

4-1-2011

Postmodernism Meets the Mopey Prince: Comparing the Ideologies of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

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Recommended Citation

Weitekamp, Sarah, "Postmodernism Meets the Mopey Prince: Comparing the Ideologies of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*" (2011). *2011 Spring Semester*. Paper 5.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2011/5>

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Modern Theater

15 March 2011

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

It is often said that Hamlet's tragic flaw was indecisiveness. Centuries of scholars and high school students have imperiously pointed at Hamlet, prescribing an oh-so-obvious solution to our dithering hero's problems: just *do* something! Yet in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard takes the opposite tack, introducing us to characters who are even more actionless and aimless than our troubled Danish prince. Stoppard's main characters are an obvious homage to Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*: purely Postmodern men—clueless, directionless, and passionless. By juxtaposing Beckett-like uncertainty with the Bard's iconic characters and setting, Stoppard is able to clearly illustrate the principle ideological change that has occurred during the centuries that separate *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: a transformation from caring for oneself and others to apathy, and a change from passion to indifference.

When speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, the titular character exclaims, "What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty!" (Act 2: Scene 2). Although Hamlet is morose and even suicidal, he still concedes the magnificence of human abilities. Contrast this with Stoppard's Player, who displays a lack of appreciation for human capabilities when he tells Guildenstern, "You're nobody special" (Stoppard 731). Here, Stoppard is displaying classic Postmodernist thought. Whereas *Hamlet* is about someone

undoubtedly special—on top of being the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet is said to be intelligent and talented—*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* focuses on two utterly ordinary, unimportant characters. In *Hamlet*, the original Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are entirely disposable, as shown by Hamlet's nonchalant willingness to have them killed, despite the fact that they are supposedly his close friends. In the very act of choosing to write a play about two such devastatingly unimportant characters, Stoppard reminds us that nothing has more value than anything else; a play about two personality-less characters is just as legitimate as a play about a severely depressed prince out for revenge—people are equal in every conceivable way, after all. Thus, there are two layers on which Postmodernist thought operates in the play: in the very existence of the play as well as through the speech and actions of the characters. In *Hamlet*, human action (and, for that matter, inaction) is taken seriously—not only is Hamlet constantly soliloquizing about his wretched state of affairs, but Gertrude, Claudius, and the rest of the court are incessantly fretting about Hamlet's seeming insanity. Meanwhile, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* maintains that human action is empty and disposable. The Tragedians exemplify this, willing to do whatever, whenever, wholly indifferent to the causes or effects of their actions. When the Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not” (Stoppard 691), it's not so much his uncertainty that surprises us as his extreme flippancy towards his unknowing state. Then again, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at all—after all, the meaninglessness of Postmodernist life strips away the need for caring, even about oneself.

The constant indifference that Stoppard's Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Tragedians exhibit is perhaps the most alarming aspect of the play. Yet Postmodernist thought requires this indifference—after all, in a Postmodernist world where the search for explanation has been

extinguished, curiosity and wonder are only anachronisms. Shakespeare, on the other hand, presents us with a world that is still mysterious and unpredictable, a world in which ghosts may visit their still-living sons. Both plays, it is true, emphasize the unpredictability of the world—in *Hamlet*, as in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, even the need for life itself is often called into question. In *Hamlet* the inability to truly know strikes a deeply emotional chord. To Hamlet, the grief and agony of his uncertainty is overwhelming, driving him to lament, “For who would bear the whips and scorns of time...To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But that the dread of something after death...puzzles the will” (Act 2: Scene 2). Weariness, fear, trepidation, mourning, suffering, longing for escape: all are acutely felt by the young prince. Because of these paralyzing emotions, Hamlet eventually suffers even more. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* displays no such depth of emotion. Things are what they are, or they are what they aren’t, or they aren’t what they are—no one really knows, actually, but no one seems to care either. This is seen clearly in an exchange between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (733):

G: I think I have it. A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself.

R: Or just as mad.

G: Or just as mad.

R: And he does both.

G: So there you are.

R: Stark raving sane.

Player: Why?

In this impenetrable dialogue, we see the apathy that pulls Stoppard’s ideology so far apart from Shakespeare’s. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are just as undirected as Hamlet, yet

unlike the prince, neither seems to be particularly upset about this or, in fact, have any emotion at all in regards to their state. In this conversation, they demonstrate their apathy towards even sanity itself. To them, the world is not something to be wondered at or admired, but rather something to muddle through, looking nowhere, hearing nothing. Nothing is certain and nothing is of worth. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be depressed and downtrodden, but he still feels, whereas Stoppard's play gives us characters devoid of meaning, dreams, and hope.

At one point, the Player describes the path of his unhappiness to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, saying "We're actors...we pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade, that someone was watching. And then, gradually, no one was" (Stoppard 729). But the fact is we are all actors, forever playing out different scenes and characters, trying to find the ones that fit best. *Hamlet* touches upon these themes, and even utilizes theater to execute the major climax of the story. In the Postmodern world, however, this grand theater of humanity has been divested of its playwright, stage, and audience. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* mirrors *Hamlet*, twisting it into a reflection of life today and showing us exactly what we expected—hardly anything at all.

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