Title	The theatrics of 'not-being' : rehearsing death in postmodern theatre
Author(s)	Ng, Carmen Siang Nan.
Citation	Ng. C. S. N. (2012). The theatrics of 'not-being' : rehearsing death in postmodern theatre. Final year project report, Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2012
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/9456
Rights	Nanyang Technological University

Ng Siang Nan Carmen

Dr. Daniel K. Jernigan

HL499: Graduation Essay

16th April 2012

The Theatrics of 'Not-Being': Rehearsing Death in Postmodern Theatre

<u>Introduction</u>

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale suggests making distinctions between modernist and postmodernist writing based on the dominant of the work. While "the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*," (McHale 9) that of "postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls 'post-cognitive'," suggesting that postmodernism is primarily concerned with the way worlds are structured as opposed to the inquisition of knowledge (10). The implication of McHale's generalization is this: postmodernist writing brings to focus not just the world, but worlds in general, especially in their plurality and contradictions. McHale moves on in *Postmodernist Fiction* to talk about the different types of postmodernism and their features, but what remains central in all the different kinds of postmodernist fiction is precisely the way ontology is foregrounded in these texts and, in many cases, with ontological boundaries being broken down. If postmodernism is first and foremost concerned with ontology, then theatre is arguably always potentially postmodern in light of its stylistic features.[1]

In *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Steven Conner argues, "the condition of theatricality connects with many of the most important

---

[1] Daniel K. Jernigan claims in *Drama and the Postmodern: Assessing the Limits of Metatheatre* that the features of live theatre makes it "reasonable to assume that the ontological and epistemological fragility of the theatrical environment would make it a particularly engaging forum within which to investigate a wide variety of postmodern crises" (Jernigan 3).

preoccupations of the postmodern debate" (Conner 142). Indeed, it is not unfair to claim that postmodern concerns can largely be observed on the theatrical stage, and that theatre itself is easily and commonly used to explore these concerns. Lionel Abel, in *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, proposes, "[a] play is essentially a game but a game played with something sacred" (Abel 127). To liken a play to a game suggests that plays are, at their fundamentals, made up and hence the opposite of reality. Given the unique features of live theatre and drama performances, there is a sense that the game Abel refers to is precisely the stylistic features of dramatization. Drawing the ideas of these three critics together, is it then too much to assert that drama, even the seemingly Realist productions, are stylistically postmodern?

In "'Possible Worlds' in Literary Semantics," Thomas G. Pavel states, "[the] reader of a literary work is less interested in evaluating the *logical* possibilities of the propositions encountered than in assessing their 'real' possibility," suggesting that every reader necessarily abandons the logic of the real world in favor of the rationale in the work's ontology (Pavel 174). For a reader to wholly indulge in the projected world of the text, he must cross the boundary separating the rationale of the real and fictional worlds, making the act of reading essentially postmodern. More significantly, the nature of theatre causes this to be extremely complicated for drama: on the one hand, the etiquette of theatre-going creates a hyper-awareness of the play's fictionality; on the other hand, with the use of props and actors, the action on stage maintains a close illusion of the real world. That, added on to the merging of the physical spaces of the audience and the stage, makes drama the epitome of boundary crossing despite its obvious fictionality.

Indeed, the very etiquette of theatre-going functions to keep the audience highly aware that what they are seeing on stage is simply a projection. Due to the limitations of participation, the audience is constantly reminded that what happens on stage is not real – this

is all the more true given that even if the audience strongly disagrees with what is happening in the play, it is recommended that they keep it to themselves so as to avoid disrupting the action. Of course, this protocol is strongest with Realist plays. But what, then, about characteristically postmodern ones that directly address the audience, or even require audience participation? While these plays give members of the audience some freedom to interact with the play, it is still common for most (if not all) of these plays to maintain a structure where interaction between audience and actors only occurs at certain, premeditated, points of the play. For the rest of it, audience members are still expected to simply be an audience – that is, to watch.

What is more imperative to note about actor-audience interaction, at least in those rare instances when it occurs, is the way the ontology of the play is always retained. While actors appear to have the freedom to reach into the realm of the audience and speak to them, this is simply an illusion, since it can only happen when the script calls for it, and more importantly, because any attempt at boundary crossing on the part of the actors necessarily keeps them trapped within the narrative landscape. Similarly, while the audience never possesses the freedom to cross into the ontological reality of the play by their own will, attempts by the actors to diminish this boundary through any form of interaction would necessarily render the audience as part of the narrative landscape as well[2]. In this way, watching a play, regardless of how Avant-garde it is, necessarily reminds the audience of a projected world, while at the same time maintaining at least two different types of ontological merging.

As Austin E. Quigley posits in *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds*, "[t]he theatre, with its given lines of demarcation […] and with its capacity to create new lines of internal

---

[2] In Christopher Innes' *Avant Garde Theatre*, he cites an example of the living theatre where "actors are required to stay in character and mingle with the audience during the intermission" (184). Even in cases like this where the audience can seemingly interact with the characters, it happens firstly, offstage, and secondly only by drawing the audience into the realm of the narrative.

demarcation […], offers a peculiarly appropriate forum for exploring this aspect of the world motif," suggesting that the stage is indeed one of the best platforms to explore the postmodernist ideal of ontological merging (Quigley 12). As stated, the ontological merging here is twofold. First of all, as Pavel pronounces, the audience must believe in the projected world of the stage. Secondly, the physical merging of the ontologies of the audience and the dramatic piece is achieved via the enclosed space of the theatre.

Despite the audience's knowledge that what is on stage is an illusion, the very act of sitting in a theatre and watching a play inevitably requires the audience to consciously project (or at least, believe in the projection of) an alternative world, a reality that is different from the audience's reality of sitting in the theatre watching a play. In dramatic Realism, it is precisely the intent of the author to replicate reality such that the audience is less likely to feel distanced from the action on stage, making it easier for the audience to believe in such a projection. What then, about self-reflexive ones where the staging of a play intentionally requires destabilizing its ontology?

In Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello suggests using "masks for the Characters," explicitly reminding the audience that the six characters on stage are of a different ontological reality from their own (Pirandello 75). Of course, comparing Pirandello to dramatic Realism, the illusion under consideration is much less believable. And yet, precisely because theatre requires the use of actors, the events on stage largely maintain the appearance of the audience's reality. This makes the ontology of a dramatic work illusorily closer to that of the audience's as compared to the ontology within a novel, since a novel's ontology is made up of words instead of real-world objects. Hence, the very nature of theatre itself, with the use of real life actors, allows the audience to easily indulge in an ontological reality different from their own due to that illusion of reality, blurring the two ontologies in the mind of the audience.

What this means is that the existence of the stage itself – placed side by side with the audience in a single space – is always and already ontologically problematic, especially since watching a play essentially entails a merging of the physical space between the ontology of the audience and the play. Within the confines of the theatre exists the stage where the play takes place as well as the arena where the audience sits. While what is going on onstage is always a projection, the audience themselves live in what is considered the real world. In other words, what happens onstage is always at least one level 'down' from the audience's reality (a feature of theatre often complicated further by other features of postmodernist plays, such as the play-within-a-play, in which case, subsequent lower levels may also exist), yet the only demarcation of the two ontological spaces are, perhaps, the stage-edge, which may not even exist in certain theatrical spaces where actors perform amongst the area traditionally meant for the audience. In this way, the boundary between the two ontologies becomes blurred, as the two radically different ontologies are captured in one single space.

Hence, theatre is in itself what McHale calls homotopian. Although it looks like the two different ontologies in the theatrical space "occupy different, incompatible spaces [...] they all belong to the projected space of the fictional universe, the space concretized by readers in the process of reading the text" (McHale 56). The implication of this quote is this: the reality of the stage is only real because the audience believes in it. In turn, the audience cannot exist without the staging of a play. After all, as Quigley claims, "[t]he mutual contamination of the world of the theatre and the world of the audience is not just unavoidable, it is fundamental to the theatre's structure and function" (Quigley 38). Hence, theatre is arguably always potentially postmodern, since the very structure of theatre necessarily involves a sharing of one physical space between two distinct ontological realities, making it the epitome of ontological blurring.

In this thesis, I will investigate the way all forms of drama are potentially postmodern in either their stylistic, or alternatively, thematic features, especially through the staging of death by looking at three plays, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Molière's *The Hypochondriac*. Even in Pirandello and Molière, both of whom predates the postmodern tradition, the performance of death is used to exemplify the breaking down of ontological boundaries, nudging the plays in a postmodern direction. After all, as McHale suggests, "insofar as postmodernist fiction foregrounds ontological themes and ontological structure [...] it is *always* about death," suggesting that postmodernism, theatre, and death share a much closer tie than what is commonly perceived (McHale 231).

To be sure, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is particularly obvious in its postmodernity with all of its theatrical transgressions. Borrowing the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard traces the two in their narrative limbo, the state of emptiness they exist in when they are not written in *Hamlet* but exist as characters in their own right. Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first "[pass] the time in a place without any visible character" (11), and later on a boat that is better, but still poorly, defined[3]. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "[bet] on the toss of a coin" (11) and play at questions, their activities are periodically interrupted by the narrative of *Hamlet*, and the two characters are thrown into and out of the action of *Hamlet* based on their actual appearances in the play itself. At the end of the play, these two characters die just like they do in *Hamlet*, and their constant waiting gives Stoppard's messengers a human-like quality – they are conscious of the possibility of death but not explicitly aware that their own has already been written for them.

---

[3] In his stage directions, Stoppard describes the setting to first be "pitch darkness" (97) and later "[a] better light – Lantern? Moon? … Light. […] [T]hree large man-sized casks […] a gaudy striped umbrella […] tilted so that we do not see behind it […] [s]till dim upstage" (99).

Interestingly, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is similarly postmodern even though it is written in 1921, a time that is generally considered too early for the emergence of postmodernism. Focusing on six characters that had been abandoned by the author who thought them up, the play explores the transgression of the boundary between the real and the imagined by portraying the characters as taking control of their own lives in the real world so as to search for an author who would tell their story. After getting the Producer of an acting company to give their story a chance, the characters eventually reveal that two of them, the Little Boy and the Little Girl, have, at least in some sense, been dead all along. Through the odd behavior of these two characters, Pirandello gives a literal example of how works of creation "will never die" even though they are well aware of their own theatrical deaths (Pirandello 79).

Although these two plays are explicitly postmodern in their techniques, not all plays express postmodernist concerns through theatrical transgressions. On first look, it is understandably unsettling to argue that a French Neo-classical play like Molière's *The Hypochondriac* is potentially postmodern not only because the play was written long before the postmodern era but especially given that the strict rules involved in the theatrics of the French Neo-classicists are downright anti-postmodern. However, while the play undeniably follows the traditions of the period in its form and structure, the subject matter of the play puts it firmly in the locus of postmodernist concerns, since it is largely about the existing pretenses of a society.

Argan, the protagonist of the play, is, as the title suggests, a hypochondriac who spends a large amount of money every month on his imagined illnesses, much to the frustration of his servant, Toinette, who rightly sees through the exploitation of the various quack doctors who surround him. On the surface, Argan's wife, Béline, is attentive to his illnesses but in reality, she only pretends to care about him in the hopes of receiving a huge

inheritance upon his death. Through Toinette's persuasion, Argan pretends to be dead and henceforth discovers the truth about his family, bringing the play to a happy ending with Argan being made a doctor. While Argan's pretense of being ill might appear to be the central, most obvious performance of all, everyone else's performances are just as significant in pointing out the hypocrisy of the society. All the transgressions of the characters portray a society that is based on pretenses – a notion that is critical to the postmodern genre. And, moreover, if there is one pretense among all the rest that has to be ranked more important than others, it would arguably be Argan's fake death – a performance that finally destroys all the other pretenses.

Keeping in mind McHale's proposition that "[p]ostmodernist writing enables us to experiment with imagining our own deaths, to *rehearse* our own deaths," what can we make of *The Hypochondriac*, in which postmodern concerns are portrayed precisely through the usage of death itself, and more significantly, a pretended one (McHale 232)? Furthermore, if postmodernist fiction is always about death, and theatre is so closely tied to postmodernism, what then, does it say about the relationship between theatre and death, especially in a Neo-Classical play long prefiguring the postmodern? Using the three plays discussed, this paper will attempt to show how theatre always borders on the postmodern especially through the portrayal of death, and present how theatre, when used in an attempt to experiment with the notion of death, potentially fails to capture death successfully.

Chapter One: Problematic Disappearances – The Failure of Theatrical Death in Tom

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is undeniably postmodern:

the play breaks down the ontological boundary between two different narrative realities

simply based on the fact that the two main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are

borrowed from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which they appear as two messengers with minor

roles. In a discussion of *Hamlet* in *Metatheatre,* Abel posits, "there is hardly a scene [...] in

which some character is not trying to dramatize another," (Abel 45) suggesting that the

characters' knowledge of their own fictionality allows them to manipulate and be

manipulated. Undeniably, this self-awareness follows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from

Hamlet into Stoppard's rewrite. Right at the start of the play, Guildenstern is "worried by the

implications" (Stoppard 11) of their coin toss, indicating that he is aware of something odd

going on in his world. As the play proceeds, Guildenstern becomes so sure of this oddity that

he uses it to his advantage, making bets with the Tragedians they meet with the knowledge

that the coin toss would come up heads.

Yet, without realizing it, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's consciousness of their

fictionality comes precisely from the fact that they are borrowed characters. In "Holding up

the Mirror to Mind's Nature: Reading 'Rosencrantz' 'Beyond Absurdity'," John Freeman

calls the play a "complex staging of two plays occupying one space" (Freeman 25). Indeed,

this space – the world of the two messengers – is ontologically suspicious precisely because it

is restricted not just by the narrative of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, but

Hamlet's as well: Stoppard's play traces their existence in the narrative limbo when their

parts in *Hamlet* are yet to be staged, but they are already existing as characters in *Hamlet*'s

world. Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can barely "remember the first thing that

happened today," since that is never written in *Hamlet* (Stoppard 19). Freeman states, "[t]he

two characters are particularly unable to achieve any sense of continuity from their experiences […] for they never have full access to the stored narrative that would give their lives continuity" (Freeman 27). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to understand their reality simply because, like all characters, they are part of a larger narrative. But, significantly, this is more so for them than characters of other plays because the larger narrative (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) their reality is a part of, is effectively, also part of another larger narrative (*Hamlet*).

As a result, even when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are supposed to be off stage in *Hamlet*, they are still on stage in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Just as Guildenstern says of the Player, they are "always in character," so do the Player make the same point with his claim "I *start* on," suggesting that while they are simply characters, they are also in a world where characters cannot go behind the scenes (Stoppard 34). Stoppard concretizes this notion with his theatrics, where, instead of using scene changes to indicate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's re-appearance in *Hamlet*, *Hamlet'*s incorporation is shown by "lighting change[s] sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior" and so on (34). In this way, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not 'go' on stage into *Hamlet*, the world of *Hamlet* appears around them. By doing so, Stoppard both collapses and reinstates the ontological boundary between the world of *Hamlet* and his own play. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern clearly belong to the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, this world is selectively controlled by the world of *Hamlet* when the two worlds coincide via the roles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play.

The strong postmodern elements in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are important when looking at the way death is presented in the play. In a discussion of death and postmodernism, McHale claims that "postmodernist fiction is *about* death in a way that other writing, of other periods, is not. Indeed, insofar as postmodernist fiction foregrounds

ontological themes and ontological structure, we might say that it is *always* about death"
(McHale 231). McHale's assertion here suggests that postmodernist fiction is about death
precisely due to the way ontological boundaries are crossed both in death and
postmodernism, bringing us to the big question – if theatre is always potentially postmodern,
is it always about death?

Out of the three plays discussed in this paper, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are
Dead* treats the theme of death in the most overtly postmodern way. In fact, the play is
extremely self-reflexive in its criticism of death in performances, with Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern frequently musing about how death in any performance "isn't *death*! [... It]
doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says – 'One day you are
going to die'" (Stoppard 83). Considering that these two characters 'die' in a questionable
manner at the end of the play, Rosencrantz's dispute with the performance of death is
extremely apt – while one can put on stage the various types of death and its varying
moments, all that is purely a portrayal of physical death. There is simply no way to capture
the essence of death, the human emotion and the spiritual end that death brings.

That is not to say that performances of death are always unconvincing: even
Guildenstern is sold when the Player pretends to be killed by him. When Guildenstern
"pushes the blade in up to the hilt[, t]he Player stands with huge, terrible eyes [...] and falls to
his knees," presumably dead (123). As Gabriele Scott Robinson notes in "Plays without Plot:
The Theatre of Tom Stoppard," this is the "one moment in the play when Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern seem to exert control and establish a plot of their own" (Robinson 45). Yet, this
death unsurprisingly turns out to be just another performance – very soon, "[t]he Player
stands up, brushing himself down," (Stoppard 123) after which it is revealed that the sword
used is merely a prop with a "blade [that] slides back into the handle" (124). Even in a
moment when Guildenstern tries to break out of his narrative boundaries, his action turns out

to be purely another illusion. By relegating the most convincing 'death' of the play to just another performance, Stoppard suggests that the performance of death is only possible because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were unaware of the deception.

In fact, the Tragedians are evidently convinced that death on stage must be fake in order to be convincing. As Robert Egan states in "A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," "the Player and his band are doomed to act in scenarios not of their own devising [… but] the Tragedians accept from the outset their dislocated and unfree condition" (Egan 62). Precisely because of this, the Tragedians are much more comfortable accepting that illusions can be just as, or even more, real than reality. Citing an instance when he "had an actor [...] who was condemned to hang for stealing," the Player exclaims that "he just *wasn't* convincing" to the audience, who "know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in" (84). This ironic scene provides a comic moment for the audience who would pick up on the contradiction of the Player's audience, and more importantly, leads us to reflect on the reality of the situation.

As mentioned previously, watching a play necessarily entails the audience's belief in a projected world, and the constant reminders present in the theatrical space that the stage-world is not real possibly renders the audience to expect a fake death rather than a real one on stage. Hence, when presented with an impending real death, with real human reactions to it[4], it becomes less believable as compared to if the death was scripted. In fact, these two scenes are just two sides of the same coin – one can only be convinced of death if he is unaware that it is a portrayal, and at the same time, one cannot be convinced of death if he is assured that it is simply an act. In this way, Stoppard explores the nature of death in performance, bringing the audience into a discussion of the way performances of death can be convincing.

Interestingly, the deaths of these two characters are not quite death-like, especially

---

[4] The Player describes the actor to "[do] nothing but cry all he time – right out of character – just stood there and cried" (Stoppard 84).

when compared to the numerous staging of death by the Tragedians. In fact, not only are the big death scenes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern subverted, Stoppard goes so far as to deny them the appearance of dying itself. Helene Keyssar-Franke states in "The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "have a primary desire it is to escape death" (Keyssar-Franke 87). Hence, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply "disappears" (Stoppard 126) at the end of the play, and this can be understood in at least two ways. One, on the most literal level, the staging of these two deaths cannot happen purely because they are not staged in *Hamlet.* Instead, Horatio narrates the deaths, and Stoppard chooses to end his play with this exact scene from *Hamlet*, providing yet another instance when the world of Stoppard's play collapses into that of Shakespeare's.

More importantly, however, by allowing the two messengers to vanish, Stoppard jars the audience into realizing that death is not just about the body. As discussed previously, the play explores extensively the unreality of staging death, and while the play seems to agree that the physical act of death can be captured through theatrics, the disappearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern highlights the fact that death goes beyond the physical. While it is undoubtedly absurd that the characters disappear upon their deaths, this is precisely what we assume happens to a person's consciousness, since "[d]eath is… not. Death isn't […] Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being" (108). As Egan offers, "[u]ltimately, Guildenstern does die the death he has opted for. His repeated insistence on the meaninglessness of death […] becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Egan 69). Indeed, the deaths of the messengers are incredibly apt – instead of physically dying, they disappear, they become the epitome of not-being.

However, by depicting the two messengers' deaths as simply disappearances, there is still a sense of inadequacy. After all, if death is absence, is it really possible to understand, and therefore capture, death? Stoppard, or at least Rosencrantz, seems to suggest that it is

simply not achievable. In one of his monologues, the notion of death increasingly confuses Rosencrantz, who first declares "[i]t's silly to be depressed by [death …] one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead*... which should make all the difference," (Stoppard 70) but later realizing that he would rather be stuffed in a box alive because "[l]ife in a box is better than no life at all" (71). The way Rosencrantz immediately contradicts his own opinion on death is telling of the human fear and inability to understand the concept of death – on the one hand, death should be unintimidating precisely because the loss of consciousness would render us unaware of death, yet on the other hand, the notion of losing this consciousness is incomprehensible.

Indeed, Douglas Hofstadter, in *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, explores this very contradiction, stating, "when you 'step out of yourself' and see yourself as 'just another human being,' it makes complete sense. But on another level […] personal non-existence makes no sense at all" (Hofstadter 693). This quote encapsulates Rosencrantz's fear completely – people are, by and large, unable to grasp this concept simply because no one can truly know what death is like. In this way, it becomes necessary to question Stoppard's portrayal of death: even though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's disappearance appears to be an accurate portrayal of human consciousness, is it even really possible for us to portray death? McHale posits:

> [p]ostmodernist writing enables us to experiment with imagining our own deaths, to *rehearse* our own deaths… [it] may be one of our last resources for preparing ourselves, in imagination, for the single act which we must assuredly all perform unaided, with no hope of doing it over if we get it wrong the first time. (McHale 232)

Quigley similarly claims that "[l]earning about the theatre is part of the process of learning about ourselves, our society and our individual and collective pasts," suggesting that the stage

reflects real life, allowing writers to both depict and explore the human condition (Quigley xiv).

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are obviously characters, the play can still be considered as an exploration of real-world death due to the human-like qualities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Like Abel claims, "in the metaplay life *must* be a dream and the *world* must be a stage" (Abel 79). Hence, despite the blatant fictionality on stage, "[m]etatheatre gives by far the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness" (113). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's inability to escape from their deaths thus creates a resonance with the audience's notion of fate. If Rosencrantz is right in that "[t]hey had it in for us [… r]ight from the beginning," (Stoppard 122) then this is true for the audience as well: "everyone […] marked for death dies" (79), and in the reality as the audience knows it, that is literally everyone. Certainly, as Keyssar-Franke proclaims, "if, in a world where other probabilities are radically altered, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot alter their ends, we in our ordinary worlds can do no more" (Keyssar-Franke 96). In this way, the play reminds the audience that, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we are trapped in our own versions of a narrative from which we cannot escape.

However, as stated previously, there is still an overarching sense that Stoppard's experiment is inadequate, since there is no possible way for theatre to capture the true essence of death. While Stoppard captures the inevitability of death, Rosencrantz's inability to grasp the concept of death coupled with Stoppard's use of theatrical disappearance indicates that the attempts writers make to explore and rehearse death in postmodernist texts simply cannot yield promising results because of its incomprehensibility. Indeed, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,* 'death' just entails a return to the beginning. The play starts off with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a narrative limbo, a place where, as Guildenstern rightly but ironically proposes (and rejects), "time has stopped dead" (Stoppard

16). Indeed, the first half of Act I is a blank space of time which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fills with seemingly mindless activities. Time really only starts again when their world collapses with *Hamlet's*, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in a scene lifted straight out of Shakespeare's masterpiece[5]. With the intersection of the two plays within the ontology of Stoppard's world, there is a sense that the world created by Stoppard's play is simply a subset of *Hamlet*'s. Hence, there is an implication that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, prior to this scene, are not well and truly 'alive' as characters – their existence in Stoppard's play is akin to the limbo state in Shakespeare's world.

Considering that *Hamlet* (as well as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead)* ends with the deaths of these two characters, it is possible that this precise death sends the characters back to the narrative limbo that starts off Stoppard's play – which means that the two characters are neither dead nor alive at the start of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; rather their deaths at the end of *Hamlet* merely throws them into the narrative reality of Stoppard's play, where they simply exist until the next staging of *Hamlet*. In this way, even though death in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is crucial in pointing out the postmodern elements and concerns of the play, it is not a successful rehearsal of death for Stoppard despite the human-like qualities of the two messengers. Instead, death is an incomprehensible concept even for the characters themselves, who do not die true deaths but are simply destined to 'disappear' back to the start of a narrative.

---

[5] As Rosencrantz realizes that the last coin toss turned up tails, "Ophelia runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts – followed by Hamlet" (Stoppard 34).

Chapter Two: Six Characters in Search of Death – The Impossibility of Staging Death in

Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Even though Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is written in a

time that predates the postmodern era, it still displays obvious postmodernist concerns. From

the outset, the play collapses the boundary between the real world and the fictional world by

placing six characters on the same stage as a group of actors, thereby raising their ontological

level. From his stage directions, it is clear that Pirandello intends for the six characters to be

explicitly different from the actors, since the characters "should not appear as ghosts, but as

created realities, timeless creations of the imagination," (Pirandello 75) in turn staunchly

situating them within what McHale names their 'subworld'[6]. As A. Richard Sogliuzzo

proclaims in "The Uses of the Mask in *The Great God Brown* and *Six Characters in Search

of an Author*", the masks not only announces to the audience the different ontological reality

of the characters, but "remind [the characters] of their role as dramatic personages" as well

(Sogliuzzo 227). Hence, Pirandello uses theatrical techniques to clearly illustrate the

ontological transgression of the characters, and further embodies this by portraying them as

taking control of their own lives in a different ontology.

Before we move on to examine the intricacies of the six characters' search, let us first

think about the postmodern paradox of the Author-as-God, which McHale explains as the

situation whereby "no matter how many recursive authors and authors-above-authors and

authors-above-authors-above-authors he projects, he can never get outside of his own

imaginings to the reality of his ultimate creator" (McHale 13). This quote brings to attention

the human condition in which the existence of the ultimate creator is always at least one step

removed in the human mind, suggesting that whenever we think of our creator, it always

---

[6] In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale explains how "characters inside fictional worlds are also
capable of sustaining propositional attitudes and projecting possible worlds. Eco calls these
possible-worlds-within-possible-worlds *subworlds*" (McHale 34).

comes with the question of our creator's creator, resulting in a paradox in which we can never establish the existence of the true creator.

Six Characters in Search of an Author is the perfect example of such an intrigue. Created by an unnamed author who "wouldn't or couldn't make [them] live in a written play for the world of art," (79) the characters try to find an author in the Producer, who "[o]nly [has] to write it down [...] while it happens in front of him," (95) thereby creating for themselves two different authors, one who gave them life and one who will be giving their story life. The paradox becomes clear when we consider that the unnamed author the characters refer to is, ultimately, Pirandello himself – it is Pirandello who thought them up but refuses to stage them in a play of their own. Yet, choosing to leave this mystery author unnamed, Pirandello also becomes the author of this author, distancing himself from the play. In the same way, the Producer (the second 'author' of the six characters) is authored by Pirandello, making Pirandello the ultimate creator (of the stage-world) who cannot be imagined. Ironically, Pirandello blatantly writes himself into the play as a character when he describes the actors as rehearsing one of his own plays[7]. This self-reflexivity then causes an intricate mix of ontology within the play, creating a cycle of creation in which the work of Pirandello the character-author is given life by the actors who are given life by Pirandello the author.

With the deaths of the Little Boy and the Little Girl occurring only at the end of the play, death seems to be a minor theme but it is significant to note that these deaths are constantly being hinted at throughout the play: the Stepdaughter casually mentions that the Little Boy "does the most stupid thing," (81) the Mother laments over how the Little Boy and the Little Girl "don't speak any more, not now," (117) both of which insinuates a knowledge that is kept from the audience. Precisely through a mixture of foreshadowing and withholding

---

[7] *Six Characters in Search of an Author* starts off with "the rehearsal of a play by Pirandello, 'The Rules of the Game'" (Pirandello 72).

the exact information, death takes on the role of the driving force for the characters to tell

their story – it is a tragedy that they are aware of and which they find necessary to portray.

Indeed, when trying to convince the Producer to write their play, the Father exclaims that

"the play is in [them]: [they] are the play [...] the passion inside [them] is driving [them] on"

(80). Drawing a link between the play and their passion, the Father seems to say that the

passion they possess is the play itself, the need for each of them to tell their individual stories.

Yet, at the end of the play, there is a clear suggestion that the passion really refers to

the tragedy of death. Upon finding the body of the Little Girl, the Stepdaughter "sobs

pathetically, her sobs sounding like an echo," indicating that her reaction is not an original

one, but a repetition of something that had already once happened (132-133). Her hysterical

reaction is shadowed by both the Mother and the Father, one desperately crying for help from

the actors while the other, "with desperation on his face" tries to make the actors see that the

deaths are "real [...] it's reality" (133). The hysteria that ensues from the deaths is clearly

beyond an expression of familial love from the three characters. Considering the indication

that the characters are aware of the impending deaths, it is more likely that their reactions are

a result of the passion the Father talks about – it is the tragedy that drives them to ensure their

story is told.

Through his claim that the deaths are real, the Father confuses the hierarchy of their

respective ontologies. Being on a lower ontological level as compared to the actors, the

deaths of the two characters are easily accepted by the actors as something that is not real.

The Father's claim then collapses the boundary separating these two ontologies, suggesting

that the existence of the characters is just as valid as that of the actors. Indeed, this is

proclaimed by Pirandello himself in an interview with Domenico Vittorini, "[t]he world of

illusion is a real world to my characters. The solace that they derive from illusion makes

illusion real" (Vittorini 286). In this way, the theme of death is used to illustrate the

postmodern ontological blurring in this play by depicting how different ontologies are just as

real as one another.

Since the backstory of the six characters is a seemingly Realist, sentimental, family

drama that ends in death, it is interesting to consider why Pirandello chooses to depict his

characters in this manner, making a jarring contrast with the postmodernist boundary-

crossing of the characters. Arguably, what the six characters have to say is just as important

as the frame story of the play – Pirandello spends the bulk of the middle and last act relating

this story, even setting aside a section in Act Two titled "The Scene" (Pirandello 109) as a

way of drawing attention to the story itself. Keeping in mind Anne Paolucci's comment that

"central to Pirandello's work is the fact that 'he saw the stage as something to be shaped

anew with each play'," it is worth questioning why Pirandello chose to use a family drama at

the crux of exploring a postmodern theme, since this central story of the six characters does

not appear to be something too new (Quigley 5).

Analyzing the portrayal of each character, it becomes fairly obvious that even in this

subplot, the theme of performance is rather prominent. Whether they are alone or with one

another, each character appears to be putting on a performance at all time. Instead of verbally

communicating their disagreement, the Mother makes "gestures of contradiction" while the

Father communicates his unhappiness through "a gesture of desperation," bringing to mind

mimes where exaggerated gesticulations are used for the benefit of the audience (Pirandello

85). While this might seem like a comic moment, Antonio Iliano claims in "Pirandello's *Six

Characters in Search of an Author*: A Comedy in the Making," "[w]hat seems humorous on

the surface is revealed as a matter of sorrow and pain, and far from comic, underneath"

(Iliano 9). Indeed, the humor in this scene conceals a distinct performativity that is evident in

other characters as well. Keeping in mind that these characters are indeed meant to be

characters in the play, it is hardly surprising that they are theatrical, but this should by no means reduce the significance of performativity in their character traits.

On the surface, the Son is, perhaps, the least performative of the six characters, and he freely admits that he is "a character who has not been fully developed dramatically, and [he] feel[s] uncomfortable, most uncomfortable, in their company," implying that he is not, logically, involved in the same type of theatricality as the others (94). Yet, despite his proclamation of non-involvement, the Son is actually very much entangled in the tragedy, being present not only when the Little Boy finds the Little Girl's body but also when the Little Boy shoots himself. His insistence on being uninvolved in the drama is, in reality, an act that shows his pretense not only towards his fellow characters but to the actors and the audience as well. In this way, Pirandello's use of the family drama, especially through the Son's reaction to the deaths, is apt in drawing attention to more than just the literal crossing of ontological boundaries through the placement of the characters onstage. It is more imperative to note how each character, no matter how undeveloped dramatically, is still likely to slip into a state of performance, especially regarding the issue of the children's deaths.

Although Pirandello aptly ends *Six Characters in Search of an Author* with these two deaths, it is worth noting that these deaths, like those in Stoppard's play, are not actually staged. Instead, the death of the Little Girl is narrated by the Son, who sees the Little Boy "looking [...] at his little sister, floating there, drowned," (132) while that of the Little Boy is simply cued by "the sound of a shot" (133). By leaving the deaths of these two characters to auditory aids instead of visual representation, the depiction of death itself is subverted. If the depiction of death in theatre is really "to *rehearse* our deaths," it is then imperative to question Pirandello's subversion of it – how can death be rehearsed if we staunchly refuse to portray it (McHale 231)?

Indeed, Pirandello offers no real solution to this question, since his subversion of

death is a means to advance his postmodernist concerns. The ending of the play consists largely of a mime, showing how the six characters are essentially trapped in a world where they are constantly forced to relive their tragedy. Although it is true that "these characters are themselves dramatists, capable of making other situations dramatic besides the ones they originally appeared in," there is a sense that every one of them is still trapped within their narratives, and not even death can save them from it (Abel 62).

In one of the last words spoken in the play, the Producer calls out for the stagehands to "[k]ill everything" (Pirandello 134). On the literal level, the Producer is merely referring to the lights, but this exclamation becomes highly ironic when we consider the Producer's denial of the characters' expression as one way of killing them. But these killings never actually happen: the audience is presented with a scene of the "huge sharp shadow of the Characters, but without the Little Boy and the Little Girl," followed by the Stepdaughter's "manic laughter" (134). Having dropped a hint that the Stepdaughter will eventually go crazy[8], the final pantomime from the remaining four characters suggests a need for them to continue staging their play regardless of the absence of an audience. As Hoover W. Clark posits in "Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*," "[a]lthough these six characters are not confined to doing and saying solely what their author obliges them to […,] they are what they are because their author made them that way" (Clark 281-282). True enough, the characters cannot be "free" (282) precisely because they are a creation, and hence, they are trapped within their narrative in such a way that they are forced to act and re-act their story, re-living it from start till end regardless of their circumstances.

Since the Little Boy and the Little Girl are no longer part of the group at the end of the play, the implication is that their deaths are real enough even in the ontology of the actors. However, there is still a sense that this death is reversible. Accordingly, Hubert C. Heffner, in

---

[8] The Stepdaughter refers to her own impending madness in her speech, "I can still hear it ringing in my ears! It was that cry that send me mad!" (Pirandello 118)

"Pirandello and the Nature of Man" declares, the deaths of the children "could not have been genuine deaths as we know it, for here these children are again, ready to re-enect their stories" (Heffner 34). Surely, not only do the characters imply constantly that they have lived through the deaths before, the Little Boy and the Little Girl are also portrayed to be almost dead in their behavior despite being present throughout the action. As the Producer points out, "[t]here's something very odd about [the Little Boy]," who does not say a word throughout the play (Pirandello 127). Of course, this silence could simply be part of his character trait because he feels "so mortified, so humiliated" (94) as Father explains, and yet there is a clear sense that both he and the Little Girl remain sidelined in the narrative simply because they are just waiting for death.

After all, the Mother hints that they "don't speak any more, not now," (117) indicating that prior to the occurrence of the tragedy, the two children do not behave in this manner. If the characters are forced to relive their tragedy over time, then the Little Boy and the Little Girl are resurrected only to die again in every reenactment. In this way, they, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, never really die nor are they ever truly alive in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The Father too insinuates this notion, asserting that "[a] man will die, a writer, the instrument of creation: but what he has created will never die," creating a resonance that almost suggests a reference to the children (79). The subversion of the death scenes then suggests that death in theatre is impossible. Instead of being an exploration like McHale claims, the notion of death here is simply left as an unknown, something that can be informed to the audience but not quite depicted, since death in theatre is not quite death, as we know it.

Recalling the earlier discussion on Stoppard, we can see similarities in the way both authors imply the incomprehensibility of death, and therefore the impossibility of portraying death. Although *Six Characters in Search of an Author* predates *Rosencrantz and*

Guildenstern Are Dead by over 40 years, both plays offer similar ideas about death. Not only do they portray death as an empty space – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern disappear from the stage and similarly, the Little Boy and the Little Girl disappear from the group of six characters – the two plays also depict the dead characters as being resurrected, albeit in different ways, creating the sense that these characters are neither dead nor alive at some points in the play. In this sense, Pirandello's play is just as postmodern as Stoppard's despite being written in a time that is considered too early for postmodernism, and just as ineffective in capturing the essence of death.

Chapter Three: (Per)Forming Death – The Ontological Transgression of Death in Molière's *The Hypochondriac*

On first look, it appears to be a bit of a stretch to call Molière's *The Hypochondriac* postmodern, since it is fundamentally, in its form and structure, a traditionally French Neo-Classical play, following established Neo-classical practices such as verisimilitude, limiting the time span of the play to a day, and keeping the setting to a single space. Considering the strict rules governing the French Neo-Classical tradition, *The Hypochondriac* should logically be the antithesis to postmodernism, since a strict adherence to tradition would not allow the play to be creative with its ontology.

Yet, it can safely be said that *The Hypochondriac* contains at least some stylistic postmodernist aspects, with special thematic concern for way the ontological boundary between reality and pretenses is broken down. Indeed, the very title itself, *The Hypochondriac*, points to a kind of falsity. While the play's central figure, Argan, believes himself to be suffering "[e]very illness in the book," his servant Toinette, believes he's "not really ill" (Molière 18). As a result, two "medicos [... are] having a high time with [Argan]" because of his hypochondria, encouraging him to believe that he truly requires medical attention although he is actually of sound health (11). Moreover, in "Charpentier's Music for Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* and its revisions," John S. Powell calls the play "a devastating satire of the abuses of contemporary medicine – Molière's last attack upon the pseudoscience of the doctors" (Powell 92). True enough, pretense in the play does not only occur with Argan pretending to be sick, but also with the medical personnel who join in on his pretense in order to benefit economically, making this play, on one level, a criticism of the unethical medical practices where everyone puts on performances for their own advantage.

More importantly, we can see how the very language used in *The Hypochondriac* points to the centrality of performances, indicating that such pretense abounds in the play. For instance, in the scene where Dr. Lillicrap and Thomas pay Argan a visit, the fictionality of the play is foregrounded by the comical atmosphere. At the end of II.iv, Toinette prepares everyone for the arrival of their guests, telling them to get "in their places," which brings to mind actors being prepped for their scene on stage (Molière 42). Of course, by setting the visit up in this way, the audience is cued to view the following scene as a farce of sorts. Indeed, Argan and Dr. Lillicrap talk over each other for the most part, each of them ending their individual speeches with an assurance that they will be "entirely at [the other's] service" (44). The very fact that they ignore each other to get this point across shows the hypocrisy of both men and the performative nature of this society, in which one must constantly present oneself to be of benefit to another. In "Molière and the Historian of French Society," L. Leon Bernard calls Molière's theatre "first a picture of universal humanity, then a picture of contemporary society," suggesting that Molière's plays deal with human nature, and in this case, hypocrisy, making *The Hypochondriac* not just a social commentary but an exploration of human vices as well (Bernard 543). While the depiction of human hypocrisy is a feature of verisimilitude, the focus on the performativity of the characters ironically gives the play a self-reflexive element. Hence, the theme of the play draws out two opposing customs, giving the play an interesting mix of both the Neo-Classical tradition and postmodernism.

In "Molière and Farce", Gustave Lanson calls "the root of all Molière's comedy […] the comedy of manners and comedy of character," and this is exemplified in Thomas' speeches (Lanson 136). Mistaking Angélique for Argan's wife, Thomas starts to deliver a hyperbolic, complimentary speech stating the "unerring justice [with which] Providence has bestowed upon [her] the name of mother-in-law," revealing to the audience that his salutations are insincere and hypocritical (Molière 45). Like his father, Thomas is simply

putting on an act of reverence so as to make himself seem like a better candidate for

Angélique's husband. What is both jarring and humorous about this scene is the simple fact

that Thomas could mistake Angélique for Argan's wife. Being unable to even make a smart

guess as to who Angélique might be, Thomas presents to the audience the biggest farce of all

– the claims of love he makes for Angélique simply cannot be true if he does not even know

who she is. Using an amplification of deceitful human behavior, Molière's *The*

Hypochondriac draws a link between pretense and the stage by showing us how dishonesty

can unravel into constant performances. In this way, the play can be seen to be postmodern

simply based on the way it is simultaneously concerned with the unreality of Argan's society

and the stage, which allows the ontological boundary of realness and pretenses to be blurred.

While death is not a significant part of the play for the fact that it is a plot device that

brings focus to a larger theme, it is this act that exposes the falsity of the other characters, and

which helps to bring the play to its happy ending. For while Argan believes Béline to be his

"only consolation," (25) she thinks him to be "[a] pain, a nuisance to everyone[, a]

disgusting, smelly carcass" (91). The fact that she is merely acting the role of the dutiful wife

is only revealed because Toinette convinced Argan to "pretend [he's] dead [... so they can]

see how devastated [Béline] is when she hears the news" (90). The pretense of death here

works on two different levels. As McHale rightly argues, "[d]eath is the one ontological

boundary that [… we have] no hope of doing […] over," indicating an irreversibility of death

(McHale 231). And it is precisely because of this fact that Béline reveals her true feelings

about Argan, since she believes that she has no reason to keep up her act anymore. Molière,

in using death (a boundary-crossing act) as a pretense (itself another boundary-crossing act)

to reveal Béline's deceit (yet another boundary-crossing act) is in no way coincidental.

On the one hand, as Carol A. Mossman in "The Restitution of Paternity in Molière's

Le Malade Imaginaire" claims, Argan's death is a "surrendering to that fate which he most

dreads, only to be resurrected, and gloriously so, for his descent into hell has led to a revelation […] and to a softening of his own fear of death," suggesting that this exact pretense is necessary to help Argan get rid of his hypochondria (Mossman 55). On the other hand, the use of death here is significant precisely because the irreversibility of death makes acting death a unique theatrical affect – unlike other instances of performance in which reality could be part of the act (such as when an actor is actually crying when his role requires him to), death in any performance must always maintain a quality of falsity. In this way, the pretense of death is vital in *The Hypochondriac*, as it is only through the ultimate pretense that Argan can determine the true intentions of Béline's actions – any other attempts would simply fall short. Argan's fake death here is reminiscent of the performance of death by the Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Just like how the Player plays on the trust of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to trick them into believing his pretense, Argan's deception here illustrates a similar point two centuries ahead of Stoppard. Molière's use of pretended death here is then extremely postmodern although the play comes from a much earlier tradition.

Having used death to bring the play's central problem to a resolution, Molière ends the play in an elaborate and obviously parodied ceremony. To celebrate the turn of events, Béralde brings in a "theatre company [...] who've been rehearsing a piece about a man who's just passed his medical exams," using Argan as the star of the play-within-a-play and in turn, making him a doctor (96). At the heart of this last interlude is a social commentary in which a critique of the medical profession is offered. Despite not having the medical training, Argan is made a doctor in a "burlesque ceremony," (97) and all he has to do is read the "lines written down for [him]" (96). Obviously, one is meant to be skeptical of this ceremony, which is a satire of the real ceremony for newly made doctors.

Indeed, Powell calls the ending of *The Hypochondriac* "Argan's fantastic apotheosis

into the suprahuman realm of Doctorhood," (Powell 117) suggesting a sort of unreality both

with this ceremony as well as the real ones. He further records in his article that

"Charpentier's autograph score begins with a pompous overture, during which the doctors

dance an *entrée* […] followed by an orchestral air for the attendants (tapissiers) to prepare the

hall and a solemn march for the Faculty of Medicine to take their places according to rank"

(118). This is, apparently, very close to the real ceremonies. As Martin Sorrell notes in the

introduction of *The Hypochondriac,* such ceremonies are accompanied by "the grand

procession of doctors [...] the orchestra playing Lully [, ...] more music, and the crowning

moment when the President puts the bonnet on the new doctor's head" (Sorrell xii).

Interestingly, the theatricality of this makes Argan's pretend ceremony believable but at the

same time, undermines the seriousness of the occupation. It is hence especially apt that

Molière mimics the ceremony with a theatre company, pointing out the obvious falsity of it.

The audience of Molière's time, being aware of the similarities of the ceremonies, would be

mindful of the criticism Molière is making of the medical profession. In this way, Molière

uses the theme of death to advance his postmodernist concerns – instead of portraying death

in the conventional way, he uses death as an act to expose the hypocrisy of his society, giving

the play an added sense of self-reflexivity.

While *The Hypochondriac* is the least postmodern play amongst the three texts, it is

also arguably the most successful with its experiment with death, albeit unintentionally. By

ending the play with a conflation between a real and a pretended ceremony, the audience is

made to reflect upon the other various metatheatrical aspects of *The Hypochondriac* and all

its significance. Indeed, with the use of the prologue, eclogue, and several interludes, the play

takes on a highly self-referential quality towards its own staging. In a scene where Béralde

tries to talk Argan out of his hypochondria, Béralde explicitly states that "there's a comedy

by Molière on at the moment" (75). Of course, there *is* a comedy by Molière on at that very

exact moment, in that very exact theatre – the very one that Béralde is a character in! Mossman assert, "*Le Malade Imaginaire* shares borders with fantasy […] one might even maintain that the world of the fairy tale stands behind the play as an intertext" (Mossman 51). The self-awareness of the two characters confuses the boundary between the real and the illusion, disrupting the realism of the play and pushing it towards a fantasy world. In this way, their self-references jar the audience into thinking about the subject matter of the play, and hence achieve the effect of social criticism. The use of such metatheatrical methods allows Molière to show an awareness of any criticism *The Hypochondriac* might face for "making fun of medicine" by portraying Argan as the critic who thinks that "[m]edicine's not the right subject for a night out at the theatre" (Molière 75). The audience is then prompted to make their own judgment on the two differing views of Béralde and Argan, again giving them the chance to think about the situation of the medical industry in their times.

Yet, this self-referential element quickly spirals into even deeper episodes of ironic dark humor when Argan laments that "if [he] were a doctor [... he'd] let [Molière] die slowly if he were ill" (75). According to *Molière, A Theatrical Life,* a biography by Virginia Scott, Molière was, indeed, suffering from tuberculosis.[9] After the fourth performance of *The Hypochondriac*, Molière was "taken home and he began to hemorrhage" (Scott 256), after which he passed away. Keeping in mind that Molière plays the part of Argan in the performances of *The Hypochondriac,* the play takes on additional elements of self-reflexivity, as the character of Argan in various ways echoes the life of Molière himself. The parallels between Molière's life and *The Hypochondriac* are less surprising considering the speculation that Argan is "one possible version of Molière, himself, at home, ill and ill-tempered" (242). Since it is not uncommon for authors to create semi-autobiographical

---

[9] "Molière knew what he had and knew he would probably die of it. […] He was not well, but he was not acutely ill. Tuberculosis does not necessarily run an uninterrupted course." (Scott 243)

works, it is, on some level, apt to have Molière act as Argan. But it is imperative not to overlook the different layers of acting involved in Molière's very last performance. Armande, Molière's wife, was aware of his sickness and "begged him to rest, to stay away from the theatre," (257) but Molière insisted on going onstage anyway. This very act of performing his role as Argan then consists of at least four different layers of acting – Molière the sick man has to act as Molière the healthy man to play the role of Argan the healthy man pretending to be Argan the sick man.

The moment of Argan's fake death then takes on extreme irony, since Molière, at that moment in the play, is really dying and would meet his death soon after. In this respect, Molière's unique biographical details exemplify precisely what Lionel Abel means when he claims that "[t]he dramatist [in *Hamlet*] is death" (Abel 49). While Molière uses death in *The Hypochondriac* to dramatize societal hypocrisy, death itself seems to be using Molière to dramatize the irony of pretended death: Argan's performance of death becomes a poignant foreshadowing of the fate of its author. Argan's lament is then highly ironic, since Molière, as the actor, would be the one who is cursing the death and suffering of Molière the author, making it almost like he is cursing his own death. The humor intended in this instance gives way to a more ominous feeling when taking into account Molière's timely death. Death in this play then takes on an almost sinister quality despite the comic elements of the play due to the way it reaches across the ontological boundary of author/actor and character, resulting in the death of the author/actor when he was only pretending to pretend to be dead in the play.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have exemplified how the staging of death in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Molière's *The Hypochondriac* pushes the plays towards a postmodernist direction, even though the latter two are written in times that far predate the postmodern era. Although McHale theorizes that postmodernist fiction is an outlet for writers to explore and experiment with the notion of death, it is evident that these experiments are hardly successful in capturing what death really is.

While *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the most obviously postmodern of the three plays, employs postmodernist theatrics in portraying the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, this exact anti-climatic death sparks off the question of whether such a depiction is adequate in capturing what death really entails. Similarly, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* subverts the actual death scenes of the Little Boy and the Little Girl, indicating to the audience that the staging of death itself is necessarily problematic, especially if death strikes the characters as opposed to the actors. Ironically, *The Hypochondriac*, the least postmodern of the three plays, is the most successful in such an experiment, although it is arguably not due to the intent of the author. Instead, it is the coincidence of Molière's timely death coupled with the self-reflexive elements of the play that gives the performance of death a unique and haunting quality, where death itself transgresses two layers of ontology, leading to the death of the actor/author even though the author only meant for himself to pretend to be a character who is pretending to be dead.

Hence, it becomes evident that regardless of the author's attempt at exploring death in theatre, what happens during (and after) the staging of the play itself is extremely important. For example, in "Odd Couple: *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival," Bernard Mc Elroy records how in that festival, "[a] good deal of

Stoppard's play […] leaked into Shakespeare's, but in the process a great deal of Shakespeare's leaked out and simply disappeared […] the older play was made a spin-off of the younger one instead of vice versa," illustrating how staging can further confuse the ontology of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by changing the ontological hierarchies of both this play and *Hamlet* (Mc Elroy 94). William Herman, in "Pirandello and Possibility," recalls Georges Pitoëff's staging of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in which "the Six Characters […] were lowered onto a bare stage in an old elevator, an open cage once used to bring on scenery," at once indicating the foreignness of the six characters by linking them to props rather than actors (Herman 92).

Although both instances do not concern themselves with the staging of death, it is apparent how the contexts of a particular performance can help to further the cause of an author, pushing the play further in a postmodern direction. Putting these two cases together with Molière's last performance of *The Hypochondriac*, one cannot help but wonder if the exploration of death in theatre can be done only with the help of circumstances itself. While *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* subvert the performance of physical death through postmodern theatrical techniques, in turn indicating that death is more than just the failing of the body for both real life and the stage, there is no documentation of any performance that brings the theme of death so far as Molière's last performance of *The Hypochondriac* does. Death as absence may be a convincing argument, but how can we truly understand and explore death if characters simply disappear? Similarly, if the experiment of death is the most successful in a play that only attempts to use death as an illusion, but achieves its haunting effect due to the (bad) luck of its biography, can death really be explored by us, much as we try? Ultimately, death, with all its inscrutability, is perhaps still best left to the realm of the obscure and the fantastic.

(10,862 Words)

Works Cited

Abel, Lionel. *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

Print.

Bernard, L. Leon. "Molière and the Historian of French Society." *The Review of Politics* 17.4

(1955): 530-544. Web. 3 April 2012.

Clark, Hoover W. "Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*." *Italica* 43.3 (1966): 276-

284. Web. 3 April 2012.

Connor, Steven. *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. 2nd

ed. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1989. Print.

Egan, Robert. "A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and*

Guildenstern Are Dead." *Theatre Journal* 31.1 (1979): 59-69. Web. 3 April 2012.

Freeman, John. "Holding up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: Reading 'Rosencrantz' 'Beyond

Absurdity'." *The Modern Language Review* 91.1 (1996): 20-39. Web. 3 April 2012.

Heffner, Hubert C. "Pirandello and the Nature of Man." *The Tulane Drama Review* 1.3

(1957): 23-40. Web. 3 April 2012.

Herman, William. "Pirandello and Possibility." *The Tulane Drama Review* 10.3 (1966): 91-

111. Web. 3 April 2012.

Hofstadter, Douglas R. *Gōdel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*. Harmondsworth:

Penguin, 1980. Print.

Illiano, Antonio. "Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: A Comedy in the

Making." *Italica* 44.1 (1967): 1-12. Web. 3 April 2012.

Innes, Christopher. *Avant Garde Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Jernigan, Daniel K. *Drama and the Postmodern: Assessing the Limits of Metatheatre*.

Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008. Print.

Keyssar-Franke, Helene. "The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*."

    Educational Theatre Journal 27.1 (1975): 85-97. Web. 3 April 2012.

Lanston, Gustav, and Ruby Cohn. "Molière and Farce." *The Tulane Drama Review* 8.2

    (1963): 133-154. Web. 3 April 2012.

Mc Elroy, Bernard. "Odd Couple: *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* at the New

    Jersey Shakespeare Festival." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.1 (1989): 94-96. Web. 3

    April 2012.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1987. Print.

Molière. *The Hypochondriac*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1994. Print.

Mossman, Carol A. "The Restitution of Paternity in Molière's *La Malade Imaginaire.*" *South*

    Central Review 3.1 (1986): 50-56. Web. 3 April 2012.

Pavel, Thomas G. "'Possible Worlds' in Literary Semantics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and*

    Art Criticism 34.2 (1975): 165-176. Web. 3 April 2012.

Pirandello, Luigi. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. *Three Plays.* Trans. Robert Rietty,

    Julian Mitchell and John Linstrum. London: Methuen Drama, 1985. Print.

Powell, John S. "Charpentier's Music for Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* and Its

    Revisions." *The Journal of the American Musicological Society* 39.1 (1986): 87-142.

    Web. 3 April 2012.

Quigley, Austin E. *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds*. New York: Methuen, 1985. Print.

Robinson, Gabriele Scott. "Plays without Plot: The Theatre of Tom Stoppard." *Educational*

    Theatre Journal 29.1 (1977): 37-48. Web. 3 April 2012.

Scott, Virginia. *Molière: A Theatrical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

    Print.

Sogliuzzo, A. Richard. "The Uses of the Mask in *The Great God Brown* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*." *Educational Theatre Journal* 18.3 (1966): 224-229. Web. 3 April 2012.

Sorrell, Martin. Introduction. *The Hypochondriac.* By Molière. London: Nick Hern Books, 1994. v-xix. Print.

Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Print.

Vittorini, Domenico. "Luigi Pirandello at Close Range." *Books Abroad* 11.3 (1937): 283-288. Web. 3 April 2012.