Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead:

A Study of Theatrical Determinism

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Abstract

This paper collates some of the relevant scholarship on Tom Stoppard’s play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. It is relevant to CCT because of its exploration of the critical response to a play that both comments on contemporary culture and pays homage to a cornerstone of the Western literary tradition, Hamlet.

Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead functions as a standalone play—intelligible within its own dramatic limits—and as an adaptation of an older work, with added meaning lying in the nexus of old and new. With its echoes of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, the play draws parallels to the theater of the absurd, though not all critics agree that the play is an absurdist work. Stoppard’s initial stage direction: “Two Elizabethans passing the time in a place without any visible character” alludes to Beckett’s tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who occupy a similarly nondescript stage (Ros 11). But Beckett’s tramps occupy a theatrical space entirely their own; Ros and Guil exist within the context of the larger play to which they owe their origin. The play’s hints of absurdist theater and its appropriation of a classical piece of literature invite varying critical conclusions about it. Surveyed in this essay are seven dramatic critics’ responses to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, from the 1970s into the new millennium. These critics deny that the play is absurd—as it operates within the fixed world of Hamlet, where things have an ordered dimension absent from the theater of the absurd—and conclude that Stoppard uses absurdist techniques to explore, in his play, human agency and determinism.

For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, a critical point of entry is the extent to which an audience can enjoy Ros and Guil as original characters, despite their prior knowledge of the pair. According to William Haney, “Stoppard is famous for undercutting preconceptions, treating philosophical and moral issues with a lightness of non-attachment, and innovating a new relation between ideas and farce, all for the sake of entertainment and enjoyment” (69). For Ros and Guil to assume any traction in the minds of the audience, the viewers must see them beyond their stature as characters from Hamlet. Thus, Stoppard takes the old and makes it new again so his play can resonate in the audience’s mind. He breathes fresh life into the pair as philosophizing, word-playing loiterers—whose intellectual banter and existential fears round out the flat characters first drawn by Shakespeare. This technique makes Ros and Guil’s fate seem undetermined, though they remain trapped in the greater design of the Shakespearean play. Haney continues, “Ros and Guil . . . in spontaneously skirting the boundaries of thought . . . reveal the possibility of also transcending the script” (80).
By transcending the Hamlet script, Stoppard opens Ros and Guil to new interpretations and potentials.

From the beginning of the drama, when a tossed coin turns up heads 89 times in a row, Ros and Guil engage in word play to understand their places in the universe. Guil surmises of the coin tossing: “It must be indicative of something, beside the redistribution of wealth” (Ros 16). A list of explanations for what the coin tossing might indicate follows, but Ros and Guil never come to any sort of conclusion. Upon analysis, Stoppard uses this list for his own, as opposed to Ros and Guil’s, purposes. It serves to draw the audience away from its notions of Ros and Guil as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and it begins Stoppard’s process of constructing new characters from old literary stock. As Haney puts it, “From the opening scenes of Rosencrantz, Stoppard undermines the intellect through a series of frog-leaps or ambush...these repeated ambushes undermine our naturalistic expectations” (71). These leap-frogs and ambushes are the strange, but intelligent, extemporizing of Ros and Guil, through which Stoppard invites the viewer to enjoy the pair’s clever exchanges and to wonder if their fate is not, after all, determined.

The ability to see scripted characters as unscripted, spontaneous and free is necessary for the audience’s enjoyment of theater. Haney alleges that in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, “We see the illusion as uninevitable, and realize that things might have turned out differently with only a slight change of perspective” (81). Uninevitability allows the viewer to suspend her disbelief and emmesh herself in the theatrical world. Stoppard highlights the importance of perspective in the theater by demonstrating the importance of the theatrical action over the denouement. Thus, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead becomes a play about the very institution of the theater; this allows it to ask many questions of its audience, which explains the variety of critical answers found in a survey of the writing on the play.

Not all critics view Stoppard’s work in a positive light. Some regard it as overly derivative, sucking its power unwholesomely from the majesty of its source text. Theater critic Robert Brustein, for instance, described the play as a “theatrical parasite” (“Moon” 81). Still, many, if not most, critics do not share this interpretation. Rather, the critical writing on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead indicates a pervasive view of the play as an homage to Shakespeare, which never denies its connection to the work of the great poet and uses this nexus to find new meaning in old forms. Stoppard scholar Paul Delaney, for instance, writes, “There is also in Shakespeare’s created world of Elsinore that which is glorious; there is—in Hamlet himself—a quintessence of more than dust...we feel the wonder, the power, the splendor of that world” (21). Instead of riding the coattails of Shakespeare, Stoppard, in Delaney’s reading, uses the sublimity of Hamlet to deepen the sense of wonder present in his own play. June Schlueter, a Shakespearean academic, expands this notion; she writes, “The play possesses indisputable originality, particularly in the way in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern achieve their own unique status as metafictional characters” (“Moon” 81). Schlueter argues that this originality allows Stoppard to make his own conclusions about life in the play.

For Schlueter, a main prerogative in Stoppard’s writing of his play is an inquiry into human agency. She reads in Stoppard’s text an investigation into the extent to which men and women control their lives and to which the forces of history and the constraints of biology bind them. She writes, “By appropriating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—exhuming them from their (conveniently nearby) English graves—Stoppard could test and contest the imperative of the Ambassador’s announcement—and the title and force of his own play” (Dramatic 69). Stoppard tests the waters of Ros and Guil’s determinacy: he seeks to evaluate the level of autonomy he can give to characters whose fates have been sealed before he wrote his play. Ros and Guil perform most of their actions outside of the Hamlet script. While
...they are not parlaying with the King, Queen and Prince, their lives are wholly their own. Yet, everything they do remains overshadowed by the fate the audience knows awaits them. Within this bind, Stoppard frees his characters to live in an interval. And in this, Ros and Guil mirror the lives of all men and women—who can only live in the interval between their birth and their death.

Schlueter continues, “Stoppard manages to posit the inevitability of one text—Shakespeare’s—while teasing the possibility of choice and of change in his own through exploiting the contradictory doubleness that informs every moment of the theatrical event” (Dramatic 75). Stoppard experiments with notions of presumption and chance in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, asking his audience to consider whether a character can be made wholly new, while still conforming to the dictates imposed upon him by an earlier work. According to Schlueter, “To conclude that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are prisoners of the Shakespeare play is to ignore their existence as dramatic characters outside it” (Dramatic 74). In reviving Ros and Guil, Stoppard allows his play to look backward to Hamlet and forward to contemporary life. Ros and Guil are trapped in a play whose depths they can never penetrate. They bumble and clown about, toss coins and play word games, trying to understand their place in the great goings-on at Elsinore, never able to do so. As Guil explains: “We are little men, we don’t know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels” (Ros 110). Nonetheless, Schlueter argues, the courtiers very well could have understood the matter: that they are players in a larger theatrical framework; that their actions do matter in that they progress the plot; that while their freedom may be constricted to the realm of their personal drama, it does exist, within the interval of their play. She writes, “Indeed, the theatrical metaphor which sustains itself throughout the play underscores the playwright’s vision of life as essentially dramatic and of living as nothing more than playing a role” (“Moon” 83). Since Ros and Guil fail to realize their own theatricality, they perceive their lives as random and meaningless. Such randomness characterizes the theater of the absurd, where things occur in detachment from a connection to a larger framework of meaning.

Shakespeare scholar Victor Cahn describes how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead transcends the limits of the absurd, doing more in its presentation then imputing the chaos of the social world. He writes, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not trapped in some nondescript void. Theirs is essentially the predicament of the individual trapped in a world where the powers in charge carry on as though all events had purpose, but where that purpose nonetheless eludes the individual citizen” (39). In absurdist theater, the histrionic world remains meaningless. There is no higher power directing the lives of the characters, nor is there an overt motivation to what the actors are doing. According to Cahn, “Essentially, absurd theater accepts the absence of a guiding symmetry in the world” (17). The world of Ros and Guil very much has a guiding symmetry: to some critics, this symmetry is the masterpiece, Hamlet; to others, it is Stoppard’s script. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead does not populate an absurd, meaningless world, but a world where meaning exists, but seems intangible.

Cahn grants that elements of the Stoppard play remain absurd. He argues, “[Stoppard] brings his characters into a new world, one where elements of absurdity are disguised under a mask of order and reason worn by a society which Stoppard has made us come to see as perhaps absurd itself” (64). The play posits that the inherent meaning in the world—both around the audience and around Ros and Guil—may be absurd, arbitrarily governed by things man-made and biological, but meaning importantly does exist. Cahn further describes the topos of absurdity and Stoppard’s use of this theme. He writes, “Stoppard has created two levels of absurdity: the recently traditional one, where men have no role to play and must fabricate reasons for their existence, and a sec-
ond one, within an incomprehensible society, where men play a role that is strictly defined but still hopelessly unfathomable” (65). Thus, Stoppard uses his audience’s notions of the theater of the absurd to present a message in his play. He questions the validity—even the sanity—of the social norms that govern behavior in the contemporary world.

Ros and Guil, to Cahn, are symbolic of all humanity in a time when social meaning has not evaporated, but become harder for the individual to perceive. Cahn writes of Ros and Guil, “Theirs becomes the archetypal plight of man lost in a world he cannot control and cannot even understand” (53). Delaney agrees that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead contains a structuring force that separates it from the absurdist realm. He posits that the play allows for the existence of order, albeit one that often evades understanding, arguing, “But to the extent that the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mirrors our own it shows us the inability of all mankind to understand those forces ultimately in control of their lives...at the same time that it asserts that such forces...exist” (19). Delaney reads Stoppard’s play as a social mirror. “Stoppard’s play,” he suggests, “leads us to recognize that whether we can comprehend it or not that there is ‘design at work’ in life as well as art” (19). Ros and Guil question their condition endlessly, but never chalk their lives up to utter nihilism. Delaney writes, “Even to the very end, Guildenstern does not deny that an explanation exists, does not deny the existence of order and causality, that there are wheels within wheels that have been set in motion” (31). Delaney believes that Stoppard presents a world where meaning operates, even if it is hard to grasp: this is not the bleak void of the absurd. He infers that meaning in Stoppard’s play can be found inside the human individual. He asserts: “We are confronted by the significance of the human even in its most insignificant manifestation rather than by the glory and exaltation of the noblest and most sublimely human. We are confronted by the fact of mortality which will come to all men” (35). A sense of hope clings to Delaney’s reading even as it intimates an understanding of the play as a study of the pervasive awareness of death within life.

To Schlueter, one of Stoppard’s main artistic objectives is this study of the inescapability of death. Writing on the inability of Ros and Guil to alter the fate predestined for them in the title of their eponymous play, Schlueter deduces, “The inexorability describes the demands imposed both upon man by virtue of the inevitability of death and on the dramatic character by virtue of the script” (“Moon” 84). Ros and Guil philosophize at length on the nature of their lives and question frequently their predicament: at Elsinore with no clear knowledge of why they are there or for what purpose, other than that, “A messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened” (Ros 18). Ros and Guil cannot make their lives their own, and they cannot defy the imperative issued by the messenger. Schlueter argues that Ros and Guil’s static nature stems from their lack of willful self-determination; they always succumb to the role designed for them in Hamlet. She writes, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern prove to have no existence outside Hamlet. Their entire time in the outer play is overshadowed by our knowledge that they are Shakespeare’s, and not Stoppard’s” (“Moon” 86). As Ros and Guil can never become wholly Stoppard’s, the human individual can never become wholly her own, she is always in hoc to mortality. Human life, like the lives of Ros and Guil, remains attached to a script beyond personal control, one that starts at birth and ends in death.

Theater director Anthony Jenkins also views Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead as a meditation on death. He believes the play to be an allegory for man’s use of doublethink as he progresses through life; he elucidates the play as a depiction of the cognitive dissonance that allows us to live as though we may not die. In Jenkins’ words, “Though Ros and Guil can never be at home, we are their supporters, and it is through them that we come to feel what death is. We know that they must die as must we, but like us they behave as if that

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were not the case” (42). For Jenkins, Ros and Guil epitomize the pain of living life in full view of death. He further describes how Stoppard uses his play to philosophize on what it is that makes death so painful. He writes, “The collision between the muddled striving of Ros and Guil and the purposefulness of those at Elsinore dramatizes the sense of life’s going on without us which makes the thought of death so painful” (46).

The question of culpability as it pertains to Ros and Guil frequently occurs in critical evaluations of the play. Cahn writes on the dehiscence between the characters of Ros and Guil in Stoppard’s play and the original, claiming, “The differences between Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Stoppard’s are twofold. First, Stoppard discards the sinister elements… Second, Stoppard magnifies the comic elements” (51). Cahn posits that Stoppard uses the play to free the two courtiers of guilt. Others argue that the play shows the ultimate fate of the pair as their just deserts: the inexorable conclusion of their selfish actions in both the master play and the Stoppard adaptation. The assignation of guilt is important because, depending on their stance on this issue, critics adopt differing conclusions as to the nature of the Stoppard play.

Emory University professor William Gru- ber takes the position that Ros and Guil are very much in control of their own destinies. He writes, “The two courtiers are not sniveling, powerless victims of time and circumstance, and their story does not illustrate the baffling absurdity or the blind fatality that has sometimes been said to arrange their lives” (111). Though the characters have a fate given to them by an older playwright, Ros and Guil can, in Gruber’s opinion, rewrite their endings. Critics like Gruber read Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead neither as a display of the unchecked forces of fate, nor as an explanation for the necessary deaths of the two courtiers: they see the play as Ros and Guil’s chance at redemption. Gruber describes how Stoppard allows Ros and Guil to take responsibility for their deaths, a responsibility they are not afforded in Ham-}

let. He writes, “Most of Act III of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead exists between the lines, as it were, of Hamlet, in what has always been represented as an undefined, unwritten zone. Stoppard here invites his characters to invent their history according to their will” (113). With this freedom, Ros and Guil become the active generators of the deaths that await them.

Whereas Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are minor characters in Hamlet, in their eponymous play they take center stage. Gruber suggests that in their stardom, they become tragic protagonists. He concludes, “Like other tragic protagonists before them, Ros and Guil must choose, and they choose in error” (116). After discovering the letter to the English king for Hamlet’s death, they do nothing. After finding the revised letter calling for their own deaths, they again do nothing. Ros questions, “They had it in for us, didn’t they? Right from the beginning. Who’d have thought that we were so important? “ (Ros 122). Gruber answers that no one, in fact, had it in for Ros and Guil; that they made their own choices and determined their own destinies. Thus, Gruber reads the play as an explanation of the powers of choice and freewill. Not allowing fate or the script to take the blame for Ros and Guil’s deaths, he puts the onus on them.

Jenkins reflects the sentiment of Gruber regarding Ros and Guil’s culpability. To Jenkins, despite the unknowable mystery present in the play and the inevitable arrival of death in life, Ros and Guil have the freedom to choose in the face of apparent predestination. He explains, “Doomed as they are, the pair still seem free to choose, and their refusal to seize the opportunity is nowhere more apparent than when they read the letter condemning them to death … Stoppard provides them with an unequivocal moment when they could have said ‘no’” (48-9). Jenkins believes that Ros and Guil are caught up in a sort of infernal machine, but he posits that within that machinery, they are given a chance to exhibit free will.

Princeton University literary critic John Fleming agrees with Jenkins’s reading of limited free will in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
are Dead. He writes,

The image is one of free will, but within constraints—of limited freedom within a larger, determined course. At other points, the belief in a preordained destiny contains a darker sentiment /ldots Thus, the belief in an ordered world leads to both a feeling of security and one of condemnation. (57)

Still, on the question of Ros and Guil’s responsibilities for their deaths, he equivocates: “Pas-sivity and fate are the downfall of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Stoppard . . . [shows] an equivocating attitude toward whether the characters, and by extension humans, are bound to determinacy versus having the free will to choose their own course of action“ (59). Fleming returns to the earlier idea of Stoppard’s need to generate interest in characters whose fates are fully known. He argues that while one knows the eventual outcome, in life and in theater, one also has the ability to suspend one’s disbelief: to live in the moment and to enjoy life and theater as if they were malleable and undetermined. Fleming continues, “While one might hope that all is predestination, au-diences can share their bafflement and desire for an explanation, relying on the hope, the protagonists’ intuition, that there is something to comprehend and that human lives, no matter how seemingly small and insignificant, do matter” (65). Fleming reads the Stoppard play as a celebration of the moment in the face of certain death.

Richard Andretta, a Stoppard critic, believes that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is an inquiry into the extant yet unknowable forces that govern human life; he alleges that life is pervaded by a sense of uncertainty. According to Andretta, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a play about man’s confusion and frustration as he finds no satisfactory answers to any of the mysteries that surround him“ (23). He makes this connection by drawing a parallel between Ros and Guil’s ignorance of the script that governs them to man’s inability to fully comprehend the order of his life. Andretta explains, “People, actors, and characters in a play—all enact two scripts: a script known to them and one that is mysterious. People know the routine of their daily lives but they cannot foretell the contingent and cannot discern the overall pattern . . . of their existence” (27). Andretta believes that Stoppard makes Ros and Guil empathetic, engaging characters despite the audience’s awareness of their eventual ending. As he puts it: “In spite of the fact that the Hamlet script determines their fate, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a different play from Hamlet and quite capable of absorbing the audience’s interest completely“ (30). He furthers this line of logic by positioning Guil as a symbol of man’s life outside the theater’s walls: “Guil’s plight is the plight of every man. Man thinks he enjoys a certain measure of free-dom, that his actions are not all pre-determined or leading to a predetermined conclusion, although deep inside he feels otherwise“ (32). However, Andretta differs from Gruber and Fleming in his attitude toward the guilt of Ros and Guil. He believes that Stoppard relieves the courtiers of agency; to him, the two are innocents trapped in machinations they cannot control.

Moreover, Andretta writes that one of Stoppard’s main goals is to exonerate the courtiers. Apropos of choice, Andretta affirms, “The play . . . shows that their deaths are not the inevitable result of their initial choice. Act III makes it clear that their fate is purely accidental“ (48). In exonerating Ros and Guil, Andretta promotes a reading of Stoppard that paints Hamlet as cold and calculating, cruelly responsible for the deaths of his onetime friends. Andretta writes, “The plot of his play shows that Ros and Guil are innocent, whereas Hamlet is guilty of causing the death of two innocent people“ (39). This reading asks viewers to consider the innocence of Ros and Guil within their eponymous play and to reevaluate the character of Hamlet in the play baring his name. Unlike the critics previously discussed, Andretta suggests that Stoppard’s play
not only comments on contemporary life, but also inspires a rereading of Hamlet, with more empathy for the courtiers and less for the tragic prince.

The protean critical response to Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead does not allow for a single interpretation of the play. Critical responses have run the gamut from disdain to high praise, and in the interval scholars suggest many layers of meaning at work within the play. Some critics see the play as a testament to the guilt of Ros and Guil: a presentation of their deserved fate. Others see it as a pardon for the courtiers: Stoppard’s presentation of two small men caught up in things outside of their control. Amidst these readings, critics also identify the play as a mediation on death and an attempt to answer the question of how one lives a happy life knowing full well that one day he will “[shuffle] off this mortal coil.“ The critical material available on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead suggests the play to be a philosophical work open to as many interpretations as its world-famous progenitor.

REFERENCES


