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Metadrama and Theories on Play-Acting in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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Flora R. Van Canneyt
Student number: 01305170

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Guido Latré

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HAMLET. ... the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target, the lover shall not sigh gratis, the humorous man shall end his part in peace, the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle a th' sear, and the lady shall say her mind freely - or the blank verse shall halt for't.

- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (2.2.319-24)

MISS PRISM. The good end happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.

- Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (29; Act 2)

PLAYER. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.

- Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (72; Act 2)

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I. Introduction

Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's most revered plays, has perhaps never been adapted as uniquely as in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,[1] a twentieth century comedy wherein two minor courtiers from the Renaissance tragedy are placed centre stage while the plot of *Hamlet* unfolds around them, much to their confusion and occasional despair. A striking addition to Stoppard's play, as compared to Shakespeare, is his decision to write a "drama about drama" (Hornby 31) in such a manner that his audience become compelled to reconsider their previously suspended disbelief. This, in essence, is the result of the metadramatic. Despite identifying this metadramatic 'addition' to *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was no stranger to metadramatic devices. In fact, discussions of metadrama often rely on *Hamlet* or *R&GAD* for illustrations (e.g. Abel 125, Hornby 94, Thumiger 35-6), such as Shakespeare's *The Murder of Gonzago*[2] - probably the most standard example of an inset play in literary criticism - or Stoppard's numerous references to Shakespeare and other playwrights.

Another important similarity between Shakespeare and Stoppard is that they have both created characters, namely Hamlet and the Player respectively, who hold specific viewpoints on what constitutes a convincing play. Hamlet urges the traveling troupe to hold "the mirror up to nature" (*Ham.* 3.2.22) in order to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.601), while the Player holds that "[a]udiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in" (*R&GAD* 76; Act 2). Hamlet advocates realism, the Player asserts that audiences will only believe in theatre within the limits of their own expectations. For both plays, these theories on acting have been discussed as manifestations of their broader theme of acting (e.g. Hibbard 34, H. Jenkins 135, A. Jenkins 49). However, scholars have not yet explicitly linked Hamlet and the Player's theories of acting to metadrama, nor investigated the way in which Stoppard's Player, through metadramatic devices, modernises the theme of playing that *Hamlet* so extensively explores. As these theories contribute to the audience's experience of the metadrama in both plays, it merits addressing.

Thus, the main question which this paper concerns itself with is how the theories on acting of Hamlet and of the Player are related to the distinct metadramatic features of *Hamlet* and

[1] Hereafter *R&GAD*.
[2] Hereafter *Gonzago*.

R&GAD. By close reading passages that reflect ideologies concerning 'playing', this paper intends to establish the implications of these different perspectives on acting throughout both plays. Their contrasting theories are manifested, respectively, by Hamlet's need for a naturalistic inset play, and by the dismissal of realism by the Player. These reflect broader yet distinctive features of each play, namely the narrative function of (role-)playing and the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* and the specific brand of metadrama of the Player's self-referential dress rehearsal of *Gonzago* in *R&GAD*. Hornby's model of possible varieties of overt metadrama will inform the discussion of the metadramatic effects of both plays, which will then be connected to the role of Hamlet's and the Player's theories on play-acting in constituting these effects.

Naturally, many of the separate elements mentioned above have been touched upon within the scholarly literature. With regards to *Hamlet*, the theme of acting has been extensively studied (e.g. Hardison, Hibbard, Holland, H. Jenkins, Latham, Replogle, Wiemann), but rarely has much thought been given to how this theme works within the interpretative framework of metadrama. The content of the play-acting theories and the metadramatic effects have individually been linked to the two plays' historical-theatrical context (e.g. Levenson 162, Simard 52, Vanden Heuvel 223). In the Renaissance, theatre presented an idea of life. In modern times, however, with the emergence of broader (social-philosophical) theories of performance, the relationship between life and art has altered. Some scholars have concentrated on the relationship between the themes of delay, of acting, and the play-within-the-play (e.g. Hapgood, Leggatt, Malone), but despite touching upon the latter – a common metadramatic device – little attention is paid to its metadramatic effect. The analysis into the plays' metadrama is usually restricted, as mentioned above, to exemplifying 'metadrama' as a concept, thus not engaging in concrete textual research. When discussing Stoppard's *R&GAD*, the focus is usually thematic or is restricted to the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern[3] (e.g. Brassell, Levenson, Hunter, Robinson, Uchman), so the function of the Player is rarely the focus (a notable exception is Egan). Some literary scholars (Boireau, Fei, Meyer) have discussed Stoppard's metadrama at length (respectively the motif of repetition, the themes of anxiety, identity and memory, and finally intertextuality), but never with a focus on the theories on acting.

[3] Hereafter Ros and Guil, when meaning Stoppard's titular characters. (Shakespeare's courtiers will remain 'Rosencrantz' and 'Guildenstern' to avoid confusion.)

Metadrama is a common phenomenon in both modern and Renaissance times (Puncher 4), but the differences in their use and effect remain to be explored further, and I believe *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* to be excellent case studies in this regard, not only because of their extensive usage of metadramatic devices, but also because of Stoppard's attempt to link "the dislocations of his own era with those occurring in the late sixteenth century" (Freeman 20).

The structure of the paper is as follows: chapter II begins with an analysis of both Hamlet's and the Player's theories on play-acting, identifying what they are, how they reflect the broader of theme of theatricality in each play, and what their functions are within each corresponding play. Next, chapter III will explore the theory of metadrama, firstly by presenting working definitions of metadrama and metatheatre in the literature, and highlighting the obstacles of formulating these definitions. Some general characteristics of metadrama will then be emphasised, leading to an argument for preferring Hornby's model of metadramatic varieties for undertaking textual analyses of metadramatic plays. After briefly touching upon the possible significance of metadrama both in Renaissance and modern times, I will explore, in chapter IV, how in both *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* we can find Hornby's varieties of metadrama, producing distinctive metadramatic effects. Finally, chapter V will draw on the analyses of chapters II and IV to account for how the respective theories on play-acting are reflected by the metadrama in Shakespeare and Stoppard, thus extending these theories from mere expressions of the plays' theme of theatricality to directly influencing the metadramatic effects of both plays.

As a side note, a few deliberate choices of terminology in this paper require clarification. Firstly, there is a practice in both literary studies and theatre studies to differentiate between the dramatic text and the theatrical performance. In keeping with this distinction, I will use 'metadrama' for the former and 'metatheatre' for the latter. The scope of this paper is restricted to the meta-effects as they exist in the text, meaning that any effects that could be added in any given performance will not be considered here.[4] Secondly, in order to distinguish between the actors of the play and the actors within the play, different terminology will refer to these two groups. When talking about the

[4] For example, in Leveaux's production of *R&GAD*, when Guil demands "how can you expect them to believe in your death?" and the Player replies, "it's the only kind they do believe" (76; Act 2), both performers gesture and glance at the audience in the auditorium, thus acknowledging their existence and exposing that they are talking about them. As this is not a stage direction in the script, it will not be taken into consideration in this paper.

actors of *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* on stage, the term 'performer' and all its related words (e.g. 'performance', 'performing', etc.) will be used. When talking about characters within the plays, the term 'actor' or 'player', depending on what is more appropriate, and all their related words (e.g. 'acting', 'playing', 'play', etc.) will be used.[5]

II. Theories on Play-Acting in Shakespeare and Stoppard

Despite the ready recognition of the importance of playing in both plays, scholars have insufficiently identified a striking similarity between Shakespeare's titular character and Stoppard's Player, namely that they both articulate perspectives on acting, on how theatre works and what constitutes a good play. This chapter will analyse what these two distinct theories are, so that later on (in chapter V) they can be related to the distinct metadramatic effects of *Hamlet* and *R&GAD*.

II.i *Hamlet*: The Prince and Nature

When the players first present themselves at the Danish court, Hamlet requests the First Player to recite "a passionate speech" (*Ham.* 2.2.428). Hamlet seems very pleased with the monologue, as he only stops the player after Polonius requesting so multiple times. Yet only a few lines later Hamlet calls the player's acting "monstrous," a mere "dream of passion" (2.2.545-6). What at first seemed a demand for genuine feeling has been thrust into a world of illusion. This begs the question whether Hamlet considers acting as a reflection some genuine feeling or as mere fiction.

The most direct thoughts that Hamlet communicates with regards to acting is the famous opening of the third act's second scene, the pivotal piece of the play's "accumulated mass of references to acting" (Holland 41). The Prince advises the players to handle their arms with moderation, to apply their training and talent with smoothness, and not to rely on the "histrionic and artificial" (H. Jenkins 287n9) or exceed "the modesty of nature" (3.2.19). He ends his speech by describing what constitutes a bad actor, noting that such a player "imitate[s] humanity so abominably" (3.2.35). Hamlet's "discourse on the art of acting and the abuses to which it is prone" (Hibbard 35) culminates in the renowned metaphor of "hold[ing] [...] the mirror up to nature"

[5] This distinction is made in order to avoid confusion. Of course, this distinction will only be relevant some of the time, in the sense that when I discuss 'theories on acting' this is synonymous with 'theories on performing'. I do not wish to imply a significant semantic difference between the two words for this paper.

(3.2.23). Indeed, 'nature' is an important part of Hamlet's reflections on acting, as he defines "the purpose of playing" (3.2.20) to be this very kind of mirroring. "Hamlet's naturalistic basis [for] drama" (Sammells 111) stems partly from the necessity to show the court a recognisable scene so that he can "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.601), and partly from the contemporaneous theatrical conventions. Weimann notes that Elizabethan theatre "attempt[ed] to imitate nature" (216) and H. Jenkins, when annotating this scene, also stresses the importance of the "widespread Renaissance theory of drama as an image of actual life" (288n21-2). In other words, Elizabethan theatre was greatly concerned with "*dramatic representation*" (Weimann 218). In this sense the image of the mirror is quite poignant, as a mirror reflects a near perfect representation of the reality around itself, but it never contains it. It always remains merely an image, a re-presentation. As Hardison formulates it clearly, "[t]he mirror metaphor opposes life to an image of life" (134). What Hamlet conveys to the players is how they should act in order to mirror his father's murder as clearly as possible. Similarly, when Hamlet feigns his madness, he relies on the naturalism of his portrayal to fool the court. However, he does not expect a display similar to our contemporary views on realistic performance. "Shakespeare is not interested in external realism" (Hornby 137). To understand this difference, one must understand that Renaissance "ideas about art and reality were [*organised*] *differently*," in the sense that this polarity – between art and life – was not the "modern actor's [...] realistic/antirealistic code," but instead "the Platonic one of Idea/Imitation;" Hamlet thus requests not that the players "avoid artifice," but rather that they avoid "anything that might blur the audience's perception of an Ideal form" (Hornby 16). This is how Hamlet manages to contemplate the fictionality of play-acting, while also stressing this naturalistic approach.

As it happens, the necessary separation between life and play does not contradict a naturalistic acting style. Leggatt makes the interesting point that "the paradox of theatre is that, never claiming to tell the truth, dealing only in seeming, it conveys through deceptions images of reality" (68). Hamlet himself also recognises it as a deception when he reflects that it is but "a fiction," a "dream of passion," a "forc[ing] the soul [...] to [...] conceit," "all for nothing" (2.2.546-7, 551). Yet it is 'deceptive' only from the player's perspective, as Hamlet actually admires his skill. The player mirrors the outward to represent the inward, and for Hamlet this distinction is crucial. From the very beginning of the play, Hamlet has been very much concerned with seeming and truth (1.2.76-86), because he believes there to be a distinction between the two which his uncle is concealing. By

deliberately mixing fiction with reality in *Gonzago*, Hamlet hopes to trick the King into betraying his true self. In this sense, Hamlet's theory on acting is (in part) formed by his specific need for its naturalism. In sum, Hamlet's insistence on both the fictionality and the naturalism of an actor's display is not a contradiction; on the contrary, his whole theory of dramatic representation relies on this very distinction.

Because of Hamlet's specific goal for the inset play, his focus regarding play-acting rests upon the portrayal's effect on the audience in question. *Hamlet*'s major theme of role-playing reflects the importance of these effects. When Hamlet decides to feign madness, he applies specific methods (as he articulates to Horatio after meeting the Ghost of his father, 1.5.176-87) so as to fool specific people. When Hamlet orders *Gonzago*, his whole purpose, as mentioned above, is to draw out the King. In fact, the most interesting cause of Claudius's reaction to *Gonzago* is the dramatic representation of an event that he not only externally but also internally – meaning 'emotionally' – identifies with. When Hamlet writes some of his own lines into *Gonzago*'s script in order to align the depicted events more closely to his uncle's situation (2.2.534-6), he does so because he requires the inset play to resemble life – to mirror nature – so that the play can inspire this identification by Claudius.

Hamlet's insistence on a naturalistic inset play is informed by multiple factors. Firstly, Shakespeare employs the play-within-the-play as a plot device, for "a murderer betraying his guilt on seeing his crime represented in a play" (H. Jenkins 103) is the whole reason for *Gonzago* being ordered in the first place. Secondly, "*Hamlet* depends for its structure on connections that are thematic rather than causal" (Hibbard 35), in the sense that the theme of role-playing is reflected in the very structure of the play. Role-playing is very much linked to Hamlet's revenge plot, as it informs the need for revenge (as foreshadowed in the later validated 'seeming' of King Claudius, 1.2) as well as the preparation of the revenge (the play-within-the-play, 3.2) and the execution of it (the tension between the King's role of 'an innocent' being overturned while Hamlet maintains his role of a madman, 5.2). By the end of *Hamlet* the show is up, not only for the audience in the theatre, but also for the characters on the stage.

II.ii *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: The Player and Identity

Upon meeting the Player, the audience of *R&GAD* are instantly made aware of the artistic practice of this new character: "An audience!" (*R&GAD* 12; Act 1) he cries out joyously. The irony here rests upon the fact that the Player is not addressing the audience, but Ros and Guil – even though they form a "disappointing" number by the Player's standards (15; Act 1). And yet the Player does not question their function: he and his troupe are actors, Ros and Guil must be their audience. Throughout the play it becomes abundantly clear that the Player is in fact free of any "existential uncertainty," due to his "wholehearted acceptance of acting as a mode of living" (Brassell 52).[6] Acting, according to the Player, simply involves "follow[ing] directions – there is no *choice* involved" (72; Act 2), and this also pertains to life. He even goes so far as to claim that actors are "the opposite of people" (55; Act 2). As Egan indicates, "[t]heir playing is all-encompassing and nonstop. Always in character, never out of costume, they [recognise] no limits to the time and place appropriate to dramatic play" (62). By living in, for, and through art, the Player presents to us his "disavowal of naturalism" (Sammells 111), for naturalism requires a reality to emulate, but for the Player reality and play are one and the same.

The idea that acting is living and living is acting creates some ambiguity surrounding the concept of identity, especially the Player's. "We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade," (55; Act 2) he explains to Ros and Guil, making it clear to them that the presence of an audience is "the single assumption which makes [their] existence viable" (54; Act 2). Identity is generally accepted as a core philosophical concept that Stoppard engages with (e.g. Bennett 8, Fleming 53), but the question remains what to make of the Player's sense of identity. If he is always in character, can he have one of his own? Is he in essence "the quintessential chameleon of identity but also the enactor of roles with fixed destinies" (Fleming 58), or has he "sold [his] identit[y] to become [an] actor" (Hunter 137)? The Players themselves do not seem disturbed by this conundrum. If anything they "willingly relinquish[] control" (Sammells 110) to "play out the roles predetermined for them by the gory melodramas of their repertoire" (Egan 61). Their "'on-stage' encounters hold the key to their existence" (Brassell 41). "Stoppard creates the circumstances for an

[6] Many other scholars have recognised this trope of acting as living (e.g. Egan 62, Robinson 39, Simard 59, Uchman 58).

ongoing debate about life as drama" (A. Jenkins 49) where the actors have no control and must follow the script, thus living in a state where no spontaneous action is possible. This is what the Player lives for, and it is the only way in which he knows how to live. Rather than concluding, then, that the Player lacks identity, one could argue that the Player identifies with his art, as it is in essence synonymous with his life.

The Player's theory on acting – seeing play-acting as a sense of identity – differs from Hamlet's – a method of reproducing nature – but the Player's ideas concerning the role of the audience in the theatrical event also differ from Hamlet's. When talking about acting death, Guil and the Player have the following exchange:

> GUIL. [...] how can you expect them to believe in your death?
> PLAYER. On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. They're conditioned to it. [...] Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in. (76; Act 2)

We can contrast this clearly with Hamlet's assumption regarding the audience's reactions to *Gonzago*:

> HAMLET. [...] I have heard
> That guilty creatures sitting at a play
> Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
> Been struck so to the soul that presently
> They have proclaim'd their malefactions. (*Ham.* 2.2.584-8)

For Hamlet, the quality of the scene determines the reaction of the audience, which is why he requires the players to play 'naturally'. Stoppard's Player, however, works on the assumption that realism will not produce a favourable reaction in his audience. It is not the mirroring of nature that touches the audience, it is the actor's ability to "match their expectations of what dying should look like," for which purpose the audience knowingly "suspend their disbelief" (A. Jenkins 46). So it is theatrical convention, an unspoken contract between the audience and the actors, that allows for

convincing death scenes, and "it is only when [this contract is] broken that the imitation of death becomes un- or too convincing" (A. Jenkins 44), which is exactly what happens in *Hamlet*. Claudius finds "the players' imitation too real and calls for lights" (A. Jenkins 45). For Hamlet, this constitutes a success, a sign that the players have acted naturally; for the Player, however, this constitutes a failure, as the King's reaction clearly signals that the theatrical conventions were not upheld.[7] Guil himself, despite his contempt for the Player's idea of acting death, proves this point when he stabs the Player in Act 3, thinking his victim to be dead, only to find him standing up mere seconds later to the applause of his troupe. As A. Jenkins illustrates, "Guil[] believes in the Player's death because he believes in the dagger, and the Player acts in a manner that answers those expectations" (46). As Boireau sums it up nicely, "[b]eing is saying is performing, the ontological truth of the Player" (140).

Thus, by living as an actor and acting as a person, the Player releases all sense of control and surrenders to the destiny of the written text, of the determined plan. His "dismissal of the pretensions of naturalism" (Sammells 105) stem from this lack of separation between art and life. If there is no separate life to imitate, as established above, a natural imitation of life will not constitute art. Rather, the Player embraces his lack (or possibly overabundance) of identity. The only entity that gives him a sense of purpose is an audience; it is even vital to his existence. Once "someone is *watching*" (54; Act 2), he fulfills his side of the implicit contract. There is a confluence in the Player's view on acting: as long as the audience are willing to suspend their disbelief, he will present to them what they already believed. This stands in contrast to Hamlet's theory on play-acting, which includes a clear (if ambivalent) distinction between the real and the (inset) play, and an assumption that the more realistic the play, the more intense the audience's experience is.

III. Metadrama

Both *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* have been deemed metadramatic plays. Holland, for example, understands *Hamlet* as being "obsessed with its own status as a play" (40). Abel, in his famous account on *Hamlet*, describes Shakespeare's play as "a superb example[] of metatheatre" (Puncher 6). In this vein, Puncher, in his introduction to Abel's collected essays, states that "Tom Stoppard's

[7] The Player is of course not aware of the King's guilt, so this failure does not necessarily reflect bad acting on the Tragedians side. The Player will merely assume that, because of the King's displeasure, the play will in some way not have met with his expectations, which is exactly correct, only the Player cannot know the nature of this injury.

[*R&GAD*] [is] metatheatre [...] in the most literal sense that [it is a play] about *Hamlet*, one of the paradigmatic examples of metatheatre" (21). In this theoretical chapter, I will first outline different approaches of defining and problematising 'metadrama'. In the second section, the model used for the metadramatic analyses of Shakespeare and Stoppard in chapter IV will be described. Finally, in the third section, there will be a brief reflection upon the influence of (post)modernism on metadrama and its importance for establishing what metadrama means to playwrights and audience members in contemporary society.

III.i Definitions and Difficulties

As with all literary concepts, 'metadrama' is difficult to define. Thumiger's extensive article about metatheatre throughout the ages highlights this problem by starting her essay with the statement that any analysis of metadrama "has to take notice of its lack of a universal definition" (9-10). She then presents the reader with a long list containing many different definitions attempted by scholars (10-11). Thumiger notes that in these definitions "a dualism between 'art' and 'life', 'fiction' and 'reality', and so forth is established" and that metatheatre seems to be "undermining and challenging these boundaries" (11). She consequently argues that these elements, along with "'self-awareness' and 'self-referentiality'" (11), are problematic, as they presuppose "an objective notion of 'self'" and "an agreement on what 'awareness' entails" (11). In short, she regards these definitions as misunderstanding the nature of interaction in theatre: it is not "the sum of individual subjectivities," but rather an "interaction between two 'communities', the public and the actors on stage" (11-12). I am very much inclined to agree with her. Even when analysing dramatic texts, the researcher must take into account the inherent performative possibilities and implications that the text presents. "[W]e should approach [metadrama] as a system of effects as varied and elusive as theatre itself" (Thumiger 15). The challenge, then, is to find out what these effects are and how to apply them, in this case, to a literary analysis. Lionel Abel, who coined the term 'metatheatre', recognised this distinction between metatheatre as a theoretic concept and the multiple manners in which it can be applied in a given dramatic work. He labels the play-within-the-play as an example of "a device, and not a definite form" (134). Due to the fuzziness of the term, many other elements or devices are suggested in the scholarly literature as being characteristic, or even defining, of metadrama. Boireau

goes so far to name 'repetition' as Stoppard's "own idiosyncratic brand of metadrama" (136). According to her, "repetitive dramatic situations" can carry "a high level of improbability" (139), which ties in to Abel's stance that "a lack of concern for the real" (Puncher 11) is a central feature of metatheatre. Yet, again, the problem presented by Thumiger arises, as we find ourselves using terms about 'reality' which remain undefined.

Another scholar who has written about an alternative approach to theatre has described a model for categorising the various forms in which metadrama can occur. Hornby, like Thumiger, stresses the importance of the "metadramatic experience of the audience," which he characterises as "one of unease, a dislocation of perception" (32). It seems that if we want to engage into a serious debate about metadrama, then we need to move towards "the theme of human perception" (Fei 101). For this purpose, Hornby presents a theory regarding the relationship between drama and reality that will inform the distinct metadramatic devices that he distinguishes. Claiming that "no form of drama or theatre is any closer or farther from life than any other" (17), he subsequently presents new axioms for how drama engages with life:

> 1. A play does not reflect life; instead, it reflects itself.
> 2. At the same time, it relates to other plays as a system.
> 3. This system, in turn, intersects with other systems of literature, nonliterary performance, other art forms (both high and low), and culture generally. Culture, as it centers on drama in this way, I shall refer to as the "drama/culture complex."
> 4. It is through the drama/culture complex, rather than through individual plays, that we interpret life. (17)

The manner in which one engages with theatre informs the manner in which one engages with culture and vice versa. Now that we understand that an analysis of metadrama should rest upon an awareness of perception and the effects that the various devices generate, we can fully appreciate the notion that "the *manner* in which a given play is metadramatic, and the degree to which the metadramatic is *consciously employed*" (Hornby 31) is the real object of the analysis.

III.ii Hornby's Varieties of Metadrama

Hornby, in his book, distinguishes five varieties of metadrama:

1. The play within the play.
2. The ceremony within the play.
3. Role playing within the role.
4. Literary and real-life reference.
5. Self reference. (32)

However, as my metadramatic analyses of *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* (in chapter IV) only concern varieties (1), (3), and (5),[8] I will restrict my discussion here to those three forms.

Hornby distinguishes two kinds of plays-within-the-play, namely "the 'inset' type, [...] a [play] set apart from the main action, [...] [and] the 'framed' type, [where] the inner play is primary, with the outer play a framing device" (33). *Gonzago* is a clear example of an inset type. For a play-within-the-play to be metadramatic, however, "there must be two sharply distinguishable layers of [play]," meaning that the characters of the outer play "must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and [...] they [must] acknowledge it as a [play]" (35). This is a specific requirement for a metadramatic inset play that differentiates Hornby from other scholars, as he identifies the necessary conditions for a given play with an inset play to influence an audience's perception.

Role-playing-within-the-role, described by Hornby, "adds a third metadramatic layer to the audience's experience: a character is playing a role, but the character [herself] is being played by [a performer]" (68). This effect can be achieved in many different manners, for which Hornby distinguishes three broad types of roles-within-the-role (73-74): voluntary (meaning that "a character consciously and willingly takes on a role different from [her] ordinary self"), involuntary (meaning that a character is either unwillingly or subconsciously taking on a role, either because of outer or inner factors), and allegorical (meaning that a character is related to "some well-known literary or historical figure" with allegorical associations).

[8] The reasons for this choice of varieties will be outlined in chapter IV, which is when the metadramatic analyses of both given plays begin.

When self-reference arises, "the play directly calls attention to itself as a play, an imaginative fiction" (Hornby 103). The play-within-the-play has a similar effect on the audience, but what sets self-reference apart is that it is "direct and immediate" (104) and "always strongly metadramatic" (103). Hornby classifies this as a radical change in "the audience's relationship with [the performance]" (105), explaining that the "boundary between foreground (the dramatic illusion) and background (the 'realities' that define the illusion)" remains intact, but the audience experience "a shift in perception that turns the field of thought inside out" (106).

III.iii The Importance of Being Metadramatic: (Post)modernism

"Metatheatre has replaced tragedy," Abel breaks to us, because it gives "the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness" (147, 183). The consequences of this shift in theatrical perception is what makes discussions about metadrama so important, especially if understood within the context of Hornby's drama/culture complex. If we interpret life through the intersection between theatre as a broad system and culture generally (Hornby 17), then the importance of how this (meta)drama works merits devoted attention. In the cases of Shakespeare and Stoppard, concerns regarding "an interest in a changing world" (Puncher 24) are relevant to both centuries, as "the Renaissance's 'recognition of the discontinuous nature of human identity' and its 'clash of paradigms' [are] themes particularly relevant to twentieth-century concerns" (Freeman 21). In this sense, the fact that both Shakespeare and Stoppard are "rais[ing] questions of human identity" (Hornby 68) should not come as a surprise. The main difference between the two eras can be illustrated by means of *Gonzago*. Hornby notes that "the inner play is an obvious illusion (since we see other characters watching it) [and that] reminds us that the [performance] *we* are watching is also an illusion" (45). Landfester, however, states that "in the twentieth century there are no such boundaries to be blurred, only a compound of realities derived from individual ways of performing one's identity" (130). In a "postmodern world [...] devoid of meaning" (Best and Kellner 127), "Stoppard's drama on drama clears the way for the world to be perceived anew" (Boireau 149). Metadrama "thus participates in a larger attempt to explain modernism" (Puncher 3), as it explores how perceptions can be changed and finds innovative ways to engage with the unknown nature of 'reality'.

Despite being conceived in the sixties, *R&GAD* seems to fit more within the paradigm of modernism than of postmodernism (Vanden Heuvel 223). Though Stoppard thrusts Shakespeare's courtiers in a world without meaning or purpose, that loss is sorely felt and mourned for, and the pursuit of some sort of explanation, though in vein, is not portrayed as a useless activity for Ros and Guil. The Player, having relinquished all control, has not exactly surrendered himself to a set of rules in a meaningless world, rather he has pledged his identity to a function that creates (theatrical) meaning. The playworlds make sense and the Player has decided to live within those. In a sense, then, Stoppard seems to be teetering upon the cliff of modernism, peering down at postmodernist possibilities, but keeping his feet firmly on the ground. Writing in a time when modernist concerns about a shifting cultural paradigm have been abandoned for a more empty world, Stoppard reflects the consequences of this lack of meaning in *R&GAD*.

IV. Metadramatic Devices in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

As mentioned earlier, three of Hornby's varieties of metadrama will be applied in this section. In *Hamlet*, we find role-playing-within-the-role, in *R&GAD* we find self-reference and both utilise a play-within-the-play. These varieties were chosen specifically because, firstly, they are the most closely related to the theme of acting, and, secondly, they apply strongly to the two principal characters under discussion here, namely Shakespeare's Hamlet and Stoppard's Player.

IV.i The Madman and the Inset Play

In the following two subsections, I will focus on *Hamlet* and analyse the metadramatic implications of role-playing-within-the-role and the play-within-the-play, focussing on Hamlet's part in establishing the metadramatic effects.

IV.i.1 Role-Playing Within the Role: The Seeming Truth

As explained by Hornby in his definition of role-playing-within-the-role (68), the metadramatic effect of this device stems from an added layer to the audience's perception of a given character. This extra dramatic level of perception reminds the audience of the first dramatic layer, that a performer

is performing a character, which is an awareness usually is suspended within theatrical conventions. In a similar manner, Hamlet's repeated reflections on the quality of portrayals, of himself and of others, heighten this metadramatic effect. This is clearly felt when he advises the players on acting, taking on the role of the director – besides the roles of the avenger and the madman. The implication of the whole "speak the speech" monologue (*Ham.* 3.2.1-45) is that the performer of Hamlet is executing what the character of Hamlet is commending. If, in fact, the performer is not following Hamlet's acting advice, then the effect is still metadramatic because it either indicates the performer's inability to perform properly, if we assume that Hamlet's advice is legitimate, or it ironically emphasises Hamlet's inability to be a director, if we assume that, because Hamlet is not a professional actor, his acting theory cannot be counted upon.[9] Either Hamlet is right and the performer is doing a bad job, which would remind the audience of this sad fact, or the performer is spouting a theory on acting that does not correspond with the performance itself, which would remind the audience of the performer's superiority over Hamlet, again achieving a very metadramatic effect.

In addition to the raised awareness by the audience of the outer dramatic layer, the new layer established by the role-playing-within-the-role needs discussing. When Hamlet considers shows of grief as "actions that a man might play" (1.2.84) "while claiming [that] outward signs are clues to his inward state" (Leggatt 63), he is mourning the loss of distinction between what is real and what is not, for now he takes everything on "seems" (1.2.76), as most people around him portray externally something different from their inner worlds. His role-playing a madman is his concession to a corrupt world where charade can pass for the genuine article. Hornby believes that Hamlet's role-playing "is both voluntary and involuntary" in the sense that his "feigned madness [...] [is a] false face[] that reveal[s] deep inner truths about [his] character[]" (75, 67). Thus, a bizarre metadramatic situation arises where Hamlet's reflection upon what constitutes a convincing role become metadramatic even though Hamlet is not always self-aware. Not only is the feigned madness an important plot device and an embodiment of the broader theme of role-playing and theatricality, it can also metadramatically remind the audience, when Hamlet puts on his madness, of the performer who is putting on Hamlet, for Hamlet's role-playing is simply that: a theatrical illusion designed to

[9] A third possible interpretation is that this speech reflects the playwright's ideas about performance, which would make this monologue implicitly self-referential. However, as this is never directly asserted in the play itself, it cannot fall under Hornby's definition of self-reference and will therefore not be discussed here.

fool his whole audience, though that does not extend to the audience in the theatre, a fact of which we are made disconcertingly aware. By creating an illusion for the court, Hamlet destroys the illusion for his audience.

IV.i.2 The Play Within the Play: *The Murder of Gonzago*

Gonzago is not merely an expansion on the theme of role-playing (H. Jenkins 141), it is also an important plot device, as Hamlet orders the play with a clear objective in mind. However, Shakespeare complicates the matter. Even though Hamlet intends to "[confront the murderer] with his crime," he also "alerts him to the threat of vengeance" (H. Jenkins 128). The character of 'Lucianus' embodies this duality when he appears as "*The* Poisoner" (*Ham.* 296sd)[10] in the dumbshow and later, in *Gonzago* itself, as the "nephew to the King" (3.2.239). The court interprets him as a nameless perpetrator, while the audience first read him as a stand-in for Claudius, but later changes their interpretation of the role when "upon the image of the murder can now be superimposed an image of its revenge" (H. Jenkins 509n239) in the form of Hamlet, nephew to King Claudius.

Questions on framing and interplay boundaries can now be posed. To return to his definition of the play-within-the-play, Hornby stresses the need for "a continuous link between the outer and the inner play;" in the case of *Hamlet*, "the characters of the outer play fully acknowledge the existence of [*Gonzago*]" (33). That being said, when considering the case of Lucianus, this acknowledgement is more difficult to attain for the audience of *Hamlet*. Malone, when discussing framing in *Hamlet*, believes that the "distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the theatrical performance [...] is always problematic, and [that] the play-within-the-play calls attention to the difficulty of defining this distinction" (57). She also refers to Lucianus (58), explaining that "[a]s the [p]layers enact [*Gonzago*], the boundaries between framing play and framed play, between elements inside and outside the spectacle, become pointedly blurred" (57). Thus, the metadramatic effect of the inset play depends on the clear-cut distinction between inner and outer plays by the characters in *Hamlet*, while at the same time the audience of *Hamlet* witnesses the dramatic tension established

[10] When citing stage directions, I will borrow the citational method common within theatre studies, namely the page number of the play's edition followed by the initials 'sd' for 'stage direction'. Moreover, stage directions will be cited in accordance with the formatting of the original.

by this dual status fulfilled by Lucianus, as "Lucianus becomes identified with both" killer and avenger (H. Jenkins 145). One could say that the conflation of these nemeses serves as a narrative device "whereby a key incident or motif is repeated or anticipated in a different mode" (H. Jenkins 135). Hamlet therefore seems to undermine the metadrama of the inset play, for his identification of Lucianus transforms it to a narrative device. For the audience, the boundaries between the plays' frameworks become blurred, leading to *Gonzago* being more embedded within the structure and the theme of *Hamlet*, rather than a theatrical device with a distinctly metadramatic effect. Yet simultaneously only the audience can fully appreciate the messy boundaries between *Hamlet* and *Gonzago* (with the deliberate exception of Claudius). Shakespeare has provided us with both effects: a metadramatic device where "we watch [performers performing] people (Hamlet, Horatio) watching [performers performing] people (Claudius, Gertrude) watching [performers performing] actors (The Players) acting people (Player King and Queen, Lucianus) travestying people who are watching (Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet)" (Hunter 135) even though it is deeply embedded within *Hamlet*.

IV.ii The Dress Rehearsal and the Performer

Here I will explore the complications regarding the Player's 'play-within-the-play' and his inherent self-referentiality.

IV.ii.1 The Plays Within the Play: Playing Within and Without

Many scholars have written about the relationship between *R&GAD* and *Hamlet* in terms of the 'on- and off-stage', meaning that Stoppard presents to us his version of what happens 'backstage' of *Hamlet* (Bennett 9, Boireau 137, Brassell 39, Brater 204, Fei 102, Hornby 94, Simard 53, Uchman 49). Though I appreciate the ease of the metaphor, it is a viewpoint wherein the authority of *Hamlet* has not been shaken off, and I am of mind that *R&GAD* operates perfectly well on its own, this in contrast to some scholars who claim that knowledge of *Hamlet* is necessary to understand *R&GAD* (e.g. Brassell 50, Fei 103). Freeman suggests that Stoppard has created a "complex staging of two plays occupying one space" (25), which, again, is an attractive image, but it does not allow for an analysis of *R&GAD* as an independent play. A more impartial approach to *R&GAD* is to term it an

'adaptation', as some scholars have done (Fei 103, Hornby 94, Hunter 138, Levenson 162). Only the nature and structure of Stoppard's adaptation informs this on-stage/off-stage metaphor as powerfully as it does in the literature, which is not surprising, but also not exhaustive. Cahn tries to account for Ros and Guil's inactivity by suggesting that "the two are but spectators at a performance of *Hamlet*" (49), which also undermines the creative input of Stoppard himself. Some scholars have suggested that the relationship between Shakespeare and Stoppard is one based upon intertextuality (Boireau 137, Meyer 106, Thumiger 35), which can account for why Hornby discusses Stoppard in his chapter about literary and real-life reference.[11] This manner of interpreting *R&GAD*, founded on the idea that it is a heavily intertextual adaptation of *Hamlet*, more accurately accounts for the specific kind of 'presence' of *Hamlet* in Stoppard's play and disposes of the derivative implication of the off-stage metaphor. As Huston asserts, "[Ros] and [Guil] are not, as critics claim, trapped in the *Hamlet*-world; they are rather trapped in Stoppard's dramatic world, [...] even if Stoppard's theatrical magic periodically conjures up pieces of the *Hamlet*-world" (56).

The reason for this difficulty behind the two plays' relationship, even when understanding one as an adaptation of the other, is the idea that the plays are 'layered' in *R&GAD* in such a manner that the two are difficult to distinguish. Though I think Fei is being reductive when she states that the "frame of Stoppard's play is of course Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" (102), she does identify that "the boundary between inner and outer play disappears completely" (101). Is *Hamlet* a play-within-the-play of *R&GAD*, or the other way around, or both at once? According to Hornby's definition, none of those options are viable, because nobody acknowledges either play as a play, and when they do, the situation is not so straightforward.

To grasp the complexity of the situation, we must turn to the only acknowledged inset play in Stoppard. The play-within-the-play in *R&GAD* is actually a dress rehearsal of *Gonzago*, which will ultimately consist of solely the rehearsal of the dumbshow (*R&GAD* 68-77; Act 2).[12] *Hamlet*'s dumbshow ends with the following description: "*The Poisoner woos the Queen with gifts. She seems harsh awhile, but in the end accepts his love. Exeunt*" (*Ham.* 269sd). This, however, merely constitutes the end of the first act of *Gonzago* in *R&GAD*. The Tragedians promptly continue the mime with

[11] 'Adaptation' is one of Hornby's subtypes of literary reference.

[12] In essence, a similar metadramatic effect results from the rehearsal than if it were a play-within-the-play proper. We are merely witnessing a different stage of the inset play's creative process.

"*a love scene, sexual and passionate, between the Queen and the Poisoner/King*" (72sd). As the second act of this mime unfolds, "Stoppard stretches the playlet's fabric" (Brassell 50) to include the plot of *Hamlet*, which runs concurrently the plot of *R&GAD*. As opposed to *Hamlet*'s *Gonzago*, where the inset play portrays only the events prior to the start of *Hamlet* – a kind of prequel within the play – Stoppard's *Gonzago* exhibits the closet scene, the stabbing of Polonius, the banishment of Hamlet accompanied by two cloaked figures, and his escape from the boat. So far, the playlet has extended from *Gonzago* into *Hamlet*, with great metadramatic effect as it is both literarily referential and, due to *R&GAD* borrowing its plot from Shakespeare, self-referential. After the disappearance of the Prince in Stoppard's dumbshow, *Gonzago* does not pursue Hamlet, but lingers with the two spies on their journey to England:

> PLAYER. [...] The plot has thickened - a twist of fate and cunning has put into their hands a letter that seals their deaths!
>
> *The two Spies present their letter; the English King reads it and orders their deaths. They stand up as the Player whips off their cloaks preparatory to execution.*
>
> PLAYER. Traitors hoist by their own petard? – or victims of the Gods? – we shall never know! (74; Act 2)

Gonzago becomes *Hamlet* becomes *R&GAD*, as the events quoted above form part of the plot of Stoppard's third act. The audience's vision is "doubled even tripled" (Fei 101), because outer, inner, and original play are all fused together so that we no longer know which is which. This is a typical feature of twentieth century plays within plays, as Hornby characterises their outer plays as having "boundaries between inner and outer play [that become] blurred and sometimes disappear[]" (47). Brassell, too, suggests that there is no longer a focus "upon the ambivalence of a real world and a playworld. Instead, it is two playworlds that collide, that of *Hamlet* and, inextricably reined to it, [Ros] and [Guil]'s own" (49).

When considering how this stretching of *Gonzago* prompts this very strong metadramatic effect, the role of Lucianus in *R&GAD*'s dumbshow marks an illustrative difference from *Hamlet*'s. In Stoppard, there is no conflation between Hamlet and King Claudius, as Lucianus is introduced as "nephew to the king ... usurped by his uncle and shattered by his mother's incestuous marriage"

(73; Act 2). So, unlike in *Hamlet*, the theatre audience do not reinterpret whom Lucianus corresponds to: the Poisoner remains Claudius and Lucianus is Hamlet. This is particularly striking because, as discussed in subsection IV.i.2, in *Hamlet* it is this conflation of two characters that diminishes the inset play's metadramatic effect, and in *R&GAD* it is necessarily omitted to create this very particular branch of metadrama. In fact, Hamlet and Claudius need to fulfill their roles in *Hamlet* so that Ros and Guil can fulfill theirs in this dumbshow and, by extension, in *R&GAD*. It is Ros and Guil's deaths that will signal the end of Stoppard's play, as they are the protagonists, so the audience of *R&GAD* would not benefit from the ambiguity of Lucianus as it existed in *Hamlet*. Thus, as Claudius stays Claudius and Hamlet remains his nephew, Stoppard's inset rehearsal becomes self-referential, and therefore strongly metadramatic, by foreshadowing the fate of the titular pair.

IV.ii.2 Self-Reference: The Performing Player

The two dominant positions on the Player in the literature either emphasise the metadramatic tendencies of the Player (e.g. Brassell 41) or read him as an integrated part of the plot (e.g. A. Jenkins 49). In other words, he is either omniscient,[13] or simply a main character. The problem with this dichotomy is that it undermines the complexity of Stoppard's play, namely in that it operates on multiple levels at the same time. Of course, some scholars have noticed this doubleness (e.g. Fleming 60), but it is rarely further expanded upon. Though the Player is not strictly speaking aware that he is also a performer in *R&GAD*, his personality is characterised by a "self-conscious theatricality" (Fei 104), in the sense that he always acting in some sense. The following fragment emphasises this point, and will serve as an illustration to explore Stoppard's particular kind of metadrama in the further discussion of self-reference:

> GUIL. Well ... aren't you going to change into your costume?
>
> PLAYER. **I never change out of it**, sir.
>
> GUIL. **Always in character.**

[13] As discussed in section III.i, the problem with the concept of omniscience or self-awareness is that it disregards the function of the audience in a theatrical situation. As shall be argued for in this subsection, Stoppard has not created a godlike character who has explicit knowledge of future events. The situation is more complex than this.

PLAYER. That's it.

Pause.

GUIL. Aren't you going to – come *on*?

PLAYER. **I *am* on.**

GUIL. But if you *are* on, you can't *come* on. *Can* you?

PLAYER. I *start* on.

GUIL. **But it hasn't *started*.** (25; Act 1; emphasis in bold added)

The four bolded lines are incredibly ambiguous when read within the framework of self-reference. With regards to the first, namely the idea of never changing out of costume, one could state that as long as the performer is performing the Player, he too remains in costume, so that as long as the play exists "he never changes out of it." Simultaneously, this line relates to another that the Player recounts to the titular pair about his troupe later in the play: "We always use the same costumes more or less, and they forget what they are supposed to be *in* you see" (68; Act 2). So the ongoing wearing of the costume holds true both for the character and for the performer of the Player. A similar situation occurs with the second bolded line, "always in character," because the Player as a character is always playing (as he regards acting as a mode of living), but of course the performer performing the Player also remains in character for as long as the performance is going on. Then, "I *am* on" once more refers both to the performer on the stage and to the Player about to start a play-within-a-play.

The most obscure line is the last, however: "But it hasn't *started*." If we interpret this line analogously to the previous three, we would need to conclude that it refers both to the play-within-the-play that the Player has promised to play and to *R&GAD* as a performance. However, finding ourselves on page 25 of the text, to claim that *R&GAD* "has not started yet" is more difficult to argue. Another possible explanation is that Guil is referring metadramatically to *Hamlet*, as up until now the explicit *Hamlet* framework has been blissfully absent (although only one page separates Ros and Guil from the scary world of Elsinore). This is the first instance in which Stoppard, very subtly, blurs frames and confuses perspectives for those members of the audience who are familiar with *Hamlet*, thus anticipating the more complicated framing of the dress rehearsal in Act 2. This is the ambiguity of Stoppard's metadrama, as it is always both metadramatic in its own right *and* plausible

in the story, operating on two levels, which not only accounts for the Player's theories about acting also having this status but also for the widely debated sense of confusion that Ros and Guil are suffering under. Boireau mentions the term "'circular self-reference' of the performance aspect" (141), an enlightening term to describe what Stoppard creates here. When the Player spews the famous line, "*Decides?* It is *written*" (72; Act 2) when speaking of the action of a play, he alludes to the play that he as a character is about to play, and to Stoppard's play of which he himself is a participant, but also to the plot of *Hamlet* which drives *R&GAD*.

V. Act Natural: Actors and Metadrama

Because Hamlet's ideas about acting have a narrative purpose, this has consequences for the metadramatic effect of the play-within-the-play and the role-playing-within-the-role. On the one hand, Shakespeare has blurred the boundaries between the inset play (an ordinarily very metadramatic device) and the outer play. Because of this, the audience's attention is drawn away from the metadrama to the contemplation of the unique relationship between *Gonzago* and the plot of *Hamlet*. This is in part due to Hamlet's significant reflections on his need for the distinction between truth and fiction, between life and art, to develop his ideas about theatre.[14] On the other hand, Hamlet's role-playing, both of the madman and the director, actually increases the metadramatic effect due to his continuous reflections upon the nature of role-playing (i.e. his theory on acting). However, role-playing-within-the-role is usually less metadramatic than the play-within-the-play. Yet the role-playing is informed by Hamlet's theory on acting, which he formulates with a specific goal in mind, which not only embeds the theory, but also embeds the role-playing more heavily into the play. Rather than being merely integrated, as in Stoppard's play, where the metadrama operates on multiple levels in such a way that the whole existence of *R&GAD* seems to depend on its metadrama, Shakespeare's metadrama is actually embedded with the play's plot, structure, and theme, weakening its effect on the audience. The result is that *Hamlet* stops short of

[14] This does not imply that the theory on acting that Hamlet expresses should be reduced to this necessity, as there are many other reasons why Shakespeare could have included these reflections about theatre in his play, but they fall outside of the scope of this paper. Not discussed here is the possible 'real-life reference' effect that these theories could have had on Shakespeare's contemporaneous audience.

its full metadramatic potential, because the narrative function diminishes metadrama of the play-within-the-play and by extension overrides the effect of the role-playing-within-the-role.

If we turn to Stoppard, his strongest metadramatic effect, namely self-reference, is still contained within the play. The Player's theory on acting, in fact, also has this double status. The idea that 'acting is living' operates both for the character of the Player, in the sense that he is a professional actor whose work is all-encompassing, and for *R&GAD* itself, in the sense that anything that constitutes the 'life' of the play requires performance, a very simple point which Stoppard metadramatically plays with throughout. The layered tiers of performance and play of the dress rehearsal reflects the layering of the Player's theory on acting: acting is living is being, and similarly *Gonzago* (the world which the troupe enacts in the play) is *Hamlet* (the world in which the players narratively live) is *R&GAD* (the world in which Stoppard's Player exists). These indistinguishable layers in the play-within-the-play correspond to the Player's lack of distinction between life and art, because what constitutes life for the Player is acting, and in the case of *Gonzago* he is acting out the plot of the playworld of which he is a player. This lack of distinction between art and life is illustrated by his advice to Ros and Guil in the following extract:

> PLAYER. Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.
>
> GUIL. But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to *act*.
>
> PLAYER. Act natural. You know why you're here at least.
>
> GUIL. We only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true.
>
> PLAYER. For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust [...] One acts on assumptions. (58; Act 2)

Important here is the ambiguous verb 'to act', because if this 'acting' refers to natural or normal behaviour, then this is not 'acting' in the Player's sense of the word (Bennett 11). 'To act' here "wilfully confuses action with acting, and the agent with the actor" (Sammells 110), the implication being that if we truly have no control, as the Player maintains, then we must surrender to "a dramatic

plan whose inherent significance and purpose we can neither know nor be certain exists" (Egan 64). Ros and Guil sometimes even "have difficulty telling when they are their genuine [selves] and when they are acting" (Fei 103). The Player would say that it is all the same, and that Ros and Guil confuse life with art because they cannot understand that there is no difference between them:

> ROS. I want a good story, with a beginning, middle and end.
> PLAYER. *(to Guil)* And you?
> GUIL. I'd prefer art to mirror life, if it's all the same to you.
> PLAYER. It's all the same to me, sir. (73; Act 2)

While Ros and Guil would prefer to return to a Shakespearean world where the distinction between art and life is maintained, or at least considered important, the Player assures them that they are one and the same. All these reflections are presented to us by characters in a play, to great metadramatic effect.

"Holding the mirror up to nature" and "acting natural" greatly differ in their uses of 'nature' and its relationship to art. In Shakespeare, nature refers to reality, or at least to the Idea of it, and relates to play-acting in the sense that theatre should be a good representation of nature, of life. The Player, however, asserts that there is no reality to imitate. For him, to "act natural" means to "act on assumptions," to follow the script, to present to your 'audience' what they expect to see. In a sense, just as actors are "the opposite of people" (55; Act 2), acting natural is the opposite of play-acting, yet at the same time no distinction can be drawn between the two.

Furthermore, Stoppard also plays with the Player's notion of the importance of the audience's expectation. An excellent example of this is the moment after Guil, who is of the strongest opinion that "you can't act death" (76; Act 2), has stabbed the Player and realises that he has unknowingly wielded a retractable blade:[15]

> *While he is dying, Guil, nervous, high, almost hysterical, wheels on the Tragedians* – [...]
> *The Tragedians watch the Player die: they watch with some interest. The Player finally*

[15] This example was also discussed in section II.ii.

lies still. A short moment of silence. Then the Tragedians start to applaud with genuine admiration. The Player stands up, brushing himself down.

PLAYER. *(modestly)* Oh, come, come, gentlemen – no flattery – it was merely competent – [...] *The Player approaches Guil* [...]

PLAYER. What did you think? *(Pause.)* You see, it *is* the kind they do believe in – it's what is expected. [...] For a moment you thought I'd – cheated. (115; Act 3)

After repeatedly reminding his audience that everything on stage is an illusion and that we will believe what we expect to believe, Stoppard still manages to fool us in this instant, as we cannot know for certain "whether [the Player] is acting death, or only acting an actor acting death" (Hunter 22). And still, this moment cited above, one of the most deceptive metadramatic moments in the whole play, operates within the play too, because the Player has explained what he considers theatre and performing to be. By making his metadramatic devices part of the characterisation of the Player, through his theories on acting, Stoppard is able to walk this subtle and delicate line between distinct and integrated metadrama. As he does many times throughout *R&GAD*, Guil in the following exchange has accidentally hit upon a very significant point, even though he does not grasp the implication of what he is declaring:

PLAYER. And I know which way the wind is blowing.

GUIL. Operating on two levels, are we?! How clever! I expect it comes naturally to you, being in the business so to speak. (57-8; Act 2)

VI. Conclusion

Hamlet's theory on acting relies on the philosophy that art should mirror life, that theatre should represent nature. The Platonic manner of imitating nature befits Renaissance theories on play-acting, from which we can conclude that the metadramatic effects in *Hamlet* will presumably correspond to a relationship between performance and reality that conforms to Renaissance theatre practices. In *Hamlet*, the Prince's theory on acting not only reflects contemporaneous theatrical conventions, but is also heavily embedded within the structure of the play. A sense of thematic unity

ties *Hamlet* together, which allows for many manifestations of, and plot devices concerning, 'playing'. Suspicions surrounding the travesties of the court, the feigned madness, the directorial instructions to the players, and the inset play are all illustrations of such manifestations where Hamlet expresses his need for a distinction between illusion and reality. In fact, his whole internal conflict in the play rests on this distinction, with Hamlet trying to sort out the 'seemers' from the truth-sayers, the manipulators from the manipulated. Many of the aforementioned manifestations produce a metadramatic effect, yet Hamlet's ideas about theatre weaken this effect because his theory is, narratively speaking, ultimately a means to an end, namely to affect Claudius. Hamlet's role-playing also conforms to this idea of having a conscious intention, as he indeed (believes that he) manages to fool the court into thinking that he is mad, [16] and Claudius is indeed affected by the inset play. Even though the court acknowledges the inset play as a play, the audience of *Hamlet* is preoccupied with the connection between the inner play and the outer play, partly because the plot is alike and partly because of the double status of Lucianus, who represents both Claudius and Hamlet. Thus, the audience are distracted from recognising the first dramatic layer, namely the awareness of the performers on stage. Hamlet's theory on theatre contributes to this, as for him a natural representation is still a fiction, no matter how close to life it gets, and he ensures that his audience remain aware of this distinction, thus causing the inset play to lose some its potential metadramatic effect. Shakespeare presents an idea of human perception where truth and lie can be blurred, but the distinction is always present.

The Player, on the other hand, recognises no such distinction between art and life. The world is a stage, acting is living, and nobody has any control, agency, or access to truth. Because the Player presents himself (both to Ros and Guil and to the audience of *R&GAD*) as an actor always acting, the audience become aware of the performer who is always performing. Stoppard's subtle use of self-reference allows for this constant double vision. The dress rehearsal is a sharp illustration of this, as yet another layer is added and the boundaries between *Gonzago*, *Hamlet*, and *R&GAD* become indistinguishable, both for the audience and for Ros and Guil. Stoppard differs from Shakespeare, then, when he makes the inset play raised above *R&GAD*, rather than embedded within the framed play. This makes sense if we remember how the Player considers theatre: if acting is being, then no

[16] In fact, the only person who remains unconvinced is Claudius, who himself is 'seeming' his way through the play.

strict boundaries can be drawn between art, life, or play. His perpetual compliance with the script not only saves him from the existential questions which Hamlet, and Ros and Guil struggle with, it also creates a distinct metadramatic effect. By maintaining that he is always in character, that he has no choice in the matter, that he has nothing to worry about for all that must happen will happen,[17] the Player, through his theory on play-acting, presents a character who is always both player and performer, and reflects the usage of metadramatic devices that conflate *Hamlet* and *R&GAD* so that the relationship between the two plays becomes obscured.

The different theories on play-acting of Hamlet and the Player not only reflect differences with regards to theatrical conventions of their respective creators, they also account in part for how these different eras present metadrama to their respective audiences. Hamlet's theory on play-acting is narratively determined by his intention of utilising *Gonzago* and his role of 'madman' for specific objectives. The Player's theory, on the other hand, is informed by his broader view of life. He draws no distinction between art and life, and therefore his emphasis lies upon the expectations of the audience. When Claudius stops the production, this must signal a disappointing production of *Gonzago* for the Player, because the King has not upheld his side of the implicit contract between actor and spectator, whereas for Hamlet a play that is so natural that it breaks this contract is most desirable. This is why the Player maintains that, whether or not it is realistic, players must kill each other as the audience expect it to occur, and Hamlet orders the players to portray the murder as it actually happened, for only then would the audience (though chiefly Claudius) believe it. And yet, despite their distinct theories of acting – one serving Shakespeare's narrative structure, the other serving Stoppard's unique brand of metadrama – they both agree that the purpose of playing is to 'act natural'.

[17] He "aim[s] at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies" (*R&GAD* 71; Act 2).

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