

“Somebody is watching”: The Panoptic Gaze in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31973/jwbekh33>



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Publication Dates

(Received 2025-06-5) (Revised 2025-08-11) (Accepted 2025-08-17) (Published 2026-09-15)

Abstract:

This study examines Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* through the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault’s theory the Panopticon and the concepts of disciplinary power and surveillance. By examining how power operates through visibility, observation, and normalization, this study reveals how the two protagonists are trapped within a system that makes them passive, obedient, and ultimately disposable. Their feelings of disorientation, alienation, and powerlessness reflect the internalized structures of control Foucault describes—where force is replaced by an omnipresent visibility and self-regulation. As the play unfolds, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become allegories for modern subjectivity under observation: watched, categorized, and ultimately eliminated without resistance or recognition. Their disappearance at the end of the play is not just a dramatic conclusion but a bureaucratic erasure, symptomatic of the silent violence perpetrated by disciplinary regimes. Not only does this reading emphasize the absurdity and philosophical barrenness at the heart of Stoppard’s play, but it also opens the way for a deeper exploration of the development of surveillance on the modern stage.

Keywords: Tom Stoppard, disciplinary power, docile bodies, the Gaze, Normalisation.

ثمة من يرصدنا: عين السلطة في مسرحية "روزنكرانتز وغلدينسترن في عداد الأموات" لتوم ستوبارد

تواريخ المنشور

الإستلام	النسخة النهائية	الموافقة	النشر الإلكتروني
(2025/6/5)	(2025/8/11)	(2025/8/17)	(2026/9/15)

(مُلخَصُ البَحْث)

تتناول هذه الدراسة مسرحية "روزنكرانتز وغلدينسترن في عداد الأموات" لتوم ستوبارد من خلال الإطار النظري لنظرية ميشيل فوكو حول السلطة، ومفاهيم السلطة الانضباطية والمراقبة. ومن خلال تحليل كيفية عمل السلطة عبر الرؤية والملاحظة والتطبيع، تكشف هذه الدراسة كيف أن الشخصيتين الرئيسيتين محاصرتان داخل نظام يجعل منهما كائنين خاضعين، مطيعين، وفي نهاية المطاف قابليين للاستغناء عنهم. فمشاعر التشتت والاعترا ب والعجز التي يختبرونها تعكس البنى الداخلية للضبط والسيطرة التي وصفها فوكو، حيث يتم استبدال القوة الفيزيائية برؤية دائمة الحضور وتنظيم ذاتي داخلي. ومع تطور أحداث المسرحية، يتحول روزنكرانتز وغلدينسترن إلى رموز للذات الحديثة الخاضعة للمراقبة؛ مرصودين، مصنفين، ومزالين في نهاية الأمر دون مقاومة أو اعتراف. إن اختفائهما في ختام المسرحية لا يمثل مجرد نهاية درامية، بل يمثل محو بيروقراطيا، يعكس العنف الصامت الذي تمارسه الأنظمة الانضباطية. لا يسلط هذا التحليل الضوء على عبثية المسرحية وفراغها الفلسفي فحسب، بل يفتح المجال أيضاً أمام استكشاف أعمق لتطور خطاب المراقبة في المسرح الحديث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: توم ستوبارد، السلطة الانضباطية، الأجساد الخاضعة، النظرة،

التطبيع

Introduction

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) is a postmodern reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), offering a philosophical and absurdist examination of fate, identity, and the nature of existence. In this play the spotlight is shifted onto two characters who have always been sidelined in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As noted that these two characters (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), "are used seven times in *Hamlet*, while Stoppard makes them vital to his play" (Alrifai & Karamah, 2025, p. 43). *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot* lay the groundwork for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. It also calls to mind, that their confusion and anguish, metaphysical speculation and games to pass the time and to put to rest the fear of the unknown bear some resemblance to Vladimir's and Estragon's doings in *Waiting for Godot* (Andretta, 1992, p.23). Hence both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (briefly, referred to here as Ros and Guil), the titular anti-heroes of

Stoppard's play, are finally bound by Shakespeare's script in the framework of their story. Stoppard affords them some measure of characterisation and in doing so addresses some fundamental existential questions-largely concerned with identity, agency, and the purpose of existence.

The dramatic narrative of the play represents Ros and Guil as unwilling players in a farce too grand for their comprehension-lying somewhere between *Hamlet's* will, fate's manifestation, and the demands of the audience. They are unable to exercise control over their own fate, much less grasp the absurdity of existence, whose challenges for meaning mainly lie within a predetermined framework. Stoppard uses these characters as a vehicle for questioning the nature of fiction and reality, employing their growing self-awareness as proof of that very constructed nature. Stoppard uses Ros and Guil not just as characters, but as big questions about what is real, what is fiction, and how it can provide a better understanding for their worldly circumstances. As the

play goes on, the two characters become more aware that they have no control over their actions or fate. And their growing awareness shows that they might just be part of a script and their world is constructed, possibly even theatrical or fictional. Unlike, Hamlet who is actively trying to interact with and be in control of his freedom, Ros and Guil are forever suspended within this existential limbo, utterly oblivious to what they are and painfully aware of what they are not. Their realization that they are mere figures in a theatrical narrative parallels broader philosophical inquiries into fate, observation, and the human condition.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead's narrative structure revolves around the relationship between power and surveillance. As Ros and Guil progress through *Hamlet's* events, they discover that they are more and more under the influence of others, frequently without even realising how trapped they are. Michael Foucault's panoptic theory that it was inspired from the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham and further more

Foucault usage of this notion which shows modern world and the power of the unseen force that controls people without direct coercion is reflected in their bewilderment and incapacity to exercise agency over their circumstances. The invisible forces driving their behavior are reflection of the panoptic system Foucault outlines, where people internalise surveillance and alter their behavior in reaction to an unknowable but constant gaze. Fundamental concerns regarding autonomy, free will, and the ways in which power functions within institutional and social structures are brought up by this dynamic.

The play explores human confusion and frustration, much like the scene of coin tossing, When Guil states: "A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability" (Stoppard, 1967, p. 8). When people cannot solve the mysteries present in their lives. Human experience requires embracing ambiguity because it represents the standard operating system of humanity. It explores surveillance not just as

something imposed from the outside, but as a hidden system that shapes how reality works. What seems like a light, absurd journey is actually a deeper process of shaping, controlling, and finally erasing individual identity within powerful systems. By drawing on Foucault's influential theory in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Ros and Guil exist as more than confused wanderers since their behavior results directly from the disciplinary system which controls their actions and shapes their perceptions before determining their destiny. The characters Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, and the Player act as surveillance agents who work within the network. The combination of characters manipulates Ros and Guil to create a complex network of surveillance which becomes more stringent throughout the play. The practice of surveillance exists as a continuous operation that completely conditions how the characters perceive their life experiences.

The application of Foucault's perspective transforms the core meaning of the play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead evolves from its whimsical tone to offer a profound perspective on how modern power operates silently. Stoppard presents a reality where resistance gets eliminated through external influence while authorities construct human perception and disciplinary control mechanisms guarantee the disappearance of any threats. When Ros and Guil recognize themselves as tools for the authority they experience a deeper sense of existential fear. The two characters try to establish their unique self-identity independently from their assigned social positions which parallels the modern reality of surveillance that limits individual autonomy. According to the Player's explanation the play demonstrates how surveillance functions: "PLAYER (*bursts out*) We can't look each other in the face! (*Pause, more in control.*) 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 (p. 57). As such, the player's statement

shows how there is defined by observation and surveillance.

This study, aims to focus on analysing the characters of Ros and Guil by connecting their story to the surveillance theories proposed by Foucauldian concepts: “Surveillance” , “Docile Bodies” , “The Gaze” and how the human identity is shaped according to these ideas. Authority in modern political regimes, according to Foucault, does not require visible forceful actions, authority functions through covert methods which embed itself into the daily conduct and beliefs of people. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* that “Visibility is a trap” (p. 200), which illustrates the concept behind the play’s surveillance theme. The text shows that Ros and Guil must fulfill their surveillance duties that stand as they become visible under the controlling power which restricts their freedom of choice. Their apparent involvement in unfolding events is actually a result of political powers which control their actions. The concept becomes clearer through the Player because this

character embodies the core theory.

The Player demonstrates complete understanding that personal identity becomes an artificial construction that actors perform before both visible audiences and hidden spectators. The Player speaks about the nature of modern surveillance when he makes the statement: “We are actors—we’re the opposite of people” (p. 57). The stance established by Victor L. Cahn *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* (1979), as he provides a clarification for this perspective. The characters in Stoppard’s works remain existentially poor because of systems so extensive and obscure that they evade human understanding (p. 102). The bitter expression of a past missed opportunity emerges through Ros who says: “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it” (p. 116). Thus, Ros’s statement shows remorse of how they have missed the opportunity to be free and have their own independence.

Surveillance through the Foucauldian perspective acts to determine not only behavior but also restricts the potential for choice without any coercion only by dictating what is necessary and what is required to do, Foucault says: “surveillance of the population, silent, mysterious, unperceived vigilance, [surveillance] it is the eye of the government ceaselessly open and watching without distinction over all citizens, yet without subjecting them to any measure of coercion or what-ever” (p. 280).

In the play, the transformation of Ros and Guil into passive figures becomes unmistakable. The characters in the play do not push back against authority but adopt it as a natural and essential state. According to Foucault, these individuals exist as “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (p. 136). Their destiny arises not from an individual act of betrayal but stems from the natural evolution of life under invisible control systems. Accordingly, invisible control is vital in this play due to the characters

powerlessness, control, and surveillance.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the main characters’ lives controlled and watched over by political regimes that make existence seem pointless. Foucault’s ideas about disciplinary power say that people are shaped not only by outside sources of authority, but also by being taught to accept these sources as natural parts of their reality. Ros and Guil are stuck in a world where an unseen force controls everything they do. They are a good example of this condition. They are confused and frustrated not only because they cannot make their own decisions, but also because they do not understand the system that controls them. Foucault argues that “power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who do not have it; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them” (p. 27). In Stoppard’s play, this hidden power is an all-seeing but undefined authority that controls the main characters fate without ever showing

itself. Which means, that power does not just come from above it works through people, shaping how they think and act, often without them realising it, this is seen in how the two characters unknowingly enforce the system that traps them. When they are sent to deliver a letter, Ros suggest that they “take Hamlet to the English king, we hand over then letter—what then?” (p. 97), (unknowingly carrying Hamlet’s death sentence), they become agents of power without knowing it, just as Foucault describes. The real authority remains invisible, but its influence shapes everything they do.

As Ros and Guil get ready for their execution in the play’s closing moments, one of the most moving depictions of oppression by political regimes can be found. They finally face the fact that they have never had true autonomy after spending the entire play navigating an unclear world. The essence of their existential dilemma can be found in their final exchange:

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.*)

Rosen—?

Guil—?

He gathers himself.

Well, we’ll know better next time. Now you see me, now you— (*and disappears*). (pp. 116-117)

While Cahn explains in his book *Beyond Absurdity*, the case with Ros and Guil is not as it is with Estragon and Vladimir. The characters unmistakably exist within a society, bound by certain social conventions and customs. The nature of the conventions and customs is not specified. What matters is that the two characters exist within a social system, not suspended between its isolated pieces. There is no societal structure in *Waiting for Godot*. In fact, one can surely be found in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Consequently, Estragon and Vladimir have no context to refer to, and the outcome is that Godot is an absent presence,

something envisioned rather than actually expected. Ros and Guil, on the other hand, can consider their circumstances to a certain extent:

GUIL (*tensed up by this rambling*): Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROS (*promptly*): I woke up, I suppose. (*Triggered.*) Oh—I've got it now—that man, a foreigner, he woke us up—

GUIL A messenger. (*He relaxes, sits.*)

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.

ROS We were sent for.

GUIL Yes.

ROS That's why we're here. (*He looks round, seems doubtful, then the explanation.*) Travelling.

GUIL Yes. (pp. 14-15)

The language here suggests that events of the past are only expressions within an unclear mist, hence making memory unreliable. However, memories found in the body of

Ros add some level of veracity to their account. The two men have a sense of the fact that they have been called to witness on that specific day, the day which they believe to have been summoned by the a man, as Guil puts it a “messenger”. Though they are not aware of the reason for their summoning, they keep moving towards a marked goal. The first act of the play explicitly identifies itself with this definition of reality. The coin toss that fascinates Ros and Guil is not so much an extension of reality itself but rather a theatrical device, holding the attention of the audience from the beginning of the play and encouraging them to participate in the events on stage. Moreover, the coin toss, is a reflection of a reality that is marked with indeterminate values. As against the lack of values depicted in the reality of the world of Godot, the reality of Ros and Guil is not against reason but against the presence of reason. (Cahn, 1979, pp. 37–38)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead does not reject the idea of reason itself but questions whether reason can ever truly be present

or accessible. The characters constantly search for meaning, patterns, or logic in their situation—but always come up empty. This shows that while they believe in reason, they are trapped in a world where it never appears clearly or reliably, in which “they cannot find the missing part to complete the puzzle of their existence because such a part does not exist... In their search for truth, they come upon the disastrous knowledge that truths are just foggy concepts which evade recognition” (Kermany, 2008, p. 15).

1.2 The Mechanics of Surveillance in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead shows surveillance involving multiple characters who use their methods to support control mechanisms. The combined actions of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Hamlet, Ophelia and the Player result in Ros and Guil experiencing growing entrapment during their observed and reshaped existence. The surveillance system begins when Claudius enlists Ros and Guil by

pretending to be their friend and loyal subject: “Friends both, go join you with some further aid: Hamlet in madness hath Polonius slain, and from his mother’s closet hath he dragged him” (p. 78). The comment is made following the murder of Polonius at the hand of Hamlet as a consequence of his attempt to spy on Hamlet. Claudius calls Ros and Guil as “friends” and requests their service to address the situation. Specifically, they are charged with tracking down Hamlet, bringing back the corpse of Polonius, and minimising the fallout of the event. Stoppard’s reading of this scene underscores the irony and discomfort of the deployment of the word “friends” here Ros and Guil are clearly being used to carry out the dictates of governmental power instead of being considered true friends.

The power structure established by Claudius demonstrates pastoral power according to Foucault’s theory because it operates through voluntary submission instead of fear-based rule. The surveillance methods employed by others against Hamlet

remain transparent to him. Through his knowledge of the system, he uses appearance management to follow specific expectations when it serves his purposes. His famous line: “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw” (p. 49) show that Hamlet maintains his own exposure level through a strategic approach which confuses detection systems.

The court’s risky atmosphere of suspicion continues under the management of both Polonius and Gertrude. The downfall of Polonius occurs when his obsession with surveillance activities becomes his ultimate defeat which aligns with Foucault’s warning about observers who fall into their own surveillance traps. The Queen’s moral arguments help establish surveillance as a natural practice that everyone should accept because spying does not generate moral concerns. Ophelia who appears innocent to the court becomes a manipulated instrument in the power struggle against Hamlet. Her manipulation serves as an example of how powerless people are forced to help

sustain surveillance systems. The Player emerges as the only character who completely accepts the performative side of surveillance in the play. Through his dumb show performance, the Player creates a silent drama which functions as a Foucauldian method to control the audience’s emotions. His remark: “We’re actors— we’re the opposite of people!” (p. 57), captures the heart of modern power, in societies controlled by manipulative political regimes individuals no longer display authentic behavior and instead engage in continuous performances.

In *Outer Circles: Exploring the Philosophical Dimensions of Stoppard’s Theater* (2003), Daniel Fischlin argues that public entertainment shapes personal identity through figures like the Player (p. 211). In the play, this idea is reflected in how Ros and Guil cannot separate performance from real life, as their fate is already written. The Player confirms this when he says, “It is written” (p. 72), showing that their actions are predetermined. Their passive roles and inability to resist reveal how surveillance

and control operate through scripted behavior, turning identity into something governed by external forces. According to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, surveillance maintains its effectiveness despite the absence of any actual observer. The act of surveillance without direct observation leads individuals to control their actions. The perfect execution of power should lead to situations where actual power exercise becomes unnecessary. He explains:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they

are themselves the bearers. (p. 201)

This demonstrates how Stoppard's play dramatises Foucault's panopticon theory by presenting a society where surveillance is an internalised state rather than just an external mechanism. The confusion, obedience, and ultimate resignation of Ros and Guil highlight how well disciplinary authority can mould human conduct. The play illustrates how surveillance operates as a pervasive force that controls people without their knowledge through their interactions with authority figures, their involvement in performative realities, and their eventual submission to an invisible political powers of control.

The collapse of Ros and Guil's autonomy unfolds through a series of key scenes that illustrate the tightening grip of surveillance and disciplinary control. Each moment pulls them further from any illusion of freedom and closer to becoming fully normalised, passive subjects. One such scene occurs during their attempt to extract information from Hamlet. Although tasked by Claudius to spy on their

friend, their awkward and uncertain questioning exposes how unfit they are for this role. Hamlet's penetrating question: "Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining?" (p. 54) forces them to confront the uncomfortable truth of their situation. They are not free agents; they are tools, unaware of how thoroughly they have been enlisted into the machinery of surveillance. Foucault describes such subject as: "that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory" (p. 26). Thus, it reflects Ros and Guil's condition, as they are caught in a web of shifting power relations rather than holding any real agency. Their existence is not defined by control but by constant tension and passive participation in a system they cannot grasp or resist.

Ros and Guil are living proof, this inability to recognise their own entrapment is further highlighted when they receive

the letter condemning Hamlet to death. Their blind acceptance of the task, without any curiosity about the letter's contents, reveals the depth of their negativity and ignorance. They no longer see questioning authority as an option; obedience has been internalised as it seems in the terms of "docile bodies". The tragedy intensifies in the ship scene. As they unknowingly carry the rewritten letter sealing their own doom, they continue to treat their mission as a duty. Guil's philosophical musings expose the despair lurking beneath the surface: "We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?" (p. 100).

Death, in this moment, is stripped of drama or resistance, while "Foucault is more interested in the resistance to power than repression" (Mhayyal & Hasan, 2024, p. 30). Yet, their normalisation seems to be processed as part of their assigned function. Foucault's notion of "Normalisation" which he presents in *Discipline and Punish* argues:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior his aptitudes, his achievements. The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalising power. (p. 304)

Therefore, Ros and Guil unresisting their fate not due to their evil deeds or nature, but because they are unable to imagine a role outside the normative framework. They have been so deeply embedded in the structure of obedience and courtly loyalty that they never question Claudius’s command to escort Hamlet to England or the sealed letter ordering Hamlet’s execution.

The final act of *Hamlet* reinforces this bleak view. The English ambassadors offhand announcement: “Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern are dead” (Shakespeare, 2012, p. 285), illustrates the complete success of disciplinary power. Their deaths are not mourned, not even really noticed; they become administrative facts, background noise in a world too normalised to register individual loss. Hana Kovar (2014) argues that Ros and Guil are trapped in a predetermined system in which “each move [is] dictated by the previous one” and they are ultimately stripped of agency. Ros and Guil’s disappearance is not a narrative failure, it is the logical quiet endpoint of a life shaped by invisible surveillance.

Foucault conceptualises this decentralised circulation of authority as follows:

Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment. Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere... everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked – it is the great review of the living and the dead. (p. 195)

This clarifies how surveillance can be more than just a way to watch people; it can also be a powerful force that shapes and fixes people's authority upon themselves. Foucault shows a system in which each person has a place, and moving outside of that place physically, socially, or ideologically—puts them in danger or invites punishment. Surveillance does not just happen, it actively creates a social order where identity is based on how visible control and constantly presents who you are. In this kind of society, identity is no longer a personal or independent way of expressing oneself. It is built under pressure, when people are watching and expecting you to be there, follow the rules, and be clear. This phrase covers it up perfectly, answering to his name and showing himself when asked. One's existence and legitimacy are only confirmed by being seen and recognised by authority. And this shows that Ros and Guil are despite of being watched yet not seen as a complicated persons, but as a fixed role within a social structure docile bodies that is catalogued,

known, and placed. When Guil says, “we cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered” (p. 54).

Accordingly, it becomes clear through Guil's contemplation, that people often go through life without fully thinking about their actions, and only understand their consequences later. The “smell of smoke” and the “presumption” that their “eyes watered” represent how our past choices often leave behind only unclear memories or feelings, rather than clear meaning or understanding.

1.3 The threads of Surveillance in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Ros and Guil experience surveillance as an existential power which forces their behavior and distorts their understanding of the world. Stoppard's metatheatrical adaptation of *Hamlet* amplifies the control theme, through spying, control, and manipulation, which reveals power mechanisms that

function through invisible yet continuous forces. Stoppard elevates Ros and Guil from their small Shakespearean roles into a network of surveillance which deepens their feelings of confinement. Their assignment to monitor Hamlet by Claudius exposes them to dual authority enforcement from both the king and Hamlet's rising distrust. This structure represents Foucault's concept of "The Gaze" which explains how power relations function through continuous observation that forces people to control their own conduct. Through its narrative structure Stoppard's work explores the influence of surveillance in determining people's ultimate paths and how it affects their ability to control their lives. Ros and Guil experience increasing confusion during their conversation because of the emerging reality of their surveillance situation.

GUIL Don't let them confuse you.

ROS I'm out of my step here.

GUIL We'll soon be home and high—dry and home—I'll—

ROS Out of my head. I want to go home.

GUIL Don't let them confuse you!

ROS I'm out of my step here.

My instincts are all wrong!

GUIL We'll soon be home and dry.

ROS It's all over my depth.

GUIL I'll hie you home and—

ROS —dry you high and—

GUIL—high you home. (p. 33)

The characters in this situation find it challenging to adapt to their dual roles as spectators and the ones being watched. The characters disjointed conversations demonstrate their confusion and powerlessness through recurring phrases and reversed word patterns. Guil's statement, "Don't let them confuse you" exposes his knowledge of outside control but fails to prevent Ros from feeling increasingly troubled. The character's continuous request to return home demonstrates his wish to break free from their system of confinement but the current circumstances prevent any such release. The characters failure to establish power over their environment, follows Foucault's idea that surveillance mechanisms create automatic self-policing behavior in individuals who are not under direct watch:

The perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it assumes responsibility for the constraints of power he makes them play spontaneously upon himself — he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (p. 202)

According to Foucault the main point about surveillance operates through internalised control stands as essential when analysing the circumstances faced by Ros and Guil. Their realisation that someone observes them leads them into self-monitoring which causes them to fulfill their roles while remaining uncertain about their actual expectations. Throughout the play their way of expressing themselves breaks down more and more thus showing that their independence erodes. Their mental conditioning through power mechanisms of Claudius together with Hamlet and the controlling forces which shape their environment leads them to reinforce their own subordination while

becoming trapped within the establishment they serve. Surveillance maintains its greatest power by causing people to manage their actions independently of direct control from others. The concept follows Foucault's theory about discipline which functions as an unseen controlling influence that uses surveillance methods to maintain power rather than physical domination.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead brings forth a new perspective on free will through its depiction of surveillance as an inescapable limitation. Cahn's assertion about characters being controlled by outside elements and their search for meaning emerges in his statement about the characters dual roles as observers and observed beings (p. 112). The evaluation by Cahn directly matches Foucault's concept of "The Gaze" which explains how watchers turn people into objects that leads to real independence loss. Ros and Guil gradually realise their restricted autonomy because no action to break free from observation actually succeeds in escaping their predetermined

roles. The surveillance methods in Stoppard's play demonstrate the pointless nature of human life while showing that individuals experience predetermined choices according to unobservable determinants.

In *Modern Theatre and the Crisis of Identity*, Elaine Aston analysis of surveillance which proves that monitoring serves as a basic component in human life instead of a tool for authoritarian governance (p. 85). Stoppard positions his main characters so they operate under surveillance while being active performers in their own enslavement, thus, outlining how agency remains impossible within a system that inherently restricts it. Foucault demonstration of how surveillance evolves from observation into control by showing that monitoring serves to both monitor people and make them observable (p. 170). The essential part of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* exists in the main characters growing unease because they constantly receive directives from King Claudius to act as surveillance operatives. Their mission to

gather intelligence about Hamlet shows their involvement in the system but they do not understand their complete submission to power. Through the direct use of *Hamlet's* lines Stoppard creates a connection between Shakespeare's surveillance portrayal and his own work. For example, in Act One, Ros and Guil acknowledge their purpose: "GUIL: We have been sent for.... ROS: Yes, we were sent for" (p. 15). This exchange mirrors their dialogue in *Hamlet*: "GUILDENSTERN: My lord, we were sent for" (p. 101). The repeated language suggests that they are fully aware of their position as manipulated characters by Claudius, and this is only can be seen as a reflection of their blindly obedience to their superiors. Foucault notes:

Whenever a good pupil hears the noise of the signal, he will imagine that he is hearing the voice of the teacher or rather the voice of God himself calling him by his name. He will then partake of the feelings, saying with him in the depths of his soul: "Lord, I am here". (p. 166)

This highly matches their situation as it well known in their time as Elizabethan characters, the King's words and demands are Godlike. Their need for self-definition beyond *Hamlet's* narrative reveals their reliance on external perspectives. In which, it is also a reminder of the nature and purpose of surveillance during the Elizabethan era, surveillance played a pivotal role for monarchs and even servants whom they surveilled and spied for their masters in hope of getting their favour. Surveillance was a form of traditional phenomenon at royal courts:

This culture of surveillance was also embedded in the patronage system. Pro-

minent courtiers and Privy Councillors, including Leicester, Burghley, Walsi-

ingham, Essex, and Salisbury, operated intelligence networks on behalf of the

monarch. Servants spied for—and on—their masters, lesser courtiers passed

secrets to higher leeches, who in turn passed them onto the monarch, all with

the hopes of favours in return. (Stenfane, 2012, p. 181)

Guil's frustration serves as the perfect expression of their existential crisis: "Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths?" (p. 113). The characters in the play exist under a surveillance system which imposes definitive destinies on them even when they do not recognize its operation. Stoppard transforms their minor roles from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into the central position of a drama where they become subjects watched and controlled by invisible forces including Claudius, Hamlet and the audience. The two friends who appear in the play receive continuous observation from their first entrance and become part of a grand design which they fail to understand. Their anxiety about being observed by others is being shown through their early interaction with Hamlet: "HAMLET But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived. GUIL In what, my dear lord? HAMLET I am but mad north- north-west. When the wind is southerly, I

know a hawk from a handsaw” (p. 49).

Hamlet makes a mysterious statement which reveals that he is evaluating them as spies which reverses the surveillance perspective. The situation reflects Foucault's panoptic surveillance theory which observes people at all times although they remain unaware of it. Foucault expands on this concept by introducing his “Biopolitics” which explains how power functions through constant individual observation. Accordingly, he notes:

power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead - all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (p. 197)

Categorised in a way similar to data instead of people, into groups like “the living, the sick, and the dead”. This relates to a system that observes and describes people, not in terms of their individual identities, but from the viewpoint of outside observation and control

systems. Hamlet resists such categorisation in response by saying, “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw” (p. 49), his sarcastic way and suspicion of Ros and Guil and the spreading systems of spying around him. Claudius-his-uncle-father and Gertrude his-aunt-mother, conclude that they have successfully pinpointed and labeled him as mad; but Hamlet suggests that he assumes the “madness” only when it suits him. He is aware of being surveyed, watched, and branded, but he resists being contained to a single label. He exercises a measure of conscious control, when the situation changes the wind is southerly, he is capable of perceiving accurately and knowing reality from falsity. By Foucault's account, Hamlet refuses to be included within a priori categorisation; he openly resists the assignation of the condition of madness from hierarchical framework aimed at maintaining control. His madness is a strategic act of opposition to the controlling scrutiny that seeks to enclose him.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead features uncertainty as its core element which influences the characters' lives and shows their lack of power. At the start of their journey Ros and Guil become exposed to a world where predictable outcomes do not apply because reality perpetually shifts. The repeated coin tosses demonstrate their existential uncertainty because the characters fail to comprehend the forces which govern their destiny. The characters lack of understanding their path combined with their authentic selves leads them to surrender their ability to direct their lives. Stoppard develops uncertainty through his play's metatheatrical structure which shows characters that know their fate but cannot deviate from it. The way Foucault describes disciplinary power reveals that people bow to control systems in their lives without detecting their presence. The play's absurd philosophy intensifies the existential uncertainty because characters live in a world where truth remains concealed and free will stays beyond reach.

GUIL When the wind is southerly.

ROS And the weather's clear.

GUIL And when it isn't he can't.

ROS He's at the mercy of the elements. (*Licks his finger and holds it up facing audience.*) Is that southerly?

They stare at audience.

GUIL It doesn't look southerly. What made you think so?

ROS I didn't say I think so. It could be northerly for all I know.

GUIL I wouldn't have thought so.

ROS Well, if you're going to be dogmatic.

GUIL Wait a minute-we came from roughly south according to a rough map. ROS I see. Well, which way did we come in? (*GUIL looks round vaguely.*) *Roughly.*

GUIL (*clears his throat*): In the morning the sun would be easterly. I think we can assume that.

ROS That it's morning? (pp. 51-52)

This portrays the characters existence as being heavily shaped by fundamental doubt and lack of personal control. The characters in the play

especially Ros and Guil feel completely lost about wind motion direction because it serves as a metaphorical symbol for their life's core confusion about their destiny and the power structure of their existence.

Foucault's "disciplinary power" theory explains that control operates through hidden mental regulatory systems that individuals accept internally rather than through external domination. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault demonstrates that people develop subconscious patterns to accept surveillance systems and discipline as their only way of life while maintaining the illusion that they have freedom of choice:

A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force in order to constrain the convict to good behavior, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of the regulations. (p. 202)

Ros and Guil depend on external indicators including maps and audience surveillance to illustrate the theme because

they progress through the play without challenging their boundaries. Through their inattentive discussion, thus, it demonstrate their powerlessness and deepening the control mechanisms which operate their whole existence. The direct involvement of these characters with the audience adds a new level of surveillance that makes them complicit in the observational systems described by Foucault: "The examination transformed the economy of visibility into the exercise of— power. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (p. 187).

Their knowledge of being observed by others makes them face existential doubt about their true selves by demonstrating that surveillance defines their personal existence. Their dual subject-object existence on stage forces them into an unchangeable script while the audience's watchful eyes enforce their dependency on external control. Their circumstances in the play illustrate the universal themes of surveillance and power

relations while they deal with their present situation. Furthermore, the ambiguity surrounding their goal reflects the psychological effects of the panopticon, which reinforces the notion that power can exert control without visibility by having people alter their behavior in response to an ambiguous gaze.

The illusion of freedom is a major theme in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and this idea is closely related to Foucault's examination of disciplinary power and the panopticon. Ros and Guil seem to act independently throughout the play, but outside forces that they cannot understand constantly influence what they do. Their growing awareness of a behavioural system which constrains their choices unfolds gradually. Their increasing realisation leads to a state of existential uncertainty that shows their powerlessness in directing their lives, while the play's structure resembles Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), which underscores humanity's struggle for meaning in an irrational existence. The coin-tossing scene serves as the

play's opening sequence since Ros achieves over seventy heads in a row through his coin toss that sets an eerie tone of brute control by some unseen power. The impossible outcome of consecutive heads points to a deeper existential problem which demonstrates that Ros and Guil exist within a predetermined system, a system of manipulation and most importantly a system that exclude them, and they only being called upon when they provide an interest to the high authority which means the King, Queen, and the royal court. Otherwise, they are being ignored and mistreated all along their confusing journey towards their doom where death is waiting without their knowledge. The stage directions use repetition to highlight the continuous nature of the coin tossing:

The run of "heads" is impossible, yet Ros betrays no surprise at all-he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money of his friend. Let that be his character note.

GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried

about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it his character note. GUIL sits. ROS stands (he does the moving, retrieving coins). GUIL Spins. ROS studies coin. ROS: Heads. He picks it up and puts it in his bag. The process is repeated. (p. 7)

The unsettling aspect of this coin toss is perhaps highlighted most strongly by the extraordinary run of seventy heads in a row before the experiment begins. Guil phrase: “A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability” (p. 8). This line lays the groundwork for the conflict that runs throughout the play: the breakdown of reason and structure. The primary challenge Ros and Guil shall have to face is to try to understand the events that are happening internally within their minds and externally around them (Cahn, pp. 38-39).

Foucault’s theory of surveillance power shows how subjects adapt control systems before fully understanding them despite the system complexity. Surveillance methods in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault

shows how people develop self-regulating behaviour’s through continuous observation which works independently from direct coercion. A person who recognises being watched transforms into a self-imposed system of power. Stoppard here has successfully integrated *Hamlet* scenes while maintaining core themes which show how hidden forces guide human behavior. Through *Hamlet*, the ghost uses its omniscient powers to interfere with events which triggers increased paranoia in Hamlet.

Thus, the coin tossing which has triggered the skepticism and questioning of Ros and Guil and their wondering about their quest or well-being is as important as the ghost in *Hamlet*. The theatrical piece can be read as an intellectual exercise, marked by an attempt to understand a reality that is marked by events that are irrational and happen for no reason. At the same time that Ros and Guil are perpetually observing the events that unfold before them from the periphery, they experience situations that elude their understanding, both about their selves and the expectations that society places

upon them. It is, however, important to recognize that these situations are concrete realities. Ros and Guil are not trapped in this uncertain state of being. Their experiences essentially capture the frustrations of people who request that people who are in power act as if every event has some importance, but this importance is never available to the common populace. Ros and Guil discover their lives follow an unchangeable path which forces them to become tools of destiny. Guil accepts his fate during a moment of defeat:

GUIL 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 happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd feel less guilty. (pp. 53-54)

The absurdist theater explores human behavior within a universe that does not provide any meaning or direction. Esslin in his book *Theatre of the Absurd* presents how absurdist playwrights illustrate reality as an irrational

automated structure that evades human efforts to establish order. The absurd dramatists use their work to demonstrate a universe that people cannot grasp through their fruitless pursuit of significance. The theatrical stage functions as a platform for illustrating the conflict between incompatible elements and repeated behavioural sequences which mirror prevalent human existential issues (p. 189). The perfect representation of absurdity exists in Ros and Guil because their narrative follows a predetermined script that eliminates any chance of independent decision-making. The two characters demonstrate complete acceptance of their predetermined life path while Hamlet actively resists any external control. The combination of constant surveillance and their inability to recognise external control makes their plight even more difficult to bear.

1.4 The Meta-theatrical Elements and the Audience as the Watcher

The audience in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* functions as a silent but attentive presence which

mirrors the ghost in *Hamlet* observing and directing the play's events. The Players actively maintain the theatre's artificiality by emphasising their role as performers. The Player delivers a line which states "We are actors—we're the opposite of people!" (p. 57), to emphasise the fundamental contradiction between their existence as theater characters and their limited awareness of the people who watch them. In the play, the main source of irony stems from the uninterrupted observation of its main characters together with their vital dependence on this surveillance.

This play establishes the audience as the primary watchers who reinforce the main themes about surveillance and control. The audience takes an active role as universal observers who direct the characters toward their destiny by controlling the sequence of events. As the Player states, "our audience spied upon us from behind the nearest bush, forced our bodies to blunder on long after they had emptied of meaning, until like runaway carts they dragged to a halt" (p. 58). Thus, Ros and Guil emerge

within the theatrical setting when they reveal themselves as on-stage performers who remain under the power of symbolic control mechanisms in the theater. Their stage performance relies on outside influences to enforce their character enactment because surveillance mechanisms establish behaviour management through external control methods. Surveillance demonstrates its operational process by watching people as they react to different situations according to the Foucauldian framework. Foucault explains that people become trapped by being constantly seen because repeated surveillance makes individuals adjust their behavior to match the observed standards. He states that:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and re-arranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others

bodies... Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. (p. 138)

Foucault explains how disciplinary power targets the body as the major point of control. Power has moved away from dramatic displays of spectacle and overt physical punishment; instead, it works quietly, repetitively, and systemically dismantling, reconditioning, and reconfiguring bodies to assume specific habits of behavior. He calls this process "political anatomy" demonstrating how institutions such as schools, prisons, and theatres ultimately control individuals by dictating their physical presence, routines, and expressions. The end result of this process is the creation of the "docile body" obedient, compliant, and conditioned to respond according to invisible expectations. Rose and Guil embody the very docile bodies Foucault outlines. They are controlled both by the script of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and by the invisible forces of the stage, from the King's command to the watching gaze of the audience. They comply without

question, mechanically acting out their parts, struggling with their responsibilities, and submitting to obligations they did not choose or understand.

Their physical presence on the stage is determined not by choice but by a dramatic structure that compels them to blunder on long past the time they had emptied of meaning, as the Player explains. Here, the audience becomes a contemporary panoptic force. They may appear passive in their activity, but they are attentive in their watching. By simply watching, the audience exercises power calling for continuity, performance, and coherence. Ros and Guil, aware on some level that they are being watched, grow increasingly mechanical, moving through a script not their own, yet one that they feel an overwhelming urge to complete. Their bodies, like those in Foucault's account, are inspected, rearranged, and regulated by the demands of theater and narrative. They do not act—they are acted upon. Even their confusion operates to secure their control. The more they become entranced in their roles, the more they are

reduced to performing bodies, objects of spectacle without any existence other than that. Like captives trapped in a regime of discipline, they are inscribed in the tissue of the visible, and their obedience is founded not in resistance but in confusion—makes them perfect models of submission under surveilling eyes.

In *Stoppard's Comic Philosophy*. Tom Stoppard (1986), Allan Rodway intensifies that structurally, Stoppard utilises a variation of the play within a play to construct the metafiction reality of the characters. The exterior play is situated in the real world of Ros and Guil, a reality characterised by the throwing of coins, the playing of games, and the interrogative conversations about the nature of death. The internal play is nothing less than *Hamlet*, or, more accurately, scenes taken directly from its core, instantly recognisable to the audience. That shows the heart-breaking meeting of Ophelia and Hamlet that sparks the internal conflict. Being immersed in a metafictional play within a play exemplifies the coin flippers, actors of the outer play, as

“real” (Rodway, p. 82), While looking upon the secret companions of Hamlet, actors of the inner play, as mere inventions. That these characters, however, existed many years before Stoppard sat to write of them makes such perceptions impossible. Surely, Ros and Guil, speaking in their modern language that seems so jarringly out of place against their Elizabethan costumes, can be accepted as nothing but Shakespeare's doomed pair.

The fact of the matter is that the dramatic life of these characters does not begin with Stoppard's Act I; they bring with them an indelible past that informs our response. Though, the awareness of this double perception, the impossibility of classifying the metatheatrical actors within the boundaries of fiction and reality, for considering the coin flippers real occasions discomfort about their past. So even before Hamlet appears on stage, one might think of Ros and Guil in terms of him, and well before they re-enter Hamlet's realm, we, as readers are all too aware of what becomes of them; our knowledge of Shakespeare, assisted by the very title of the

play itself, leaves no doubt that “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead”. As fate intertwines its complex fabric around them, Ros drops his protests, courageously admitting, “To tell you the truth, I’m relieved” (p. 116). Acceptance is not the same as comprehension, however, Guil lost even in the shadow of death, he asks: “But why, we ask ourselves? Was it all for this? Why is our existence the focus of this immense convergence? little deaths? (*In anguish to the Player:*) who are we?” (p. 113).

The Player replies: “You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That’s enough” (p. 114). The notion that there is nothing beyond the limits of the universe of Shakespeare in which Ros and Guil exist and finally die within the limits of their appointed roles is forcefully underscored by Stoppard’s last image (Rodway, 1986, pp. 83-84). The disappearance of Ros and Guil occurs without any dramatic climax but instead happens through a quiet and mysterious evaporation. According to the stage directions, “*The lights dim to nothing while the sound of fighting continues. The sound*

fades to nothing. The lights come up. The middle barrel (Ros’s and Guil’s) is missing” (p. 109). The two characters vanish simultaneously in both physical and metaphysical ways. The stage presence of Ros and Guil is defined by audience observation, yet after their disappearance, this vital gaze disappears, due to their exiting both the narrative and structure of visibility that had defined them. Thereby, altering their existence, they cease to exist, as if they were never here. As Foucault describes those who are unnoticed and nevertheless have any shred of significance. He embarks: “Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of ‘contagions’, of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder” (p. 198). And this echoes the discreet departure of Ros and Guil in the last scene. They go away quietly; they simply drop out of sight and hearing. Foucault’s observation that people appear and disappear, live and die in disorder, aptly sums up the

feeling; they fade away lacking importance, consumed by the same system that monitored them with such intensity all along, finally discarded with no resolution.

Conclusion

The ultimate outcome of their fate is that, Ros and Guil, can be defined as the echo of the past as it always find its way back to their present moment. Although, that this play is a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and yet their fate has never been altered, more like if their demise is intended by their own script. As if they do not create their own story; they inherit roles, expectations, and destinies from a system they have no access to. Their conclusion is not climactic, it is formal, unexpected and unmourned. They die not as people, but as characters always condemned to be forgotten. In Foucault's panopticon, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* illustrates how power works today, not by open violence but, by deception of watching, spying constantly, and managing behaviour. In their fragmented conversation, circular logic, and tentative

efforts to take action, Ros and Guil become metaphors for how individuals are controlled today: they are being watched, labeled, and eventually rendered invisible.

They are deprived of both power and identity, and even the certainty of their own being. They are compelled to move within an unseen framework they cannot identify and a narrative they cannot leave. This mindset does not only affect the way they behave; it determines their destiny. Their existential confusion is not merely absurdist theatre, it is a symptom of a system that objectifies people as subjects of knowledge and control, then casts them aside when they are no longer needed. Alienation, confusion, and absurdity in the play do not function as abstract themes, but as by-products of being under constant surveillance, constant classification, and never being noticed. The play therefore articulates surveillance as a silent violence; one that demands performance, extracts utility, and then disposes the subject without spectacle or resistance. Finally, Ros and Guil, remain passive because

they lack the awareness or courage to question the system that controls them. Instead of resisting, they accept their roles blindly, failing to see that those in power are just people like them. Their tragedy lies in their obedience, not in their fate.

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