Confusing the Critics: Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*

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5 December 2001

Critics of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* generally agree that it is not absurdist in its construction. Despite this fact, the play borrows greatly from the Theater of the Absurd, and does not lend itself well to interpretation, even though its plot is set within Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one of the most well known works of western literature. Stoppard changes *Hamlet*'s focus from the title character to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his two friends with roles so minor directors seeking to save time often omit them, and creates the Player, a mysterious guru who helps shed some understanding onto the main characters. Analysis of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* especially stumbles when critics polarize to certain branches of criticism; looking at the play with such a narrow focus prevents critics from getting an accurate picture of its meaning.

Critics entertain one set of lines in particular that displays the plethora of ideas concerning Stoppard's text. During the dress rehearsal of the pantomime before "The Mousetrap," Guildenstern questions the Player on the nature of dearth in drama. The Player explains that a play ends "when everyone who is marked for death dies" (Stoppard 79). Guildenstern does not comprehend and asks, "who decides?" (80). The player responds with

> *Decides?* It is *written*….We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions—there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means. (80)

The critics respond to this passage differently based on the branches of criticism they employ. While each critic illuminates a layer of this passage, none of them hit the mark completely.

Manfred Draudt compares Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the players in terms of the game of coins, betting on the flip of heads or tails with a nearly impossible run of heads. According to him, the text explains the players' acceptance of death, a superior strategy for

survival in comparison to the title characters' plan of inaction. Although there is some logic to this, Draudt does not admit that the players do not represent characters as much as they do drama as an art form—being characters without names or, except for the Player, identities. With that in mind, Draudt would realize that Stoppard's comment on the players' acceptance of death as the end of their existence—because they represent drama, specifically tragedy—they are really acknowledging bloodshed as the necessary terminus in schematic tragedy.

Opposing Draudt, Leslee Lenoff picks up on this idea of separating the dramatic acting from life. She notes, "Unlike art, life consists of randomness from which the individual must create his own design" (Lenoff 53). She praises Stoppard for realizing that actors are the opposite of people because they simply follow the directions that are already written. She calls people "re-actors" because they are forced to roll with the punches life deals them. The players, as actors, portray identities, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend the entire play searching for their own identities "amidst the interchangeable titles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (Lenoff 53).

Because of the inflexibility of formal criticism, Lenoff fails to notice the link of this passage with other texts, which may better her understanding of it. Christopher Nassaar recognizes the depth of "The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means" (80) because he makes the connection between the passage and one from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Mrs. Prism says of her three-volume novel, "The good ended happily, the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means" (Wilde 341). Nassaar explains the phrase as focusing on predestination, saying Stoppard believes "human life is basically predetermined because, even though humans do have choices in this life, they do not have enough information to choose intelligently" (91), and that when humans do get the information

they need, it comes too late and they have missed their chance. Unfortunately, Nassaar either did not read the text of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* very well, or had not read it in some time. He points to the title characters' deaths as evidence of predestination, arguing, "Ros and Guil…have no way of saving themselves: They are doomed from the minute the play begins" (Nassaar 92). The text of the play refutes this idea; in the final scene, before he disappears for the last time, Rosencratnz says, "Couldn't we just stay put? I mean no one is going to come and drag us off….All right, then. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved" (Stoppard 125). He willingly submits to his fate; he decides to deliver the letter he bares, despite the fact that it demands his immediate execution.

Because of Nassaar's ideas as to why Stoppard makes this connection between Wilde's and Stoppard's two plays, his understanding of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* appears suspect. He points out the tragic, unlucky end of Wilde's life—he died in poverty after his fortune was shipwrecked—as the key link between Wilde and Stoppard. He argues that, "in [*The Importance of Being Earnest*], the entire issue of fate and free will is reduced to nonsense and treated with flippancy" (Nassaar 92). Therefore, Stoppard comments on the error of Wilde's thinking with biting cyicism. Nassaar also completely forgets to mention the link between the texts—*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* both deal with human identity crises: all of the characters from Stoppard's play cannot stick names to the title characters, and Wilde's Jack and Algernon both engage in name swapping. Nassaar, although using genetic criticism to delve intertextually into the two plays, pigeonholes himself in the authors' lives and forgets the most important part of the two plays—the text itself.

Many critics point to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as a work similar to *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*. Within this play, Vladimir and Estragon, two poorly dressed tramps, wait along an

abandoned roadside for the mysterious Godot to come. At the end of each day, a young boy comes to tell them Godot will not be coming. The characters, who call each other Didi and Gogo, attempt to pass the time with idle conversation that prods at the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. When comparing the two plays, almost every critic lays somewhere along a continuum, with one extreme admitting only slightly significant commonalities within the language and characters, and the other condemning Stoppard as a plagiarist. However, the critics comparing these plays often dig themselves into holes by aligning with only one type of criticism.

Joseph E. Duncan posits that, although the characterizations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very similar to Vladimir and Estragon, the similarity ends there. He scours the plays thoroughly and enumerates multiple similar character details in both texts. Gogo and Rosencrantz both have poor memories, both desire to leave, and both cling to their companion for support. Didi and Guildenstern both use logic to try and understand their surroundings. Vladimir and Guildenstern are the more cerebral of each pair, while Estragon and Rosencrantz are the more physical.

Although based on their personalities and social interaction the characters are similar, Duncan points out the many dissimilar facets to the setting and story of *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. For Duncan, the pasts of the characters and their consciousness of those pasts is a vital difference: "Didi and sometimes Gogo remember fragments of a long lost past….Rosencrantz and Guildenstern refer to no recollections from the time before the summons, and Rosencrantz cannot even remember the first thing her can remember" (Duncan 59-60). It is feasible that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lives began at the instant they were summoned, but Vladimir and Estragon hint at a life before the text of the play.

Duncan also points out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are put into a plot and a setting, while Didi and Gogo exist in a timeless, society-less void. He quotes Esslin in his explanation of Godot as something that "simply represents the objective of our waiting—an event, or thing, a person, death" (66), and sees Godot himself as "a little god, love, or death" (66). The critical difference to him is that death, a symbolic Godot, comes in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*, and not in waiting for Godot.

Duncan relies far to heavily on simply finding comparisons and differences in the two plays, however, and struggles at times with weak examples. He displays the two works as similar by showing the two pairs both ruffled by uncertainty and "frustrated by lack of success" (64-65). While truth exists in these statements, almost every work of fiction and drama contains characters that are afraid of the future and/or discouraged by failure. After delineating differences in the characterizations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Duncan then goes on to criticize Stoppard, asserting that his play departs from the original *Hamlet* "where the two friends are virtually indistinguishable" (59). Duncan forgets that, to the characters of *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *are* indistinguishable: the King and Queen cannot tell the two apart as they are introduced (Stoppard 35), and Hamlet, their old friend, confuses them as well (Stoppard 53). Duncan also misreads the text of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*, because the thinks "they do not feel, like Didi and Gogo, that they have been abandoned, but that they are receiving a disproportionate amount of attention" (Duncan 68). At the beginning of the play, Guildenstern muses, "we have not been…picked out…simply to be abandoned…set loose to find our own way….we are entitled to some direction….I would have thought" (Stoppard 20). Toward the end of the play he cries out, "we act on scraps of information…sifting half-remembered directions" (Stoppard 102), and "we move idly toward eternity without possibility of reprieve or

hope of explanation" (Stoppard 121); it seems obvious from the text that the characters fell abandoned and lost.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Duncan, Axel Kruse argues that *"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are* applies *Waiting for Godot* to *Hamlet* and….begins to seem an extraordinary exercise in plagiarism and literary non-sense" (87). He has the audacity to say, "any reader who failed to react to the play in this way would seem to have missed the point" (87-88). In his twenty-page essay analyzing *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern*, Kruse manages to show off his knowledge and analysis of seventeen different works, despite the fact that his connections are quite weak:

> The first moment of high illumination for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern becomes ridiculous imitation of the excesses of speech Hopkins: 'it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head…heading to a dead stop…and *high* and dry' recalls *The Wreck of the Deutschland* most of all (and perhaps stanza 32, in particular) (89).

Kruse name-drops banking on the reader to not have read Hopkins' poem. The thirty-second stanza reads as follows:

> I admire thee, master of the tides,
> Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall;
> The recurb & the recovery of the gulf's sides,
> The girth of it & the wharf of it & the wall;
> Staunching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind;
> Grounding of being, & granite of it: past áll
> Grásp Gód, thróned behind

> Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides. (Hopkins 249-256)

The connection between the two is obviously weak; there is no similarity within the language, and no evidence why Kruse singles Hopkins out over any other wordy writer.

Aside from squeezing in weak comparisons, Kruse also does not show a competent understanding of either play. He insists that *Waiting for Godot* ends on a happy note because they "escape extremes of violence" (Kruse 81) and have simply come to the end of the day. Abandoned by Godot once again and not told why, with no hope of finding whom they are waiting for, the light fades on Vladimir and Estragon as they echo the haunting lines,

> VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
>
> ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.
>
> *They do not move.*
>
> *Curtain.* (Beckett 61)

Kruse's idea of happiness must be one with no understanding, no fulfillment, and no future. Rosencrantz, according to Kruse, "is intelligent, and a fool, and a clown" (95). While the fool trait is unarguable, Rosencrantz constantly confuses his own name with Guildenstern, repeatedly cannot remember what he just said, and can barely communicate with his comrade: he simply is not intelligent. As the play begins, the pair "are well dressed—hats, cloaks, sticks, and all. Each one carries a large leather money bag" (Stoppard 11), and hardly appear as clowns. Kruse also confuses the two plots: "*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* is an exchange of conversation which is both a social art and a casual chat to pass the time" (Kruse 96). While this is an adequate description of *Waiting for Godot*, it does not describe Stoppard's play, where the two characters continually examine—at times agonizing over—the nature of life, death, and reality.

Closer to the center of the continuum, but not far from Kruse, John Freeman asserts, "Stoppard his filled the Beckettian void in part by placing his own Vladimir and Estragon in recognizable surroundings, the Renaissance context of Hamlet" (20). Stoppard chooses this setting, according to Freeman, because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's names come from Brahe's *Epistolae*; Brahe, an astrologer in the days immediately preceding the paradigm shift from Ptolemy's geocentric view of the universe to Copernicus' heliocentric view, struggled to accept the changes in scientific thought going on in his time. Because Elsinore is close in proximity to Hveen, Brahe's laboratory, and because similar shifts in scientific thought were occurring both in the Renaissance and in post-war England, *Hamlet* was an ideal setting for Stoppard to place his play. Anthony Jenkins proves a more realistic, although less dramatic, solution to Stoppard's motives when he paraphrases an interview of the author:

> Kenneth Ewing happened to remark that he had often wondered which king of England received Claudius' letter commanding Hamlet's destruction…was it Lear or Cymbeline? By the end of the ride Stoppard was playing with the idea of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the Court of King Lear*. (Jenkins 51)

He goes on to quote Stoppard in saying, "The interesting thing was them at Elsinore….the chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential" (51). Entertaining as Freeman's ideas are, he buried himself too deep in historical criticism II and neglected that the author's intention was available for those willing to look.

Jenkins quotes Stoppard as admitting that his intention was "to entertain a roomful of people" (52), but posits that his goal does not trivialize the playwright's agenda in describing death. Jenkins then goes back and forth between utilizing the text to describe Stoppard's ideas

on death, and describing the dramatic and linguistic techniques that keep the play from being realistic. In the second act of the play, Rosencrantz stares out at the footlights and yells, "Fire!" (Stoppard 60), explaining his explosion as "demonstrating a misuse of free speech. To prove it exists" (60). By labeling this technique as "an estranging device…[that] allows us sufficient detachment to consider that truism" (Jenkins 57), Jenkins utilizes an inverse mimetic look at the play, in addition to his formalist dissection of death as meaning both pain and fear in human lives.

Simon Varey takes nearly the exact quote of Stoppard that Jenkins does and demonstrates a superior understanding of the play by interpreting not only through genetic strategies, but also through utilization of deconstructive techniques to point out the facets of the play that appeal to the reader's perception and empathy. He plucks apart the lines, noting verbal "ambushes" (22)—surprises—that influence a viewers' response, picking out "one of the funniest scenes of the play" (24). Varey relates these surprises to Stoppard's insecurity as a writer and his desire "to inject some sort of interest and colour into every line" (Varey 22). By picking through *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* carefully, Varey concludes that its value lies not only in its comments on God and fate—through formalist methodology—but also that it "is *about* particular people in a particular situation" (Varey 31), revealing a mimetic understanding of the play.

Both Jenkins and Varey demonstrate much more coherent analyses of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* than other critics previously cited simply because they utilize multiple critical strategies and interrelate them, instead of narrowly focusing on one or two absolute ways of looking at literature. Their arguments do not contain the same holes that plague the other critics. Superior even to Jenkins and Varey, Victor Cahn displays the power of combining

different types of criticism into one massive discussion on the play that humbles other critics in the sheer depth and breadth of its analysis.

Although Cahn compares the text *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* to *Waiting for Godot*, he does so in order to show the realism inherent in Stoppard's characters. He argues that, while Vladimir and Estragon "are denied a context" (Cahn 37), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are set within a time period—Renaissance Denmark—and exist within a social structure—the court of King Claudius. Cahn then backs up his discussion by analyzing symbols and dramatic techniques that support his claim. The dress and bags Stoppard's characters carry symbolize social standing, and the coin game "alerts the audience to a world of uncertain values" (Cahn 38), which contrasts with Beckett's value-less world. A dissection of the characters' longer lines prove the existence of individual differences—personalities—that makes them even more real. He then points society as being absurd. He uses this analysis to conclude:

> Stoppard begins his play in the world of traditional absurd theater, recalling specifically Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. But he 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)

Cahn's intertextual, mimetic, formal, and deconstructive analyses of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* creates this more complete picture of Stoppard's text. He proves that various types of criticism can not only support each other, but lead to a more complete understanding of the play.

The critics have proven that literary analysis can be compared to politics: while many politicians that rise to fame are those who polarize either to the far left or far right, the best

leaders are those who are more or less moderate in their thinking. The critics who insist on reading *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* from a single critical approach handicap themselves in their understanding of the work. The many issues discussed in the text, combined with its pastiche composition, links to multiple other works, and seemingly inane and pointless dialogue hides the fact that Stoppard depicts truth in life and the human experience. Criticizing with tunnel vision only keeps that truth hidden amongst the play's layers.

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