

ROSENCRANTZ APOLOGETICS: ROSENCRANTZ'S RELATIVE GOOD NATURE IN ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD AND HAMLET

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

In an appropriation, a writer or otherwise creative person generates a new piece that draws on a source text in such a way that it "affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source" than an adaptation might (Sanders 26). Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* certainly embarks on such a journey, as the minor characters of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are made major and vice versa. It is clear that in many ways this play, as Julie Sanders asserts, "does not simply impose [its] themes on a Shakespearean framework," but rather it departs quite dramatically from the original (56). The points I would like to make about these two essays and their intertextuality are twofold: First, Stoppard emphasizes Rosencrantz's good nature relative to Guildenstern's egocentricity in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* more than Shakespeare did in *Hamlet*, and he does so in such a way that one is compelled to reevaluate these two in the source text. Second, upon this reevaluation, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare still makes the same distinction between these two characters, and yet there remains a dearth of current scholarship exploring the how Rosencrantz is a more sympathetic character than Guildenstern.

SYMPATHY FOR ROSENCRANTZ IN HAMLET

In order for the aforementioned assertion to hold true, one must first establish how Shakespeare made Rosencrantz appear more sympathetic than Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. Firstly, one should take care to consider the respective words of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern upon their arrival at the royal residence in Denmark. When they arrive, Rosencrantz's first words make the point to the king and queen that, because they are the king and queen, he is obligated to do whatever they ask regardless of decorum: "Both your majesties / Might, by the sovereign power you have of us, / Put your dread pleasures more into command / Than to entreaty" (2.2.26-29). Guildenstern is then quick to ameliorate Rosencrantz's words and express his eagerness to serve, not just his subservience: "But we both obey, / And here give up ourselves, in the full bent / To lay our service freely at your feet, / To be commanded" (2.2.29-32). Thus there is a subtle, but important, distinction between these two characters this scene: while Guildenstern's words seem to clearly indicate that he is looking to better himself in the eyes of the throne, Rosencrantz's words could be interpreted in such a way that would suggest he feels obligated to help the crown as a subject of the monarchy, regardless of what they ask him to do. These two things having been said, it would appear from this scene that Guildenstern is more interested in personal gain via spying on Hamlet than Rosencrantz is, and that Rosencrantz may be spying on his friend only because he truly believes that he is obligated to do so.

Additionally, Guildenstern is quick to tell the king and queen what they want to hear by disparaging Hamlet in 3.1, saying that Hamlet only spoke to him and Rosencrantz "with much forcing of his disposition" (3.1.12). Immediately following Guildenstern's comment, Rosencrantz says Hamlet was "niggard of question, but of our demands most free in his reply" (3.1.13-4). If one reads Rosencrantz's comments in such a way that Rosencrantz is surprised by Guildenstern's answer, a perfectly reasonable supposition given his wording, then his rebuttal suggests he is, at the very least, not in agreement with what Guildenstern said, and thus is not in agreement with the idea that Hamlet is withholding anything willfully. Furthermore, if one reads this line as if Rosencrantz is not only surprised but also irked by Guildenstern's words, one could conclude that Rosencrantz is of the mind that it is wrong to confirm the

suspicious of the king and queen simply to do so, especially at their friend Hamlet's expense, which is a sympathetic mindset for Rosencrantz to hold.

One should note that Rosencrantz's lines elsewhere in the play also appear more sympathetic in light of this interpretation of Rosencrantz's disposition. When Hamlet first meets with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, it is generally assumed by most that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both feel that the primary reason for their visit with Hamlet is to get information from him for King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. However, this is not necessarily the case judging from Rosencrantz's words in said scene. When Hamlet asks "what makes you at Elsinore?" Rosencrantz responds "To visit you, my lord; no other occasion," and this is traditionally considered a disingenuous response (2.2.234-5). It is by no means an incontrovertibly deceptive response, though, for when one visits a friend does he or she not usually intend to figure out how that friend is doing? This is especially true in circumstances where one has heard that one's friend might not be doing well, and equally true in circumstances where one has not seen one's friend in a long time; both of these conditions are certainly true of Rosencrantz's reunion with Hamlet. Consequently, one must ask oneself in this scene: is Rosencrantz truly being disingenuous with Hamlet, or could his answer be straightforward?

In the same scene, Rosencrantz distinguishes himself from Guildenstern with his opening remark to Hamlet as the three greet one another. While Guildenstern welcomes Hamlet as his "honored lord," Rosencrantz refers to Hamlet as his "most dear lord." The distinction between these two titles, though perhaps not obvious, is an important one: the term "honored" leaves the impression of formality, especially relative to the term "most dear" (2.2.17-8). Considering the decorum of the time surrounding royal families and the fact that Hamlet is a prince, it would be inappropriate to consider Guildenstern's wording overly formal, and thus one can not surely conclude that he looks to Hamlet in a purely formal way from this line. Nevertheless, the appropriateness of keeping in good taste with a prince does not change how endearing Rosencrantz is with his welcome relative to how decorous Guildenstern is with his. Subtle moments like these challenge the conventional wisdom that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are interchangeable characters within the context of *Hamlet*, and the distinction between the two only becomes more clear when one considers Tom Stoppard's portrayal of the two in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

SYMPATHY FOR STOPPARD'S ROSENKRANTZ

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard elaborates upon the idea that Rosencrantz is a more sympathetic character than Guildenstern through what he includes from the source text, what he omits from the source text and what he adds to the narrative of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As the play begins, Stoppard adds character notes about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After introducing the absurdly long streak of heads-resulting coin tosses that open the play, Stoppard notes that Rosencrantz "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" (11). Stoppard goes on to say that Guildenstern "is well alive to the oddity of [the coin toss results]. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried about the implications; aware but not going to panic about it" (11). With these character notes, Stoppard has already set up Rosencrantz as a less intelligent and more sympathetic character than Guildenstern at the very start of the play.

Stoppard chooses to include an aforementioned scene where Rosencrantz is quite possibly surprised by what Guildenstern says to the King and Queen regarding Hamlet's forced disposition. By including this scene but not many other pivotal scenes, Stoppard is clearly designating this specific scene's significance for his work; but why does he do so? Perhaps one should consider a stage direction Stoppard has added to this scene in order to find the answer to this question. After Guildenstern says that Hamlet spoke only with goading, Stoppard adds a stage direction where Rosencrantz judges Guildenstern's words to be "a fat lie and he knows it and shows it, perhaps catching [Guildenstern's] eye" just before Rosencrantz's response in defense of Hamlet (72). With the addition of this stage direction and the source-verbatim response of Rosencrantz that follows, Stoppard solidifies what was largely a suspicion in the source text—both that Guildenstern is lying to remain in the throne's good favor and that Rosencrantz does not approve of Guildenstern doing so at the expense of their friend.

In another scene included from *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz puts his blissful ignorance on display. After spotting Hamlet with the body of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confront Hamlet, seeking to retrieve Polonius's body at the King's behest: "What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?" (Stoppard 90). Here, Hamlet calls Rosencrantz a sponge, one that "soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities" (Stoppard 90). After Hamlet's tirade comes to an end, Rosencrantz simply responds "I understand you not, my lord" (Stoppard 110). This line presents interesting and similar consequences for the development of Rosencrantz as a character both in *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, as it demonstrates the dimwittedness of Rosencrantz in both works. Additionally, it is certainly possible that this line could be used as humorous device, with Hamlet accusing Rosencrantz of behavior that is much more true of Guildenstern. Accordingly, this could be a line that misleads readers and critics alike into thinking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have similar intents, but because Rosencrantz truly may not understand the insult it is entirely possible that he is not as nefarious in his intent as Guildenstern.

It is also worth noting that Stoppard leaves out the scene where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern actually talk to Hamlet and he asks if they are there for the interests of the king and queen. This scene was perhaps the only incriminating scene for Rosencrantz because at one point he does not give Hamlet a straight answer, instead opting to have Guildenstern answer for them both: "What say you, [Guildenstern]?" (2.2.252). By omitting this scene, Stoppard strengthens the case for Rosencrantz being a sympathetic character because he limits the instances where Rosencrantz might appear unsympathetic. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Rosencrantz's intentions behind visiting Hamlet in Shakespeare's play are quite possibly benign anyway; recall that when asked the reason for his visit by Hamlet, Rosencrantz replies "to visit you, my lord; no other occasion" which could certainly mean checking to see how well Hamlet is doing (2.2.234-5). As it to clarify this exchange, in Stoppard's play Rosencrantz makes his intentions rather clear when he explains: "Hamlet is not himself, outside or in. We have to glean what afflicts him" (67). Considering the fact that it is far from iniquitous to worry about a friend when one hasn't seen his friend in a while and said friend's family tells you that he is deteriorating mentally, one can conclude that Rosencrantz is also perhaps far from iniquitous with his actions toward Hamlet.

Rosencrantz also displays sympathy for others in some small exchanges that he and Guildenstern share, while Guildenstern showcases his egocentrism. For example, when Rosencrantz reveals that he has had coins in both hands each time he made Guildenstern guess which hand the coin was in, Guildenstern seems baffled by this gesture of friendship and he asks "what's the point of that?" (Stoppard 103). Here, Guildenstern displays his unsympathetic tendencies. Rosencrantz then reveals that he was ensuring Guildenstern's victory because he "wanted to make [Guildenstern] happy," which emphasizes how sympathetic he is relative to Guildenstern who could not understand why Rosencrantz would do such a thing for another person (Stoppard 103). In "The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," Helene Keyssar-Franke makes an important distinction between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when she writes about the other coin game they played earlier in the play, where "Rosencrantz will play with whimsy and blunt acceptance, whereas Guildenstern participates with increasing resentment and horror" (88). With this quote, Keyssar-Franke distinguishes between the differing personalities of these two characters, clearly giving a more favorable depiction of Rosencrantz, and thus her work lends support to the argument that Rosencrantz is a more sympathetic character.

One also sees Rosencrantz ponder death while Guildenstern becomes extremely frustrated with him, indicating a marked difference between the two. Rosencrantz ponders being buried: "you'd be helpless, wouldn't you? Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you'd be in there for ever. Even taking into account the fact that you're dead, it isn't a pleasant thought" (Stoppard 71). Here, Rosencrantz appears to be genuinely fearing death, as the thoughts he expresses flow as if they are coming to him for the first time. Rosencrantz's meandering mind proves too much for Guildenstern to handle, and he lashes out at Rosencrantz saying: "You don't have to flog it to death!" (Stoppard 71). If one were to take this conversation and put it into the context of real friends having an exchange, it would become quite clear that Rosencrantz is the more sympathetic figure. Imagine a friend is explaining to one of her friends her thoughts about death. The friend is very genuine, albeit also very annoying, and the friend listening decides to lash out at the friend speaking, telling her just how annoying she is being. Clearly, the friend listening may have said what anyone in that situation would have been thinking (namely "please stop

talking”), but that friend also displayed a lack of patience and compassion. Thus, with his actions in this scene, Guildenstern displays how he is lacking in these same areas relative to Rosencrantz, who never lashes out in such a way.

Guildenstern again displays his brashness and disregard for the feelings of others when he corrects the players after they stage a death scene: “No, no, no... you’ve got it all wrong... you cant act death,” Guildenstern asserts to the players as they lay playing dead (Stoppard 84). In the play, Stoppard does not give evidence that legitimizes Guildenstern’s self-acclaimed status as a theater critic, and yet he asserts himself as such. Granted, the players in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* do not appear to be highly-acclaimed dramatists themselves; nevertheless, it still takes a hefty amount of chutzpah to unabashedly criticize professionals and claim that you know how to do their line of work in a better way. In stark contrast to Guildenstern’s brazen critiques, according to stage directions, Rosencrantz “starts to clap slowly” at the end of the players’ performance (Stoppard 84). This clapping could be interpreted one of two ways: For one, Rosencrantz could be in complete agreement with Guildenstern and be clapping sarcastically to indicate the lackluster performance by the players. On the other hand, Rosencrantz could be clapping slowly because he liked the performance and only reacted sheepishly because he feared a potential rebuke from Guildenstern. Given Rosencrantz’s interactions in similar situations with Guildenstern elsewhere in the play, the second scenario seems far more likely (recall how he meekly told Guildenstern that he let him win the coin game to make Guildenstern happy). As a result, Guildenstern emerges from this scene having further solidified his status as a non-compassionate, egocentric man, especially compared to the acquiescent Rosencrantz.

In Stoppard’s play Rosencrantz further shows his relatively good intent and reluctance to engage in immoral duties when he laments the commandments given to Guildenstern and him by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. After the king and queen give Rosencrantz and Guildenstern their orders to check on Hamlet, the King asks “I beseech you instantly to visit / My too much changed son” (Stoppard 37). After Guildenstern responds with a throne-pleasing “Heaven make our presence and our practices / Pleasant and helpful to him,” the royals leave and Rosencrantz remarks “I want to go home” (Stoppard 37). Here not only has Guildenstern again shown his subservience to the throne, but also Rosencrantz has separated himself from Guildenstern once more by saying that he wants to go home against the wishes of the monarchy. Ultimately, Guildenstern works to persuade Rosencrantz to fulfill the king’s wishes, siding with the throne over his friend once more.

Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, Rosencrantz displays his relatively sympathetic nature when he and Guildenstern read the letter that sentences Hamlet to death. After reading the letter, Rosencrantz says “we’re his *friends*,” clearly indicating serious reservations about going through with delivering the letter. (Stoppard 110). Inversely, Guildenstern insists that they go through with their assignment, and Guildenstern ultimately persuades the less cognizant Rosencrantz into going along with him. However, stage directions indicate that Rosencrantz was still up all night after resolving that he and Guildenstern would not interfere with King Claudius’s plans for Hamlet: “Rosencrantz watches the morning come and brighten to high noon” (Stoppard 112). In this scene, once again, Guildenstern seems like a more brutal character, as he is far less affected than Rosencrantz by their friend’s death sentence, only waking when Rosencrantz speaks, after sleeping until at least high noon (Stoppard 112).

Having now established that there are, in fact, significant differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, it is important to consider how existing scholarship neglects these differences. Before delving into specifics, it is important to note that there is even limited attention paid to these minor characters at all. Articles dedicated to analyzing the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are scarce, even regarding their portrayals in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. However, *Hamlet* is quite obviously more extensively-studied. Unfortunately, even the far more prevalent work of the two has not yielded much literature on the subject, so the current critical landscape lacks any serious consideration of the two characters’ differences in Shakespeare’s play.

SIMILAR OR DISSIMILAR, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Susan CW Abbotson perhaps says it best when she writes that “critics of the play have tended to describe Ros and Guil as an unindividualized pair [sic]” (178). Unfortunately, Abbotson does not go on to describe

any sort of differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, although she does elaborate about their differences in Stoppard's play and its film adaptation (also done by Stoppard). Similar to my assertions about Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, Abbotson calls them a man who "pointedly ignores, dismisses or even destroys each of Ros's experiments [sic]" and his "more innocent friend," respectively, clearly indicating that these two are not merely a homogenous item in Stoppard's play (179). Moreover, Abbotson's description of Guildenstern as the more aware of the two and Rosencrantz as the more innocent of the two seems to not only confirm my assertion that the two are different, but also my position that Rosencrantz is the more sympathetic figure of the two. However, Abbotson denies the significance of the distinctions she draws between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by electing not to mention how important these differences are in the play, ultimately positing that the film draws this distinction instead of the play: "The film clearly makes an effort to show these two as potential individuals." (178)

Other critics address the dissimilarities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only in brief, not fully acknowledging the significance of how this defies the conventional wisdom about these two characters. In her article "*Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: Transformations and Adaptation*," Marea Mitchell mainly discusses the more broad topic of transformation from *Hamlet* to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and the various intertextualities therewith, but along the way she makes an interesting point about how "both plays might be said to be interested in individuality but in fundamentally different ways" (49). Mitchell neglects to ascribe much of that individualism to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though, as she only makes one, brief distinction between the two in a footnote where she writes that "Guildenstern seems more introspective, philosophical, and smarter than his colleague" (50). With this point, again a scholar confirms my assessment of one of the differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and yet her article does not explore these differences to their fullest extent. Instead, Mitchell's work is more focused on comparing the individual identities of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as plays than it is focused on the identities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Consequently, though she makes her points admirably, her article's scope is somewhat limited by its refusal to significantly acknowledge the differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's play or Stoppard's play.

While these past two critics at least ascribed some sort of individuality to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the majority of criticism on both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* fails to do so in any way. For example, in "Holding Up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: Reading *Rosencrantz 'Beyond Absurdity'*," John Freeman provides an interesting take on the cognitive and neuropsychological basis for the words and behaviors of the titular characters, but Freeman erroneously assumes that these two characters are so identical that a cognitive and psychological analysis of one character is equally an analysis of the other, creating an issue with one of the very foundations of his work. Freeman writes that "the two characters' inability to act defines the hopelessness of the absurd condition in terms of the mismatches and lack of integration between two subsystems of consciousness that determine agency and action," but how can this be the case if, as previously established, the two are very much independent actors who make their own decisions and even convince one another to make certain decisions (36)? We see the two act decisively when they decide not to warn Hamlet of his ensuing execution, and Guildenstern convinces Rosencrantz not to interfere with the king's wishes. The assumption that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are an inactive, identical pair, leads Freeman to make other erroneous points about the traits of this pair as well. For one, Freeman asserts not only that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are an inseparable item, but that "without the referencing of others to guide them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are merely 'flat' or one-dimensional characters when left to their own devices" (35). Consider this: earlier on in this essay, the point was made that Rosencrantz ponders death in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Similar scenes persist throughout the play, with Rosencrantz constantly begging eternal questions; he "questions our means of validating what is 'out there,'" to quote Freeman himself (31). Rosencrantz is very much left to his own devices in these scenes of deep questioning, and they help generate the philosophical backbone of the play. What about these profound scenes of questioning suggests that Rosencrantz is flat or one dimensional? Are death and the meaning of life so trivial as to be rendered flat? It is at least partly because of the assumption that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are one in the same that such assumptions are made.

Other pieces of literary criticism on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Hamlet* similarly lack any sort of proper attention paid to the differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In "Extending the Audience: The Structure of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," Richard Corballis, perhaps unintentionally, exposes differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern but does not note them, and then he goes on to refer to the two as a pair continuously throughout his work. When Corballis writes "to Rosencrantz and (more particularly) Guildenstern, death is no more meaningful than life," he separates the two in a meaningful way (72). However, in the very next paragraph, Corballis asserts that "through the experience of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Stoppard conveys to his audience these three themes ..." (72). By referring to the experiences of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a singular, shared experience, Corballis somewhat negates the distinction he drew earlier. More importantly, When Corballis assumes that the events of which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were both a part yielded the same experience, he is essentially treating the two as a single unit, which is unfair to their previously-determined individual identities.

CONCLUSION

In his canonical novel *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad put forth the idea that we live as we dream: alone. This sentiment holds true in the literary world as well as the practical, and it creates a necessary individualism attributable to any person, as no two characters are so alike as to be rendered the same character. One sees this happen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as each character develops a distinct identity even though they all live in Elsinore, and yet two characters are routinely denied the title of individual by literary scholars and everyday readers alike. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are deemed a single entity by many, and yet there is plenty in Shakespeare's work to suggest that Rosencrantz is a daft, but well-intentioned man in comparison to Guildenstern who is a more intelligent and cold man. This distinction only becomes more clear when one considers Tom Stoppard's appropriation of *Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which takes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and puts them into titular roles in such a way that it forces one to reevaluate the source text's portrayal of the two. Even with this appropriation's ability to make critics reevaluate, current scholarship does not fully recognize the significance of the differences between these two characters and how they affect the play in Stoppard's work or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and inaccurate conclusions have consequently been drawn about each play on the basis that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are an inseparable unit. In all, the most damaging deduction reached is perhaps the idea itself that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are an interchangeable pair because it marginalizes two distinct individuals and their personalities.

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