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### An Act of Reality

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a tragicomedy with absurd dialogue and plot which expands upon the two titular characters in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* has nested plays within the play itself, including *Hamlet* and the shows put on by a traveling band of actors called the Tragedians, which conveys a complex consideration of the nature of theatre. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* work together to show a similarity relationship between the world of the stage and real life. The plays draw upon our model of competence, blurring the lines between reality and acting through their treatment of confinement and death. The theme of confinement exists in both the worlds of acting and reality, acting being the world of the Tragedians' performances in Stoppard's work and *Hamlet* being reality. The theme of death permeates and works together in both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Hamlet* to connect the real world to the world of stage by observing what constitutes a real death versus an acted death and in turn teaching the audience about their own death-destined reality.

The intertextual network, comprised of the plays themselves and also the plays nested within each play, toys with the audience's model of competence and muddles real world and the stage. The plot of the play by the Tragedians within *Hamlet* and within *Rosencrantz and*

*Guildestern are Dead* mimics the life situation which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in, showing to the men and the audience a similarity between the real world and the stage. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch the play, they realize that two actors parallel themselves and are even dressed in the same way as them; this greatly confuses Rosencrantz. He recognizes the actor that looks like him and tells that player that he is not who the actor thinks he is. Rosencrantz says to the actor, "I know you, don't I? I never forget a face - ... not that I know yours, that is. For a moment I thought - no, I don't know you, do I?" (Stoppard 2.75). The intertextual network between the three plays occurring, the Tragedians' act within *Hamlet* which is within Stoppard's play, must be known and clear to the reader/audience who must then have a sufficient model of competence from pre-text related knowledge to be able to differentiate what 'reality' is and what 'play' is in each work. That is, in the play in question, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the real Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are 'reality' and the act of the Tragedians (which is from the plot of *Hamlet*) is stage acting. Therefore, the Tragedians' act mimics reality so well that Rosencrantz himself cannot even differentiate between the two. Further in example of play and life meshing together, the two Tragedian characters that are similar to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die which is exactly the fate of the true Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in reality. Although Stoppard does not fully remove Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the script after they die (in a sense leaving them in as narrator characters), they still contemplate their death, what it means, and whether it is 'real'. Rosencrantz says, "That's it, then, is it?" and then disappears from view confirming his death in 'reality' and transition to narrator (3.116). Guildenstern then yells out, "Rosen-? Guil-?"; he calls the already gone Rosencrantz and himself, evidently still lost between the blurred similarities of play and reality and the real Guildenstern versus his acting doppelganger (3.116). A continuously sufficient

model of competence is required throughout the reading of Stoppard to understand the intertextual network of the three plays well enough to see how they work together to challenge perceived difference between acting and truth.

*Hamlet* on its own shows us how morality can result in feelings of confinement. With this understanding from the pre-text applied to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, confinement can be seen through the tensions presented between adhering to the script in acting and functioning autonomously. Stoppard's play is essentially set within the play of the pre-text *Hamlet* and since the characters in Stoppard's work do not acknowledge that they are scripted, *Hamlet* can be considered the 'reality'. In this reality, Hamlet himself is seen to be trapped by his own morality when contemplated how and whether he should "revenge his [father's] foul and most unnatural murder" (Shakespeare 1.5.31). He is swayed back and forth trapped with hesitation – he goes from having "wings as swift ... [to] sweep to my [his] revenge" to questioning whether it is just "the devil" abusing his thoughts (1.5.35-37, 2.2.628). The sense of internal confinement in reality seen through the Shakespearean pre-text can likewise be applied to acting as discussed in Stoppard's work, once again showing the similarity between life and the stage. Stoppard uses repetition, direct dialogue, and metatheatrical claims to create this feeling of constraint. A sense of claustrophobia is created around Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they seem trapped repeating certain actions including coin flipping, asking questions, and attempting and failing to remember the past. Likewise, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also confined into a repetition of the action of their roles in the larger play *Hamlet* (although only an external audience can see this and not the characters themselves) and the Tragedians, or any actor for that matter, are confined to their script. "We're actors....," says the player, "We pledged our identities, secure in the convention of our trade," explaining to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

that an actor, while at work, loses their personal identity and becomes locked into the role that is set for them (Stoppard 2.57). In acting, “events play themselves” and the player is confined by the nature of their trade just as in reality Hamlet, or anyone for that matter, is confined by their morals (2.72).

The sense of death conveyed in *Hamlet* is the same as the sense of death supported by acting; in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Guildenstern modifies this perception of death to emphasize the nothingness of it, demystify the dramatic notion, and focus on the reality of death. This theme, woven throughout and cross-analyzed in both plays in terms of theatre and reality, blurs the line between real death and acted death, and real life and acting. *Hamlet*, being the pre-text, prepares the audience and sculpts their model of competence for the inevitability of death, the ever-present “intuition of mortality” (2.65). *Hamlet* presents death as dramatic and gruesome, for the play culminates in the romanticized death of most of the significant characters by duel, poison, violent murder, suicide, etc. With the awareness of the pervading role of death from the pre-text, Stoppard’s play can be read with the inescapable ending of death already in mind since the play is limited by the script of *Hamlet* which teaches the audience that humans are trapped by their mortality. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* compares true death to acted death on the stage. The player, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern endlessly bicker about what constitutes a proper staged death and whether the audience will believe it based on their expectations. The player says that “Audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in” so “we do on stage things that are supposed to happen” (2.76, 1.23). Truth be told, however, the audience may never have experienced an up-close death of someone and certainly has never experienced it for themselves, therefore, they do not know what to expect from a personal stance. An audience may only have been exposed to imitations of death, such as

from the Shakespearean pre-text. Therefore, the expectation is often grandiose death – both the play *Hamlet* and the actor characters in Stoppard's work claim that this is what death always looks like and this is how it should be performed in show. Guildenstern, however, presents an alternative view of death, acknowledging the emptiness and uncertainty of it which to him is more in line with reality. He says, "no blood runs cold anywhere... no one gets up after death... there is no applause... there is only silence" (3.1.14). Guildenstern's comparison of mortality to acted death demystifies the unknown notion of dying by contrasting it to the familiar – acting. The back-and-forth and varied perspectives surrounding acted and real death show the room for similarity between life and the stage based on one's interpretations and understandings of the world.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* work together in their nested nature to blur the lines between acting and real life, harnessing the ideas of confinement of the self and what constitutes 'real' death. One is seen confined in both real life (*Hamlet*) and in the act by morality and script, respectively, showing a common theme and therefore similarity between reality and acting. The pre-text of *Hamlet* reinforces the idea that death is finite, inevitable, and dramatic. The idea of death in Stoppard's play sheds light on the different understandings of an unfamiliar, inescapable element of our lives and helps demystify and explain it through Guildenstern's perspective by connecting the world to something more familiar – acting.

Works Cited

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