Chapter II

Pastiche: Shifting the Spotlight in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Shakespeare in Love

GUIL. Why don’t you say something original! No wonder the whole thing is so stagnant…

ROS. I can’t think of anything original. I’m only good in support. (75)

Pastiche is not an original art form. The attempt in this Chapter is to analyse how Stoppard applies pastiche in two texts, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Shakespeare in Love. I study the use of pastiche foregrounding the meta-theatrical and self-reflexive concerns in these works, focusing on the hypotexts in each case. In both texts, the focus of attention is not the centre, but the margin, and I discuss how Stoppard is more concerned about the latter.

Pastiche as a literary device manifests itself at different levels of structure and style. Originating in the word “paste”, it signified fragments pasted together to create a new work, very much like a collage, especially in the field of painting. Pastiche began to be used in English in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, the term “pasticcio” goes further back and signified “a medley of various ingredients, a hotchpotch, farrago, jumble” (O.E.D.). The term was also used in opera, music and painting to depict influences on a work of art. In literature, pastiche initially had a derogatory air about it and was not considered a form of high art. However, during the modern and post-modern ages pastiche began not only to be accepted but also appreciated. The practitioners of pastiche argue that no writing is free from the “anxiety of influence” and that there is no original writing, only re-writing, that all texts are intertexts to some extent. Since pastiche writers were extremely conscious of their writing it evolved as a highly self-reflexive technique:
Many of the High Modernists employed pastiche as a specialized, self-conscious and self-reflexive mode. They imitated aesthetic styles, juxtaposed motifs from different sources and created a deliberate incongruity between the borrowed material and its new, textual position. (Jaidev 30)

Pastiche not only implies an inter-penetration of text and text, it also includes an imitation of style and manner, thereby incorporating the original’s linguistic techniques, use of devices and wordplay. This kind of interlacing between old and new works of art achieves many results:

It could be the writer’s homage to an earlier master and his texts. It could also be a way of coping with an influence otherwise too strong to be shed. Occasionally, it could be an inter-textual signal introduced in the hope that one could bathe in the glory of the original. (Jaidev 32)

Pastiche differs significantly from parody. Unlike parody, pastiche is non-subversive in nature and intention, but is imitative, self-reflexive and self-conscious. Since pastiche is most often derivative of other works, it ends up mostly as an inter-text, incorporating and assimilating the contexts of the previous works. It is not originality but wit and ingenuity that are visible in pastiche. Because of the technical craftsmanship required in recontextualisation of the sources, the presentation is the most important aspect required for making a pastiche. According to Jaidev, “the chief intent of pastiche is to seek credit for its presentational skills” (37).

The two texts to be examined in this Chapter, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Shakespeare in Love are off-shoots of Shakespeare. The former uses Hamlet as its backdrop while the latter uses Romeo and Juliet. Stoppard has literally applied scissors and paste to Shakespeare’s plays to write these works. The first play to be studied in this thesis is the play which brought fame for its writer, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. It is also the work which has fetched the most attention for its writer. In this study, I have brought into the limelight the conflation of Waiting for Godot and Hamlet, the
meta-dramatic discourse of the script, the issue of the genre of the play and the relevance of the absurdist tag attached to it.

Stoppard did not intend to write a pastiche, certainly not Shakespearean. He simply wanted to dramatize the off-stage lives of these two men who die for probably no reason at all except that Hamlet could think of nothing else to write in the letter which originally required his execution. In an interview with Roger Hudson, Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler for the Theatre Quarterly (May-July 1974), Stoppard says:

I was not in the least interested in doing any sort of pastiche...or in doing a criticism of Hamlet - that was simply one of the by-products. The chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential - of these two guys who in Shakespeare’s context, don’t really know what they’re doing. The little they are told is mainly lies, and there is no reason, to suppose they find out why they are killed. (qtd. in Hodgson 20)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead must be examined in light of the two plays to which it is most often compared; Hamlet and Waiting for Godot; both plays being classics. The two texts in question, Shakespearean and Beckettian, are historically separated by about half a millenium and represent the Renaissance and Modern ages of literature, a rather unusual combination. Using these two works as frames of reference, Stoppard takes two absurdist characters back in time, placing them in the limelight of the Elizabethan world. Stoppard conceived of a design which would embody the experience of both Hamlet and Waiting for Godot. As a result, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead alternates between the theatrical plentfulness of Shakespeare and the philosophical contemplation and minimalism of Beckett. The yoking together of two heterogenous texts like Hamlet and Waiting for Godot reminds one of meta-physical conceits, an unnatural combination, wrought by violence. The experiences of both these texts coalesce in the opening lines of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: “Two ELIZABETHANS passing the time in a place without any visible character” (7).
The Elizabethan context abounds in character, plot, sub-plot and a very visible situation. Stoppard’s play has two “Elizabethans” in a place “without any visible character” questioning the certitudes and the complacence associated with the Elizabethan age. The lack of “visible character” in the topography of the place probably serves to show that the conditions were “absurd” then too but went by unnoticed or unrecognized. The non-recognition of their surroundings allows the play to open in an absurdist limbo - like situation where even the geography is without any specific character. The scarcity of characters and situations of absurdist theatre is done away with and there is plenty of coming and going of dramatis personae in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, to the extent that “Ros” and “Guil” are sick of it. It is this skillful combination of two vastly different plays and contexts which makes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead essentially a pastiche.

Structurally, much of the complexity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead comes from the fact that it is almost impossible to distinguish whether Waiting for Godot has been inserted in Hamlet or if it is Hamlet which has been thrust into Beckettian limbo. Whatever the case may be, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped in two seemingly paradoxical contexts. They are the prototypes of the rootless modern man as well as the imprisoned and bound characters of a medieval court which was shamelessly indifferent to their fates. Stoppard has exploited Shakespeare’s blatant indifference to the two childhood friends of Hamlet. In Hamlet, the focus is not on the attendant lords, but, on the prince whose procrastination dominates the play. Before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s entry in Hamlet, we know nothing of their past and their lives preceding their entry in the Elsinore court. It is as if prior to coming to Elsinore they had no lives at all. Stoppard shows us their bewilderment at having received summons from the court, which Shakespeare did not deem important enough to mention, shifting the spotlight to these two members of Claudius’s court who live virtually in the margins. The most famous figure of tragedy, Hamlet, now becomes a character who occupies the wings and comes onstage only to torment our “heroes.” His brooding intellectuality is also transferred to his attendant lords in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, since in the modernist/post-modernist tradition, they too have sensibilities and can question
everything. But they are unlike their master, who is wayward and needs correction in the 
eyes of his “parents” and well wishers. Considering the other text which forms the 
backdrop of Stoppard’s play, no society exists in Waiting for Godot. Vladimir and 
Estragon seem timeless and can be assigned no physical location. The void in which they 
live leaves ample scope for speculation about their identities and lives. Moreover, no 
reason is assigned for their arbitrary wait for Godot. Similarly, there is absolutely no 
revelation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s thoughts and feelings in Hamlet and the 
audience gets no hint about the working of their minds. Going by the title of the play, 
though they are dead from the start itself, yet Stoppard creates biographies for them, 
gives them ample opportunities to express their thoughts and at times to reveal 
themselves threadbare to us. Looking at Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, he realized the 
hidden dramatic potential of two characters lying in wait for something to happen, for 
someone to come:

ESTRAGON. Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful! (71)

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too are plagued by the 
absurdist predicament of having nothing to do, except wait for the King’s orders.

GUIL. What are you going to do now?

ROS. I don’t know. What do you want to do?

GUIL. I have no desires. None… (11)

In order to trace the ancestry of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, one must 
understand that it is Stoppard’s attempt to bring together multiple texts and frames of 
reference. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead originated as The Gamblers which 
Stoppard himself calls a Waiting for Godot type play. It was written in 1960 and 
performed by Bristol University undergraduates in 1965. In 1964, Stoppard was in Berlin 
on a Ford Foundation grant for a five month period when he wrote another one-act play, 
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear, in blank verse. In his first re-write, he 
eliminated the verse and settled for prose. The idea for this particular play had 
germinated during a discussion with Kenneth Ewing, Stoppard’s agent. Ewing’s off-hand 
remark regarding the English ruler, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reach England
(in Hamlet) sparked Stoppard’s interest in the theme. The possibility that the ruler might be King Lear further fuelled his imagination. After consistent re-writing, The Gamblers and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear, together, have formed the basis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear was not met favorably by critics, although Stoppard had eliminated the verse in his play to achieve a contrast with Shakespeare’s verse. The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) bought an option for production on this script in 1965, but at the end of the term of one year it was still unproduced. It was then bought by the Oxford playhouse and was eventually performed by Oxford undergraduates on the fringe of the Edinburgh Festival in 1966 where it was recognized as a huge success. Thus, like the two protagonists of Stoppard’s play who lived on the “fringe” of Hamlet’s world, but who occupy centre stage now, the play’s first performance was also on a fringe of a main theatre event.

Most of Stoppard’s body of writing draws upon the audience’s shared knowledge of past literature and common contexts. Both Hamlet and Waiting for Godot are plays which offer an immense scope for theatrical inventiveness, offering exceptionally fertile ideas and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is the product of the inter-weaving of these texts, which provide complex layers of sources. In such a scenario, dramatic allusions and inter-textuality are only inevitable and Stoppard repeats fragments of these works in a new context. When he tries to liberate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from their Shakespearean cloisters, he is indirectly referring to the Godotesque elements in his play: “At the time when Godot was first done, it liberated something for anybody writing plays. It redefined the minima of theatrical validity” (Hayman 6).

Another of the coincidences which this play calls to mind is Eliot’s 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...

The lines in question refer to Polonius, “an attendant lord” of Claudius, but, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too are attendant lords who are “easy tools” not only in the hands of Hamlet, but also, Shakespeare, who conveniently forgets them once his purpose is fulfilled. Stoppard, like Eliot is a very allusive writer. He “borrows from, alludes to, and travesties the artists he likes” (Hunter, Plays 131). Stoppard also quotes Eliot’s poem several times in his first and only novel, Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon, which was published in the same week as the first performance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. According to Stoppard, “there’s an element of coincidence in what’s usually called influence” (Hayman 7). The verse and sentence structure of Stoppard’s play is also reflective of Eliot in the sense that the dialogues are clipped and short. This brevity best comes to the fore in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s consolation of each other (27), their analysis of Hamlet’s state of mind (33), Guildenstern’s interrogation of the Player (47), their predicament aboard their ship taking them to England (75), but the most obvious illustration of Eliot’s influence on Stoppard’s language is the following exchange:

GUIL: You’d be lost for words.
ROS: You’d be tongue-tied.
GUIL: Like a mute in a monologue.
ROS: Like a nightingale at a Roman feast.
GUIL: Your diction will go to pieces.
ROS: Your lines will be cut.
GUIL: To dumbshows.
ROS: And dramatic pauses.
GUIL: You’ll never find your tongue.
ROS: Lick your lips.
GUIL: Taste your tears.
ROS: Your breakfast.
GUIL: You won’t know the difference.
ROS: There won’t be any.
GUIL: We’ll take the very words out of your mouth.
ROS: So you’ve caught on.
GUIL: So you’ve caught up. (44-45)

It seems as if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are reading out aloud a poem which could be attributed to Eliot for its content, style and imagery. There is also an observer - audience to whom this piece is addressed - the player, who reprimands Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for having deserted them mid-performance. He is the one who is catching up on the duo. This piece also calls to mind the vaudeville routine of circus performances and a similar note in the exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon.

Vladimir and Estragon of Waiting for Godot are the lineal descendants of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Hamlet while the “Ros” and “Guil” of Stoppard come from the blood-line of Vladimir and Estragon. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern form a pair which is not free; they are controlled by the King’s command which came at midnight, while Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot who continues to elude them. To some extent, Hamlet’s inability to act is the curse which plagues both these pairs. The pairing of two mirror type characters is further extended to Pozzo and Lucky, ringmaster and clown, who are the predecessors of the player and his troupe in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. Stoppard uses the players as a bridge between Hamlet and his own play.¹

All the characters of the play are playing a game by the rule book. Everyone including the audience or the reader is aware of the rules and result (through the title) but it seems that the protagonists are not. In an interview with Giles Gordon, Stoppard says that he saw Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in productions of Hamlet” (Page 15). Unlike Beckett’s characters, Stoppard’s are not tramps. As he tells us in the beginning: "They are well dressed - hats, cloaks, sticks and all. Each of them has a large leather money bag. GUILDENSTERN’s bag is nearly empty and

¹ The players have been discussed in detail later in this chapter.
ROSENCRANTZ’s bag is nearly full” (7) because the play opens with a gambling sequence. “To pass the time” they are spinning coins and very absurdly the tossed coins come down heads eighty-nine times in succession. The coin game at the beginning has as its theme, the element of chance and time. Rosencrantz’s winning so many times in succession, prompts Guildenstern to remark very self-reflexively, “there is an art to the building up of suspense” (7). Referring to this bizarre phenomenon of the coins coming down heads every time, Katherine E. Kelly says, “The oddity of the event we are witnessing is Stoppard’s equivalent to the ghost opening HAMLET. Both events signal the suspension of the ordinary and the entry into art” (Craft 74).

Waiting for Godot also opens with a pair of men waiting on an open road for someone or something to come to relieve them of their uncertainty. However, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not as uncertain as Vladimir and Estragon. Vladimir and Estragon have no identity and are deprived of any stature or belonging, whereas, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are definitely “Elizabethans” and are members of a society, sent for by the head of the society. They try to analyze their condition:

GUIL. Do you remember the first thing that happened today?
ROS. I woke up, I suppose. Oh - I’ve got it now - that man, a foreigner, he woke us up-
GUIL. A messenger.
ROS. That’s it - pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters – shouts - What’s all the row about?! Clear off! - But then he called our names. You remember that - this man woke us up.
GUIL. Yes.
GUIL. Yes.
ROS. That’s why we’re here. Travelling.
GUIL. Yes.
ROS. It was urgent - a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked - lights in the stable - yard, saddle up and off headlong and hotfoot across the land, our guides outstripped in breakneck pursuit of our duty! Fearful lest we come too late!! (13)
This is in stark contrast to the gross uncertainty of Beckett’s play. Notice how Vladimir oscillates between certainty and uncertainty while answering Estragon’s questions:

ELSTRAFON. I’m asking you if we’re tied.
VLADIMIR. Tied?
ESTRAFON. Ti-ed.
VLADIMIR. How do you mean tied?
ESTRAFON. Down.
VLADIMIR. But to whom? By whom?
ESTRAFON. To your man.
VLADIMIR. To Godot? Tied to Godot? What an idea! No question of it. (Pause.) For the moment.
ESTRAFON. His name is Godot?
VLADIMIR. I think so. (50-51)

The pairing of characters like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Vladimir and Estragon, even Pozzo and Lucky serves a larger purpose. They depict the interior monologue that the dramatist is having with himself as he gives shape to their characters. In productions of both Waiting for Godot and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead it is customary to show one of them as fat and the other as thin or one as tall and the other as short. The difference between their statures is not only outward but also inward. They act, talk and behave like a married couple to all intents. Women are conspicuously absent in both these texts (except Ophelia and Gertrude who come from Hamlet). The omission is deliberate, at least on Stoppard’s part. It is not for nothing that he chooses the spellings of “house” and “wife” as illustrations to show that Guildenstern “can’t remember ever having seen those letters in that order before.”

There are plenty of puns in Stoppard’s theatre and they are not there only for the sake of amusement. Majority of his puns relate to the images of theatre: “We don’t know how to act,” “We are entitled to some direction,” “Act natural.” Hersh Zeifman in his essay “Stoppard’s Theatrical Puns” in Modern British Dramatists says that “in Stoppard’s plays words are, more often than not, puns: ambiguous, confusing, enigmatic”
(89). The strategies that both pairs; Vladimir and Estragon and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, adopt to while away the time are similar. Both engage in verbal games and punning giving rise to slapstick humour. Stoppard plays with language to drive home the humour:

ROS. The toenails, on the other hand never grow at all.
GUIL/bemused. The toenails on the other hand never grow at all? (13)

Jim Hunter says, “The underlying joke is a teasing of the audience for having paid money to come and watch, or even for bothering to stay tuned at home.” He calls these displays of linguistic skill “jokes...to fill stage time” and the jokes “include the audience” as well.

PLAYER. The old man thinks he’s in love with his daughter.
ROS. Good God! We’re out of our depth here.
PLAYER. No, no, no - he hasn’t got a daughter - the old man thinks he is in love with his daughter.
ROS. The old man is?
PLAYER. Hamlet, in love with the old man’s daughter, the old man thinks. (49)

Like Rosencrantz and the Player Hamlet also plays with words. His first dialogue, “A little more than kin, and less than kind,” reveals him reveling in the felicity of words. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel that they too have nothing to go by except what the others tell them and what they have left:

ROS. What are you playing at?
GUIL. Words, words. They’re all we have to go on. (29-30)

These “words” remind one of Lucky’s verbal diarrhea in Waiting for Godot, as he rants off a travesty of scholarly speeches at supersonic speed. This particular speech also has as its theme the subversion of language and its meaning. Just after Guildenstern has finished his story about the unicorn focusing on the nature of illusion and reality, Stoppard cleverly contrives to bring onstage the players so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet them before meeting any of the other characters of Hamlet. Guildenstern’s expectations
are belittled as the players enter as he had expected something as fantastic as a unicorn but instead he gets: “No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this - a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes....” (19). The troupe is worn to threads and engages in bloody sensationalism. As it proceeds, it is obvious that they have no specific character but a speech about child actors relates them to the Elizabethan context, as well as revealing their tawdry nature:

PLAYER. Roundabout. A nest of children carries the custom of the town. Juvenile companies, they are the fashion. But they cannot match our repertoire...we’ll stoop to anything if that’s your bent.... (17)

A parallel reference to a troupe of child actors is also present in Hamlet:

ROSENCRANTZ. Nay, their endeavor keeps in the wonted pace: but there is, sir, an aery of children, little eyases...these are now the fashion... (2.1.337)

Three strands of action now weave in and out of the play’s structure; the conversation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their interaction with the players and the fragments of Hamlet that are inserted and pasted. The entry of the players corresponds to the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky in Waiting for Godot as they encounter Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting but not for them. Commenting on the inter-textuality of Stoppard’s play, Kelly says, “When the players arrive on Stoppard’s stage, we recall both their promising arrival at Elsinore in Hamlet and the anti-climactic entrance of Pozzo and Lucky in Godot” (Craft 75). Pozzo and Lucky are performers/players in their own right. The counterpart of the players of Hamlet, Pozzo enacts a spectacle for Vladimir and Estragon wherein Lucky rattles off a speech after wearing his thinking “hat”.

POZZO: Ah, yes! The night. But be a little more attentive, for pity’s sake, otherwise we”l never get anywhere...How did you find me? (67-68)

... 

LUCKY: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of...tennis...the stones...so calm...Cunard...unfinished... (72-75)
As the players arrive, it is evident, that they are desperately looking for an audience to perform to. Stoppard’s players are six actors in search of an audience. Here, Stoppard contrives a deft transition into Hamlet as the players prepare for “no.38” and we are transported to Elsinore observing a mute scene between Ophelia and Hamlet, corresponding to a similar entry of Ophelia in Hamlet Act 2.2.75. In order to dramatize what was not shown in Shakespeare, scenes from Hamlet happen off-stage here and what is only reported in Hamlet in enacted onstage. For instance, in a typical Stoppardian maneuver, which recontextualises his sources, the contents of Ophelia’s dialogue in Hamlet are dramatized onstage with some very elaborate stage directions in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead:

And Ophelia runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts - followed by Hamlet.
(Ophelia has been sewing and she holds the garment. They are both mute. HAMLET, with his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled...without taking his eyes off her...she runs off in the opposite direction.)

(24-25)

In a similar style, Stoppard will also dramatize Hamlet’s adventures at sea, later, which Shakespeare had revealed through Hamlet’s report to Horatio in Act 4.6. Claudius’s speech in Hamlet (2.2) which describes Hamlet’s malady is pasted completely, as he expects Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “glean” what “afflicts him.” Meanwhile, Polonius enters on his cue from Shakespeare’s Hamlet claiming to have discovered “the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy.” This textual interlacing of dialogue is a form of pastiche. Much has been said about the derivative qualities of Stoppard’s drama. But, the fact is that, to some extent, Hamlet is also deflated in the process. It loses some of its intellectuality and dignity to the credit of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead; whereas, Waiting for Godot becomes thematically heavier in content. This is the reason why the relationship between the three texts needs to be examined closely. Deploying texts separated by five hundred years to create an inter-text as brilliant and as vital as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead serves a two-fold purpose: celebration of the original through subversion of the same.
At this point, it is clear that Hamlet both contains and constrains Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. It functions not only as the outer play but also as the inner play. While providing the framework within which Stoppard works, it is also the play within. Their boundaries merge as the play progresses and the paradoxical nature of freedom and constraint magnifies itself as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern get entangled in the layers of Stoppard’s “trans-historical melting-pot” (Boireau 148). However, an important difference between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is that while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come on and off in Hamlet, one of the main characters being present always; in Stoppard’s play it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who occupy centre stage all the time. Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and even Hamlet, come on and off. Thus, the spotlight shifts to the unimportant marginalized characters who are the mainstay of the action. As the court exits “leaving Ros and Guil” Rosencrantz remarks, rather like the bewildered child that Stoppard says he is:

ROS. I want to go home.
GUIL. Don’t let them confuse you.
...
GUIL (the nursemaid): There!...and we’ll soon be home and dry… (27)

This is visibly Godotesque dialogue, especially when compared with a similar situation in Beckett, when Vladimir and Estragon try to console each other:
VLADIMIR. There…there…Didi is there…don’t be afraid…
ESTRAGON. Ah!
VLADIMIR. There…there…it’s all over. (100)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is in the tradition of meta-theatre as there are prominent self-referential elements in the text. Stoppard’s drama conveys the very nature of theater in its essence; as it is about two actors who are playing onstage. Consequently, the theatre becomes the dominant image in the work due to the references to theatre contained in it. Throughout the play, we are reminded that we are in a theatre watching a play and the Player in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead stands for all actors of all times. Stoppard’s meta-dramatic discourse extends to the players in general
and to the First Player specifically. He is perhaps the most “sure-footed” character in the play. In him we see another of the marginalized dramatis personae of Hamlet. Stoppard picks him out from the anonymity of Hamlet and makes him an integral part of his dramatic structure. He emerges as a chorus type figure of ancient Greek tragedy who comments on the action and guides the protagonists as they move along. Equally comfortable in both Elizabethan and modern contexts, he is always at ease. “Much of the success of Rosencrantz is due to Stoppard’s creation here of a character adequately consistent with Shakespeare’s honest professional and also in the same philosophical-intellectual wavelength as Ros and Guil” (Hunter, Plays 200). In the First Player we see Stoppard’s retreat from reality at more than one level. The actor who plays the player is the first Stoppardian level. As we peel off one layer from his onion skinned personality, we realize that he is also Stoppard’s player playing Shakespeare’s player. Regressing even further, the same player becomes the player in Hamlet’s mime and play-within. Thus, the first player is the player-within-the-play-within-the-play too. But, at times he too is infected by the uncertain atmosphere which pervades the whole of the play. He is not even sure of his audience:

PLAYER. Oh yes. We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not. (18)

Unwittingly, the player accepts that he has no control as Stoppard’s universe is governed by Shakespearean dictates. Consequently, he is uncertain about the audience they would perform to. Functioning as Stoppard’s mouthpiece, the player is an instrument for expounding the dramatist’s own theatrical notions or rather subversions of the same. To the amusement of his readers and audience, Stoppard lists the elements of conventional drama missing in his play:

PLAYER. We’re tragedians, you see. We follow directions - there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means. ...

ROS. I want a good story, with a beginning, middle and end.

GUIL. I’d prefer art to mirror life... (58)
This point onwards, the meta-theatrical elements in the play become all the more pronounced. We have already noticed the relationship which the text has with Hamlet. Further, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a continual self-consciousness regarding their existence as characters in a play in which their destiny is pre-written. In a departure from normal theatrical practice, they consciously show their knowledge about the audience’s presence:

ROS (at footlights): How very intriguing!...I feel like a spectator - an appalling prospect. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute.... (30)

At another place, Guildenstern remarks quite self-consciously about the audience, “They’re waiting to see what we’re going to do.” Such moments of overt theatricality make Stoppard’s work self-reflexive and it seems that he is already anticipating the type of reviews that he will get. He puts dialogues into their mouths time and again to convey his anxiety about the reception of his work. At one place, Guildenstern says “to be kept intrigued without being enlightened” while Rosencrantz remarks, “Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!” (85).

Thwarting any expectations of sustained action, a typical Vladimir and Estragon type light-hearted banter follows in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern indulge in word games. Eventually, Shakespeare takes over once again as Hamlet enters for his first conversation with those who are “so neighboured to his youth and havior”:

HAMLET. My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both? (2.2.225)

Stoppard hints that, probably, Shakespeare’s “Ah” conveys some ambiguity about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s identities. Hamlet corrects himself in Stoppard with the help of stage directions and “they laugh good naturedly.” Establishing a complex interplay of Shakespeare and Beckett to arrive at his play, Stoppard’s first act ends with the trio (Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and also Stoppard, Beckett and Shakespeare) walking out together. As is evident from the above discussion, there are layers of
dramatic events happening super-imposed on each other. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped beneath this edifice and cannot struggle free at any cost. They are mere puppets in the hands of the script. They are “characters” who are “fixed in art” very much like Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

Act II opens with a flourish announcing the arrival of the tragedians at Elsinore’s court, this is again an extract from *Hamlet*, Act 2.2.365:

Act 2 carries forward the multiple texts informing act 1, but interrupts them frequently with abrupt and brief incursions from *Hamlet*. Three kinds of playing cross and re-cross in this act: the highly charged and stylized presenting of Hamlet; the intimate bantering of Rosencrantz and Guil; and the melodramatic rehearsing of the Tragedians. (Kelly, *Craft* 78)

As mentioned, in a significant departure from Shakespeare, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain moored to the stage, while Hamlet and Polonius come and go. They reflect on their encounter with Hamlet and “hold a prose post-mortem”:

GUIL. I think we can say we made some headway.
ROS. You think so?
GUIL. I think we can say that.
ROS. I think we can say he made us look ridiculous.
GUIL. We played it close to the chest of course.
ROS. ...He was scoring off us all down the line.
GUIL. He caught us on the wrong foot once or twice, perhaps, but I thought we gained some ground.
ROS. He murdered us.
GUIL. He might have had the edge. (40)

This might have been roughly the conversation that Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had in *Hamlet* as they performed their royal task, but Shakespeare did not accord enough importance to this piece of information and left it unreported.
The play regresses into *Hamlet* once again as Polonius ushers in the players. According to Polonius, the players who arrive at Elsinore are, “the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited…” (2.2.395) while for Stoppard’s players, “blood is compulsory” and their line is “tragedy.” Their specialties include “death and disclosures,” “a world of intrigue and illusion,” (16) and when Guildenstern asks the Player if that is what people want, the Player says, “It’s what we do.” To suit his own purpose, Hamlet asks the Player to alter the text of the play which they are going to perform before the court. The seeds of revisionistic drama were sown in *Hamlet* itself when Hamlet asks the player to ‘study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines’ which he “would set down and insert in’t.” Hamlet himself is modifying/re-writing the play which the players are supposed to perform before the court. As the text winds back to the present play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are left alone once again to listen to a tirade from the Player whom they had left mid-performance on the road to Elsinore:

PLAYER. We can’t look each other in the face. You don’t understand the humiliation of it - to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable - that somebody is watching....The plot was two corpses gone before we caught sight of ourselves, stripped naked in the middle of nowhere and pouring ourselves down a bottomless well.

ROS. Is that thirty-eight?

PLAYER. There we were - demented children mincing about in clothes that no one ever wore, speaking as no man ever spoke, swearing love in wigs and rhymed couplets, killing each other with wooden swords, hollow protestations of faith hurled after empty promises of vengeance - and every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin unpopulated air. We ransomed our dignity to the clouds, and the uncomprehending birds listened. Don’t you see?! We’re actors - we’re the opposite of people!...

PLAYER. We’re actors….We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was.

(45-46)
He emphasizes the absurdity of performing without an audience. At this point it would be worthwhile to discuss the “absurdist” labeling of this play. An absurd world implies an absence of moral values and ethics. In this sense, the moral world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is not totally devoid of them. For instance, Guildenstern is shocked at the player’s suggestion of “a private and uncut performance of the Rape of the Sabine Women”:

> GUIL. It could have been - it didn’t have to be obscene…. (19)

Rosencrantz also reacts similarly at another place:

> ROS. Filth! Disgusting - I’ll report you to the authorities - *perverts!* I know your game all right, it’s all filth! (20)

The fact that some kind of regulatory authority exists to which Rosencrantz threats to report them belies the claim that this is an absurd play. Absurd theatre presents a world without divine order, without relationships, without sexual fulfillment or genuine love, and without moral awareness (Cahn 20). The absurdist vision of writers such as Camus and Sartre is largely nihilistic and devoid of any meaning. Moreover, dramatists such as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Genet incorporate a sense of pathos with comedy in their works. Their protagonists are not heroes, rather anti-heroes. Chaos not authority is more likely to be present in an absurd play. But, Stoppard’s dramatic structure is not devoid of order and purpose, rather it is symmetrical. He even goes a step further, his protagonists are more of non-entities, rather than anti-heroes. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern roll their stone uphill like Sisyphus, but it tumbles down on them, crushing them in the process. The pity is that they never get another chance like Sisyphus who starts all over again. Regarding the contents of an absurd play, Victor L. Cahn says:

> (A)n absurd play almost always consists of a series of free-floating images. Life does not have a beginning, middle, and end; neither does an absurd play. Life does not progress rationally from step to step and culminate in a dramatic climax; neither does an absurd play. (21)
Distancing himself from the absurdist tradition, Rosencrantz says, “I want to go home.” According to Cahn, “That line could not be found in any totally absurdist play, for the concept of home and security are alien to absurdity” (46). Guildenstern’s innocuously pregnant remark, ‘Somebody might come in. It’s what we’re counting on, after all. Ultimately” (42) - brings to the fore their predicament, as well as Vladimir and Estragon’s whose existence was defined by their creator only on one parameter - waiting. This is also true of the audience whose interest is sustained only by the hope of someone entering anytime. Establishing the fact that some kind of order exists, Guildenstern continues:

Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one - that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it’ll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we’d know that we were lost... (42-43)

He is trying to wriggle out of the script but the inevitability of their doom is pre-written in the title itself and they are not allowed to question the script. Towards the end, they miss the one chance they have to be spontaneous and finally succumb to the order that contains them. Stoppard makes it clear that though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are uncertain, yet this is a situation of comparatively greater certainty than Waiting for Godot. They have one point of reference, which is Hamlet, and he is quite a tangible reality for them. Vladimir and Estragon have Godot, yet, he is elusive and none of them remembers ever having seen him. They are on their own, but, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a part of a larger purpose set out for them by Claudius. Nevertheless, this purpose eludes them as individual citizens:

PLAYER. Uncertainty is the normal state. You’re nobody special.
GUIL. But for God’s sake what are we supposed to do?!?
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. (47-48)

Stoppard plays on the word “act”. Guildenstern literally means that he does not know what to do about Claudius’s orders and Hamlet’s situation. But the implication is the “acting” that he is supposed to do onstage. Another place where bits and pieces from Hamlet are interspersed with the present play, is just as Rosencrantz forbids anyone to enter and “immediately, behind him a grand procession enters, principally Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia” (52). Lots of comings and goings later Rosencrantz says, “It’s like living in a public park.” They don’t like the outside world constantly intruding upon them:

ROS. Never a’moment’s peace! In and out, on and off, they’re coming at us from all sides. (53)

Significantly, most of the weighty and forceful dialogues go to Guildenstern who emerges as the stronger of the two; the Vladimir of Waiting for Godot. While Estragon is the one who takes things easy and is more preoccupied with his immediate physical needs, it is Vladimir who is concerned more with philosophical questions. However, there is little to differentiate between the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Hamlet, who are more or less similar in dimension so much so that even the number of syllables in their speeches is the same and they are exact mirror images of each other. In Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are always referred to together as a unit:

KING. Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.
QUEEN. Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz. (2.2.83)

Stoppard’s Claudius also confuses their names and identities and they seem faceless with interchangeable ‘identities. At times they themselves have difficulty remembering their names and throughout the play there have been numerous instances of both of them responding to the other’s name. As one reads either Beckett or Shakespeare one tends to lose track of the individual identities of both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern;

45
and to some extent of Vladimir and Estragon, because the shorter dialogues assigned to them, especially when they converse rapidly, leave them with hardly any individuality. Both pairs, Vladimir and Estragon; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, reflect on similar topics - life, death, time, memory and direction. Like Vladimir and Estragon, they discuss the direction, more precisely the direction from which they came. Uncertain of either, Guildenstern finally decides that, “In the morning the sun would be easterly. I think we can assume that” (41).

One aspect that emerges clearly is the fact that the “Ros” and “Guil” of Stoppard lie mid-way between the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Shakespeare and the Vladimir and Estragon of Beckett. While, the two in Shakespeare’s play even seem clever at times, the tramps of Beckett seem totally lost. The pair in Stoppard’s play too is confused, lost and scared; and they find it impossible to comprehend the situation they are placed in.

The contrast between modern and Elizabethan English is perhaps most evident here than in any other part of the play because of the rapid transitions between Hamlet, Waiting for Godot and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. One type of language that emerges is the stylized and lofty English of Hamlet and the tragedians; the other is the short clipped speech of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who take it from Vladimir and Estragon. It seems that the former is the language of the brain and the intellect while the latter is the normal way in which we grumble about life and its circumstances. This brings about a great variation in speech, which is stilted at times and extraordinarily eloquent at others. Alternation of speech rhythm and style corresponds to the alternation of story lines of Godot and Hamlet. Minimalism of language, characters and imagery alternates with plentitude of the same.

In a deft move by the dramatist, the mime to be enacted before the play “The Murder of Gonzago” begins in the shape of the tragedians’ dress rehearsal. We retreat a further step away from reality into another play-within-the-play-within-the-play. The Player narrates a summary of Hamlet with breathless garrulity. He refers to the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Hamlet as “two smiling accomplices-friends-courtiers-
… two spies” making them seem rather like modern day villains or henchmen which is precisely the image that Stoppard starts out with, ultimately aiming to shatter it. Gradually, this dumb show being performed before the player Claudius coalesces into Hamlet with the two cloaked tragedians dying “rather well”, presenting onstage the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Hamlet. When the lights come on after some time, we see “two cloaked FIGURES sprawled on the ground in the approximate positions last held by the dead SPIES” (62). The two player spies of the rehearsal are now merged with “our” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whom we have known since the beginning, “Fictional layers overlap, separate, and intersect again as the exiles from Shakespeare’s play imitate the actors imitating them in Stoppard’s play” (Kelly, Craft 80). The fluidity with which Stoppard handles transitions from one text to another is visible once again as we crossover into a Godot type of situation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern having an argument about the direction.

Claudius’s next appearance onstage reveals him sending Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to England. When Claudius informs them about Polonius’s murder and tells them to bring the body, none of them moves because they are unable to grasp who is being spoken to and who should respond. Whenever an attempt is made to remove one of them from the stage, they hesitate and falter. They seem rooted to their fixity, unable to exit even for a second like Vladimir and Estragon who “do not move” at the end of the play. They remain motionless, while Guildenstern, again the moralist says, “Good God, I hope more tears are shed for us!” (63). Aping Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remove their belts to trap Hamlet’s entry from one side of the stage, Rosencrantz’s trousers slide down like Vladimir’s. To their intense chagrin, Hamlet enters from the other side making them look absurd. Act two ends with a loaded remark:

ROS. We’ve come this far.
(He moves towards exit. GUIL follows him.)
And besides, anything could happen yet.
(They go.) (69)
Act three opens on the sea to show us that part of Hamlet’s story and of course Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s which went unreported earlier, though, this is Stoppard’s version of the same. On the sea, they may seem free to move from level of reality to the other as they regress further and further, yet they are bound:

GU1L. Free to move, speak, extemporize, and yet. We have not been cut loose…but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England. (73)

This single remark effectively hammers down the fact that we have to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only within Shakespeare’s framework. They cannot exit; they are tied to the tether to which they were bound just as they came into existence. They can stretch the rope to its limit but they cannot cut lose. Their capacity for action is minimal:

GU1L. Allowed, yes. We are not restricted. No boundaries have been defined, no inhibitions imposed. We have, for the while, secured, or blundered into, our release, for the while. Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.
ROS. Within limits, of course.
GU1L. Certainly within limits. (84)

At this juncture we come across a reminder of an early draft of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear:

ROS. Who is the English King?
GU1L. That depends on when we get there. (76)

Uncertain of whether all the events that they remember actually happened, Guildenstern says, “But you don’t believe anything till it happens. And it has all happened. Hasn’t it?” (78). We for certain know that it has happened indeed; in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.
Continuing the theatrical metaphor in the play, Rosencrantz assumes the role of the English king and questions Guildenstern, who plays both himself and Rosencrantz, about their purpose of journey (just as Vladimir and Estragon play at being Pozzo and Lucky). While they are at this play-acting, they get so engrossed that they tear open Claudius's letter to the English king and stand in the knowledge of their mission. The absurdity of the entire situation stares them in the face and they turn to thoughts of mortality which echo through all the three texts.

Hamlet's soliloquies, reflecting primarily on his mortal status and his inability to act, are totally done away with. They have been replaced by the dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern which is reminiscent not only of the academic criticism which Hamlet has prompted over the years but also of Stoppard's early years spent as a theatre critic which is another aspect of his writing (to be examined in detail in Chapter III of this study). A pseudo-critique enlightens us about Hamlet's character through a character sketch by Guildenstern, "It really boils down to symptoms. Pregnant replies, mystic allusions, mistaken identities...which at his age is coming on a bit strong" (84-85). At another place, they reduce Hamlet's dilemma to a few lines:

ROS. To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

GUIL. I can't imagine! (36)

Thus, drawing upon his early struggling years spent as a theatre critic, Stoppard comments not only on Hamlet but also on Elizabethan drama as well as the genre of drama.1 Stoppard makes us observer/critics of not only Shakespeare's but his own play as well. Guildenstern's witty yet deflating response brings together Shakespearean criticism, Beckettian ping-pong and music hall comedy in the play taking us towards a discussion of the genre of the play, whether it is a tragedy, comedy, farce or parody. In this context,

---

1. Elizabethan drama, its commercial and exploitative aspects, will form the theme of the next text to be examined in this study, Shakespeare in Love.
Normand Berlin gives a very interesting classification in his article “Theatre of Criticism”:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is art that studies art, and therefore serving as a document, dramatic criticism as play presenting ideas on Hamlet, on Elizabethan drama, on theatrical art, and by so doing commenting on the life that art reveals. That is, Stoppard's play is holding the mirror of art up to the art that holds the mirror up to nature. (276)

Hamlet is the most famous tragedy ever written while Beckett chooses to call his play a “tragicomedy.” In an interview for the Theatre Quarterly cited earlier, Stoppard explains how he creates new genres in his writing:

What I try to do is to end up by contriving the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or, perhaps, even high comedy...to that end I have been writing plays which are farcical and without an idea in their funny heads, and I have also written plays which are all mouth...and don't bring off the comedy. (Page 88)

While the theme of Stoppard’s play is basically tragic, it is the performance or the theatricality inherent in it which is comic. Stoppard has combined vital issues of philosophy with images of overt theatricality in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. This incongruity supplies his plays the comedy which makes them tragic-comic in nature. All the devices that he uses - puns, wit, humour, farce, parody, travesty - the list is endless, illustrate his concern with heavy issues like the function of art, will, an omniscient controlling authority, philosophy, physics, etc. Bigsby says that Stoppard “has blended humour with metaphysical enquiry” (17). The comedy that he incorporates is there only to raise significant philosophical issues.

The one weak point in Hamlet, the pirate attack, is exploited lucratively by Stoppard. Predictably, Hamlet vanishes after the pirate attack and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take to play-acting as a refuge once again. This time Guildenstern is “kingly” and in a strongly repetitive gesture, they tear open the letter once again. This element of duplication and repetition is a hallmark of modern drama. In Waiting for
Godot. Act II duplicates Act I, in Stoppard’s play, they have already opened the letter once. It is only Shakespeare’s context which did them in and they stay ignorant of their fates till the end. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Hamlet changes the letter and it seals their fate. They now face a dilemma; whether to resist or to give up in the face of the impending doom. As the Player would say “it is written”, they die but back in the domain of Shakespeare.

GUIL. Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current....

ROS. They had it in for us, didn’t they? Right from the beginning. Who’d have thought that we were so important?

GUIL. But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (In anguish to the PLAYER) Who are we?

PLAYER. You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That’s enough.

GUIL. No - it is not enough. To be told so little - to such an end - and still, finally, to be denied an explanation.... (89)

Shakespeare’s canvas was too crowded. He did not bother about these two lesser mortals, but their fate should have bothered Hamlet. Their deaths were “not near” Hamlet’s “conscience” at all. Like chaff, they were ground between two mighty forces; Hamlet and Claudius, Denmark and England. Stoppard considered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern important enough to write a full length play about two nondescript characters of the world’s best known tragedy, though they did not receive their full share at the hands of Shakespeare. In his last speech which has any degree of eloquence about it, Guildenstern clarifies the difference between the reality of death and its theatrical illusion:

GUIL. I’m talking about death - and you’ve never experienced that. And you cannot act it. You die a thousand casual deaths - with none of that intensity which squeezes out life...and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after death - there is no applause - there is only silence and some second hand clothes, and that’s - death - (89)
The only point where one of them uses action/will is when Guildenstern stabs the Player to prove his point about “death.” To his horror he realizes that the Player was only “playing” at being dead. His one act outside the script is also proved futile and they wander to the ends of their tethers, exploring the freedom that they have within their limits. After groping and fumbling through the maze that Stoppard creates for them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern finally decide to exit. Just before Rosencrantz exits for the first and last time in this play, he remarks poignantly:

ROSS. We’ve done nothing wrong! We didn’t harm anyone. Did we?
GUIL. I can’t remember.

(Ros pulls himself together.)
ROSS. All right, then. I don’t care. I’ve had enough. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved.

(And he disappears from view.)

(Guil does not notice.)
GUIL. Our names shouted in a certain dawn...a message...a summons....There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said-no. But somehow we missed it.

(He looks round and sees he is alone.)
ROSS-?
GUIL-?

(He gathers himself.)
Well, we’ll know better next time. Now you see me, now you -

(And disappears.) (91)

Fortinbras enters to restore order in Hamlet. An ambassador from England arrives at Elsinore in the last scene of Hamlet (V, ii, 363) to tell the King that “his commandment is fulfill’d, / That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.” (92). Though Stoppard’s work celebrates past, present and modern theatre; it is Shakespeare who has the last word.

Some similarities emerge in all the three texts examined in this study. The protagonists of all are strongly concerned with thoughts of mortality. Whether it is
Hamlet’s soliloquy “to be or not to be,” whether Beckett’s heroes reflect on being alive inside a coffin, whether Guildenstern stabs the player in earnest only to discover that his death was feigned, all of them reflect on death as the ultimate reality. Moreover, the inability to act or move, and their inertia, limits their movements, both physically as well as intellectually. Linking both these themes, Anthony Jenkins says:

What Stoppard does is to exploit the comic potential of Ros and Guil’s situation in Hamlet, a confused paralysis most cogently expressed in modern terms by Estragon and Vladimir’s circumstances in Godot, in order to arrive at a statement about death that is both serious and of universal application. (37)

In 1990, Stoppard himself directed the film version of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. He had to re-write the script to suit the new medium he was experimenting with. And the result is evident – the stress is now on games and with a difference. The verbal ping-pong match between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 1 (30-31) now takes place on a crude volleyball court. Further, the playwright-director takes pains to show a marked difference between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a nuance not established in the early script. The former is always on the verge of making momentous scientific discoveries at numerous instances – when an apple falls on his head, he is Newton; when he sees water move up and down with his movement in the bathtub, he is Archimedes; he also drops an iron ball and a feather together to see if they fall at the same speed. While Guildenstern eats his bread, tomato, cheese separately, Rosencrantz makes a sort of hamburger out of these ingredients. Anachronisms such as these will figure quite prominently in the next play to be dealt with in this study, Shakespeare in Love. However, it is the players in the movie who are the focus of Stoppard’s directorial vision. As they encounter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the large desolate forest, pages with writing on them, waft out of their wagon and other belongings. These pages apparently have the script of Hamlet written on them and they float in the air, across the screen as when the movie meanders into Hamlet. In a brilliant stroke, the film ends with the players gathering their belongings at the same place where they had first met Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the camera spans backwards to
show us that the entire movie had in fact taken place on the stage of the roving ensemble of the players.

Stoppard has not deconstructed Shakespeare's or Beckett's canon from outside. He works within their frameworks and subverts both their texts and genres. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Stoppard emerges as the champion of confused minor characters, but in Shakespeare in Love it is the dramatist himself who takes center stage. Stoppard's reputation as a playwright with remarkable verbal prowess has fetched him numerous offers to polish or spruce up existing screenplays. Many times he has collaborated with other writers, a project which he finds to be "a sort of holiday." The screenplay for Shakespeare in Love, too, was written in collaboration with Marc Norman and it is neither easy nor possible to separate the contribution of either of the co-writers. The alternating situations, verbal fireworks, meta-theatrical references are almost certainly Stoppard's to all intents and purposes:

The recent success, Shakespeare in Love (1999), takes its place alongside other (co-written) Stoppard screenplays as primarily a director's property but with extraordinary dialogue instantly recognizable as Stoppardian. (Kelly, Companion 15)

The medium of film differs greatly from that of theatre and so does writing for the two mediums. A film is "the creation of its director, actors and technicians" and the function of the "writer is subordinate" (Hodgson 170). While the joy of watching a live performance is the main attraction of theater, the same is lost in film. A script or screenplay comprises the dialogue and directions in the form of annotations required to produce an understanding of the depiction. Stoppard possesses the necessary strong visual sense required to make a good screenplay. His forays into script writing have been sporadic. In 1978, he adapted Vladimir Nabokov's novel Despair, followed by Graham Greene's The Human Factor (1979), Brazil (1985), Empire of the Sun (1987), John le Carre's The Russia House (1990), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1991) which he directed himself, and Shakespeare in Love in 1998. The cast list of the movie is quite impressive and there are almost 50 named parts. However the present screenplay has not
received much critical attention. Its success may have been celebrated commercially but its literary worth has gone relatively unnoticed. In this study, I have tried to draw attention to the “wordiness” of the script, the structural parallels with Romeo and Juliet, how it is a pastiche of the same, the meta-dramatic concerns inherent in it, how Stoppard has brought alive the Elizabethan dramatic scenario for us and, most importantly, how the focus is now on the dramatist himself who shares the spotlight with the actors in his play.

Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Shakespeare in Love also uses a Shakespearean text as its backdrop. Stoppard and Norman established a connection between a fictionalized account of a love affair between the playwright and his leading lady at the time of the writing of Romeo and Juliet. The context is the making of Romeo and Juliet, its genesis, how at that time the playwright was supposedly engaged in a love affair which transformed his writing, culminating with the first performance of the play. Pieces from Romeo and Juliet have been lifted and pasted to provide the two-way dramatic action. In a way, the action of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead prepares us for Shakespeare in Love. The wandering players of the first play finally find a theatre-home in the latter work. The contexts may be similar but there is a difference between the basic premises of both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Shakespeare in Love. Hamlet, which provides the framework for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is already “there” when we read Stoppard’s play while Romeo and Juliet is still being written in the course of Shakespeare in Love. Stoppard’s first play could not move beyond the constraints of Hamlet and there was a sense of finality about it. But the plots of both Shakespeare in Love and Romeo and Juliet run parallel to each other and are free to take any direction.

Apart from being a pastiche of Romeo and Juliet, the script traces the development of English theater from its infancy to its maturity. This progress also parallels the movement of Shakespeare’s professional career showing the life of the artist as a young man. Before this period, players in Elizabethan times were mostly itinerants, roaming the countryside and staying in the town at different times. They toured when the theatres were closed because of plague in the summers. There used to be immense
variation in the size, style and repertoire of these companies. These companies had noblemen as their patrons since Elizabeth herself, and her court, took a marked interest in theatre. Performances at Palaces like Whitehall and Richmond were keenly attended:

The performance of drama at Elizabeth’s court was part of the drama of Elizabeth’s court. Like the courtiers, the actors were dependent on their sovereign not only for their financial survival, but also for the simple ability to continue functioning. If Elizabeth I had shown no more interest in plays and the whole ceremony of courtly performance than have many of her successors, the London theatres would certainly have been closed and the household players dispersed. (Thomson 146)

Stoppard takes his characters from these real life actors and playwrights. William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe shared a special relationship which consisted of mutual admiration as well as competition. They were exactly the same age but Marlowe’s meteoric career was cut short by a drunken brawl. They wrote strikingly similar works at the same time; Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, Edward II and poem Hero and Leander correspond to Shakespeare’s Henry VI, Richard II and his Venus and Adonis. Apart from “Will Shakespeare”, Christopher Marlowe and John Webster, the two leading actors of the Elizabethan stage Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage become the “Ned Alleyn” and “Burbage” of Shakespeare in Love. Alleyn was the son-in-law of Philip Henslowe, the owner of The Rose Theater where the action of the film takes place. The Rose had been built with a cost of 360 pounds in 1587. In the movie this is the same Henslowe but there is no mention of his relationship to Alleyn. Richard Burbage was the son of James Burbage who owned The Theater first and then built The Curtain. The actors of The Rose comprised The Admiral’s Men while those at The Theatre/Curtain were called The Chamberlain’s Men. This nomenclature was derived from their respective patrons. Peter Thomson in his book Shakespeare’s Professional Career says, “The story of the London playhouses over the next decade features a jostling for supremacy between The Admiral’s Men at The Rose and then The Fortune and The Chamberlain’s Men at The Theatre and then The Globe” (108). But, these theatres aroused the ire of the puritans, the clergy and
the city authorities alike while the preachers threatened “divine vengeance upon all who took pleasure in filthy, godless shows” (Thomson 182).

The text of Shakespeare in Love can be read at three levels; that of the conjectured love affair of Shakespeare and Viola, the creation of Shakespeare - the love affair of Romeo and Juliet and the real love affair of Stoppard and his leading lady for almost a decade, Felicity Kendal. There are similarities between all the three. In Romeo and Juliet, Romeo’s first but false love is a woman called Rosaline whom Shakespeare calls a piece of “baggage.” Romeo is “out of her favour where I am in love.” As the movie begins, Shakespeare too is in love with Rosaline, Burbage’s mistress, who will prove to be fickle. Although there is no historical evidence to suggest that Shakespeare fell in love with any lady, leave alone his leading lady (there were no female actors during Elizabethan times) during that particular period, yet Stoppard gives us an entire biographical sketch of the supposed love affair which Shakespeare had with his leading actor who is in reality a woman. This affair is strongly resonant of Stoppard’s own relationship with Felicity Kendal. Kendal had first appeared in a BBC production of Twelfth Night as Viola. In 1981, she walked onto the rehearsals of On the Razzle dressed in male attire to audition for a male role. Years later, in Stoppard’s screenplay, a Viola De Lesseps walks into The Rose dressed as a boy to audition for the role of Romeo in Shakespeare’s play. Both Kendal and Viola become the Muse of Stoppard and Shakespeare respectively. Stoppard’s 1982 play, The Real Thing, though dedicated to his wife, describes the adulterous relationship of a playwright and his leading lady. It seemed as if Stoppard was telling his wife about “the real thing” between them.

Dualism marks the opening of the movie in the fashion of Stoppard. Henslowe, the theater manager-cum-actor-cum-money lender-cum-manipulator provides the prosaic and rather pragmatic beginning, as he is in debt and to repay that debt he commissions a script from Will. To complicate the situation further, Will is suffering from a writer’s block. He “cannot love nor write it” and to add to his woes he has been “lately humbled in the act of love”. Will is buying time as the theatres are closed. Henslowe sells Fennyman, his money lender, the idea of Will Shakespeare’s next play Romeo and Ethel.
the Pirate’s Daughter. But to his chagrin he finds that Will has not even started writing
the play as yet:

HENSLOWE
Will! Where is my play? Tell me you have it nearly done! Tell me you have it
started.

(desperately)

You have begun?

WILL
Doubt that the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move…

HENSLOWE
No, no, we haven’t the time. Talk prose. Where is my play? (5-6)

Differentiating between the language of the head and the heart, Stoppard makes it clear
that the situation has not changed since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. While
the two courtiers used normal colloquial language to communicate with each other, they
automatically tuned themselves to the high flown rhetoric of the players which they used
to communicate with the court. Similarly, Henslowe insists that they talk in prose
because of the shortage of time. Thus, there are different times for being prosaic and
poetic; the former language belongs to the everyday business of the world while the latter
is the language of the theatre and its “players”. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
Dead, this text too alternates between these two idioms.

In this work, Stoppard attempts to piece together the links of Shakespeare’s life to
create a biography for him. At the same time there are various interesting parallels not
only between the love affairs of both artists but also between the lives of both
playwrights. Both of them arrived in London after having spent considerable parts of
their lives in the rural areas. Shakespeare worked as an actor first and then started writing
plays, Stoppard started his career as a journalist but found his calling ultimately in the
theater. When both of them arrived in London there was an unprecedented demand for
new plays. While Romeo and Juliet was Shakespeare’s first success, Stoppard became
known overnight with the success of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. On the
basis of the text of Shakespeare in Love, we can say that both the already married playwrights had love affairs which transformed them. Both Stoppard and Shakespeare did not receive any formal higher education yet their works resound with intellectual wit, polish and refinement, ‘Shakespeare was of a new breed: a professional actor who had the audacity to write plays that were not immediately distinguishable from those of the university wits” (Thomson 75).

This brand of “witty” writing comes across at its best in Stoppard’s description of Shakespeare’s encounter with Dr. Moth. To overcome his writer’s block, Shakespeare visits a kind of doctor. Stoppard presents an interesting spoof of modern psychologists and counselors in Shakespeare’s meeting with Dr. Moth, who is described as an “apothecary, alchemist, astrologer, seer, interpreter of dreams, and priest of psyche” (9). He is a fore-runner of the modern-day shrink who times his sessions to an hour glass. The whole situation is described as “nothing less than the false dawn of analysis” and in a conversation loaded with innuendoes and double entendres, Will finally reveals to Dr. Moth that he has lost both his verbal and sexual prowess:

WILL

Words, words, words...once, I had the gift...I could make love out of words as a potter makes cups of clay...love that overthrows empires, love that binds two hearts together come hellfire and brimstone...for sixpence a line, I could cause a riot in a nunnery...but now... (9)

There are visible anticipations of Hamlet in Will’s “words” like “nunnery”. In fact the whole text resounds with allusions to other Shakespearean plays: Two Gentlemen of Verona, Hamlet, Titus Andronicus, Twelfth Night, Antony and Cleopatra and the sonnets. One of Shakespeare’s most famous sonnets Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day becomes the letter poem which Will sends to Viola, thereby putting at rest, even if momentarily, the conjectures of critics and researchers regarding the object of this praise. Stoppard’s fascination with this particular sonnet began in Travesties. Tristan Tzara, one of the main characters, writes down the sonnet and then cuts it up into bits and pieces. He puts the pieces in a hat, each piece with only a single word written on it, thereby
deconstructing it both literally and "theoretically." At moments such as these Stoppard's textual revisions resound with Shakespeare. In the next scene itself, we meet Burbage and Will Kempe, hero and clown respectively and crowd favourites. To establish the contrast between the hero and the clown, there is a word picture mocking Hamlet's famous graveyard scene:

KEMPE leads the dog into the wings and rummages in a box of props. He finds a skull. He has one foot on the box, his elbow on his knee, he looks at the skull...in other words he reminds us of Hamlet. (13)

Later in the movie, Stoppard describes the fight between Will and Wessex as "a parody of the Hamlet duel" (119) between Hamlet and Laertes. This delight in verbal and visual images and felicity of diction gives the text its richness but at the same time it demands that the audience recognizes the jokes and laughs with the playwright. These games would have bypassed "the groundlings" of Elizabethan times. At the same time it arouses the audience's intellectual and literary curiosities as we delve more and more into the intricacies of Elizabethan history and theatre. Stoppard wants us to recognize these jokes and allusions and revel in them. One such device which Stoppard uses is the anachronisms in the play. When we first meet Will, we see on his shelf "a mug that says A PRESENT FROM STRATFORD-UPON-AVON" (5). Later, we encounter a boat-man taxi driver to whom Will says, "Follow that boat" in typical Hollywood style. It is another matter of course that all boatmen in the play have literary leanings. One has even written his memoirs which he wants published. In any case, none of the boat-men please Will:

WILL
Oh, Thomas! She has cut my strings! I am unmanned, unmended, and unmade, like a puppet in a box.

BOATMAN
Writer, is he?

WILL turns on him savagely.

WILL
Row your boat. (63-64)
The boatman smirks when he hears Will’s fancy verbal grandeur which he uses to show his pain and anguish at Viola’s letter. Consequently, he evokes Will’s ire who tells him to mind his own business. In another instance, Ned Alleyn, the leader of the Elizabethan stage is appalled to find that he has been given a marginal role in the play and in fact the title of the play is not “Mercutio” which is the name of his character:

WILL
(preempting)
You did not like the speech?
ALLEYN
The speech is excellent…
WILL
There you have his duel, a skirmish of words and swords such as I never wrote, nor anyone. He dies with such passion and poetry as you ever heard: “a plague on both your houses!”
NED nods satisfied and turns back to work. Then he turns back.
ALLEYN
He dies?
But the author has escaped. (62)

This explains the process which goes into the creation of a play. The playwright has to make numerous compromises to fulfill his vision. Commenting on the genesis of the script of *Romeo and Juliet*, Stoppard suggests that Shakespeare got not only the key elements of the plot from his conversations with others but also the title and some important lines. It is a well-known fact that Shakespeare took the plots and story-lines of existing works and remade them. Here, Stoppard tells us how there were still other “sources” at work which cannot be traced historically:

MARLOWE
What is the story?
WILL
Well, there’s a pirate…
(confesses)
In truth, I have not written a word.

MARLOWE
Romeo is...Italian. Always in and out of love.

WILL
Yes, that's good. Until he meets...

MARLOWE
Ethel.

WILL
Do you think?

MARLOWE
The daughter of his enemy.

WILL
(thoughtfully)
The daughter of his enemy.

MARLOWE
His best friend is killed in a duel by Ethel's brother or something. His name is Mercutio.

WILL
Mercutio...good name. (30)

Stoppard suggests that Marlowe supplied Shakespeare with the main plot of Romeo and Juliet, the names of Romeo and Juliet as well as Mercutio, Romeo's best friend. He initiates Shakespeare's train of thought and puts the various pieces in place. Thus, Shakespeare gets ideas from others which give him stuff to move his story forward. The richness of Shakespeare's works come from the fact that he "recycled every word he ever encountered, every person he ever met, every experience he ever had" (Thomson 155). The structure of both works will run almost parallel now. The famous balcony scenes of Romeo and Juliet have their counter-parts in Shakespeare in Love when Will is unable to leave the premises of De Lesseps' house and in a scene corresponding to Act 2.2 of Romeo and Juliet, Will addresses Viola over the balcony with constant interruptions by the Nurse, who serves practically the same purpose in both texts. The plot in place,
Shakespeare now needs to finalise his title and a little help/suggestion comes well in time:

ALLEYN

The title won’t do.

WILL

Ah...

ALLEYN

*Romeo and Juliet* - just a suggestion.

WILL

Thank you, Ned. (86)

Stoppard plays upon the fact that Shakespeare’s memory was the greatest resource available to him. This remarkable gift enabled him to remember scraps of conversation, sermons by preachers, plays that he might have watched or scripts only glanced at in passing. To prove this, Alleyn also points out that “there’s a scene missing between marriage and death.” (115). At this suggestion, Shakespeare adds the “new scene.” This scene is the parting scene of Romeo and Juliet as well as Will and Viola - “The words of the scene become WILL’s and VIOLA’s, their way of saying the farewells they cannot utter” (116). Shakespeare even dreams about the storyline - “I found something in my sleep. The Friar who married them will take up their destinies.” A dream provides Will the idea of his next play too - “I dreamed last night of a shipwreck. You were cast ashore in a far country.” This starts off the storyline of *Twelfth Night*. At other times, he literally pastes the words of others into his play. He had heard the Puritan, Makepeace, cursing both The Rose and The Curtain, “I say a plague on both their houses!” and he “gratefully makes a mental note.” Mercutio dies with the same line as his last words, only in this case the houses refer to the Capulets and the Montagues.

There are striking parallels between the first meeting of Will and Viola and that of Romeo and Juliet. In both cases, the meeting takes place at the heroine’s house at parties to which both Will and Romeo gain illegal entry and are gatecrashers. Both meet their
beloveds during the course of a changing partner kind of dance. Wessex notices Will while Tybalt suspects the presence of Romeo. Both affairs are doomed from the start. Will and Viola are separated by the difference in their social status while Romeo and Juliet are the children of sworn enemies. Referring to both affairs, Viola says:

**VIOLA**

Oh, but it will end well for love?

**WILL**

In heaven, perhaps. It is not a comedy I am writing now. A broad river divides my lovers - family, duty, fate - as unchangeable as nature.

**VIOLA**

Yes, this is not life, Will. This is a stolen season. (88)

This “stolen season” refers to both affairs, stage and real life. To establish the conflict of the two identities Viola says that as “Thomas Kent” her heart belongs to Will but “as Viola” “the river” divides the twain. The action now alternates between the rehearsals for Romeo and Juliet and the progress of Shakespeare’s own love affair. Just as Romeo’s first infatuation with Rosaline ends, Shakespeare’s Rosaline too is no longer his Muse. He is now inspired by Viola - “Will is burning the midnight oil - literally and metaphorically. His quill has already covered a dozen sheets. He is inspired” (47). Abandoning “real time” there are more than twenty alternating scenes between Viola’s bedroom and the stage of The Rose. The scene lengths get shorter every time to finally comprise single sentences only in order to effectively convey the rapidity of the transitions between play-acting and real life. Through the movie, Stoppard has explored the link between creativity and sexuality. The first sexual encounter of Will and Viola too reflects the first kiss of Romeo and Juliet (1.5). Once Shakespeare finds his true Muse there is no looking back for him, “His life has turned perfect.” Romeo and Juliet is only the first of the many master pieces that he will write in his career. Of the year 1595, Thomson says:

This year marked a turning point for The Chamberlain’s Men. Shakespeare probably contributed Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer’s Night Dream, two plays that confirmed his unique range and popular touch. His capacity to please
audiences was no longer in doubt, and the company could face competition with confidence. (115)

In a further structural parallel, the fight between the Admiral’s Men and the Chamberlain’s Men is strongly resonant of the fight between the Montagues and the Capulets in Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare calls this fight “a literary feud” and he finds it “quite normal.” Similarly, Juliet laments Romeo’s banishment, while everyone thinks that she is mourning the death of Tybalt, her cousin. Further, Viola thinks that “the fellow” who according to Wessex is dead, is Will, she is crest fallen. Like Juliet, Viola too gets married but not to her Romeo, but to Wessex. Juliet’s play-acting of death becomes the performance that Viola gives on the stage of the Rose. These comparisons emphasize the similarities between the textual construction of Romeo and Juliet and Shakespeare in Love which run almost parallel to each other.

Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Shakespeare in Love too abounds in references to the theatre. It is a comment on the nature and essence of theatre. Not only does it show how literary master-pieces are created but also how genius takes its colour from observation and personal experience. If Hamlet is the play-within-the-play in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, then Romeo and Juliet is the play-within-the-play here. It seems as if Shakespeare in Love fiddles around with Romeo and Juliet to turn it inside/out, upside/down to reveal its seams and to remove its gloss to show its inner mechanism. Henslowe explains the working of the theatre business to Fennyman:

HENSLOWE
Mr. Fennyman, let me explain about the theater business.

The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster. Believe me, to be closed by the plague is a bagatelle in the ups and downs of owning a theatre.

FENNYMAN

So what do we do?

HENSLOWE

Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.
FENNYMAN

How?

HENSLOWE

I don’t know. It’s a mystery. (23)

Henslowe will reiterate again and again that all will turn out well but he does not know how. Viola’s first appearance on screen reveals her as an ardent theater lover and it is through her that Stoppard puts across the self-reflexivity of the script. She is the equivalent of the player of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and she would dream herself “into a company of players” rather than live the cushioned life that she is leading now. She is a critic too, after witnessing a performance of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and reminding us of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* she says:

But Silvia I did not care for much. His fingers were red from fighting and he spoke like a schoolboy at lessons. Stage love will never be true love while the law of the land has our heroines played by pipsqueak boys in petticoats... (20)

It is during this performance that her “attention has been caught by Will” and she knows his “play by heart.” She calls him “a writer who commands the heart of every player.” Viola also contradicts The Queen when it comes to the nature of the plays:

QUEEN

But playwrights teach nothing about love, they make it pretty, they make it comical, or they make it lust. They cannot make it true.

VIOLA

*(blurts)*

Oh, but they can!

*She has forgotten herself. The COURTiers gasp. The QUEEN considers her. WESSEX looks furious. WILL is touched. (94)*

Stoppard’s annotations show us the individual reactions covering quite a broad range of all those in view. This is what makes this text a pleasure to read as well. Where a few words could suffice, Stoppard gives us entire word pictures:
This is where WILL has come. The church is empty, but for the demented, grieving figure of Shakespeare, kneeling, praying, weeping, banging his head, in his private purgatory, dimly lit by tallow candles, gazed upon by effigies of the dead and images of his Redeemer. He is wet, bedraggled, weeds and leaves in his hair...

A lovely sunny morning. The church bells are ringing. VIOLA and the NURSE mounted, approach. Viola rides sidesaddle on a beautiful horse, and is followed, rather like Quixote by Sancho, by the NURSE on a less impressive animal. (108)

Notes such as these reinforce the fact that Stoppard is a reader as well as audience conscious writer. Further, there are constant references to plays and the play-within-the-play in streaks of self-reflexivity, for instance the actors are mesmerized by the story of Romeo and Juliet but Viola's Nurse tells her that "this play will end badly":

We see that a group of the other actors have drifted "out front," drawn by the scene. FENNYMAN is there entranced. Clearly, this stuff is a cut above the normal. (81)

However the text also deals with the pragmatic side of Elizabethan theater. Shakespeare accepts two sovereigns from Burbage for the script which he is supposedly writing for Henslowe. This reveals the under-paid status of the playwright. Before Shakespeare joined The Chamberlain’s Men as a sharer, Shakespeare’s status was that of a hired player. Hired players were paid wages by the sharers in the theater and the sharers were the equivalent of modern day “board of directors.” The sharers had to pay numerous work hands like “players and musicians, the scribes, money-gatherers, tiremen, bookkeepers and stage-hands.” All actors strived to become the sharers of the theatre which employed them. Some shrewd ones like Henslowe, founder director of The Rose were fortunate enough to have a flourishing business in place by his middle age, “By 1590, Henslowe was about forty and had financial interests in mining, real estate, brothels, the manufacture of starch and in pawn broking, usury and the Rose playhouse” (Thomson 69).
The play-within-the-play functions as an agent for the meta-dramatic elements of *Shakespeare in Love*. It serves the purpose of dramatic confinement as well as liberation by fore-shadowing the events of the dramatist’s own life. The dramatic action is divided between the play-within-the-play and “real life.” In fact, the screenplay is about “playing”. Viola plays a boy, Thomas Kent, who plays Romeo and then Juliet in the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. During the rehearsals, Shakespeare will play Juliet and in the final show he plays Romeo. Thus, there is a complete reversal of the roles during the rehearsals and the performance. In the final show, Will plays Romeo and Viola is Juliet - “*We cannot tell whether this is the play or their life.*” (141). This combination is arrived at after mixing and matching Viola/Romeo and Sam/Juliet, Will/Romeo and Sam/Juliet. At times, it seems as if Shakespeare is writing the destiny of his own love affair. Whether it is a case of life imitating art or art imitating life is a difficult question to settle as both are playing with each other through the text. Juliet’s line which Shakespeare has written himself - “Go ask his name - If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding bed” “*hits WILL between the eyes*” (77) because he has concealed the fact of his marriage to Anne Hathaway from Viola. Life takes its cue from art here.

*Shakespeare in Love* also deals with the control of the producer/director which has been debated upon quite extensively in this screenplay. Elizabethan audiences were more interested in the plays and the players rather than the playwright. Most writers maintained their places in the Company as “actors”. Fennyman, “the money” is concerned about the lack of activity onstage - “nothing is happening” and he certainly does not hold the writer in good esteem:

FENNYMAN

Who is that?

HENSLOWE

Nobody. The author.

WILL

We are about to embark on a great voyage.
HENSLOWE

It is customary to make a little speech on the first day. It does no harm and authors like it.

WILL

You want to know what parts you are to receive. All will be settled as we go -

FENNYMAN

I'll do it.

(He jumps on the stage and takes over)

Listen to me, you dregs! - actors are ten a penny, and I, Hugh Fennyman, hold your nuts in my hand - (50)

But later, Fennyman is considerably impressed by the work that goes into the creation of a performance - “Alone in the auditorium, FENNYMAN looks and listens, fascinated. So this is theatre!” (57). Stoppard says that in theatre, “the director is there to serve the writer. It’s more or less the opposite of the movies where there is a directorial vision and the writer comes in to serve that vision” (Kelly, Companion 100). The writer may be “nobody” in Elizabethan and film parlance but good theatre demands that the writer’s vision be prime. Stoppard also presents an interesting comment on the theatre fraternity in general. When the Master of the Revels closes Henslowe’s theatre for showing a woman (Viola) onstage, in a magnanimous gesture, Burbage offers his own theatre to the Admiral’s Men:

The Master of the Revels despises us for vagrants, tinkers, and peddlers of bombast. But my father, James Burbage, had the first license to make a company of players from Her Majesty, and he drew from poets the literature of the age. Their fame will be our fame. So let them all know, we are men of parts. We are a brotherhood, and we will be a profession. Will Shakespeare has a play. I have a theatre. The Curtain is yours. (125)

There is historical evidence to suggest that there was, in fact, a collaboration between the two play-houses, but, it was not successful:
For ten days...the amalgamated companies of the Lord Admiral and the Lord Chamberlain performed to disappointingly small audiences. The collaboration lasted no longer than that. By mid-June, Alleyn and the Admiral’s Men were back at the Rose and Richard Burbage had gone back to his father’s theatre with the Chamberlain’s Men. (Thomson 108)

While allusions to Shakespeare dominate this and most other texts of Stoppard, there are references to Beckett, Eliot, Wilde, Joyce, Wittgenstein scattered throughout his body of writing. Two important dramatists, Christopher Marlowe and John Webster figure among the characters of this script. Marlowe’s relationship with Shakespeare has been discussed earlier and it would suffice that he was “the only one of the university wits whose talent Shakespeare might have seriously envied, whose aesthetic judgement he might have feared, whose admiration he might have earnestly wanted to win, and whose achievements he certainly attempted to equal and outdo” (Thomson 257). While Marlowe is shown at the peak of his career, Webster figures as a child (THE URCHIN). The invention of fictionalized meetings between historical figures such as the one between Shakespeare and Marlowe is Stoppard’s trademark device. Earlier in his 1974 play Travesties, he gives a fictional account of a meeting between Lenin, James Joyce and Tristan Tzara in 1917 in Zurich, Switzerland. The play gives us an amalgam of the discourses of the three through the reminiscences of one Henry Carr, a minor official at the British Consulate in Zurich at that time. Carr had acted the role of Algernon in a production of The Importance of Being Earnest staged by Joyce. This play interestingly is a pastiche of Wilde’s exquisite comedy. Similarly, in The Invention of Love (1987), Stoppard brings together Wilde and A.E. Housman. Marlowe’s death is also given a twist here. Wessex is out to kill “the poet” who he thinks is having an affair with his “property,” Viola. Will tells him that his name is Christopher Marlowe and when he hears the news of Marlowe’s death and the fact that he was stabbed, Shakespeare holds himself responsible, assuming that Wessex killed him. Stoppard shows how Marlowe’s death was a blow for all. The players call him “the first man” amongst them and say that “a great light has gone out.” This fact is corroborated by historical evidence:
The death of Marlowe in 1593 was a blow to the Admiral's Men, who owned his plays, and their chief attraction in 1594 was the majestic Edward Alleyn. Against that, the Chamberlain's Men could set the up-and-coming Richard Burbage, the popular clown William Kempe and the thirty year old William Shakespeare. (Thomson 109)

The meeting of Shakespeare and Webster in Shakespeare in Love is another Stoppardian twist. Webster tries his best to grab the role of Ethel, the Pirate's daughter who will finally be called Juliet. His attempts are thwarted by Shakespeare and Webster nurses a grudge. He comes across as a child fascinated with the way a cat will eat a mouse, especially, how "the cat bites his head off." He says that the "only writing" is the one which has "plenty of blood." Shakespeare is "unnerved." It is another matter that Webster will be instrumental in exposing the fact that Shakespeare is in love and the fact that there is a woman on the stage. This urchin grows up to become the bloodiest dramatist of all times. Tilney, the Master of Revels fears that he "will go far." Stoppard also contrives to name the Puritan, Makepeace. Whether he meant William Makepeace Thackeray is open to conjecture, but, it is well known that Thackeray accurately portrayed "the weak and vicious elements of society." Through observation and experience, he depicted the vices and intrigues of society realistically in his works, similarly the Puritan finds himself in the audience watching Romeo and Juliet albeit in a "sheepish" manner to actually see what theatre is all about. In the film version, it is the Puritan who is in raptures as the performance ends.

In a superb dramatic stroke, Viola reaches the theatre just as the play is about to start and saves the company from embarrassment as the "heroine's" voice had just broken. Bringing art and life together, Will and Viola say their farewells onstage as Romeo and Juliet and Elizabeth settles all the other complications. She finally accepts that "a play can show the very truth and nature of love." Viola embarks on her journey to Virginia, her new home with Wessex. The heroine of Will's new play, "Viola," is shipwrecked during "a perilous voyage to an unknown land" and only "Viola" survives. She becomes the Viola of Twelfth Night. Shakespeare in Love ends with an image of the
newly married Viola “walking away up the beach towards her brave new world.” We are free to infer that Lady Wessex never reached her marital home and indeed spends her life as a widow from her vows of love for Will.

Both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Shakespeare in Love* show Stoppard’s continuing pre-occupation with Shakespeare and the Elizabethan stage. Both depict the off-stage action that accompanies the writing, performance and making of a play showing us the importance of not only the marginalized, nondescript characters of Shakespeare but also the playwright himself. In these, more than any other texts, Stoppard uses theatre as a medium to create biographies where none existed. He has conflated real and imaginary characters to draw up his list of dramatis personae. Both texts have marked meta-theatrical concerns with self-reflexivity as one of the techniques. The relationship of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* with *Hamlet* is markedly self-conscious and Stoppard plays with the players in his play. The same is also true of *Shakespeare in Love*, where Stoppard plays with Shakespeare as a player and the troupe of actors which forms the cast of *Romeo and Juliet*. The play-within-the-play and role-playing-within-the-role are devices which establish and further the meta-dramatic discourse in both texts. With *Shakespeare in Love*, this pre-occupation has come full circle. In an effort to cater to commercial interests, Stoppard gives Shakespeare a touch of Hollywood but he does not parody. Parody is the concern of the next play to be examined in this study. As they say:

**HENSLOWE**

The show must... you know...

**WILL**

Go on. (134)