

Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: Transformations and Adaptation

MAREA MITCHELL

Transformation is not ... an operation performed by the author alone or a virtuoso display passively admired by a static spectator. Rather, it is Stoppard's method for revising the artistic past and its customary expectations in league with a literate audience whose recognition and enjoyment of textual mingling completes the transformational process.¹

Defined by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as a 'change in shape, form or appearance,' transformation is a term that can be applied in many ways to *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*² both as individual texts, and to the relationship between them. Identified as a way of thinking about texts and the relationships between them in recent years for HSC study, transformation is an allusive and suggestive topic that opens up fields of critical inquiry. Focussing on transformation can be a way of avoiding value judgments about texts as to whether one is better than another. The non-judgmental tone of the term transformation also discourages discussion about whether the second text is faithful to the original as if this were the source of its value, thus avoiding 'fidelity criticism,' in which everything older is better.³ In all sorts of ways focussing on transformation both as process (the way a text is changed) and product (the second text as significant in itself) is an important part of seeing texts in context and of acknowledging historical difference. A focus on transformation reflects some of the seismic upheavals that have occurred in

¹ Katherine E Kelly (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 'Introduction,' p. 11.

² Subsequent references are abbreviated to *R & G*.

³ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge: New York and London, 2006) p. xiii and pp. 1-32.

the last thirty years in the discipline of English, particularly in relation to notions of canon and literary and aesthetic value.

Transformation as a concept, however, by virtue of its broad applicability can also be elusive or of such general applicability as to lack traction. This essay attempts to harvest some of the fruit that thinking about transformation can produce in three different ways. First, how can the term be delimited or subdivided to make it more useful; what kinds of transformations are there in the plays and between the plays? Second, how might using adaptation as an adjunct term help in rethinking the relations between Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays? And third, the notion of transformation implies the perception of change, so how does a consideration of audience help refine what transformation might mean?

As a preliminary example and by way of trying to impose some order on a discussion that threatens to be as unruly as the Ghost of Hamlet itself we can turn to an occasion in the play where the issue of transformation is directly discussed in a scene that includes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Summoning the two friends to find out what is the matter with Hamlet, and to cheer him up ('draw him on to pleasures' 2 2 15) Claudius speaks of his step-son and nephew thus:

Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation — so call it
Sith nor th' exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was.

(2.2.4-7)

Claudius's point here is that Hamlet is not what he was, either in his appearance or essence. The audience, of course, knows slightly different given that Hamlet has previously counselled Horatio not to give him away if 'perchance hereafter [he] shall think meet/To put an antic disposition on' (1 5 169-70). Transformation depends, as Claudius says, upon resemblance, understood as the recognition of a connection between events and the recognition of the difference between events. This turns our attention to the knowledge and role of the audience, as suggested in the epigraph with which I began. After all, the sense that change has occurred relies on the perception by an observer of the relationship between different phases of the event or person. Without this perception there can be no notion of

change. In what follows, then, I explore some aspects of transformation and adaptation within and between *Hamlet* and *R & G* specifically as they are understood by observers and participants within and beyond the plays themselves.

It would make sense to begin with the historically earlier text. *Hamlet*, after all, begins with the profound sense of change within the state of Denmark presaged by the nightly appearance of a ‘thing’ that stalks at midnight, or as Horatio puts it

usurp’st this time of night
 Together with that fair and warlike form
 In which the majesty of buried Demark
 Did sometimes march.

(1.1.20 & 45-48)⁴

Here the notion of political change, of social and moral deterioration, is intimately linked to the physical change in the state’s ultimate leader. The figure of the king in *Hamlet* is changed in two very powerful senses. First, the dead king returns to challenge one of the most significant transformations of all, from life to death, and second, the role of king has passed to the murderer. While the Ghost of Hamlet’s father is immediately recognised by the sentinels Marcellus and Barnardo it is significant that his appearance and aspect are those of battle, indicating the link between the personal (murder and betrayal) and the political (a throne usurped, a country taken over).

The appearance of the Ghost of Hamlet’s father is the visual indication that the changes in the state of Denmark have a physical and material cause. It is from the Ghost that we, along with Hamlet, learn of the murder of the appointed king by his brother, the usurpation of the throne and the ‘o’er hasty’ marriage of the murdered king’s wife. The Ghost acts as a catalyst, an agent of change, in the play, even if that rate of change is slow as Hamlet ponders and prevaricates over the action he needs to take. A key moment in the play reflects Hamlet’s inability to take action at the same

⁴ All references are to *Hamlet* ed Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden, 2006).

time as it also addresses the nature of another character's capacity to change. When in 3.3 Hamlet comes upon Claudius praying, Hamlet's concern is that to kill him now would enable precisely that transition that his own father had been unable to make. If Hamlet did take Claudius in 'the purging of his soul' (3.3.85), then he would be sending his soul to heaven, while his own father died 'Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled' (1.5.77).

The irony is, of course, that Hamlet's understanding of the situation is based on a misperception both of Claudius's capacity for change, and of his integrity. Claudius demonstrates his sense of paradox in his entrenched enjoyment of his ill-gotten situation and his honest admission that integrity is all: 'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./Words without thoughts never to heaven go' (3.3.97-8). This small section in the play manifests a fascination with the conditions under which change might occur. To enact revenge Hamlet needs to kill Claudius without hastening his spiritual elevation. To repent his rank offence, Claudius must give up those things from which he takes his greatest pleasure. Opposed as they are in aims, intentions, and pursuits both Hamlet and Claudius recognise that the outcomes of their actions are contingent on the circumstances in which the action is taken.

The ultimate irony, as has often been remarked, is that in a play obsessed with action, inaction, and the implications for others, fundamental change occurs accidentally. It is also true that the denouement of the play is brought about by the intervention of Gertrude, since, as is characteristic of the early modern period, the play focuses on the actions of men rather than women. In drinking from the poisoned cup meant for Hamlet, Gertrude triggers the final revelations of treachery that goad Hamlet into a mortal assault on Claudius. While the ending of the play has a certain inevitability, performing its own kind of purging, it is an ending that has not been brought about by the considered and deliberative strategies of any of the characters. In this way the play absolves Hamlet of his dilemmas, in favour of the divinity that shapes their ends however rough hewn they may be (5.2.10-11).

'To be, or not to be — that is the question' (3.1.55) demonstrates a similar interest with the possibilities of change. Yet, as the editors of the 2006 Arden edition suggest, there is little sense of agreement as to what precisely the question is. Is Hamlet questioning whether life is worth living,

whether it is acceptable to take your own life, whether he should take action against his uncle, or all of the above? To some extent this debate involves questioning whether it is better ('nobler' 3.1.56) for Hamlet to react to circumstances around him or stoically to withstand the assaults of 'outrageous fortune' (3.1.57). At this point we might break into a discussion of the comparison between *Hamlet* and its most famous spin-off *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* because here we can identify one of the strongest points of contrast between the two plays.

One issue that Hamlet confronts, as suggested in the 'To be, or not to be' speech, is whether action is preferable to inaction. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the horror lies in the obverse possibility; they may have no capacity for action beyond that already determined for them. While Hamlet's ordeal involves moral uncertainty (should he take action), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's ordeal involves ontological uncertainty (in what sense do they exist, and are they capable of taking action). Yet both predicaments have a common interest in the forces behind change.

At another level, what terrifies Hamlet is the rate of change, the pace at which it occurs, symbolised by the 'funeral baked meats' that 'coldly furnish forth the marriage tables' (1.2.179-180), whereas the terror in *R & G* as represented by the interminable coin-spinning is that 'time has stopped dead.'⁵ What Hamlet values is consistency. When Claudius asks 'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?' and Gertrude entreats him to 'cast thy knighted colour off ... Do not for ever with thy veiled lids/Seek for thy noble father in the dust,' (1.2.66, 68-9) Hamlet condemns their hasty actions. In particular, of course, he excoriates his mother's behaviour, ('To post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets,' (1.2.156-57) in a speech that telescopes time itself ('But two months dead — nay not so much, not two - ... And yet within a month ... A little month ... Within a month' 1.2.138, 145,147, 153).

For Hamlet, Horatio provides a model of constancy in a world marred by the inconsistencies of fortune, and human responses to it.

For thou has been

⁵ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) p. 10.

As one in suffering all that suffers nothing —
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks. And blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well co-meddled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave and I will wear him
In my heart's core — ay, in my heart of heart —
As I do thee.

(3.2.61-71)

What Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lament is the absence of a different kind of constancy, the regularity of change.

The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon a law, or rather a tendency, or let us say a probability, or at any rate a mathematically calculable chance, which ensures that he will not upset himself by losing too much nor upset his harmony by winning too often. This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature. The sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened. Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times...and for the last three minutes on the wind of a windless day I have heard the sound of drums and flute ... (p.12).

Yet perhaps what both Hamlet and Guildenstern seek here is the security of things that conform to expectation. It is Horatio's demonstrated loyalty over time that 'sealed' him to Hamlet's soul (3.2.61). He is what Hamlet has grown to expect him to be. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's expectations are confounded by the lack of change, a 'groundhog day' experience in which they find themselves trapped in a paradoxical limbo space, so graphically described in the phrase 'on the wind of a windless day.'

Here we might step back to think about the nature of the connections between these two plays, and ask how *R & G* has arisen from *Hamlet*. Linda Hutcheon has recently explored significant ideas in relation to adaptation that are relevant to this process. She suggests three different aspects of adaptation that we might consider:

In short, adaptation can be described as the following:

An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works

A creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging

An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work.⁶

One area in which we might consider adaptation as an aspect of transformation is in relation to genre. The plays inhabit different genres that help to encourage particular reactions from an audience. Described on its title page as ‘The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,’ opening with the ‘bitter cold’ (1.1.6) of midnight on haunted battlements, the play announces its nature to reader and audience. As tragedy and history,⁷ the play declares its tone and timbre, a story ‘that is not, nor it cannot come to good,’ (1.2.158) concerning high-ranking characters and the decline of a nation. While we might now know the play simply as *Hamlet* its history precedes it and its cultural influence across the world ensures that few people could come to it for the first time without having a sense of its tragic nature.

R & G, on the other hand, signals its comic status in its title, which declares its eccentricity in turning margins into centres and bit characters into stars, and in its opening scene that uses repetition to establish its anarchic hold. Here repetition in the first four words of the play (‘Heads’) is matched by the arch self-consciousness of Guildenstern’s ‘There is an art to the building of suspense’ (p.7). Where *Hamlet* constructs a world that the audience is invited to observe at a distance, *R & G* is predicated on a knowing audience that will not only understand the joke in its relationship to *Hamlet* but also get the point that its own place as audience is under scrutiny.

⁶ Hutcheon, p. 8.

⁷ It should be noted that there are differences here between versions of the text. The first quarto (1603) has it as ‘tragical history,’ whereas second quarto (1604-5) and first folio (1623) have it as ‘tragedy’ only.

Yet in both plays there is a sense that if things change they can only get worse. *Hamlet* is redolent with images of deterioration, of ‘an unweeded garden/That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely’ (1.2.135-37), and of a general as well as the specific ‘falling off’ (1.5.47). As the ever gloomy Hamlet observes to Ophelia,

the power of Beauty will sooner transform Honesty
from what it is to a bawd than the force of Honesty can
translate Beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a
paradox, but now the time gives it proof.

(3.1.110-114)

And Ophelia herself catches the contagion in her account of his decline:

O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword,
Th’expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th’observed of all observers, quite, quite down.

(3.1.149-153)

In *R & G* ‘everything seems predestined’⁸ because it is. It is predestined in a number of ways, most obviously because there is no future for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but their death, in spite of their attempts to imagine an alternative. It is a minor piece of technical detail in *Hamlet* that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die to demonstrate the malice of Claudius and the quick-wittedness of Hamlet. Stoppard’s play uses this known outcome as the main source of interest. His adaptation relies upon the audience’s knowledge of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fate as its most significant fact. They ‘have no control’ (p. 51) at a literal level because their story has already been written, and they have no future. Yet their existence is also influenced, if not determined, by more modern forces than Shakespeare’s play. Stoppard’s intertextuality⁹ includes many sources,

⁸ Jim Hunter, *Tom Stoppard* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000) p. 20.

⁹ Jill L Levenson ‘Stoppard’s Shakespeare: textual re-visions,’ in Kelly (2001) p. 156.

including Pirandello, Beckett, T S Eliot,¹⁰ ‘Dada poetry, Shakespearian sonnets and Wittgensteinian poetry.’¹¹

The effect upon the audience of *R & G* is, then, rather different to the effect that *Hamlet* might generally have. If the latter tends to leave the audience confirmed in its expectations, the former confronts an audience with the unexpected, as Kelly argues:

Stoppard’s habit of recycling prior texts...draws the reader and spectator into the process of transformation by presenting them with familiar literary language (and visual imagery) made strange by an unfamiliar dramatic context. We both hear and then re-hear quotations from the literary past as Stoppard selectively mines the ‘imaginary museum’ of western art.¹²

The process of defamiliarisation suggests the impact of yet another writer, Bertolt Brecht. Recognising the familiar and acknowledging the change are part of the pleasure of watching *R & G*, a pleasure of experiencing ‘repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise.’¹³ Put another way this recognition of intertextuality also involves the ‘palimpsestousness’ of a work, one that is overwritten on another, complete in itself but haunted by the presence of the other.¹⁴

Stoppard’s play is as much a part of its time as Shakespeare’s was. By subverting ‘the traditional relationship between background and foreground,’ as Enoch Brater suggests,¹⁵ Stoppard has shifted the focus of attention from prince to hireling. Here the process of transformation and adaptation works in two directions. Stoppard’s play clearly takes elements of Shakespeare’s and transforms them into something new, but the effect of his play is also to alter the experience of seeing *Hamlet* itself. Brater is right to say that after Stoppard ‘Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* would never be the same

¹⁰ Hunter, pp. 12-22.

¹¹ Kelly, p.11.

¹² Kelly, pp. 110-111.

¹³ Hutcheon, p. 4.

¹⁴ Hutcheon, p. 6 draws on the work of Michael Alexander as discussed in Elizabeth Deeds Ermath ‘Agency in the discursive condition,’ *History and Theory* 2001 40: 34-58.

¹⁵ Enoch Brater ‘Tom Stoppard’s Brit/lit/crit,’ in Kelly, p. 204.

again' (p.203) not least because after Stoppard we can no longer take at face value what happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Their functionality in *Hamlet*, their sacrifice to their prince, is unacceptable when they are center stage. The point of comparison that T S Eliot makes in 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock'

(No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politick, cautious, and meticulous, ll. 111-116)

is undercut in a modern society that believes that 'attendant lords have minds and feelings too.'¹⁶ It sometimes takes a modern text to bring home the ruthlessness of discriminations in previous times, and just as having read Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* one can no longer simply celebrate that governess Jane Eyre eventually gets her man, having read or seen *R & G* one cannot ignore the lengths to which a prince might go to save his skin, even if in his soliloquies he debates the point of life. It is not so clear that a decision he might choose to make about his own life is his to make about other people's.

The effect of *R & G*, then, might be described as democratising in the sense that it works against the idea that what a life is worth depends on whose it is. This is particularly evident in the way that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent not only particular figures from a well known play, but also in some sense figure forth as Philip Sidney put it in 1580¹⁷ what used to be called the human condition, but better might be described as characteristics common to human existence. One aspect of the transformation from *Hamlet* to *R & G* involves the shift in the focus of attention from events specific to a narrative, the story of Hamlet, to events common to all, the immanence of death in life. The chill in Guildenstern's words blows particularly cold in that they apply not only to him and to his friend but to us all:

¹⁶ Hunter, p.23.

¹⁷ Philip Sidney talks about 'representing,, counterfeiting or figuring forth,' and of creating 'speaking pictures' that is the art of the poet, 'An Apology for Poetry,' *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Sir Philip Sidney* ed David Kalstone (New York: Signet, 1970) p. 223

No...no...not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over...Death is not anything...death is not...It's the absence of presence, nothing more...the endless time of never coming back...a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound...(pp.90-1).

The impossible contradiction that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confront for all of us is that of life and death.

Stoppard's play, as an adaptation, also reflects the many changes in literary style between Shakespeare's time and his own. Stoppard's text is an attack on naturalism, on a literary and dramatic style that suffuses its audience with the sense that this is how life is, with the added implication that this is how it has been and always will be. The inherent conservatism of naturalism was the target of modernist writers intent on refusing the assumptions of "oppressive normativity" in political, ethical, cultural, and sexual terms,¹⁸ but as Samuells points out the end product in this case is not necessarily politically progressive. If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are insignificant in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, then a criticism of the play in which they star might be that they are captive to their state in ways that limit their individuality. If *Hamlet* can be seen as an exercise in representing an individual consciousness, then *R & G* is an exercise in depicting individuals at the mercy of a 'collective ethic' over which they have no control and in which they have no say.¹⁹

To put it another way, both plays might be said to be interested in individuality but in fundamentally different ways. Time after time Hamlet questions what it is to be a human: 'What piece of work is a man...' (2.2.269); 'What is a man/If his chief good and market of his time/Be but to sleep and feed?' (4.4.32-34). Guildenstern seems to ask a similar question when he shouts at Rosencrantz 'WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?' (p. 32), but the general nature of this enquiry is undercut by the fact that one primary area of concern for these characters is that they are easily misidentified by other people, and even by each other. Rosencrantz and

¹⁸ Neil Samuells 'The early stage plays,' in Kelly, p.108.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 109.

Guildestern literally do not know who they are, uncertain of their past, dictated to by their role in the lives of others. In the middle of words that seem to come from their current situation comes a phrase that seem to appear from thin air, its alien nature suggested by the shift in tone or linguistic register:

Ros: Who was that?
 Guil: Didn't you know him?
 Ros: He didn't know me.
 Guil: He didn't see you.
 Ros: I didn't see him.
 Guil: We shall see. I *hardly* knew him, he's changed.
 Ros: You could see that?
 Guil: Transformed.
 Ros: How do you know?
 Guil: Inside and out.
 Ros: I see.
 Guil: He's not himself.
 Ros: He's changed.
 Guil: I could see that. (*Beat*) Glean what afflicts him. (p.33)²⁰

Hamlet's questions are more philosophical than personal and his predicament is quite different. He knows who he is, prince of Denmark, and son of a murdered king, but has difficulty in understanding how that role should be played out in its specifics.

Whatever the differences between *Hamlet* and *R & G* might be, it is worth thinking about the linked interests of their authors. Critics have long argued that while Shakespeare is Bard to us, to the people of his own time he was more prosaically a successful and popular dramatist. The weight of the last four hundred years of performances, editions, and criticisms has transformed Shakespeare from 'upstart crow'²¹ to high cultural capital.²²

²⁰ A further irony here is that while the modern Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lament their lack of individuality they are noticeably less like each other than their Shakespearian counterparts. Guildenstern seems more introspective, philosophical, and smarter than his colleague.

²¹ This famous derogatory remark comes from *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance* and is cited in *William Shakespeare, Complete Works: The RSC Shakespeare* ed Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Macmillan, 2007) p. 17.

²² As Michael Dobson points out in a recent review of the RSC edition of Shakespeare, this new edition "is competing for space in bookshops whose shelves are already straining under the

The Arden edition (2006) identifies the many different popular traces that can be identified in *Hamlet*, suggesting how strong an impetus pleasing the public might have been. No less than Stoppard's play, Shakespeare's is also the product of adaptation.

Similarly, Samuells makes the point that Stoppard saw himself 'as a commercial playwright trying to both meet, satisfy, and ambush the expectations of a specific theatregoing audience' (p.108). The particular circumstances behind the first production of *R & G* are significant here. Aimed originally for the Royal Shakespeare Company, then the Royal Court at the Oxford Playhouse, what we now have as *R & G* underwent a number of transformations before being performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1966. Stoppard himself reported that a year later when the play made it to London, not all audiences accepted the invitation that the play extended to them: 'early in the first act, a man sitting in front of me turned to his companion and said 'I do wish they would get *on* with it.' That finished it for me. I went to the pub and never came back.'²³ In forty years Stoppard's own status as struggling writer has itself been transformed. Sir Tom since 1997, in the last thirty years he 'has consistently held the position as one of England's most admired and enjoyed dramatists.'²⁴ Both Shakespeare and Stoppard well understood the business of writing for public performance, and the particular energies that this might demand.

The need to please very different audiences has a strong impact on the way that the plays use language. *Hamlet* is a very wordy play in as much as it relishes language and its nuances. Hamlet says much and does little, as he himself points out, in the speech where he upbraids himself for lack of action, and contrasts words with actions:

this is most brave
That I, the son of a dear murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Most like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,

burden' of at least thirteen editions published in the last thirty years, *London Review of Books* 10 May 2007, p. 3.

²³ Cited in Ira Nadel, *Double Act: A Life of Tom Stoppard* (London: Methuen, 1988) p.186.

²⁴ Hunter, p.2.

A stallion!

(2.2.517-522)

Hamlet revels in the power of language, rhetoric and set speeches. Both father Polonius and brother Laertes admonish Ophelia with maxims and sententiae that reflect the interests of the time. Laertes' 'For nature crescent does not grow alone/In thews and bulks, but as the temple waxes/The inward service of the mind and soul/Grows wide withal' (1.3.10-14) may well be advice about not trusting Hamlet's immaturity, but it is a point made in metaphors that do not resonate as clearly now as they did in the early seventeenth century. As Guildenstern says critically about the Player's speech 'Rather strong on metaphor, mind you. No criticism — only a matter of taste' (p. 46).

Compare Laertes' speech, for example, with the opening of *R & G* act three where exchanges between the two central characters consist of just a few words at a time. While there are longer speeches in *R & G* the tendency is away from the lengthy monologues that we see in *Hamlet*, parodied in Osric's 'golden words' (5.2.115). To suggest yet another paradox, if by the end of *Hamlet* we have a stage full of bodies and much seems to have happened, it is a play obsessed with a sense of inaction, and one that in performance can seem curiously undramatic, weighed down by speeches that inhibit and interrupt movement. *R & G*, by contrast, is a play in which nothing much seems to happen, paralysed by a sense of stasis, futility and absence, yet characterised by energetic language that propels the play along at high speed.

Much has changed in the centuries between *Hamlet* and *R & G*, not least of which are attitudes to gender, most obviously evidenced in the lifting of the prohibition against women being on the stage after the restoration of King Charles II in 1660. It is very hard to imagine what *Hamlet* would have been like with men or boys playing Gertrude and Ophelia, and it is simply not possible to reconstruct that difference given the vast changes in social attitudes that have taken place. Staging an all male version of the play today would be a very different phenomenon from an all male version in Shakespeare's time.

Yet if there were no roles for women in Shakespeare's time then there are no parts for women in Stoppard's play. Gender is largely irrelevant

in the play. The issue of gender is raised in the deliberately sleazy innuendos around the sexual availability of the boy actors playing the female characters, where the homosexual possibilities that critics have explored in relation to crossdressing are explicitly canvassed. Otherwise, however, Stoppard's play is not concerned with gender in the way that *Hamlet's* main matter is underpinned by attitudes concerning gender and sexuality. The intensity of disgust in the play for the death of Hamlet senior, and Gertrude's remarriage is not limited to Hamlet himself, though he is the first to articulate it. Before he has real reason to suspect foul play he voices his concern over his mother's 'appetite,' (1.2.144) suggesting, even, that his mother was ardent with his father ('she would hang on him' 1.2.143). The fact that she then posts 'with such dexterity to incestuous sheets,' (1.2.157) is then picked up by the Ghost who shifts the blame initially to his brother who becomes 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast' (1.5.42) while Gertrude's virtue is again impugned in his retrospective account of her as his 'most seeming-virtuous queen' (1.5.46).

This underlying cynicism about women's sexual virtue is then transferred to Ophelia whom Hamlet taunts with sexual innuendos about her fairness and honesty, commending her to a nunnery. If Hamlet's antic disposition is one that he puts on, then for Ophelia there seems to be a very real shift in mental well being that culminates in her death, so movingly described by Gertrude. The power of the announcement of Ophelia's death is well marked in the speech that begins, not with Ophelia herself, but by marking the beauty of the place in which 'like a creature native and ended/Unto that element' (4.7.177) she drowned: 'There is a willow grows aslant a brook/That shows his hoar leaves in the grassy stream' (4.7.164-5). While women were not permitted to perform on the stage in Shakespeare's time, attitudes towards women reverberate throughout the play in all their contradictory facets.

Perhaps this is one of the most surprising aspects of the adaptation from *Hamlet* to *R & G*, that a period as commonly associated with radical social changes as the 1960s produced a play that seems oblivious to one area in which change was so marked, gender and sexuality. Lynne Segal, for example, writes about the 'second wave of feminism which arose out of the upsurge of radical and socialist politics in the late 1960s' in both the

UK, Australia and elsewhere.²⁵ Yet as Segal also remarks, ‘gender has been used as an analytical category, rather than just a grammatical one, only since that time.’²⁶ In this sense if we return to a consideration of the differences between the ways in which the two plays are concerned with identity, we could say that *R & G*’s concern with the so-called human condition seems gender-neutral. The anxiety about the immanence of death in life is something that might apply to both men and women, given that the human animal is mortal, male and female.

Yet again, however, it could be argued that if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are gender neutral in that their concerns might apply equally to men and women, then they are also neutered in the sense of being powerless and unable to effect change. We might say that they have been emasculated or feminised as long as we acknowledge that these terms tie into stereotypical assumptions about powerful men and powerless women that have since been vigorously challenged by feminists of all descriptions. If gender simply does not matter in *R & G*, then we could ask why it doesn’t, and whether the problems that beset the two key characters are capable of being seen as differently affecting or perceived by women. Perhaps too the absence of women from the 1966 play follows on from the interest in the drama of the so-called ‘angry young men’ in Britain in the 1950s. If there is a clear hierarchy underpinning ideas about gender and sexuality in *Hamlet*, reflected in the absence of women on the stage, then the absence of women on the stage in *R & G* plays out differently. If this later play is not concerned with gender then that lack of concern can be unpacked for the assumptions about universality that it maintains, a universality that feminists have criticised in the subsequent decades. If the representation of gender and sexuality in *Hamlet* can be seen to be hierarchical and misogynist, then the absence of gender in *R & G* carries other kinds of challengeable assumptions from an early twenty-first century perspective.

At the end of his epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1609) Edmund Spenser attached what are known as the ‘Mutability cantos,’ which directly address early seventeenth-century anxiety about change. If only the earth

²⁵ Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) p. 9.

²⁶ Segal p. 38 draws on the work on Joan Wallach Scott *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

seems not to be in thrall to Mutability or change, then even the things that spring from earth are susceptible to endless transformation.

So likewise are all watry living wights
Still lost, and turned, with continuall change.
Never abyding in their stedfast plights.²⁷

By the end of *Hamlet* we have the sense that profound changes have taken place. While many are dead, that figure of constancy Horatio suggests that a kind of purging has taken place where ‘purposes mistook/Fall’n on th’inventors’ heads’ (5.2.369). In the world of *Hamlet*, it seems, things might be about to get better, at least for those still standing.

In the world of *R & G*, however, things could not get much worse for the central figures, given that their end is predetermined in the play’s title. As adaptation *R & G* is locked into the end prescribed in the original play. This leads to a profound sense of pessimism in a play that laments the absence of action and change, based on the audience’s knowledge that the only possible change will bring about the death of the protagonists. While *R & G* may have its genesis or its literary roots in *Hamlet* thinking about the clear differences between these plays attests not only to the vast changes in social, historical and literary values from 1600 to 1966, but also from 1966 to 2007, not least in terms of audience expectations.

MAREA MITCHELL is an associate professor in English at Macquarie University. She has publications on *The Book of Margery Kempe*, romance, Anna Weamys, Donne, Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney, early modern studies, feminism, and cultural materialism.

²⁷ Ed J C Smith and E de Selincourt, *Spenser: Poetical Works* (London: Oxford, 1975) p. 402.