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One Step Beyond Logic: Chaos and Metatheatricality in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

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Abstract

Much academic skill has filtered into exemplifying how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remains indebted to William Shakespeare, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett and T.S. Eliot and also into the necessity of realizing it as an illustration of life in its utter meaninglessness and incomprehension. I hope to accomplish in this paper an insight into the prominent factor of 'metatheatricality' through Stoppard's application of chaos theory which stands in vivid contrast to the otherwise popular and established belief that the play in question addresses primarily to its absurd abundance.

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Stoppard emphasizes the ultimate responsibility of the individual for his or her action, even in a world that cannot be predicted. In the play, the eponymous characters' anxiety of action leads to their own quiet fate demonstrating that absolute reliance on a predetermined system leads to apathy and indolence, paralyzing any inclination towards autonomous action.

Keywords-*Metatheatre, Chaos Theory, Absurd, Free will, Predestination, Action.*

Deep in the human consciousness is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic.

Frank Herbert

Color my life with the chaos of trouble. Cause anything's better than posh isolation.

Belle and Sebastian[i]

The clock-work universe convinced us that our epistemology is equipped enough to break the code of nature. This concept of universal determinism which preaches that anything and everything can be predicted encompasses within its orbit free will and autonomous human choice as well. But the merry ticking of such Newtonian universe was disturbed in the mid-nineteenth century by William Thompson's second law of thermodynamics in 1853 which shook the Newtonian world with the realization that in the universe the level of disorder is constantly rising and the amount of potential energy is steadily diminishing.

It is the anxiety over the realization that there is no longer a predetermined course that Stoppard dramatizes in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.[ii] He does not do so in order to suggest that their (or our) existence is meaningless or out of their control. In *RosGuil* Stoppard emphasizes the ultimate responsibility of the individual for his or her action, even in a world that cannot be predicted. In the play, the eponymous characters' anxiety of action leads to their own quiet fate demonstrating that absolute reliance on a predetermined system leads to apathy and indolence, paralyzing any inclination towards autonomous action. Tom Stoppard argues for the importance of human choice and action in the universe, and thereby foregrounds human will as a fundamental part of the chaotic universe and not merely subject to its whim. Stoppard intuits a

connection between the characteristics of human identity and modern science. Uncertainty, unpredictability, indeterminacy, complementarity and the ultimate fate of the universe are of the utmost importance not only for chaoticians in a cosmic sense, but also for individuals in their daily lives. Complimenting the chaos theory is the play's exceptional metatheatricality which is executed by locating *RosGuil* within the world of *Hamlet*, a play that Stoppard would clearly have expected audiences to know without being 'chaotic' and doubtful about it. Thus, *RosGuil* is constantly reminding the audience of its status as a play simply by existing; every time a character's name is mentioned, the audience is simultaneously reminded of that character's status as a character within *RosGguil* and as a character within *Hamlet*.

Metatheatre[iii] and chaos generate a sense of familiarity that do not abolish order; on the contrary, they affirm the necessity of order in our universe while realizing that disorder is also necessary and between the two the universe generates itself. Stoppard too seems to intuit this and in an endeavor to express the implications of chaos theory for human beings, he dramatizes the inherent similarities between individuals and chaotic systems and in doing so demonstrates the power of human action and choice. The constant evocation of *Hamlet* within *RosGuil* highlights its status as a play in and of itself, and thus Stoppard's concept for *RosGuil* takes metatheatricality as a starting point. Additionally, however, Stoppard peppers his play with excerpts from *Hamlet*, featuring characters such as Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius who only speak Shakespearean dialogue (indeed, direct quotations from *Hamlet*) throughout the entirety of the play. Such selections from *Hamlet* have a jarring effect; indeed, whenever a scene from *Hamlet* plays on stage during *RosGuil*, the audience is consciously reminded of both *RosGuil*'s source material and its status as a play. However, the jarring effect is mitigated by a kind of intellectual flattery; whenever a Shakespearean scene appears onstage an audience member experiences a thrill of recognition and then a subsequent feeling of self-satisfaction that they recognize the source of the material. To emphasize the suddenness of the switches from *RosGuil* to *Hamlet*, Stoppard often has Ros and Guil switch from normal, colloquial English to Shakespearean English as soon as characters appear onstage; one notable example of this abrupt switch of diction can be found during the first of what John Goerlich calls "invasions from *Hamlet*,"[iv] where Ros and Guil go from declaring of a coin, "It was tails," to telling Claudius and Gertrude, "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).

Throughout *RosGuil*, the Player seems to share the perspective of an audience member; he is aware of the play, aware of the determined fates of the characters within the play, and aware that events must be brought to their proper conclusion. Thus, it is fitting that when Ros and Guil discover that Hamlet has switched letters in the third act, it is the Player and the Tragedians who confront them, and the Player who delivers the chilling death sentence: "You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough" (122). Guil and Ros question their fates, and the Player responds (again) with a metatheatrical line; they are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and within the framework of the play written by Tom Stoppard, that is enough. The initial premise of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the appearance of characters from *Hamlet* within *Rosguil*, and the actions and words of Ros, Guil, and the Player combine to remind the audience constantly of *Rosguil*'s essentially artificial nature. Such constant acknowledgement of its own unreality may seem a strange thing for *Rosguil* to emphasize; however, when the play's metatheatricality is combined with Ros and Guil's inherent passivity it presents a complete vision of life.

Ros and Guil's defining characteristic within *Rosguil* is their propensity for inaction. They spend the vast majority of their time as observers, passively watching what occurs at Elsinore while trying as much as possible to avoid acting. Indeed, Ros and Guil are introduced via inaction. When the play opens, Ros and Guil are meant to be traveling to Elsinore; however, the audience is given no indication that Ros and Guil are in fact traveling. Instead, they are "*passing the time*" by flipping a coin (11). They continue not to travel—not to act—until, as has already been discussed earlier, the lighting suddenly changes, and Ros and Guil find themselves in Elsinore (34). Ros and Guil's reason for traveling to Elsinore also gives them reason to deny any active part in their existences. When discussing the impetus for their travel to Elsinore, Ros and Guil repeatedly state, "We were sent for;" indeed, Ros goes so far as to say, "We were sent for…That's why we're here" (19). Stoppard's use of the passive voice here cannot be anything but deliberate; Ros and Guil's passivity is exemplified by their statement that they were "sent for," told to come, without any say in the matter. Additionally, the act of being sent for seems to result in the creation of Ros and Guil; prior to being sent for, they had no past and thus no existence. Ros and Guil are, in essence, called into existence; they do not choose to exist themselves but instead are created by someone ordering them to do something. Of course such a

call into existence is the nature of being a character in fiction; however, Ros and Guil's *explicit acknowledgement of their status as mere vehicles for Stoppard's writing is unusual.*

Ros and Guil's characters are defined not by what they choose to do but by what they choose to forgo (emphasis mine). This is how Stoppard argues for the importance of human action and choice, and the complexities of the individual lives that influence them. They divest themselves of all ability to act independently; by the end of the play, they are utterly unable to live without being told what to do. Ros and Guil are not willing to act independently; they are only willing to do what they are told, and are helpless without instructions. On a fundamental level, they do not have an independent existence. The central question within the play, then, is to what extent Ros and Guil's inaction and eventual demise is predestined, and to what extent it arises out of their own free will. They vanish at the end of *RosGuil*, instead of proceeding on to England and there being executed as in *Hamlet*. Although the complexities of every individual are compounded in a chaotic universe they are at least given the hope of influence. Though their actions and thoughts are unusual, they nonetheless however strange, display the freedom to make choices and take action. This freedom is what saves them from being helpless victims of a chaotic universe. We are autonomous agents that create as much chaos as order. As Stoppard demonstrates, the most unpredictable entity in the universe is the individual.

The world only appears absurd when viewed through the limited perspective of Ros and Guil, but when viewed through the elevated structure of *RosGuil*, the design becomes clear. The fact that Ros and Guil never get to see the larger design behind their lives does not indicate that their struggle is meaningless. Instead it demonstrates that their constant search for coherence implies a firm belief that there is some greater design to comprehend. In "The Game of Coin Tossing" Douglas Colby centers in on the opening scene of *RosGuil* (and the idea it conveys of there being two sides to every coin) as emblematic of the four themes he sees running through the play: all of which emphasize Ros and Guil's purported lack of autonomy and identity. With the first theme (there are two sides to every story), Colby argues that not only is the play in question the "reverse side" of *Hamlet* but that it is in fact complementary "the missing half that completes the Elizabethan tale" (Colby 30). Although he defines the second theme as "Ros and Guil are essentially two sides of the same person," Colby hastens to point out that they are similar yet distinct (like the two sides of the coin Guil is "heads" or "the brains" and Ros is

"tails" or "the ass"). While the third theme (Fate) leaves room for Ros and Guil's deaths to be tragic, Colby concludes that because they are characters swept up in a predestined plot over which they have no control, they have no will power and are therefore spiritually dead. Colby argues that the fourth theme (the complementary sides of Ros and Guil) suggests that this double identity extends to the audience and that they too are not only characters in some larger cosmic drama but *ipso facto*, they are spiritually dead.

However, Colby fails to acknowledge that Stoppard goes to great pains to draw out two distinct characters. He does this right from the start by pointedly assigning Ros and Guil character traits. Stoppard *uses* the coin tossing to create a distinction between the two characters from the very start. Although both characters presumably have been experiencing the same "phenomenon" of a coin repeatedly landing on heads, their reactions are disparate. Ros's response is complacent. However, he is *nice* enough to feel a little *embarrassed* at taking so much money off his friend. Ros genuinely sees nothing wrong with this – he tacitly assumes that there is some *reason* this is happening. Without Guil's constant faith that there *is* something to comprehend and that they are somehow missing it, the two become helpless fools battered about by the literary minds of Shakespeare and Stoppard. The prospect of a design gives them the prospect of purpose, the prospect to *do* something.

For all the criticism (and justly so,) about the passivity of Ros and Guil, the audience feels pain at the disappearance of Ros and Guil, perhaps more pain than they feel when the "tableau of court and corpses" is revealed. *Rosguil* is not devoid of feeling; instead, it forces us to experience a different kind of death. Death in *Hamlet* is visible; characters are stabbed, poisoned, and drowned, and death comes in all manner of active ways. Death in *Rosguil* is passive; Ros and Guil simply disappear, and we are compelled to come to terms with death not as a glorious event but as a simple not-being.

In *RosGuil,* Stoppard drops two characters into a complex system in which *Hamlet* represents a determinate reality from which an indeterminate reality emerges along its margins. Because *RosGuil* is indeterminate it is not necessarily bound to its text. As Chaos theory affirms, even in a system that is initially deterministic, small differences can create vastly divergent outcomes, and because of this, Ros and Guil should be viewed as autonomous characters that maintain their supremacy of the individual despite their imposing and deterministic environment.

In *RosGuil* Stoppard explores the problem: how do we act in a world that is no longer predictable? Ros and Guil are doomed not because of their predetermined fate in *Hamlet* but because of Guil's refusal to accept the responsibility of action in a world which is fraught with uncertainty. For Stoppard, the Newtonian worldview robs the individual of their freedom of choice and action, incapacitating them through fear of uncertainty. To say that Ros and Guil do not have lives outside of *Hamlet* becomes problematic once the two are compared side by side. Although Ros and Guil's "lives" are bounded by Stoppard's play (as any characters of fiction are) their experiences are not limited by Shakespeare's. In determining how (and if) Stoppard's characters diverge, it is imperative to understand the characters first presented by Shakespeare. Ros and Guil are introduced in the beginning of Act 2 Scene 2 of *Hamlet*. The first 40 lines of dialogue between the King, the Queen, Ros and Guil are nearly replicated in Stoppard's *RosGuil*.

The differences between the two sets of dialogue emerge within the margins (within the parentheses of the stage direction.)

The scene as presented by Shakespeare is a seemingly simple one: the King and the Queen welcome two courtiers, childhood friends of their son, whom they have summoned to assist them in understanding what is plaguing Prince Hamlet. And yet beneath this presumably straightforward scene is a roiling mass of complexities and ambiguities. What are the King and Queen's real motivations? Why have Ros and Guil agreed to spy on their friend? Is there anything even really wrong with Hamlet? These are the very things on which Ros and Guil ponder while in the margins of Stoppard's play. Although parts of Ros and Guil's reality are determined by Hamlet, Ros and Guil are not. Their characters and experiences remain distinct, even as they seemingly melt into one another. When read next to the opening scene of RosGuil, it is difficult to believe that critics have persisted in conflating the flat, insidious pair of Shakespeare's play with the perplexed, yet persistent duo presented by Stoppard.

Like many of the great Western classical thinkers, Guil searches for some intuitive order in the world around him, and yet like many modern thinkers, Guil seems to be vaguely aware that if his world is determined he can have no influence in it. Guil struggles with the very problems Mackey presents as the products of universal determinism. Guil searches for the structure of the world he finds himself in but the more he searches the more he forfeits his freedom to act. When the Player arrives Guil pushes him to explain why he has come. What Guil really wants to know

is how the Player knows to come. The failure of the coins to act according to the laws of probability has robbed Guil of certainty in his own actions. In asking the Player whether it was fate or chance that brought them there, Guil is really asking what forcers are responsible for his circumstance. However, when the Player asserts that they have no control, "Oh yes. We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or the tavern. Or not" (25). Guil reacts by desperately asserting his autonomy from any deterministic system: "I have influence!" (26).

Rather than embracing the chaos (as Ros arguably does) Guil resists the reality of what is happening by applying scientific methods of logic and reasoning to the phenomenon at hand, thereby distancing himself emotionally from the situation. Guil constantly tries to make sense of the world around him through scientific methods. At the beginning of the play the run of heads in the coin toss offends Guil's logical and rational sensibilities. Guil's application and ultimate rejection of possible theories mirror the frustrations experienced by scientists like Einstein who struggled to resolve the apparent randomness of quantum science with the classically determined universe to which they had grown accustomed. Guil shares this struggle to accept the fact that his world is no longer predictable. Guil posits, "A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability" (12). With each failed explanation it becomes harder for Guil to suppress his rising panic or understand the implications of what is going on around him. Ros accepts things as they come, a willing participant in the chaotic world in which he finds himself; while Guil struggles to predict what will come next and what their move should be rather than reacting to situations as they occur. While Guil is tempted to reexamine his faith in the basic functioning of the universe, Ros does not seem concerned with the lack of determinism or probability. The straight run of heads amuses Ros, perhaps because he is winning, but also because he sees nothing alarming in the pattern:

Guil: No questions? Not even a pause?

Ros: You spun them yourself.

Guil: Not a flicker of doubt?

Ros: (aggrieved, aggressive) Well, I won – didn't I?

(17).

Guil's tendency to over think and analyze rather than experience and react to the situation at hand prevents him from making the right decision on the ship and seals the fates for the characters of both plays. Stoppard seems to be juxtaposing the two ideologies which struggled over chaos theory. Guil is representative of the classical interpretation of the world, while Ros (and the Player) represent the emergent postmodern view which embraces chaos and the indeterminate aspects of the universe. Through the actions of both characters Stoppard seems to argue against the classical interpretation of the universe as inimical to the supremacy to the individual and the freedom to choose.

From the beginning of *RosGuil* the audience is faced with the crux of the paradox of complementarity[v]: entities can exist in opposite states simultaneously. The audience is told that Ros and Guil are dead and yet there they are tossing coins. Audience members who are familiar with *Hamlet* will know that indeed "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" (Hamlet V.ii.353). And yet… there they are watching the dumb show, struggling to understand what is right in front of them. For the audience, Ros and Guil are simultaneously alive and dead; simultaneously characters in Shakespeare's play and Stoppard's. Although they may be doomed by *Hamlet* and by the title, their anxieties are real, their choices are real and their struggle to understand the indeterminate world they occupy is real. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may be dead but Ros and Guil remain caught in a system in which their opportunities to create new exists are clouded by their staunch dedication to the classical mechanical theory of the world and their underestimation of the potential impact of the trivial. For Ros and Guil what is determinate are their roles in *Hamlet*. What takes place in the margins of *Hamlet* however becomes the indeterminate realm of *RosGuil*. In this indeterminate realm even the most trivial decisions can have an incalculable impact. What Ros and Guil do not realize is that they did have a chance to change the course of their destiny, only it was such a fleeting and seemingly inconsequential moment; they allowed it to pass them by. People do not fall neatly into 'either/or' categories rather they are a mass of contradictions, inconsistencies and complexities. By recognizing the complexities inherent in ourselves, we can identify with the perspective presented by chaos theory, rather than fearing uncertainty. Without uncertainty there would be no opportunity for change or creation.

RosGuil lies located at the point of intersection between metatheatre and chaos theory where Stoppard puts the universe back in the hands of his characters who, like,everyone, struggle

with questions of certainty and prediction. Humans are not mere victims of absurdity; rather they are a fundamental part of it. Their actions create a ripple effect which reverberates throughout the universe with incalculable and unpredictable effect.

Notes

i-Belle and Sebastian. "The Boy with the Arab Strap." *The Boy with the Arab Strap*.

Matador Records, 1998. YouTube

ii-The play will be hereafter referred to as *RosGuil* and the eponymous characters as Ros and Guil.

iii-For the purposes of this essay, I will define "metatheatre" as an occasion where the play prompts the

audience to renegotiate its status as an absurd drama

iv-The invasions from *Hamlet* are those occasions when Stoppard allows the action of *Hamlet* to

come onstage within *Rosguil*. In these scenes, the dialogue is written entirely by Shakespeare, while

Stoppard adds certain stage directions to those already present within *Hamlet*

[v] -Niels Bohr developed his principle of complimentarity which states that it is possible for matter to simultaneously exist in opposite states (light, for example, consists of both particles and waves). It also states that the observer, through the act of observation, ultimately effects which state will present itself

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