

The Duality Motif in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Mark TIEDEMANN

概 要

これは、ローゼンクランツとギルデンスターンは死んだという劇の中の、様々な問題点に関する、トム・ストッパードの考察における二重性の使い方の分析である。二つずつ様々な問題点を紹介すること、例えば芸術と現実、決定論と自由論、生と死が劇の中の構造組織を形成する。また、お互いに鏡のように映し合いながら演じることで、ストッパードは問題点を解明できる。

“Heads . . . Heads . . . Heads . . . Heads,” opens *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The two main characters, referred to as “Ros” and “Guil,” have been passing time by playing a game of flipping coins. Each time Guil loses and Ros takes the coin. A peculiarly dull opening to a play, not wished away by Guil’s “There is an art to the building up of suspense.” (12) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is not a play with an interesting story, indeed even with a plot line of its own. The players are caught up in the story of Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*, previously set down, so it is already known what is going to happen. The play can even seem disjointed and repetitious as Ros and Guil’s banter leaves loose ends and jumps between topics and ideas, only to pick them up again later. Also, the pair’s perceptions are called into question at every point.

As we know from *Hamlet*, and Stoppard’s title leaves no doubt, the two protagonists are moving inexorably toward their deaths. It is tempting, Brater claims, to read the play as “a consistent existentialist narrative—‘unaccommodated man’ once more cut short by an indifferent, meaningless universe he fails to comprehend” but the play’s “extravagant minimalism belies such a tough philosophical through-line. . . . We’ve all read the same texts and we’re all ‘in’ on this together, even and especially when the joke is on us.” (205)

The play is obviously more than just farce. Despite Stoppard’s own claim that “all my plays are intended to be recreation for the audience,” (Adelman 31) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is filled with brainy material from wordplays to

profound epistemological questions, so there seems to be method in Stoppard's madness. As Sammells points out, Stoppard's "dramatic strategy is to lure the audience into a series of more or less challenging ambushes; one of his principal tactics is to constantly dislocate the audience's perspective by means of a critical engagement of the conventions and limitations of dramatic genre." (108) In this, his first play, Stoppard already demonstrates his propensity to confront the audience by throwing lots at it, by asking profound and far-reaching questions, but to back away from offering clear-cut solutions. Victor Cahn argues that the play differs from previous absurdist plays "where men have no role to play and must fabricate reasons for their existence" in that Ros and Guil "must play a role that is strictly defined but still hopelessly unfathomable." (64)

What Stoppard does is impress us, time and again, with his finesse in handling a story which had been pronounced "dead" before it started. Humor is his most potent weapon. The play has us chuckling right on through the boredom, confusion and gloom. One of the methods he uses is to introduce absurd topics, usually in juxtaposition to profound ones. The technique Stoppard admits is "a Beckett joke" that "consists of confident statement followed by immediate refutation by the same voice." (quoted in Haymen, 7) Just after Guil's proposals attempting to explain the repeating heads, ending in a long speech which begins "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear," (17) comes Ros's "Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death." (18) Profound statements slowly get reduced to confusion. After asking "What are we doing here, I ask myself," (20) they decide to continue on, but can't even remember which way they are going. Or the ideas get reduced to an over-simplistic level. After establishing that they met the players the first time not by chance but by fate, the Player continues, "Oh, yes. We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not." (25) Many of the jokes rely on the play between pairs of things, as in the Player's "It doesn't take much to make a jingle' —even a single coin has music in it," (22) and "They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins." (23) One of the most memorably humorous lines in the play is Ros's comment on Hamlet's evasiveness, "Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all." (57)

This leads us to the consistent motif Stoppard employs in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*: dualities. The playwright presents the plethora of ideas that dance through the play more or less in pairs. One of these pairs is incidental to

Stoppard's choice to extrapolate the situation of characters in another play: he sets up a play within a play, another one, this time Stoppard's play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern within the play of *Hamlet*. Ros and Guil's inability to act seems parallel to Hamlet's, but Stoppard's play can even go as far as to have an effect on the audience's perceptions of *Hamlet*. As Karwowski says, Stoppard's play is so "patently a sincere expression of existential angst, the two protagonists' almost catatonic despair [makes] Hamlet appear cheerful by comparison." (161) The two sets of players within the play, who interact extensively in Stoppard's play, and draw the most attention to the question of fiction and reality, form another pair. Players playing in plays are everywhere. It is as if, as Hynes says, the play "operates from the premise that 'all the world's a stage.'" (643) The fact that there are two protagonists is another duality. Beyond this, topics appear in pairs, art and reality, determinism and freedom, life and death. Some of these dualities represent a kind of balance that must be restored, or maintained, or at least understood. Another effect of the dualities is that they tend to play off each other, facilitating a discussion or an investigation into one in light of the other. In this sense they hold a mirror up to the other and they help define each other.

The play opens with a duality gone haywire, the coin tossing. The poignancy of the image of a coin falling "heads" impossibly over and over again becomes burned into the audience's mind, and becomes the guiding image for the play. A coin has two sides, each distinct, at least in its orientation, and in some sense opposite the other. Yet each side is dependent upon the other for its existence. How could there be a one-sided coin? It is a duality often found in nature, light and dark, up and down; one defines the other, for what would light be without the existence of dark? Thus, one side of a duality can only be understood in relation to the other; our understanding of one relies on, or at least is affected by our understanding of both. In the play, Stoppard presents us with numerous examples of dualities, challenging Ros and Guil and the audience to make sense of one in the light of the other.

Tossing a two-sided coin should result in it coming down half the time heads and half the time tails. But it doesn't. This calls into question our assumptions about the coin and the laws of nature, in this case the law of probability. Nature depends on balance and we tend to take comfort in that order. The absurd situation of the coins coming down heads seventy-six times in a row causes Guil to ponder "A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith," (12) If the law of probability is not operating, it points to a bigger problem and should fill us

with fear. The duality of the two sides of the coin expands to the duality of the two possible outcomes of tossing the coin, predictably alternating possibilities, and we have entered the abstract realm of probability.

Guil plies for explanations for the oddity of the results and his list is illustrative because these are all points that Ros and Guil revisit time and again in the play. His first explanation is that he is willing it, "the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins." (16) In other words, this is all happening in his imagination. His second explanation, that "time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times," seems less absurd in this context when we consider that Ros and Guil are trapped in a play which has already been written and performed over and over again. His third idea is that there had been divine intervention with an outside force determining events. His fourth explanation, "a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does," points to the inability of rational logic to explain the unordinary. The three syllogisms Guil subsequently offers reinforce this inadequacy of logic. The first is nonsense, the third is next to nonsense, being an argument in a circle, and the second, though rationally sound, leads to an obvious and unhelpful conclusion "we are now within un-, sub-, or supernatural forces." (17) Guil is searching for balance, "unsurprisingness is something I am trying to keep hold of." "Probability . . . made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature." (18)

Another important duality, evident from even the title, is the main characters themselves, Ros and Guil. The play is a double-headed farcical tragedy, with both characters joined at the hip as they head toward their doom. Ros and Guil are permanently linked, always together in *Hamlet*, always together here. Stoppard humorously emphasizes this by having Claudius, Getrude and Hamlet mix up their names, and even the two themselves occasionally forget who is who. The two can't even remember who did what, as in their search for the letter on the boat.

ROS: The letter.

GUIL: You've got it. What's the matter?

ROS: Have I? Where would I have put it?

GUIL: You can't have lost it.

ROS: I must have!

GUIL: That's odd—I thought he gave it to me.

ROS: Perhaps he did.

GUIL: But you seemed so sure it was you who hadn't got it.

ROS: It *was* me who hadn't got it!

GUIL: But if he gave it to me there's no reason why you should have had it in the first place, in which case I don't see what all the fuss is about you *not* having it.

ROS: I admit it's confusing.

The two are virtually indistinguishable except when interacting. Energy is created by bestowing the duo with differing personalities, allowing them to play off each other. They are like opposite sides of the same coin and they set each other in relief. This difference Stoppard sets up on the first page in his stage directions so that it will be obvious to the audience from the onset:

The run of "heads" is impossible, yet ROS betrays no surprise at all—he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note.

GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it—his character note.

Comparatively, Guil is more questioning, more negative, and Ros is more patient, slightly more upbeat. Guil's reaction to the run of heads is to ask questions and propose a "List of possible explanations." (16) Ros can only muster wonder, "I've never seen anything like it!" (16)

As the play consists almost entirely of their interchanges, it is hard to imagine one without the other. Though Guil is more critical and incisive, we sense that he wouldn't even have begun questioning if he hadn't had Ros to query to, wouldn't have continued without Ros's persistent, albeit not very lucid responses. Ros can't match his friend's intellectual verbosity, but he seems to be able to see things rightly, if in simple terms. He stops Guil's long speech trying to justify betraying Hamlet with "But what's the point?" (110) Ros is more perceptive of their failed attempt to glean anything out of Hamlet: "I think you can say he made us look ridiculous." (56)

This symbiotic relationship is best illustrated by the flip flop in their roles near the end on the boat. Guil is leading the conversation as usual until he loses

his temper:

GUIL: Why don't you say something original! No wonder the whole thing is so stagnant! You don't take me up on anything—you just repeat it in a different order.

ROS: I can't think of anything original. I'm only good in support.

GUIL: I'm sick of making the running.

ROS: It must be your dominant personality. (104)

Then with "What's going to become of us?" Ros takes up the lead in questioning their situation and Guil proves no better at saying anything original than Ros had been.

Art and audience, or in broader terms, fiction and reality form another duality. In some ways the distinction between these dualities is blurred. It is evident throughout that as players within a play, Ros and Guil are in a situation somewhat similar to Stoppard's audience, observing bits and pieces of *Hamlet*. Also, the first time they meet The Player he calls them "fellow artists" because "For some of us it is performance, for others patronage. They are two sides of the same coin." (23) Later he chides Ros and Guil for leaving them while they were performing for them on the road and further illuminates the relationship.

You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is watching. . . .

The plot was two corpses gone before we caught sight of ourselves, stripped naked in the middle of nowhere and pouring ourselves down a bottomless well. . . .

We pledged our identities, secure in the conviction of our trade, that someone would be watching. (63-4)

The Player is claiming that art is meaningless without an audience from the real world, and this implies, likewise, that the real world can only take meaning through its interpretation in art. Hynes goes as far as to claim "R&GAD insists, frighteningly and delightfully, that art is life, illusion is reality, the mirror gives us whatever truth may be, acting is the way it is," (643) but it is not necessary to go that far. Stoppard is showing that each is dependent upon the other, for existence and for meaning, but that is not to say that they are the same. Just as one side of the coin needs the opposite side—they are still heads and tails, and

though performance needs an audience, they are still distinct. Sammells takes a more subtle approach. "Guildenstern's quarrel with [the Player] is about the nature of that design which is in art. In mirroring life it must reveal meaning and significance, not just impose its own shape. When the players enact a theatrical slaughter Guildenstern can discern no truth in their cheap melodrama." (75) "I'm talking about death—and you've never experienced *that*," says Ros. "You cannot *act* it." (123) Guildenstern tries to stab the Player and "along with Stoppard's audience, is fooled by the mechanics of cheap melodrama," Sammells continues. "In attempting to get the actor to come to grips with life, at least once, by killing him, Guildenstern unwittingly demonstrates the fictional nature of what he conceives to be the real." The relationship between fiction and reality is more fundamentally complex than either the Player or the courtiers can conceive, and this relationship remains a basic conundrum poised by Stoppard and his play.

Time, coupled with their disorientation of direction, are other factors Ros and Guil struggle to see clearly. In their seemingly endless waiting they lose track of whether it is morning or evening, and when they try to use the sun as a reference, they find that they don't know whether the sun is in the east or west and therefore can't use it to tell them whether it is morning or evening.

GUIL: In the morning the sun would be easterly. I think we can assume that.

ROS: That it's morning?

GUIL: If it is, and the sun is over *there* (*his right as he faces the audience*) for instance, *that* (*front*) would be northerly. On the other hand, if it is not morning and the sun is over *there* (*his left*) . . . *that* . . . (*lamely*) would still be northerly. (*Picking up.*) To put it another way, if we came from down *there* (*front*) and it is morning, the sun would be up *there* (*his left*), and if it is actually over *there* (*his right*) and it's still morning, we must have come from up *there* (*behind him*), and if *that* is southerly (*his left*) and the sun is really over *there* (*front*), then it's the afternoon.

ROS: I merely suggest that the position of the sun, if it is out. Would give you a rough idea of the time; alternatively, the clock, if it is going, would give you a rough idea of the position of the sun. I forgot which you're trying to establish.

Relativity renders these dual notions of orientation meaningless and deprives us of points of reference. Thus, Stoppard is reminding us that order relies on

anchors without which our perception is shaken, but that the anchors rely on common assumptions, making them vulnerable to disruptions.

Ros and Guil find that the future remains shapeless because they can't even remember the past. "What's the first thing you remember?" Guil asks, but Ros can't recall, "No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago." (16) The future is actually frightening to them. "Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?" (71) When Ros thinks about being dead and lying in a box, it is the continuance of it that gets to Guil, "Death followed by eternity . . . the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought." (72)

Time is also tied to destiny and its underlying duality of determinationism and free will, the most profound duality explored in the play. On the surface, this would seem to be an either-or duality, either things are predetermined or we have free will. However, in the overall structure of the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* the determinism-freedom duality is bound up with the artistic duality of fiction and reality. Ros and Guil are doomed, the audience knows, because they are part of a play whose outcome has been written. Stoppard humorously reminds us of the impossibility of their affecting what has been written when they try, but fail, to stop Hamlet as he is dragging Polonius' body. "Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one—that is the meaning of order." (60) The Player does not see art as offering much hope in this regard. "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) This leads to the question, though actors may have their script predetermined, does the artist labor under such restraints?

To answer this, we have to look at Ros and Guil's ability to make decisions. Part of the problem is that even though they may have chances to make choices, they do not have enough information to do so in any meaningful way. (Nassaaar, 91) Throughout the play they are at a loss as to exactly why the king called them,

ROS: We were sent for.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: That's why we're here. Traveling.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: It was urgent—a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked. . . . Fearful lest we come too late!!

GUIL: Too late for what?

ROS: How do I know? We haven't got there yet.

GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself. (19-20)

what Hamlet is doing, and what their role in all this is beyond the surface: "We don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to *act*." (66) Deprived of the ability to make real choices, freedom is only an illusion, as Guil says, "At least we were presented with alternatives . . . But not choice." (39) The freedom they enjoy can affect things only to an insignificant degree without being able to affect the larger scheme. They realize their situation on the boat is a metaphor for their overall situation. They can move about on a boat, but the boat is still taking them somewhere beyond their control.

GUIL: We are not restricted. No boundaries have been defined, no inhibitions imposed. We have, for the while, secured, or blundered into, our release, for the while. Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.

ROS: Within limits, of course.

GUIL: Certainly within limits. (116)

This analogy is accurate for these two players within *Hamlet*; they are able to move about seemingly freely, but are unable to affect the course of the play in any significant way.

Soon Ros and Guil meet their ends. As the representations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in the ending of *Hamlet* being acted out upstage, are slain on their arrival in England, the Player comments "So there's an end to that — it's commonplace: light goes with life, and in the winter of your years the dark comes early." However, Guil now sees the deeper relevance of the two dualities: as dark is simply the absence of light, death, too, is the absence of life. "No . . . no . . . not for us, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over . . . Death is not anything . . . death is not . . . It's the absence of presence, nothing more . . . the endless time of never coming back." (124) Their very last words indicate a kind of reconciliation with the world they are leaving, but don't hint at really having learned anything. "To tell you the truth, I'm relieved," says Ros, then he disappears. Guil ends with "Well, we'll know better

next time. Now you see me, now you—" There will be no more coin tossing, no more wondering or confusion, no more time or direction, no more debates about determinism or freewill, and even no more duality of life and death, because death has been robbed of its existence. Stoppard lets Shakespeare draw the play to a close with Horatio's final speech ending, "Purposes mistook / fallen on the inventors' heads: all this can I truly deliver," (126) which Stoppard allows to be the final words from this playwright as well.

Bibliography

- Ken Adelman, interviewer, "The Play's the Thing: Falling in Love, Messing With Time, and Other Tricks of the Theater," *Washingtonian* 36 No. 7, Ap. 2001.
- Enoch Brater, "Tom Stoppard's Brit/lit/crit," in Katherine E. Kelly, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).
- Victor L. Cahn, *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP; London 1979).
- Paul Delaney, "Through a Glass Darkly: Morality and the Outer Mystery in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in *Tom Stoppard: The Moral Vision of the Major Plays* (Houndmills: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1990).
- John Freeman, "Holding up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: Reading *Rosencrantz 'Beyond Absurdity,'*" *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 91, Pt.1, Jan 96, p. 20-39.
- Ronald Hayman, "First Interview with Tom Stoppard 12 June 1974," in Ronald Hayman, *Tom Stoppard*, 4th ed. *Contemporary Playwrights* (London: Heinemann, 1979).
- Joseph Hynes, "Tom Stoppard's Lighted March," *The Virginia Quarterly* v.71, Aug. 95. p642-55.
- Michael Karwowski, "All Right: An Assessment of Tom Stoppard's Plays," *Contemporary Review* 282, Mr. 2003.
- Christopher S. Nassaar, "Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," *The Explicator* 58 No. 2 91-2, Wint 2000.
- Neil Sammells, "The Early Stage Plays," in Katherine E. Kelly, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).
- Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).