

HAUNTOLOGICAL CRISES OF IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND PERSONAL HISTORY IN TOM STOPPARD'S *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*¹

TOM STOPPARD'IN *ROSENCRANTZ VE GUILDENSTERN ÖLDÜLER ADLI OYUNUNDA KİMLİK, BELLEK VE KİŞİSEL GEÇMİŞE DAİR HUNTOLOJİK KRİZLER*

Neslihan ŞENTÜRK UZUN²

Abstract

First staged at the Edinburgh Festival fringe in 1966, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard garnered acclaim by presenting an inverse play in which the two peripheral Elizabethan courtiers in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, remain the focus whereas the characters in *Hamlet* have only minor roles, make brief appearances and enact fragments from the original play in scenes where the two plays converge. The crux of this existential comedy revolves around the misadventures of the duo, who were summoned by the king to "glean what afflicts" the Prince of Denmark, and whose tragic deaths go unnoticed amidst the chaotic turmoil at the end of the original play. Stoppard's absurdist text expands against the backdrop of *Hamlet* and lays bare the mishaps of the two childhood friends of *Hamlet* off the stage. This article is committed to exploring the central conflicts in Stoppard's play such as identity, memory, and personal history through the lenses of Derridean "spectres", and to investigating how far the characters' conception of the past, present and future accord with the Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a narrative of "hauntology".

Keywords: Tom Stoppard, Postmodern Play, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Spectres, Derrida, Hauntology.

Öz

İlk olarak 1966'da Edinburgh Festivali'nde sahnelenen Tom Stoppard'ın *Rosencrantz ve Guildenstern Öldüler* adlı eserinde, William Shakespeare'in *Hamlet* adlı trajedisi içinde kıyıda kalmış iki Elizabeth dönemi saray mensubu Rosencrantz ve Guildenstern, odak noktası olarak alınır. Stoppard'ın oyunu, *Hamlet*'teki diğer ana ve yan karakterlerin iki metnin birleştiği kısımlarda küçük roller, kısa sahneler ve orijinal oyundan parçalar ile yer alabildiği, *Hamlet*'in ters çevrilmiş bir anlatısı olarak beğeni toplamıştır. Bu varoluşsal komedinin can alıcı noktası, Danimarka Prensi'nin "neden acı içinde olduğunu bulmak" amacıyla kral tarafından çağrılan ve orijinal oyunun sonundaki kaotik kargaşanın ortasında trajik ölümleri fark edilmeyen ikilinin maceraları etrafında dönüyor olmasıdır. Stoppard'ın absürt metni, *Hamlet*'i arka plana alarak öne çıkar ve *Hamlet*'in iki çocukluk arkadaşının talihsizliklerini ortaya koyar. Bu makalenin amacı, Stoppard'ın oyunundaki kimlik, bellek ve kişisel tarih gibi temel çatışmaları Derrida'ya özgü "hayaletler" mercekleri aracılığıyla keşfetmek ve karakterlerin geçmiş, şimdi ve geleceğe dair kavrayışlarının bir huntoloji anlatısı olarak Shakespeare'in *Hamlet* adlı oyunuyla ne kadar örtüştüğünü araştırmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tom Stoppard, Postmodern Oyun, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Hayaletler, Derrida, Huntoloji.

¹ In the study of this paper, the ideas and arguments present in the author's MA thesis titled "Political Authority and Spectral Stories from the Margin in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Oğuz Atay's *The Disconnected* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*" (Boğaziçi University, 2013) were partially utilized.

² Dr., Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, neslih4n.senturk@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9963-6495>.

Hauntology, a neologism introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993), is a portmanteau of the words “haunting” and “ontology” and refers to the study of apparition of events or figures from the past that destabilize the supposed centrality of historical discourses or narratives about the past. Although ontology opposes itself to hauntology “in a movement of exorcism”, Derrida asserts that the former itself is “a conjuration” (201-2). As Colin Davis in “Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms” also agrees, hauntology “supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (373). The concept seeks to undermine the wedge between “being” and “not being”, and Derrida argues that it is already present in *Hamlet*’s thinking through the encounter in his famous soliloquy between “to be” and “not to be”. *Hamlet*’s dilemma “already began with the expected return of the dead King” and the revenant “figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again” (Derrida 10). What we call a ghost, Derrida adds, comes into view once we recognise the “effectivity or the presence of a spectre” even though it appears to “remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum” (10). He then calls this theory “hauntology”, the study of spectres, which foregrounds the out-of-joint mediums that are not necessarily present but have a distinguished effect on the time and setting they haunt. These ghostly figures or places lay bare for their subjects a nonlinear but spatio-temporal realm where those elements of the past, which might formerly have been marginalised or omitted altogether in the name of stability, linger tenaciously in the present.

As spectres enable a proper discussion of what is present or absent, visible or invisible, they can evoke a strong impression that what we call “present” is integrally embedded in the realm of spectres of the past and the future. This idea, by implication, not only denotes a potential conflict between the past and the present; it also raises the issue that the past and the present are bound to be haunted by the spectral futures. It is therefore of utmost significance to recognise that what is considered as “now” is an unstable ground that is profoundly bound up with the past, and it is always in the process of being defined and re-defined vis-à-vis what is yet to come. Ghosts therefore play a vital role since they do not only shatter those current delusions by means of their unexpected hauntings, but also have the potential to make their subjects remember and

even speak of the events that have gone unnoticed under trauma-like circumstances in the past. The spectre is hence a deconstructive medium “hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate” (Derrida 376) and it necessarily evades belonging to the deep-rooted realm of knowledge. This haunting requires the spectre to continue its visitations from beyond the graveyard at all costs, and taken as a whole, hauntology has direct consequences for human beings as agents (and receivers) of certain narratives belonging to the past. However, Derrida’s argument revolves around the haunted persona of *Hamlet*. He was already given a central presence in Shakespeare’s play and thanks to his father’s ghost, he is able to twist the course of events. Then how about those with the peripheral existence in *Hamlet*? Were they granted a similar central position within a narrative, what would their hauntings be like – if at all?

Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* presents such an alternative setting in which the marginal story of two attendant lords in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (hereafter Ros and Guil), is rewritten. The title is a quotation from *Hamlet*. After the tragic deaths of the main characters in the play, when the ambassador announces “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead” (Shakespeare 253), the news of their execution gets lost in the shuffle vis-à-vis the deaths of other central characters. Stoppard takes on what seems to be a minute detail in the original text, and names his play after the two minor characters in the margin. Stoppard in this respect creates a sense of the duo’s alternative experience in the wings of *Hamlet* and radically shifts the centre of the stage. As Katherine E. Kelly states, in his practice of “min[ing] the ‘imaginary museum’ of western art” by recycling classic texts, Stoppard presents the reader and the spectator “with familiar literary language (and visual imagery) made strange by an unfamiliar dramatic context” (10-11). Stoppard’s play indeed offers a new perspective and defamiliarizes the reader and audience alike since, even though they are familiar with the master text or play, they probably do not give a profound thought to subordinate characters in the play, Ros and Guil. In this sense, Derrida’s approach to hauntology and spectre is convenient to analyse the Stoppardian universe and to address the abovementioned questions.

Ros and Guil’s misadventures and musings are recounted in the form of a tragicomedy. At the beginning of the play, the two well-dressed Elizabethans merely pass time “in a place without any visible character” (Stoppard 1). The characters suddenly find themselves in an unintelligible world of which they hardly have any idea or reminiscence. As the play progresses, Ros and Guil, who have interchangeable and ambiguous

personalities, are thoroughly confused about the events which take place onstage in *Hamlet* without them. They get increasingly agitated when they find that it is impossible for them to attain any hands-on experience of, or direct information other than a pile of fragments provided by the others about the events. Ros and Guil are simply bound to accept what piece of information is granted to them by the characters in the original play. Here, the reader is left to wonder whether Ros and Guil could be the ghost figures in Stoppard's play.

Sonya Freeman Loftis in Shakespeare's Surrogates underlines that "*Hamlet* is the quintessential haunted play, and Stoppard's comic response is an equally haunted adaptation" (97). Indeed, Ros and Guil are long dead, as per the original play. As Bernard Benstock in his discussion of "The Spectres in the Tales" points out, the readers of Shakespeare's text already know that the courtiers are ghosts "through death"; and the auditors learn from Stoppard's play that they are ghosts "through absence" (32). In the surrogate universe created by Stoppard, the duo in fact has no bodily existence at all. In addition, even though they literally are the ghosts, Ros and Guil cannot be characterised as the Derridean ghosts that haunt the present and overwrite narratives of the past. In this alternative universe, the duo's inability to act as actively as a ghost stems from the fact that their fate has already been "written" by Shakespeare, and it is beyond the later playwright's reach to undo it. Stoppard does put the already deceased Ros and Guil in the centre of the play, but characters are not even remotely capable of breaking free of the narrative captivation they face, let alone determining their own narrative.

Not much further in the play, therefore, both the characters and the reader come to recognise that there is no other way out, "every exit as being an entrance somewhere else" (Stoppard 19). As Jonathan Bennett in "Philosophy and Mr. Stoppard" also sees it, "whenever Shakespeare writes 'exeunt Rosencrantz and Guildenstern' we follow them off Shakespeare's stage on to Stoppard's" (9). The spokesman of the troupers in the play openly concedes his almost dogmatic subscription to the script and underscores the textual limitations of mere actors as follows:

Player There's a design at work in all art – surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

Guil And what's that, in this case?

Player It never varies – we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for

death dies.

Guil Marked?

Player Between ‘just desserts’ and ‘tragic irony’ we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent.

Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get. (He switches on a smile.)

Guil Who decides?

Player (switching off his smile) Decides? It is written...

We’re tragedians, you see. We follow directions – there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means. (Stoppard 71-72)

Ros and Guil simply end up succumbing to their pre-determined fate and to the lines already written ages ago. On the other hand, the Derridean spectre in Stoppard’s play turns out to be nothing other than Shakespeare’s master narrative, *Hamlet*. Much as Ros and Guil are ghosts themselves, their ghostly potential is surpassed and invalidated by this former text. *Hamlet* haunts Ros and Guil (as well as the play itself) in terms of predetermining their life-in-death condition, sense of identity, personal history and existence in the temporal realm.

First of all, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* not only predetermines Ros and Guil’s life-in-death condition in the play, but also haunts them in a way that perplexes the characters and enables the duo to vaguely catch a glimpse of their murdered condition or eventual persecution. As Ramona Mosse in “From Corpse to Corpus” discusses, the issue of having a ghost on the stage is an uncanny phenomenon, “given the breathing phenomenal body of the actor that is standing in for its own annihilation” (60). At the beginning of Act 2, when they attempt to inveigle *Hamlet* into revealing what he is so afflicted with, Ros and Guil end up being bitterly mocked and outwitted by the prince. Offended and humiliated, they comment on the situation afterwards and say:

Ros(simply) He murdered us.

Guil He might have had the edge.

Ros (roused) Twenty-seven-three, and you think he might have had the edge?! He murdered us. (Stoppard 48)

In their dream-like state, Ros and Guil come to a vague awareness that they have already been killed by *Hamlet*'s trick. Apparently, Ros and Guil do not belong to the realm of the alive and, hence, are exempt from the bodily needs. Consider, for example, the fact that although they do not eat through the course of the play, they do not starve to death:

Ros They sit facing front. Are you hungry?

Guil No, are you?

Ros (thinks) No. (Stoppard 61)

Neither do they feel any kind of sleeplessness. At one point they feel obliged to sleep only to comply with the mandatory directions of the play:

Ros It'll be night soon. This far north. (dolefully.) I suppose we'll have to go to sleep.

(He yawns and stretches.)

Guil Tired?

Ros No... (Stoppard 90-91)

Moreover, it occurs to the two Elizabethans that their fingernails and beard continue to grow, which they think might be indicative of their beyond-the-grave appearance on the stage:

Ros (cutting his fingernails) Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard.

Guil What?

Ros (loud) Beard!

Guil But you're not dead.

Ros (irritated) I didn't say they started to grow after death! (Pause, calmer.) The fingernails also grow before birth, though not the beard.

Guil What?

Ros (shouts) Beard! What's the matter with you? (Stoppard 8-9)

They cannot but defer the direct implication of this “scientific phenomenon” through what seems like a chain of idle misunderstandings. Ros continues to give away yet another clue about their state of death in the following:

Ros (reflectively.) The toenails, on the other hand, never grow at all.

Guil (bemused) The toenails on the other hand never grow at all?

Ros Do they? It's a funny thing – I cut my fingernails all the time, and every time I think to cut them, they need cutting. Now, for instance. And yet, I never, to the best of my knowledge, cut my toenails. They ought to be curled under my feet by now, but it doesn't happen. I never think about them. Perhaps I cut them absent-mindedly, when I'm thinking of something else. (Stoppard 9)

As fictional characters, their fingernails and beard might be seen by the audience and they need cutting; on the other hand, because Ros and Guil are created fully-clothed by the playwright, their toenails need not grow – or maybe do not exist at all. This is because in the case of the ghosts on stage, “Life no longer activates the body from within but permeates its boundaries from without” (Mosse 60). That is, they only show what seems like vital signs when they are instructed by the playwright from without. No sooner do they come close to having a sense of their death than either Ros or Guil find a way to evade this feeling and divert their thoughts, awkwardly attempting to convince each other that they are alive:

Ros Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead,
lying in a box with a lid on it?

Guil No.

Ros Nor do I, really... It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead...

which should make a difference... shouldn't it? I mean,
you'd never know you were in a box, would you? It
would be just like being asleep in a box. Not that I'd like
to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air – you'd
wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be?
Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly.
That's why I don't think of it...

(...)

Guil (jumps up savagely) You don't have to flog it to death!

Pause.

Ros I wouldn't think about it, if I were you. You'd only get depressed.

(Stoppard 62-63)

Because they are reluctant to acknowledge that they passed away, Guil philosophises on their current situation, concluding that they may be within the realm of “un-, sub- or supernatural forces” (Stoppard 7), and the attempts to make sense of true nature of their condition is to fail because of these factors.

Despite the courtiers' inability to come to realise their spectral wanderings and utterances within the ethereal domain of the play, they seem to be so weary of their fragile condition that the idea of death, from time to time, is not so daunting, yet even alluring for the duo. Their perpetual struggle to isolate themselves from the hustle and bustle of the characters around contributes to the exhaustion they experience, depriving them of “a moment's peace” (65). On top of this, their attempts to interfere with the course of events contribute even more to their exhaustion, leaving them with a bitter feeling of uselessness. For instance, when in search of Polonius's corpse, Ros and Guil feel useless and have had enough when *Hamlet* shows up himself, not through their efforts:

*Again there is a fractional moment in which Ros is
smug, Guil is trapped and betrayed. Guil opens his
mouth and closes it.*

The situation is saved:

Hamlet, escorted, is marched in just as Claudius leaves.

*Hamlet and his Escort cross the stage and go out,
following Claudius.*

Lighting changes to exterior.

Ros (moves to go) All right, then?

Guil (does not move; thoughtfully) And yet it doesn't seem enough; to have breathed such significance. Can that be all? And why us? – anybody would have done. And we have contributed nothing. (Stoppard 84)

They seem to act as non-functional characters barely having any wilful influence on the incidents around them since they are the passive and aerial agents acting as per the pre-written script. They would probably rather be resting in peace than be concerned with deceased bodies, including their own. As Ros clearly reveals, “Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where’s it going to end?” (Stoppard 63).

Shakespeare’s text also haunts Ros and Guil’s constant yet hopeless search for their identity. When Derrida at one point problematises the identity of the ghost (175), he asserts that even though it does not have “a pure identity to itself” (136), it is neither a “lifeless body” or a “cadaver”, nor a figure “without identity” (51). On the other hand, in Stoppard’s play Ros and Guil are by no means allowed to get hold of consistent information as to who exactly they are. The only information Ros and Guil acquire about themselves and their identity comes from the other characters in *Hamlet*, and it is decidedly a construct par excellence. Ros and Guil struggle to bring together pieces of the puzzle of their identity due to the bits of vague information provided to the duo by the others. They cannot choose but internalize others’ account of who they are and what their principal purpose on stage is. Gertrude and Claudius, for example, tell them that *Hamlet* is ill and that they must somehow find out what afflicts the prince. Without providing further information, they order that it is Ros and Guil’s duty, as being childhood friends of the prince, to find out the reason for “*Hamlet’s* transformation” and moodiness (Stoppard 27). Unable to remember that far back in their personal histories, Ros and Guil cannot but seem to assume the roles they have been instructed. Therefore, despite having no clue

whatsoever, they pretend to remember being childhood friends of *Hamlet* in the royal presence. However, when alone, they cannot help but be immersed in disbelief and start questioning the awkward situation they are in:

Ros We're his friends.

Guil How do you know?

Ros From our young days brought up with him.

Guil You've only got their word for it.

Ros But that's what we depend on.

Guil Well, yes, and then again no. (Stoppard 101)

In the last sentence, the immediate utterance of "yes" with "no" is significant since it indicates that the duo is obliged to take the monarch's word for granted whereas an underlying feeling of disapproval does perpetually prey on their mind. Were they Derridean ghosts, they would be able to speak up for themselves and even make a spectral impact on the series of events in this alternative play. However, because Shakespeare did not elaborate on the personality of Ros and Guil in the first place, they are too constrained to construct it any longer.

Ros and Guil, therefore, peevishly face the nasty truth that their identity is pre-determined by the playwright and they are included, albeit reluctantly, into the world of the play. The unwilling compliance of the duo can be seen in their childish confusion with regard to a fact as simple as their names:

Ros My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz.

(Guil confers briefly with him.)

(without embarrassment) I'm sorry – his name's

Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz. (Stoppard 13)

However, one can rest assured that their respective names are merely trivial minutiae; what really matters is their role in the stagecraft, as instantly revealed by the leading actor in the play:

Player I recognized you at once –

Ros And who are we?

Player – as fellow artists.

Ros I thought we were gentlemen.

Player For some of us it is performance, for others,
patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us
say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins.
(Stoppard 13)

The Player recognises Ros and Guil as he is also created by the playwright. Although Ros tries to learn who they are and relies on the Player's reply, the latter does not know anything further than the information that Ros and Guil are "fellow artists". Therefore when the duo pass time offstage, it does not mean that they are exempt from the world onstage; conversely, they can catch a vague glimpse of their identity solely by means of taking part in the narrative that is not their own creation.

In addition to lacking proper identities, Ros and Guil's crises on stage stem from being the displaced characters that seem to have lost their grasp of individual history and sense of an origin in Stoppard's play. Their recollections about a place called "home" as such is also blurred and it turns out that "home" for them is a non-existent dreamy entity:

Guil And a syllogism: One, he has never known anything
like it. Two, he has never known anything to write home
about. Three, it is nothing to write home about... Home...
What's the first thing you remember?

Ros Oh, let's see... The first thing that comes into my
head, you mean?

Guil No – the first thing you remember.

Ros Ah. (Pause.) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long
time ago.

Guil (patient but edged) You don't get my meaning. What
is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?

Ros Oh I see. (Pause.) I've forgotten the question. (Stoppard 6-7)

The more they force themselves to get in touch with their origin, which would also inform their sense of identity, the more hopeless they grow. That they still feel an urge to remember home – which has the connotations of security, belonging, identity and personal history – is indicative of the precariousness of their condition on and off the stage. This can visibly be tracked in their forgetfulness, or amnesia, when it comes to even the most basic and vital elements in the lives of people subject to the “natural” forces of temporal and spatial linearity. Guil’s following question is intrinsically bound up with the loss (or lack) of memory:

Guil Has it ever happened to you that all of a sudden and for no reason at all you haven’t the faintest idea how to spell the word – ‘wife’ - or ‘house’ - because when you write it down you just can’t remember ever having seen those letters in that order before...?

Ros I remember –

Guil Yes?

Ros I remember when there were no questions. (Stoppard 29)

Whereas Guil rapidly utters the words for fear that he will forget what he has to say, Ros seems to remember something for a brief moment, yet it is a non-existent realm. They are indeed bound to forget even the things and activities in which they were engaged a very short while ago:

Ros You remember that coin?

Guil No.

Ros I think I lost it.

Guil What coin?

Ros I don’t remember exactly. (Stoppard 61)

Apparently, along with having an “unremembered past” (Stoppard 6), neither courtier is able to make connections between their present and the recent past. That they are unable to recollect anything about a place or time of origin suggests that Ros and Guil are like rootless entities that spend their time in a location that is alien even to

themselves, without any intelligible features or rules. At one point Ros pulls himself together to “go home”, but collapses immediately after the realisation that he has lost his “sense of direction” (Stoppard 31). They have nowhere to go in the strictest sense of the word, and are confined with the “lack of” an environment (Stoppard 2).

Another oddity that runs throughout the play is the fact that the notion of time is cloudy for Ros and Guil and they are haunted by the temporal realm of *Hamlet*. At the beginning, stage directions attract our attention to this point: “Then they repeat the process. They have apparently been doing this for some time” (Stoppard 7). Being dead entities in the play, they cannot comprehend the passing of time due to their condition of being out of time:

Guil We have been spinning coins together since –

(He releases him almost as violently.)

This is not the first time we have spun coins!

Ros Oh no – we’ve been spinning coins for as long as I remember.

Guil How long is that?

Ros I forget. (Stoppard 5)

Their conception of time is visibly constrained by the playwright, and because “time has stopped dead” (Stoppard 6) for Ros and Guil, they have been out of time all along. The courtiers are destined to obey the orders of King Claudius and to eventually be sent to death by *Hamlet*; as Ros also recognises, “there’s only one direction, and time is its only measure” (Stoppard 63). Time exists as long as they follow the stage directions; otherwise, Ros and Guil face their ghostly existence and timeless surroundings off the stage. On the boat scene in Act Three, they confront this reality as follows:

Ros We drift down time, clutching at straws. But what
good’s a brick to a drowning man?

Guil Don’t give up, we can’t be long now.

Ros We might as well be dead. Do you think death could
possibly be a boat?

Guil No, no, no... Death is... not. Death isn’t. You
take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-

being. You can't not-be on a boat.

Ros I've frequently not been on boats.

Guil No, no, no - what you've been is not on boats.

Ros I wish I was dead. (Stoppard 99)

As it turns out, the only temporal reality the characters are granted is here and now, beyond the limits of which they cannot venture to trespass. Consider the following conversation:

Guil ...one must think of the future.

Ros It's the normal thing.

Guil To have one. One is, after all, having it all the
time... now... and now... and now...

Ros It could go on for ever. Well, not for ever, I suppose. (Stoppard 62)

It is not surprising that they have no clue. Again, Ros and Guil succumb to a predetermined design, and, once they understand that they have no freedom to go beyond the temporal limits drawn for them, they not only "drift down time" but disappear.

Considering the aforementioned hauntology argument, Derrida's ghosts, and the spectral presence of the two courtiers in Stoppard's play, it remains to be concluded that neither Ros nor Guil have the prospect of future existence because, even though they are ghosts themselves, the duo is simultaneously haunted by the textual spectre of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Even though Stoppard attempts to give voice to their off-stage condition, the playwright cannot save their lives. Moving to and fro, afflicted with a life-in-death condition, without a proper sense of identity, personal history or time, Ros and Guil inevitably succumb to Shakespeare's script. They do from time to time question their situation just to end up with a mere tautology or deference of attaining any possible solid reality about themselves and their delimited world on stage. Their attempts to break free can yield no results at all; there is no actual world assigned to them in a so-called alternative universe. Already dead in the previous play, they are only the ghostly replicas of original Ros and Guil in *Hamlet*, with barely any choice of an alternative ending.

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