their mission, which seems to make meaning from the unclear “royal summons” that had thrust them into that temporary space of meaninglessness on their journey (35, 19). Ros and Guil, like Hamlet when he receives his own briefing from the ghost of his father, immediately accept the orders and assigned role given to them. The frame of these roles' theatricality, though, allows Stoppard to

play with the notion of these roles further than Shakespeare does; although Hamlet does indeed fulfill a role as an avenger, Ros and Guil take on roles in a much more theatrical sense, as the meaning-giving positions they adopt represent not only their surface-level acceptance of a mission to figure out what is wrong with Hamlet but also their entrance into the roles of the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the play *Hamlet*. This second goal, more so than their surface-level mission, is what their true task is, as emphasized here by Stoppard's decision to keep dialogue from scenes in *Hamlet* even for the characters of Ros and Guil, who, as Dorit Szykierski, citing other scholars, points out, speak the lines prescribed to them within *Hamlet* at points throughout the play – including in this opening scene with Claudius (Stoppard 36-37, Szykierski 257). They thus fulfill the roles assigned to them immediately, even as they afterward express confusion to each other about their position (37-38).

Even though the adoption of a role presents the characters of both Shakespeare and Stoppard an apparent opportunity to achieve meaning, the authors both show their characters as in some ways reluctant to adopt their roles. Hamlet appears eager enough to take on the role of avenger at the beginning of his encounter with the ghost, as he commands his father to “[h]aste me to know’t, that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love,/May sweep to my revenge,” in a metaphor that suggests an immediate and passionate movement to fulfill the wishes of his father (1.5.29-31). He later pledges to remove everything else from his mind so that “thy commandment all alone shall live/Within the book and volume of my brain” (1.5.102-103). Yet by the play's next act, when Hamlet next appears, some time has passed and Hamlet, rather than acting – taking the action required – to fulfill his role has instead retreated from action through acting the part of a morose youth gone mad. Hamlet's playing of this part presumably is being done in service of his aim of killing Claudius, but, as Robert Weimann points out, this

behavior seems counterintuitive; Weimann accurately claims that “Hamlet's madness constantly serves to subvert the representational logic of his own role in the play: in a strictly representational context, Hamlet's antic pose arouses rather than allays suspicion” (283-284). This behavior thus not only does not help Hamlet achieve his goals but seems to actually divert him from what the intended aim of his acting should be. Acting provides a similar diversion from Hamlet’s assigned role of acting out revenge when he decides to delay the necessity of killing Claudius through deciding to test the veracity of the ghost’s claims by putting on a play representing his father’s murder and watching Claudius throughout. As established above, Hamlet suggests action in his claim that the play will let him “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.616-617). Yet the action Hamlet promises in this plan, which follows his lament over his inability to take decisive action, is a pledge not to kill Claudius but simply to “observe his looks” and “tent him to the quick,” phrases of watching but not doing that underscore in their extreme inaction the extent of Hamlet’s efforts to delay taking true action to avenge his father’s death (2.2.608, 609). Indeed, given that Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech, in which he ponders the promise of death in the face of all the pains and suffering of life, occurs after he has assumed the role of avenger, the potential for regained meaning within the adoption of this role and the knowledge associated with it does not appear to be sufficient to prevent Hamlet from questioning, as he had before he spoke with his father’s ghost, whether continuing with life is worth it (3.1.56).

Stoppard similarly portrays the promise of meaning production as not entirely sufficient for his characters through the behavior of Ros in reaction to the orders he and Guil have been given. Insofar as Ros and Guil may embody a single person, given their own confusion about their identities and inseparability – until Ros disappears before Guil at the end of the play, they

never appear apart – they combined may portray the complicated, multilayered thoughts and emotions of the single character of Hamlet (125). Thus, even as Guil reflected Hamlet’s despair in the face of a meaningless world with his own desperation with the coins that unexplainably would not flip to tails, Ros reflects the side of Hamlet that bucks the duty he has been assigned and that rejects the limitations imposed by the role that may provide meaning. Even as Guil is at times hysterical in the void of the play’s opening scene, Ros remains entirely calm, as, despite the “*impossible*” nature of the coin toss, he “*betrays no surprise at all—he feels none*” (11). Once the two have received their role and assignment, though, Ros reacts similarly to Hamlet when he had received his own role, feeling anguish at the role he and Guil have been placed in. Stoppard portrays Ros’ despair at the determinacy and entrapment of his role as paralleling the despair Guil had felt at the meaninglessness of their former position. Ros runs through a progression of emotions similar to those Guil had undergone in the play’s opening scene, as Stoppard’s directions for his speech after the two receive their instructions include “*cracking, high,*” “*flaring,*” “*an anguished cry,*” and “*a dying fall*” (38, 39). Additionally, just as Guil wants to move away from where they are in the beginning of the play, as he tells Ros “We better get on” but is unable to move when neither he nor Ros knows the way to where they are supposed to be going, so, too, does Ros “want to go home” but cannot because he cannot discern “Which way did we come in? I’ve lost my sense of direction” (20, 39).

Far from only portraying the complexities of Hamlet’s emotions and suggesting a despair that parallels Hamlet’s both within and outside of meaning, though, Stoppard’s use of Ros as Hamlet’s role-avoiding parallel also allows him to emphasize the inability of his characters to act on their own. Even as Hamlet quietly protested the role he had been assigned through inaction (including inaction through theatrical acting), Ros’ protest of his role almost always takes the

form of attempted action on his part that aims to defy the expectations for his behavior in his role. For instance, in Act Two, he at one point yells “I’m not going to stand for it” before putting his hands over the eyes of “[a] FEMALE FIGURE, *ostensibly the QUEEN*” and saying “Guess who?!” (75). But his effort to disrupt the characters and plot of the story he is stuck within is ineffective, as the person who he thought was the queen turns out to just be Alfred, the child member of the band of tragedians (75). Soon after, Ros tries to take action again as he “*makes a break for an exit,*” attempting to run away, but the tragedians block this effort at escape (76). Thus, despite Ros’ attempts to push against his circumstances through action, he ultimately is forced into a state of inaction, the same state Hamlet intentionally places himself in as he, like Ros, attempts to avoid fulfilling his role. This paradoxical relationship between what Ros is attempting to do and the result of his attempts allows Stoppard to portray Ros as ultimately lacking the capacity to escape the role he holds in a way Shakespeare does not, even as Stoppard’s method of doing so is by showing his character ultimately having the same inaction that Hamlet enacts in avoidance of his own role. The role of the tragedians in thwarting both these efforts on Ros’ part to rebel remind us that Ros’ inability to resist his role stem from his limitations as a character in a play within a play, a character within one of the melodramas the tragedians act out. This status, too, stems directly from Shakespeare’s own portrayal of inaction, as Stoppard connects it to Hamlet’s lack of action as carried out via his own acting and his use of others’ acting; here, Ros is trapped by actors within the context of a world in which the thing he is trying to escape through acting – his role as a character in the acted-out play of the tragedians – is in fact a status of theatrical acting. Again here, Ros’ situation appears as connected to Hamlet’s in its very juxtaposition to it. Hamlet tries to escape action through theatrical acting, and Ros tries, and fails, to escape theatrical acting through action.

As is visible in the scenes discussed above, the roles the characters have been assigned, although providing apparent meaning to their lives, also carry with them restrictions on these characters' agency that upsets them in much the same ways their former states of meaninglessness had. In echoing the dual despair Shakespeare portrays as caused by both meaninglessness and limitation on agency, though, Stoppard continues to use his frame of theater to dramatically expand the notion of limited agency Shakespeare initially introduces. In *Hamlet*, it is apparent that if Hamlet is to fulfill the role his father gives him, he necessarily will need to take the action directed by his father, even if he himself does not desire that action. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which Hamlet is bound to a fate of fulfilling the role of the avenger, one that will lead him to death. The answer on a metatheatrical level, of course, is that his fulfillment of this role is already decided, given that the play's title, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, establishes for the audience a world in which Hamlet's fate is preordained. Within the context of the play itself, though, multiple factors appear as potential drivers of Hamlet's role fulfillment and death. Given that his final fulfillment of his father's wishes comes within the heat of battle, immediately after the death of his mother and soon after he learns of his own impending death, Hamlet's eventual fulfillment of his role may be an outpouring of passionate action, an outcome that would bind him to his role not through fate but through his own spur-of-the-moment decisions (5.2.322-323). Hamlet's role fulfillment also appears as a conscious moral decision on his part. The weighing of Hamlet's inaction on his conscience appears during his conversation with his mother in her private chamber, when the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to him. Because this ghost is invisible to Hamlet's mother, we do not know whether it is real or only a hallucination on Hamlet's part that we are privy to, an embodiment of Hamlet's own moral chiding for his failures to fulfill his father's will.

Regardless, we see in Hamlet's conversation with the ghost his guilt over having not yet fulfilled loyally the task assigned to him. In his question to the ghost, before the ghost has spoken, "Do you not come your tardy son to chide,/That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by/Th' important acting of your dread command?" we see Hamlet's own feelings that he has delayed action on a necessary deed longer than he should have (3.4.107-109). These sentiments suggest that Hamlet's eventual fulfillment of his role could be because he is bound to it by his own sense of moral duty. The third option Shakespeare presents, and the one Stoppard dramatically expands within his own play, is that the outcome of Hamlet's life, which includes his fulfillment as he dies of his assigned role, is a result of his preordained fate. Hamlet tells Horatio when he agrees to enter the duel in which he both will finally kill Claudius and himself die that "Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special/providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.220-221). In this statement, which quotes a verse from the Bible's book of Matthew, Hamlet suggests a belief as he goes into the duel that the outcome has been predetermined by God and that it is not his role to defy it. Hamlet's words also implicitly frame himself as the falling sparrow, suggesting not only that he sees his personal fate as already determined but that, like the fallen sparrow, he knows already that the fated outcome of this battle will be his death.

Through his frame of the theater, Stoppard capitalizes upon this notion of fate to reveal an absolute for Ros and Guil of being bound upon entering their roles to fulfill them, to the roles' very end, which we know will be their deaths. The inability of the pair to escape their roles is apparent through Milutinović's notion of most of Stoppard's work as a play the tragedians put on, which Ros and Guil have been summoned into. The pair's confinement within this role is apparent through the fact that Ros' attempts to assert agency are able to succeed only insofar as they cause no disruption to the play in which the two are caught. Although Ros cannot confuse

the real Queen or run away from his position, for instance, he is able, at a point where only he and Guil are in the room, to yell “Fire!” in a demonstration of “the misuse of free speech. To prove that it exists,” as this yelling affects neither the progression of the play of Hamlet nor, apparently, the actions of the audience for the play within a play, as Ros notes, “*with contempt*,” “Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes” (60). Stoppard also references the role of fate explicitly throughout his work. Liliame Campos examines specifically his use of the notion of wheels, which she sees as stemming from the metaphor of a turning wheel describing “the smooth working of royal power” in *Hamlet* (224). Stoppard, however, changes this metaphor to “the fixed wheel of determinism,” a framework that makes Ros and Guil’s deaths, which represent the culmination and ultimate fulfillment of their roles, “a pre-determined outcome which they can only actualise,” and Campos points out various iterations of the image of the wheel throughout Stoppard’s work (225, 225-226). Finally, Ros and Guil’s lack of free will also is visible in the nature of their movement from scene to scene. Rather than them changing their own circumstances, the settings change around them, ushering them into new locations and scenes, with Stoppard even altering scenes in *Hamlet* in which Ros and Guil walk in and out of rooms so that other characters walk in and out of rooms and Ros and Guil remain in place (37, 52, 73, 90). In addition to allowing him to deny the pair any control over their circumstances, this strategy also lets Stoppard construct the play with Ros and Guil never offstage, until their deaths, their inability to exit even as they change position, time, and circumstances reflecting the similar inescapability of their roles. Dorit Szykierski argues that the pair do in fact have the opportunity to avoid their fates. She claims that when they must determine whether to keep the letter that condemns Hamlet to death, they are given “a moral choice” in which “[d]oing the right thing— saying no so as to save another’s life, not their own—would allow them to escape their

deaths” (265). Yet this reading, although optimistic, is entirely incongruous with the rest of Stoppard’s play, in which Ros’ inability to escape his role despite repeated efforts is visible again and again. Why a choice of morality should prevent deaths in a world where “[t]he bad end unhappily, the good unluckily” is unclear (80). The second point Szykierski identifies as potentially allowing Ros and Guil to escape their fates is a time before the play has begun, when, she writes, they could have said no to the summons that called them to the castle and to their role there (263). But the evidence she uses to support this claim, the concept that the coins coming out heads every time provides a context in which “it seems anything is possible, including saying no,” reads possibility onto a setting that in fact shows impossibility – in the inability of the coins to land on tails, the scene provides a limiting context, in which things that normally should be possible are not, as it preemptively ushers the characters into the truly unfree world of their roles in *Hamlet* (263).

The roles that bring the characters of both works into the appearance of a possibility for meaning are also the roles that take them to their deaths, although this death is more central in Stoppard’s play, where it is required for Ros and Guil to fulfill their roles, than it is in Shakespeare’s play, where it is a consequence of Hamlet’s fulfillment of his role but perhaps not necessary for it. Given this outcome, the question then becomes, in this finale of the characters’ roles, is there any possibility for meaning, or does it disappear in death? In answer to this question, *Hamlet* offers us conflicting possibilities. On the one hand, although the possibility of meaning appears to be offered to Hamlet’s character as he dies, he repeatedly seems to reject it. As he lies dying, he reveals this possibility for meaning creation through storytelling as he tells Horatio, “[h]ad I but time ... O, I could tell you,” but he stops midsentence, changing course and telling his friend, “But let it be” (5.2.337-338, 339). That Hamlet tempts both us and Horatio

with the possibility of a meaningful statement in his death but then changes course reveals to us that there is a potential there for meaning creation, but Hamlet chooses to turn away from it. Hamlet's final words, "the rest is silence," similarly construct a void in which the potential for meaning remains untold (5.2.359).

Yet alongside this apparent rejection of meaning is the meaning Shakespeare establishes Horatio as constructing for Hamlet through storytelling, on Hamlet's own command. Immediately after Hamlet's first rejection of his own meaning creation and immediately before his second, Shakespeare includes instructions from Hamlet to Horatio to carry on his story. Hamlet first tells Horatio to "report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied," instructing him even to delay the bliss of suicide so that he can "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/To tell my story" (5.2.340-341, 349-350). The second time, he names Fortinbras as the person he desires to take Denmark's throne and instructs Horatio to "tell him, with th' occurrents, more and less,/Which have solicited" (5.2.356-357, 358-359). These commands indicate that Hamlet's rejection of his own meaning creation in his death perhaps does not equate to him rejecting the notion of meaning in his death entirely. In Horatio's carrying out of Hamlet's instruction to tell his story, Shakespeare inserts notions of performance and theatricality. When Fortinbras arrives, Horatio asks him to move the bodies of all those who have died in the final scene, including Hamlet, so that "[h]igh on a stage" they "be placèd to the view" and Horatio can "speak to th' yet unknowing world/How these things came about" (5.2.379, 380-381). Horatio presents the story of Hamlet's role and his fulfillment of it in terms of a performance that he can "[t]ruly deliver," as Shakespeare uses dramatic tropes to describe the events that have occurred as Horatio tells Fortinbras that his story will be "[o]f carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,/Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,/Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause," and "purposes

mistook/Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (5.2.382-384, 385-386). This framing clearly establishes the story of Hamlet and his deeds within the context of a show that Horatio will orchestrate. This presentation of Hamlet's living out of his role, which culminates in his death, in terms of the form of theater calls us back to the potential for deep meaning in the performance of acting that Hamlet sees in his play within a play. It also establishes Shakespeare's entire tragedy as perhaps the enacting of the commands Hamlet gave to Horatio upon his death – it does, after all, both begin and end with scenes in which Horatio is present. In this context, the question of meaning for Hamlet's mission within his death becomes self-referential; if the tragedy itself has any meaning, then we also must say that Hamlet's deeds and their conclusion in death, as the central themes of this tragedy, come with meaning. Thus, Hamlet's death and the conclusion of his assigned role on some level represent the means by which Hamlet's opportunity for meaning creation in the role of an avenger culminates in definitive meaningfulness through its construction into a performed dramatic story.

In Stoppard's work, however, the dramatic frame of the play *Hamlet* renders Ros and Guil's deaths as their only purpose, not just something that occurs as a byproduct of their completion of their aims. Throughout the span of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, we see a gradual disintegration of the apparent opportunity for meaning provided by Ros and Guil's adoption of their roles. Ros has throughout the play taken on the more nihilistic view of the pair, one that deems the meaning-making unimportant given the limitations it poses on his freedom. Guil, however, has retained hope over the course of the play that fulfilling his and Ros' mission will give him something to "count on" (105). As the play progresses and the nature of their mission seems to change, Guil places his hope in the meaningfulness of what appears to be each task: first to discern what ails Hamlet, then to escort him to England. Yet when Hamlet

disappears during a pirate attack, Guil falls into despair, saying that “the whole thing’s pointless without him” and adopting the same meaning-related doubt Ros earlier expressed when he exclaims that England’s “a dead end. I never believed in it anyway,” although before his sense of purpose was destroyed, he was the one convincing Ros that England was plausible (120, 121, 107-108). Dorit Szykierski claims that Ros and Guil “are unable to transform” the signs the tragedians give them throughout the play that their story ends in death “into knowledge of their fate” (264). This claim is not entirely true, as Guil early on points out that “[t]he only beginning is birth and the only end is death” (39). What the two actually are unable to transform from the tragedians’ acting is that the only meaning of their mission is their death. It is dying, rather than understanding what is wrong with Hamlet or delivering him to England, that is, ultimately, their role, and all the other tasks the two have taken on, beginning with their acceptance of their mission from Claudius, gain their significance from their role as progressing them in the story toward their deaths. Stoppard emphasizes this nature of death as the only purpose of their mission in the very title of his work, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which emphasizes their death as inherent to any significance the work might have. Unlike for Hamlet, then, whose meaning is enhanced in his death but whose question of meaning is not one and the same with his death, the outcome of Ros and Guil’s journey toward apparent meaning will depend upon whether there is meaning in their deaths.

The tragedians provide Ros and Guil what seems to be an opportunity to achieve this sort of meaning, but Stoppard ultimately denies it to them, and they leave the world in which they have been placed in silence and not-being. Stoppard suggests that death in and of itself represents a loss of meaning and leaves meaninglessness in its aftermath but that the performance of death can construct a precept of meaning through the role of the Player, who “extract[s] significance

from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality” (83). In this statement, the Player suggests the rare possibility for melodrama – necessarily a portrayal of death for him and his troupe – to legitimately break death’s limitations when seen from a certain perspective, but also that it is generally possible for him to glean significance from the apparently meaningless fact of death through dramatizing it. The recurring presence of the Player and the band of tragedians throughout the play, then, in addition to demonstrating that the ultimate point of Ros and Guil’s mission is their death, also is a recurring demonstration to Ros and Guil of the opportunity for death to gain a semblance of meaning through its dramatized performance. Yet Guil protests this notion throughout the play, telling the Player that death is “just a man failing to reappear, that’s all—now you see him, now you don’t,” “an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced,” and later telling Ros that “Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being” (84, 108). Both Ros and Guil in their own deaths will reflect this notion rather than the performed death the tragedians offer. Ros, true to his nihilistic nature, does not seek meaning as he decides “I don’t care. I’ve had enough. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved,” and “*disappears from view*” into his death (125). Even after he learns that death was his mission all along, Guil again rejects the notion of meaning in its dramatized form when he says that the death the tragedians show is “not for *us*, no[t] like that” shortly before he himself “*disappears*” (124, 126). In the play’s final scene, Stoppard evokes the storytelling Shakespeare establishes in his own work to suggest, as Shakespeare does, the possibility for meaning through dramatic reenactment; although Ros and Guil are nowhere to be seen, the tragedians are putting on a show, displaying “*the tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of Hamlet*” while Horatio, Fortinbras, and the two English ambassadors look on (126). In concluding his play with

this scene, making the last lines Horatio's claim that "all this can I truly deliver" in relation to the tale he says he can tell, Stoppard emphasizes the role of Horatio's theatrical storytelling here in fulfilling the Player's own mission, that of deriving meaning from melodrama, relating this meaning to that which Shakespeare himself constructs at the end of *Hamlet* (126). In refusing to accept the tragedians' understanding of death, Ros and Guil appear to have missed out on this potential opportunity for there to be any meaning to their existences. Yet, simultaneously, the circumstances in which Stoppard places Ros and Guil may preclude their ability to achieve this meaning through display regardless of their acceptance of the Player's offer of meaning. Insofar as Ros and Guil's mission is to die, it is also to disappear, to die so arbitrarily that the announcement of their deaths by the English ambassadors is pointless by the time of the ambassadors' arrival to Elsinore. Unlike the members of the court, who die with the blood and drama the Player desires because their roles prescribe these deaths, Ros and Guil will not have their bodies displayed in a dramatic retelling of events; they have disappeared. But if dying arbitrarily is Ros and Guil's mission, paradoxically, their arbitrary deaths are in fact not pointless because they fulfill a necessary position in the play. Thus, ironically, in a move that reflects Milutinović's claim that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* fulfills the late-modernist "demand to represent the unrepresentable," meaning for Stoppard in the conclusion of his work comes, in fact, only through a lack of it (357).

In appropriating Shakespeare's play, Stoppard expands on Shakespeare's own considerations of meaning, agency, and mortality, using the same constructs as Shakespeare but shaping them to different ends. Although Shakespeare's play is often ambiguous and ultimately suggests an opportunity for Hamlet to achieve meaning through the dramatic retelling of his story in his death, Stoppard paints a more disturbing picture, one in which meaning-making

involves an almost-complete loss of agency, the value of meaning itself is questionable, and the achievement of meaning through dramatic storytelling is accessible only to those whose stories, and ends, are important enough to be remembered, only to those whose roles are large enough. In this regard, as well as in his focus on the status of Ros and Guil's mission as fulfilled only in their deaths, Stoppard's play directly confronts the viewer in ways that *Hamlet*, safely confined within the bounds of melodrama, does not. Although the Player tells Ros and Guil that deep drama is all that audiences "are prepared to believe in," this very drama in *Hamlet* allows it to be just a play, with plots and long soliloquys that are very unfamiliar to the routines and cycles of our own lives (84). But the confusion and un-extraordinariness of Ros and Guil, their casual speech, their absence of extended monologues, confront us with the questions Shakespeare originally poses more directly, as Stoppard asks whether meaning is possible. Is there hope, then, in this play? One might see the nihilism of Ros as the solution, the decision that nothing matters – but this state leads him to fear and hysterics as he loses autonomy. Perhaps the position of Gil is the solution, that of seeking clear and understandable explanations for everything – but this state leads him also to fear and hysterics as he is confronted with the unexplainable and un-understandable. Perhaps, then, our only solution is to adopt the only role we can – that of audience – in which we see the absurdity and the fear and the humor of Ros and Guil's situation. From this position, we see and understand that some aspects of Stoppard's play, and so of Ros and Guil's position, are self-consciously nonsensical, and we can abstain from trying to explain their every detail. From our position, though, we also provide to Ros and Guil the very meaning that Shakespeare constructs at the end of his play for *Hamlet*. By being spectators to their lives, and to the disappearance of their deaths, we, like the audience Shakespeare imagines for the story of *Hamlet*'s quest to avenge his father's death, imbue the story of the title characters with

some meaning, satisfying ourselves the quest on which Ros and Guil embarked at the play's beginning.

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