Rewriting Shakespeare : travesty and tradition

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Rewriting Shakespeare: Travesty and Tradition

Neil Forsyth

> For this relief, much thanks
> Though I am native here, and to the manner born
> It is a custom more honoured in the breach
> Than in the observance
> Well.
> Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
> To be, or not to be, that is the question.
> There are more things in heaven and earth
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy –
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough hew them how we will. (31–32)

You may have recognized that speech . . . or some of it. It is actually (the beginning of) a speech delivered by a character called Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's play, *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*. It is a pastiche of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and it functions as the prologue to a *15-minute Hamlet* written, or rather edited, as Stoppard tells us, for performance on a double-decker bus. The effect of the speech, you can imagine, is unsettling. Everyone knows at least some of those lines, and perhaps they jangle around in our heads, but we do not expect to see them publicly performed like that. The familiar becomes strange, our expectations are broken up, and a space opened for a fresh perception of Shakespeare to grow.

The presence of Shakespeare in the English language and the English literary tradition is its chief glory but it has posed difficult, sometimes intractable problems for those who came later. Even his contemporaries seem to have felt his work as both a threat and a challenge: Robert

Greene's famous jibe, one of the earliest notices of Shakespeare we have, called him "an upstart crow." He was involved briefly in the so-called "War of the Theatres" and is said to have given that "pestilent fellow" Ben Jonson a "purge which made him bewray his credit."[1] Recall too Jonson's famous reply in *Timber* (658–62) to the players who claimed Shakespeare "never blotted out line": "Would he had blotted a thousand," which those who heard him "thought a malevolent speech." Even Jonson's great ode in the First Folio is at once adulatory and deeply anxious. It begins by pushing aside envy ("To draw no envy, Shakespeare, on thy name / Am I thus ample to thy book and fame") and the praise gets properly going only when Jonson can appropriate his subject as "My Shakespeare" (line 19). Even his version of Shakespeare the natural contains a sting:

> Nature herself was proud of his designs,
> And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines,
> Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,
> As, since, she will vouchsafe no other wit.

That last line of the quotation lurches suddenly into the impoverished present; more than the conventional modesty of the topos it registers, surely, a jealousy at Shakespeare's stature – which it tries, subtly, to delimit with that characteristically Jonsonian word "wit."

There is a similar anxiety in the playful and punning implication of Milton's tribute in the Second Folio that, since Shakespeare has no noble tomb in a place like Westminster Abbey, it is his astonished admirers that are turned to stone:

> For whilst to the shame of slow-endeavouring art
> Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
> Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book

[1] The most recent discussion is the new biography by David Riggs, who suggests the Malvolio of *Twelfth Night* as the laxative thus offered to Jonson: other suggestions have been Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida* or Jaques, the embittered satirist of Arden. Thomas Fuller's unreliable account of "wit-battles" appeared in his *History of the Worthies of England* in 1662. The various traditions of a quarrel between the two playwrights are discussed in Dutton (23–7), but there is much controversy here. Frost takes issue with Bentley, for example. See further Donaldson.

> Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
> Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
> Dost make us marble with too much conceiving.

Editors will point out, of course, that "unvalued" really means "priceless," but this misses the wider question Milton's lines pose about the impact of literary greatness, and it erases the anxiety implicit in his response. The poem functions almost as a magical charm against being overwhelmed by the Medusa effect of Shakespeare. Like Jonson, Milton saved himself from this fate, first by the common strategy of likening his Shakespeare, "fancy's child," to a force of nature that may "warble his native woodnotes wild," and then by developing his own quite different, and learned, style – the "slow-endeavouring art" he pretends to belittle.[2]

These complex forms of praise represent a classical tradition in which influence can be both felt and put to use, registered, examined, and set aside. That tradition waned and is now hard to recover: it was replaced by post-romantic bardolatry which, filtered through the well-intentioned efforts of generations of schoolteachers, has often had the effect of making Shakespeare both godlike and inaccessible. In fact the pastiche with which I began this essay serves in its context as the prologue to a school-play version of *Hamlet*. Stoppard is making fun of misplaced reverence, both for the bard and for the idea of some fixed and unchanging canonical text.

Stoppard's own relation to Shakespeare is not without some elements of professional jealousy. In fact he made this one of the subjects of a marital quarrel in his 1982 play, *The Real Thing*. The hero is a playwright,

[2] Fletcher has a fine statement of this issue: "Milton perceived the problem of being Milton: it was that he came after Shakespeare. As the most self-conscious sort of genius, he found himself, willy-nilly, post-Shakespearean. It was an impossible prospect, which he met by burying his meanings, interring them in the signs and syntax. He could not afford the Shakespearean openness, even if he had been able to imagine it" (142–43). The association of Shakespeare with fancy, therefore, according to John Guillory's excellent *Poetic Authority*, "counteracts the overwhelming effect of Shakespearean language by placing him within orders of thinking and being (the fantastic and the natural) that stand in opposition to the more controlled exercise of human reason" (71). Guillory also pays tribute to G. Wilson Knight's essay "The Frozen Labyrinth" on Milton and Shakespeare; and to Leslie Brisman.

and at one point his wife, an actress, accuses him of being bigoted and bardolatrous about writing:

> You judge everything as though everyone starts off from the same place, aiming at the same prize: Eng. Lit. Shakespeare out in front by a mile and the rest of the field strung out behind trying to close the gap. You all write for people who would write like you if only they could write. Well sod you, and sod Eng. sodding lit. (49–50)

That is refreshing. It gives a certain disruptive pleasure just to read those words out loud; they put Shakespeare at the source of a conflict about writing; they also reveal a continuing need to get out of the Shakespeare trap.

This, then, is the general context in which I want to place my argument about Stoppard and Shakespeare. On the one hand is the ludicrous cult and the tourist kitsch that surround the man on the £20 banknote or the soon-to-be-a-household-word "Bard card" (the new form of VISA cards). On the other is the question whether it is possible any longer to preserve a genuine interpretive tradition. Stoppard's professional and paradoxical approach to this problem has generally been to write parody, pastiche, or to use his own term, travesty. It is a special property of travesty that it distorts but must not obliterate its original, it is always consciously violating some norm (as is transvestism) and it depends on the effects of that violation. Like satire, travesty is both comically radical and deeply, even gloriously conservative.[3]

[3] Seeing only one side of this paradox recently led Alan Sinfield to dismiss the Stoppard play (in contrast to Charles Marowitz's 1963 *Collage Hamlet*) as "actually very conservative" because it doesn't try to "displace" Shakespeare. "The idea of *Hamlet* and the Shakespeare myth stands unchallenged, and is probably enhanced by this new evidence of their universal applicability" (in Holderness 130–34). I assume Sinfield wants this to be heard ironically, since he doesn't believe in Shakespeare's "universality" any more than I do. But in fact Stoppard's heroes are in the same broad philosophical tradition as Shakespeare's, so they could hardly be evidence of "universality": on that issue it would be much better to read Laura Bohannan's essay "Shakespeare in the Bush," whose informants severely castigate Hamlet for failing to have proper respect for his father's brother (28–33).

My main subject, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (henceforth *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*), was the first of Stoppard's travesties, indeed his first success. Other playwrights have had a go at versions of Shakespeare – there was already Charles Marowitz's 1963 *Collage Hamlet*, and there have since been a new *Merchant of Venice* (Wesker's anti-anti-semitic *The Merchant*), Bond's *Lear*, and Stoppard himself has gone back and done it again, in the play I quoted from at the beginning.[4] Shakespeare has again become a source of play. But of these plays only *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* has really become part of the worldwide repertory of modern English-language drama,[5] and one reason for its impact, of course, is that it is *Hamlet* which is being rewritten – the central play of Shakespeare and so of the English tradition, perhaps of the whole European tradition. So Stoppard takes on and exploits the major defining, and mysterious, text of our literature. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* thus manages to be both central and peripheral. It suggests the continuity of the tradition even as it disturbs or disrupts it – that peculiar property of travesty.

Now I don't want to define that term; I would rather let its possible meanings emerge from the illustration and remain in play – but let us begin by looking at these two words in my title. Both "travesty" and "tradition" depend upon Latin, and on the prefix "trans–," which means "across," and so suggests "change." The two words have root-meanings of "cross-dress" (or "change" in that sense, an important word in the theatre) and "hand across," but both words suggest other ideas also. Stoppard makes something of the sexual ambiguity of the word "travesty," clear in Italian or French, and available in English through the parallel modern word "transvestite": one of the acts that the players in Stoppard have to offer is "transvestite melodrama" – common, for example, in English "pantomime" (an odd usage of this word for the Christmas enactment of

[4] Jeremy Treglown argues that *Jumpers* is in fact a rewriting of *Macbeth*: the connection is hidden because the play is "a spoof mystery-thriller" (95–113). For the rewriting of Shakespeare generally, see Ruby Cohn.

[5] See, for example, Bernard McElroy (94–96). Although he tells us that Stoppard's play now seems like a period piece of the sixties, his review is generally favourable. The two plays were performed in alternating repertory, and with a single performance style, so that *Hamlet* was paced "at a kind of ceaseless chatter."

comic legends or fairy-tales in which the clown is always a middle-aged man dressed as a woman, and the hero, known as the principal boy, is played by a beautiful young woman). Shakespeare's theatre itself was a kind of "travestie," not only because of the dressing up that is so central to the fascination of theatre (and cross-dressing is common in the comedies), but because Shakespeare's women were all played by boys.

The other word, "tradition," also conceals a very different idea. It comes directly into English from Latin, from the word "trado" which means "to hand on," but it is cognate with another English word, from the same Latin root, but this time passing through medieval French into English: Latin "trado" includes the idea of "handing over" (an ambivalence in the prefix "trans") and so of "*traison*" – which became in modern French "*trahison*" and in English "treason." Every tradition, then, is potentially betrayal, in its very name, and the etymology suggests a hidden relation between the two ideas – that to fix a tradition is to betray it, for example, or that to hand something on (as all teachers know) is to risk handing it over to be mutilated by the dull or the spiteful. The converse may be that a travesty is a good way to preserve a tradition. Political implications are there too, in the word "treason" obviously, but in the idea of "tradition" also. What I propose is the interrogation of the past by the present, risking the accusation of treason in order to ascertain or reveal the tradition – travesty as second or strong reading.

Let me remind you of the situation: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are minor characters in *Hamlet*. At first they might seem ideal candidates for the outsider figures whom Victor Shklovsky recommended as perceivers of the action in his discussion of strangeness[6] but in Shakespeare they are not marginal in Shklovsky's modern sense. Rather they are middlemen, spies and agents of Claudius, the King of Denmark. Their mission is to find out what Hamlet, the prince, is really up to. Since they are former schoolfellows of Hamlet's, they try to play upon, in order to betray, his trust – as he quickly finds out. Then, when Claudius sends Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act as his attendants, or guards, and bear a letter which instructs the English king to put Hamlet to death – but Hamlet finds the letter on the voyage, and substitutes his own letter which makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the

[6] See the discussion of narrative outsiders in F. K. Stanzel (10).

victims. So both aspects of their role involve betrayal, and they are themselves betrayed – one of the sources of complexity in *Hamlet* being this reversal of intentions.

Stoppard both marginalizes these shifty and shadowy characters and turns them into his heroes, indeed makes them rather likeable. Their names are shortened to Ros and Guil, and they derive, in fact, as much from Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, Didi and Gogo, as from Shakespeare; they bring with them much of the same vaudeville atmosphere, discussion of trivialities, and waiting, *ennui*. At one point, near the end, Stoppard's Ros shouts in frustration: "Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?" (89). The complaint derives from Beckett, but in a parodic way: it is the kind of remark an audience might make. And it becomes in Stoppard a large theatrical joke: it is almost Aristotelian in its call for the incidents to be arranged into a coherent plot, the imitation of a unified action – but what in fact happens now derives from Shakespeare: on the word "action," says the stage-direction, the Pirates attack, and the stage is immediately filled with confusion, frantic characters colliding with each other, rushing about in a general panic – sustained stage action, in fact, but hardly what Aristotle had in mind in his measured discussion of *praxis*. Stoppard is having fun with the creakiest event in *Hamlet*: the way the Prince escapes from his guards in order to return to Denmark and accomplish his revenge.[7] A pirate attack on the open sea is the purest accident, as Shakespeare's critics have noted, and indeed the whole episode, from Hamlet's sneaking into his companions' cabin, needs to be dressed up with the famous validation: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will" (V.ii.10–11). Furthermore in Shakespeare the incident is narrated, not dramatized. Stoppard inverts the Shakespearean relation of action to word.

There are many similar inversions of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*: Ophelia's speech to Polonius in II.i, for example, when she tells of Hamlet's behaviour in her room, the first signs of Hamlet's madness or "antic disposition." This becomes part of a stage-direction in Stoppard:

[7] IV.vii.12–26 (Hamlet's letter), V.ii.4–59 (Hamlet tells Horatio).

> Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled, ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle, pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other . . . and with a look so piteous, he takes her by the wrist and holds her hard. (26)

The action in Shakespeare is thus off-stage, to be imagined by the audience, but now it happens on stage, before our eyes. The full joke, however, will be grasped only by a reader, not the audience in the theatre, and so the text becomes an instance in the theatre-versus-study quarrel that has long afflicted Shakespeare studies.

These inversions confirm that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* depends upon its original in a more insistent, demanding way than most literary allusions or adaptations. It is not, like Verdi's *Otello*, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (a version of *Macbeth*), or his recent *Ran* (a version of *Lear*), or even *West Side Story*, a translation to another medium and culture, where the primary need is for the new to make sense in its own terms, in the new form. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is a rewriting, reproduction within the same theatrical tradition. It requires that the audience know and re-experience their knowledge of Shakespeare at the same time as they enjoy the comedy of Stoppard. The audience's pleasure results from glee at the sending-up of an idol, mockery of the authority that imposes Shakespeare on all Englishmen, and, at the same time, a delighted rediscovery of the *Hamlet* being performed in the wings of Stoppard's play.

There is more to the matter than this, of course. Stoppard's play requires us to look again at *Hamlet*, but its success as travesty depends a good deal on the particular point of view from which we must look – Ros and Guil's. In Shakespeare, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are never privy to Hamlet's thoughts, and therefore do not know about his revenge plot, for example, or his various reflections on it in soliloquy. They are limited by their assigned task, to "glean what afflicts him," to explain Hamlet's madness by "drawing him on to pleasures." But they are not very good psychologists, and Hamlet easily outwits them. It is this position which Stoppard dramatizes, and makes sympathetic fun of – partly because it is the position of many members of the audience at a performance of *Hamlet*, and indeed of his critics. The tradition being travestied includes all the interpretations and responses to *Hamlet*. Ros and Guil dramatize for us the interpretative dilemmas that are set into *Hamlet* itself: the need to understand and the obstacles that frustrate understanding are together what account for the play's appeal. It is in fact

to Rosencrantz that Hamlet says (during the recorder speech): "you would pluck out the heart of my mystery" – and defies his audience to do it, thereby setting up the subsequent history of criticism as self-defeating commentary and posing the problem to the audience with every performance.

In discussing *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are limited to what they say, or hear, in Shakespeare, condemned to repetition and summary rather than clarity or insight. Thus their version of the plot becomes a paraphrase, a mere summary, circling round the action rather than getting at its meanings, a kind of schoolboy or comic book *Hamlet*. Here is one of their versions of the plot:[8] what they are doing here is rehearsing what they would like to say to Hamlet if they could, if they could get access to him, a position that many readers find themselves in.

> GUIL: Go into details. *Delve*. Probe the background, establish the situation.
>
> ROS: So – So your uncle is the king of Denmark?!
>
> GUIL: And my father before him.
>
> ROS: His father before him?
>
> GUIL: No, my father before him.
>
> ROS: But surely –
>
> GUIL: You might well ask.
>
> ROS: Let me get this straight. Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.
>
> GUIL: Yes.
>
> ROS: Unorthodox.
>
> GUIL: Undid me.
>
> . . .
>
> ROS: To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now, why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?
>
> GUIL: I can't imagine! (36–38)

That conclusion is so funny because the investigators have indeed been able to give a succinct account of the plot, Hamlet's dilemma, but they are unable to connect the situation with his behaviour. They have all the

[8] Compare pp. 59–60, 83–84, 88, 89 for other stabs at telling their story.

ingredients, but can't put them together. That is also a parody of Hamlet's own situation, of course; he can't make the connection between his elaborate self-analysis and what to do in Denmark now.

To generalize for a moment, Stoppard's play is a travesty of Shakespeare because it puts at the centre of the action not the superb and subtle intelligence of Hamlet, but this bumbling bewildered inadequacy that we all, if we are honest, sense at times in the face of the Shakespearean text. And the result, you see, is that a tragedy becomes a comedy, to put the matter in its simplest terms.

Now let's explore that distinction a little. Without complicating the issue too much, we can say that the difference between tragedy and comedy is in their treatment of death. In comedy, death can be erased, whereas in tragedy, death's inevitability is the central issue. Stoppard incorporates Shakespeare's tragedians into his play, but they are now comic. In fact they enact death several times, melodramatic but convincing stage deaths – and then they are ready to do it again. As the player leader puts it: "They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height" (63). Having died elaborately and very persuasively, a player pops up again, to applause, and says modestly, "oh . . . it was merely competent" (94). There was a moment, of course, however brief, when during that enactment of theatrical dying, Ros and Guil, together with the audience, were *convinced*, and part of the comedy is in the relief and applause which follows the theatrical death. Tragedy threatened, and it was comedy after all, because it was theatre, just theatre.

In fact the pressure of tragedy is often felt in Stoppard. The very title, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, makes this flirtation, so to speak, with tragedy a constant or recurring part of the audience's experience. How, we are likely to ask the first time we see it, is he going to manage the end, in which these two likeable characters are doomed to die by the script they are required to enact? Stoppard's first idea for this problem was simply to have the play begin again at the end – the summons repeated, Ros and Guil off again on their fruitless quest. But the solution he eventually fixed on is much better,[9] and again it incorporates the

[9] In fact it took many performances before Stoppard got it right, as a member of my audience in Basel pointed out: the first, 1967, edition still prints 39 extra lines, 19 of which are the final three speeches of *Hamlet*, and the rest given to the two ambassadors in modern dress.

theatricality of theatre: Ros and Guil read Hamlet's rewritten letter telling the king of England to put them to death, then watch their own deaths enacted by the tragedians – it is part of the scene I just described – and then they comment on it. Ros says, "To tell the truth I'm relieved" (95), Guil starts to say "Now you see me, now you [don't]," and they simply fade out. It is a delicate moment, and its power depends on the possibility that the scene might be – but is not finally – tragic.

This way of distinguishing tragedy from comedy actually takes us some way towards seeing what Shakespeare and his contemporaries thought of the generic categories. In their preface to *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1610), for example, Beaumont and Fletcher propose that tragi-comedy is "not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy." Now as they well knew, Shakespeare's own comedies often bring their characters near death, and this is indeed one of the features that distinguish his work from Jonson's, and irritated the neoclassical taste. In fact plays like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *Twelfth Night*, and especially the late group we call romances work in exactly this way. In *A Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, or *The Tempest*, characters given up for dead turn out to be alive, and their death is evaded or erased. In the tragedies, on the other hand, there is an equivalent but inverted movement. The expectation is strong that Romeo and Juliet will not die – and indeed their deaths are only a matter of a few minutes and a misunderstanding. The expectation enhances the shock of the tragedy. *King Lear* is based on a fairy-tale in which the old king finds his lost daughter alive again after all.[10] Familiarity with the tale, or indeed with any earlier version of the Leir plot, will enhance the audience's shock when Lear enters howling, the dead Cordelia in his arms, and intensify its vicarious grief when she does not come back to life. So comedy depends on the pressure of tragedy – and the release, whereas tragedy depends on the possibility of comedy

[10] The "Love Like Salt" and "Cap o' Rushes" variants of the Cinderella pattern, Tale Types 923 and 510. In type 923 the Cordelia figure is banished for saying she loves her father as fresh meat loves salt. Though the play thwarts the reconciliation of father and daughter, it was rewritten in the eighteenth century by the notorious Nahum Tate to conform to the folktale expectations. See Briggs (172) and generally Susan Snyder.

(or the happy ending, simply); the story *could* go differently, but doesn't.

How does this analysis apply to *Hamlet*? For one thing, the play contains the graveyard scene, which begins in comedy, the clown-gravediggers singing and Hamlet commenting that they do not take their work very gravely. But then comes the marvellous moment when Hamlet is forced to recognize that this skull, the one he holds in his hand, is Yorick's, who was, yes, the old Court jester. *Hamlet* also, we realize now, contains Polonius's funny speech which mixes up theatrical genres, as if Shakespeare knew how much his separate genres depended on the presence of their opposite – were redefined in each play, as it were. Talking of the actors, Polonius says they are "the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral . . . " (II.ii.390).

So turning tragedy into comedy is an inversion, a travesty, that is present in the play of *Hamlet* itself – and Stoppard helps us to see it afresh. There is one scene, indeed, in Shakespeare, in which even the ghost becomes comic. He shouts from under the stage, "Swear!" and Hamlet calls him "this fellow in the cellarage." Then the ghost shouts from another place, "Swear!" whereupon "Well said, old mole," says Hamlet, "canst move i' th' earth so fast?" (I.v.157–70). The comedy depends upon the recognition of the theatrical conventions, that we are in the theatre, and yet the ghost is the source of Hamlet's tragedy.

This aspect of *Hamlet*, the probing and questioning of theatre itself – metatheatre – comes very much alive again in Stoppard. In Shakespeare, it is in fact Rosencrantz who first introduces the players – "tragedians of the city" he calls them (II.ii.327) – and it is he who talks about the "Wars of the Theatres" and the child actors (in the Folio at least). Rosencrantz met the players on the way to Elsinore, and this serves as Stoppard's warrant to introduce them into his play. Indeed they take up much of his action. Again their role is converted to comedy, although they still claim to be tragedians, as in the following splendid set-piece.

> ROS: What is your line?
>
> PLAYER: Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, dénouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion . . . clowns, if you like, murderers – we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers – set pieces in the

poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins – flagrante delicto at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I?

ROS (doubtfully): Well, I don't know . . .

PLAYER: It costs little to watch. . . . Now what precisely is your pleasure? (*He turns to the tragedians.*) Gentlemen, disport yourselves. (*The tragedians shuffle into some kind of line.*) There! See anything you like?

ROS (*doubtful, innocent*): What do they do?

PLAYER: Let your imagination run riot. They are beyond surprise.

ROS: And how much?

PLAYER: To take part?

ROS: To watch.

PLAYER: Watch what?

ROS: A private performance.

PLAYER: How private?

ROS: Well, there are only two of us. Is that enough?

PLAYER: For an audience, disappointing. For voyeurs, about average.

ROS: What's the difference?

PLAYER: Ten guilders. (17–18)

The conclusion of that passage raises, in its comic way, a vital question in *Hamlet* – the experience of an audience at the Globe theatre. *Hamlet* contains an intense, repressed sexuality which emerges several times in innuendo. But the most important aspect of this parallel between audience and voyeur is that we notice in a new way how often the parallel is drawn by Shakespeare. The famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, for example (and the ensuing dialogue), has in fact a triple audience – it takes place during one of the tests that Claudius and Polonius set up to get Hamlet to give himself away: Ophelia is on stage, by their design, and eventually Hamlet notices her. Claudius and Polonius in turn are concealed spectators in the wings; and then there is Shakespeare's own audience, watching the other two audiences. Each audience has a different reaction: Ophelia's is innocent, "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown" – she believes him mad; the King suspects he is not mad but deep, and so plans to send him to England, while Polonius is convinced he is experiencing "grief sprung from neglected love" and sets up a new voyeur scene, this time with Gertrude, in which Polonius, behind the arras, will be killed for his voyeurism. So being an audience is, sometimes, rather a risky business.

Hamlet is already turning the tables by setting up the play within the

play, and telling Horatio to watch the king's reactions to the Player King's murder and its sequel. So the audience will itself be watched, and Claudius betrays himself (somehow) to be, eventually, killed. Gertrude's famous line, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.220), is in fact her comment on the Player Queen's speech about remaining ever faithful to her husband, never marrying again if he dies – and it is a comment which reveals her own ambivalence about her second marriage. It suggests that an audience hears mostly what it is prepared to hear, according to its own preoccupations.

Hamlet too becomes an audience: first, to the Player's impromptu performance of Aeneas as witness to the death of Priam, about which he asks "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her? What would he do Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have?" The word "cue" there shows that he sees his own situation as theatrical. Later he is audience to the play, and to Gertrude's and Claudius's reactions. And all the time he is audience to his own enactment of the revenger's role assigned him by the ghost – and a very critical audience he is of himself.

This metatheatrical situation (the use of theatrical language and contexts to reflect the play from within) is common in Shakespeare, and especially in *Hamlet*. Stoppard picks it up and makes it one of the centerpieces of his own theatre. At one point he has Ros say: "I feel like a spectator – an appalling prospect. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute" (31). As he says that he is looking across the footlights at the audience. Guil joins him and asks: "See anyone?" "No, you?" "No. What a fine persecution – to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened." So the barrier between audience and action is crossed several times by both plays: the audience ceases to be neutral or passive and finds its experience assimilated to those on stage.

In both plays, we may now go on to notice, audiences become explicit targets of action and dialogue by some form of rewriting. Ros and Guil are recreated by Stoppard's travesty as the central victims – and also the principal spectators – of the action of *Hamlet*, which they participate in but cannot affect or change themselves. Hamlet himself rewrites *The Murder of Gonzago* as *The Mousetrap*, "to catch the conscience of the king." Now everyone notices that Hamlet is thus made to enact the relation of playwright to audience, and for Stoppard, I think, this is the

key to *Hamlet*'s appeal; it is what makes Shakespeare accessible again. For Hamlet is not exactly the playwright here, rather he is rewriting or rapidly adapting another play, and as such he is an image of what Shakespeare himself, as well as Stoppard, was usually doing – rewriting – as he did, we know, with the earlier play that scholars call the "Ur-Hamlet." So we learn not so much to look for "sources" (Quellenforschung), nor to think of Shakespeare's plays as *texts*, canonized for study like the Bible, but to think of Shakespeare as *maker*, *poet*, *scop*. It is, perhaps, fortunate from this point of view that the "source" of *Hamlet* does not survive. We know very little about it beyond a report of the ghost's ringing oversimplification: "Hamlet revenge!", but what we do have is the rewriting. So my title has another meaning now, if a rather strained one: "rewriting" is not only a gerund but an adjective, modifying Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's whole career in fact was as a rewriter of plays, whether he was adapting an earlier text (often writ in very choice Italian), whether he was, as Coleridge imagined, recasting his own plays in new forms throughout his career (Coleridge recognized that *Hamlet* was itself rewritten and inverted as *Macbeth*: a good man in a rotten state becomes a corrupted man in a good state that needs to be restored, so that treason was now seen from the other side, from the traitor's point of view) or whether Shakespeare was changing his own text between performances – a likely explanation for the different versions of *King Lear*, as most recent scholars now recognize, but also of *Hamlet*.

Editors of both the Oxford and New Cambridge Shakespeares (though not Harold Jenkins, the editor of the great Arden edition) incline to the view that F, the Folio text of *Hamlet*, is a Shakespearean revision of Q2, the so-called "good Quarto." Interestingly enough, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the subject of at least two of the major changes introduced for the Folio. Part of the end of III.iv was deleted, including Hamlet's lines about his former schoolmates as "adders fanged" and his ruthless anticipation of catastrophe:

> Let it work
> For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
> Hoist with his own petard, and 't shall go hard
> But I will delve one yard below their mines
> And blow them at the moon. O, 'tis most sweet
> When in one line two crafts directly meet.
> (III.iv.207–12)

These lines imply a vengeful and decided Hamlet, coolly determined on revenge and already prepared to wait his moment to achieve it – revenge over Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as well as Claudius. But the audience does not learn until Act IV (iii.54) of Claudius's intention to have Hamlet killed in England. And when Hamlet recounts the events later to Horatio, he makes it seem as if the idea to enter the cabin of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where he finds Claudius's letter, came as a sudden inspiration:

> And praised be rashness for it – let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will. (V.ii.7–11)

The discrepancy between a Hamlet who plans deep plots and one who acts on the spur of the moment was removed in the Folio, because, if the authorial revision theory is correct, Shakespeare deleted the lines in Act III about the engineer hoist with his own petard, and so allowed for his Hamlet to be much less ruthless and decisive toward his old schoolfellows.

Shakespeare also added a line to V.ii. When Horatio comments on Hamlet's account: "So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to it" (i.e. to their deaths), Hamlet says simply, in the Quarto version, "They are not near my conscience." But in the Folio, the prince first says "Why, man, they did make love to their employment," a line which, in context, reads like an effort to protect Hamlet from too much blame for their death. It is a joke, picking up the sexual meaning of "go to it" and accusing the pair of more dedication to and enjoyment of their task than is evident from the play. It is not clear, for example, that they themselves ever learn the contents either of Claudius's original letter or of Hamlet's rewritten version. Harold Jenkins, who prefers not to think of Shakespeare as revising his play, finds the need to defend Hamlet at this point:

> It does not appear from the text that they knew the nature of the commission they carried. But it is made abundantly clear that they were willing agents. Hamlet assumes them to be willing for the worst (III.iv.204–9 [i.e. the very

> passage that does not appear in the Folio]), and we are probably meant to assume it too and to accept the poetic justice of their end. (397)[11]

But if we accept the theory of authorial revision, we have a wonderful glimpse of Shakespeare at work, anxious that he had not quite worked out the role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or Hamlet's behaviour toward them, and so adapting his text to make Hamlet's decision to have them killed a spur-of-the-moment reaction to reading Claudius's letter.

Stoppard, then, picks up and explores for us a part of the play that Shakespeare himself had already worried at. In fact he seems to extend the focus on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the same direction as Shakespeare had been moving, though he knew nothing of the recent theory of authorial revision when he wrote the play. In Q2 they are already fellow students of Hamlet (not simply the faithful courtiers of the prose analogues), but F puts more stress on the ambivalent friendship, adding for example Hamlet's confession to nutshell ambitions and bad dreams. Stoppard's Player poses the key question as he comments on the mime: "Traitors hoist by their own petard? – or victims of the gods? – we shall never know!" (62). And as the moment of their death, and so the end of the play, approaches, Ros says to Guil: "We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?" to which Guil replies: "I can't remember" (95). So the question of whether Stoppard's Ros and Guil are traitors, betraying their friendship with Hamlet, is left open.

Treason, in the strictly political as well as the more broadly human sense, is a recurring subject of many of Shakespeare's plays, whether they get labelled comedies, histories, tragedies or romances. Political instability, or at least anxiety over the succession to the aging Queen Elizabeth, was a central issue of Shakespeare's period; it was the life-or-death version of the instability of tradition. What is acted out as a play in the theatre becomes deadly serious outside it. That this relation of theatre to society was understood and appreciated by Shakespeare's own au-

[11] But also see the measured response of Stanley Wells (145) to a letter from Eric Sams on the revision question. I am persuaded by the arguments of Philip Edwards (8–9), who shows how the changes affect the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and John Kerrigan (258–59), who points to a whole sequence of such variants.

diences is shown by, among other events, the incriminating performance by Shakespeare's troupe of *Richard II* on the eve of the Essex rebellion.

In *Hamlet*, there is in fact an intriguing relation between the overt political subject, treason, and the theatrical instability – the instability of tradition – that is signalled by rewriting. Prince Hamlet is, at moments, an image of the playwright, we saw, but ultimately Hamlet is forced to play the role of revenger, inherited from theatrical tradition, and, in the play, from his father, the ghost. Hamlet Senior, as in the "Ur-Hamlet," calls upon his son to revenge the treason and so reassert the tradition, erase the rupture that Claudius has caused. Now the ghost, we are told (although the authority is not as reliable as we would like it to be), was played by Shakespeare. You can see why I should like that legend to be true, since Shakespeare thus enacted, in his own play, the role of role-giver that he played as playwright. Within the play Shakespeare played the one who insists on political continuity and legitimacy; but the play he wrote, or rewrote, represents the break with tradition. The revenge which is supposed to ensure the succession actually produces its opposite, a new lineage. By the end we have "a slaughterhouse – eight corpses all told," as Stoppard's Player puts it (62), and the kingship passes to Fortinbras, who is the son of Hamlet Senior's old enemy. So the ambivalence of that word tradition is at work – or at play – in Shakespeare too.

So Stoppard's travesty has led us back to see *Hamlet* as an act of rewriting, and to notice the importance of rewriting within the play, even at its turning-point, the play within the play. Hamlet's rewriting (of the letter also) shows Shakespeare rewriting, the whole tradition is always in play as the analogues in the text show: Lucianus and Gonzago, Nero and Claudius and Agrippina, Pyrrhus and Priam and Aeneas, Jephthah and his daughter, and, in particular the allusion to *Julius Caesar* in which "Hamlet" had already killed "Polonius" (III.ii.102). The play is self-conscious about its playfulness, and Stoppard, from that point of view merely picks up and develops the travesty that is already implicit in this traditional play about treason.

Let me give one final example of these acts of rewriting that connect Shakespeare directly to Stoppard, the one that Stoppard in fact ends his play with. Before Hamlet dies, he begs his friend Horatio to "Absent thee from felicity awhile, To *tell my story*" (my emphasis). So the play provides for its own transmission. It will survive as story, to be retold, or rewritten, in Scandinavian legend, in Renaissance France, and in Elizabethan

England. But Shakespeare himself gives this chain of transmission, of tradition, an extra twist. After Hamlet dies, but before the play ends, Horatio has a chance to tell the story, to Fortinbras and the Ambassadors from England, so inverting the relation, within the play, of drama and narrative. Notoriously, Horatio's version of the story is inadequate – not a pastiche of course but almost a travesty – for however interesting it may be as interpretation of *Hamlet*, it is *Hamlet* without the prince. And Stoppard's own play ends, in its revised form, with the simple re-enactment of this plot-summary of *Hamlet* that Shakespeare puts at his end:

> . . . so shall you hear of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, of accidental judgements, casual slaughters, of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, and, in this upshot, purposes mistook fallen on the inventors' heads: all this can I truly deliver. (96)

Now this bald plot-summary, offered by Horatio the rationalist, is all that the Ambassadors from England hear of the action of the play. It is as if Stoppard finds warrant for his own travesty by imagining himself, for a moment, as those English Ambassadors telling the story back in England, dramatizing, rewriting, the story. In the play between those two versions of *Hamlet*, both of course Shakespeare's, Stoppard found his own play. For the only purpose those Ambassadors from England serve in *Hamlet* is to announce the origin of Stoppard's play, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

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