Of Course, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

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Two of the major influences on Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz_and Guildenstern Are Dead* are Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The conflicts in Stoppard's work are a complex mix of the psychological dilemmas in *Hamlet* and the complicated free will versus determinism confusion of *Godot.* Both of the title characters in Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, wrestle with the problem of determinism versus free will. Each, however, deals with the problem in his own way. Guildenstern philosophizes about the events of the play and how each seems beyond his control as Hamlet would do. All the while he grows impatient with Rosencrantz who, contrastingly, is content to roll with the punches and to believe that he has free will as Estragon and Vladimir do in *Godot*. Neither approach is successful at the end of the play because both characters end up dead. Neither determinism nor free will is at work independently; both approaches are at work together, but even the combination is fatal when there is not enough information available to allow human beings to make careful decisions.

In act 1, Guildenstern first begins to notice that his life is not under his control when the coin toss game he is playing with Rosencrantz goes awry. After eighty-nine consecutive coin flips that are all heads, the following dialogue occurs between the friends:

> Rosencrantz: I'm afraid——
> Guildenstern: So am I.
> Rosencrantz: I'm afraid it isn't your day.
> Guildenstern: I'm afraid it is. (Stoppard 15)

Guildenstern is of course insinuating that it is his day *to die*. Rosencrantz does not pick up on Guildenstern's word play and continues with the coin toss game. Throughout act 1, Rosencrantz believes that he is capable of making decisions. For example, he asks Guildenstern "What are you going to do now?" and repeatedly tells his friend, "I want to go home" (17; 39). All of Rosencrantz's dialogue in act 1 is concerned with making decisions and finding his way, while Guildenstern's dialogue could have come directly from one of Hamlet's speeches.

In act 2, Rosencrantz begins to understand that the action of the play is happening around him and he has no control over these events. In the following dialogue, Rosencrantz realizes that he and Guildenstern are sitting still while characters enter and leave and change their lives:

> Rosencrantz (*peevish*): Never a moment's peace! In and out, on and off, they're coming at us from all sides.
> Guildenstern: You're never satisfied.
> Rosencrantz: Catching us on the trot. . . . Why can't *we* go by *them*? (73)

The lives of the two characters are conducted around bits of incomplete information offered to them by other characters. Gertrude and Claudius tell them that Hamlet is ill and that they must find out why, but, without any further information, the task is impossible. The king and queen tell them that they have been friends with Hamlet since he was a young boy, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot remember that far back, so they take the monarchs' word for it. The last line of act 2, however, shows that Rosencrantz maintains some hope that he has free will when he tells Guildenstern that they are free to go home and asserts, "anything could happen yet" (95).

Finally, in act 3, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are both acutely aware that their fates are not in their own hands. Guildenstern says, "You've only got their word for it," and Rosencrantz retorts, "But that's what we depend on" (110). The truth is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's entire lives are conducted based on what others ask of them. They are unable to refuse, for reasons unknown to them, the king's messenger who gets them out of bed and sets them on their journey. They are also unable to refuse the

king's request to find out what is ailing Hamlet. They suddenly find themselves on a boat in act 3 for reasons beyond their comprehension. Guildenstern philosophizes,

> Yes, I'm very fond of boats myself. I like the way they're—contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all—the question doesn't arise, because you're on a *boat*, aren't you?. . . I think I'll spend most of my life on boats. (101)

The boat becomes a metaphor for the lives of both of the title characters. On the boat and in their lives, neither has control of where he is going; neither knows where he has been, and neither has to worry about either problem. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern succumb to a predetermined life, and, once they both understand that they have no free will, both disappear.

Early in the play, Guildenstern possesses Hamlet's ability to consider life in a philosophic way, while Rosencrantz remains more simpleminded and unaware of life (like Vladimir and Estragon). This evidence is proof that the confusion of the characters' names in the play is not due to the fact that they are indistinguishable, but to the fact that they are insignificant; they have different personalities, but they are both meaningless characters in the scheme of things. By act 3, both characters are acutely aware that they serve as mere puppets for the other characters and that their fates are not in their own hands. Once this fact is realized, there is no reason for the pair of friends to continue living. As Guildenstern predicts in act 1, it is their day to die and, of course, they do.

Work Cited

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