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21L.017 The Art of the Probable: Literature and Probability
Spring 2008

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Inconsistency and Chance in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Tom Stoppard's concern with the inconsistency and chance that dominate the world serves as a modern compliment to themes of uncertainty in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The unlikely coin toss disturbs the physical laws that supposedly rule the universe. Recurring performances of death challenge the established concept of mortality. Ambiguous dialogue and obscure wordplay cast doubt on the efficacy of communication. Through recurring images and sequences of dialogues in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard exploits the expectations of order we hold in a world of disorder.

Stoppard's concern with chance is most clearly conveyed in the coin-tossing episode that opens the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (hereafter "Ros" and "Guil") have flipped ninety consecutive coins, which have come up heads ninety consecutive times. This absurd pattern defies the expectation that the laws of the world—specifically probability—apply and make sense. Instead of reasonable patterns, the universe seems to be ruled by the frustrating occurrence of highly improbable events.

The coin-tossing episode is mostly deeply disturbing to Guil, who makes repeated attempts to explain the bizarre circumstance with a string of dubious scientific and philosophical reasoning.

List of possible explanations. One: I am willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-sided coins. [...] Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times. [...] Three: divine intervention [...] Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each

individual coin spun individually is as likely to come up heads as tails and should cause no surprise each individual time it does¹ (Stoppard 16).

Guil is desperate to determine a cause of the highly improbable results of the coin toss. He is so dependent on his expectation that coins should come up heads and tails about equally, as probability suggests, that he plays with the possibility of such bizarre causes as subconscious telekinesis, time travel, and direct action from God. He would have no suspicion of coins that came down equally heads and tails—this meets his expectations so he believes it is sound. If the coins had come down 60/40 or even 75/25 he might question the result, but explain it as chance. However, a result of 100% heads up coins causes him to look deeper into the patterns of the universe and doubt the very laws that govern it. Guil desires a definable *cause* of such an occurrence, even if the cause is as unlikely as the occurrence itself, which clearly seems ruled by something higher than the laws of probability.

Rosencrantz, on the other hand, is on the whole unconcerned by the matter. In fact, he seems entirely convinced that the results of the coin toss are typical, even expected.

Ros: Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?

Guil (*coldly*): A bore? [...] What about the suspense?

Ros (*innocently*): What suspense? (13).

Ros' expectations have changed based on the seemingly invariable results of the toss. Guil comments on how expectations change based on induction and observation with a story about a unicorn. One man sees a unicorn, and then another man verifies his story. Beyond this, however, each observer dilutes the highly improbable event of seeing the unicorn until it is simply common experience. "Look, look!" recites the crowd. 'A horse with an arrow in its

¹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer” (21). Ros’ application of induction to the coin toss is based on a short and simplified survey of events, but still an accurate model of the method. He has created a new expectation based on his observations.

The laws of probability, however, should not be so easily changed. Or else we cannot even be certain of the degree of our uncertainty! The inexplicable coin toss destroys the patterns of probability for Ros and Guil, suggesting such a simple model cannot account for the sheer randomness of the world. The episode sets up a sequence of defeated expectations that lend to the incomprehensibility of the world.

The theme of inconsistency in the universe continues with performances of death frequent through Stoppard’s work. These “fake deaths” have effectively trained us to expect a certain kind of scene and to embrace little else. The only death illustrated is theatrical, dramatic, and not actually final—the characters always get back up. Guil, however, is painfully aware of how inadequate these portrayals of death are. “That’s not *death!*” he cries, “You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn’t bring death home to anyone” (83). The Player, on the other hand, argues that theatrical death is the only convincing kind, because audiences are only prepared to believe in what they expect. He even cites one time when he arranged for a man to be executed for stealing as part of a play – and no one believed it. That real death was the most unconvincing for viewers because they could not believe anything less than the agony, writhing, and crying they were used to.

Guil, however, is still adamant about the inaccuracy of acting death:

It’s not gasps and blood and falling about—that isn’t what makes it death. It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all—now you see him, now you don’t, that’s the only thing

that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back—an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced (84).

His speech is a revelation of the true nature of death, the reality we can't expect and as such can't believe. In contrast to the spectacle on stage, the austerity of real death is almost offensive. Maybe we expect, like actors, to be applauded for our performance (if not to come back in a different hat.) But the truth is, for average people, death is just an inconspicuous absence. It is not the grandeur of theaters, but a lack-of. The ultimate negative, as Guil put it.

Guil's resolute notions of death are scrutinized, however, after his reaction to the Player's "death." At the height of hysterics due to his confusion, Guil stabs the Player, who dies terribly, tragically. Guil turns on the tragedians, crazed and unapologetic for his crime. But then, to a round of applause, the Player gets up again. Even Guil—who so obstinately argued that acting death could never capture the morbidity of dying—was convinced by the Player's performance. The Player exploits Guil's subconscious expectations to support his own theory that people only believe what they expect.

The conclusion of the play, though, substantiates Guil's concept of death. Guil's words exactly foreshadow his and Ros' own deaths. They go without crying and without gore, simple here one minute and gone the next. As Ros' and Guil's disappearances are abrupt and unexpected, the reader is left to doubt the reality of their deaths. After all, according to the Player's logic, only death witnessed on stage is convincing and real. Even Ros and Guil don't fully believe their own impending end. Guil says they'll "know better next time" (126).

As with the rest of the play, even at their imminent deaths Ros and Guil find the depth of their situation incomprehensible—to the point that they don't really believe it. The inconsistency and uncertainty of their world follows from the quick and confusing dialogue of the play.

Characters frequently pop on stage to deliver perplexing speeches or directions, and then quickly exit again, their motives unclear. Ros and Guil squabble back and forth without actually making any progress, similar to the way Hamlet, because of his circling, futile analysis (to commit suicide, to kill Claudius) never gets anything done. These instances highlight the fragility and vagaries of communication. One expects to know what other people are talking about, or at least for characters in a story, dictated by script, to understand each other. Stoppard, however, uses word play and inconsistency to challenge this expectation.

Ros: We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be on a boat?

Guil: No, no, no...death is...not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat.

Ros: I have frequently not been on boats.

Guil: No, no, no—what you've been is not on boats (108).

Both arguments are reasonable, and this could be a legitimate metaphysical discussion. Maybe death really is some other kind of existence on a boat, to be interpreted as the damnation of being trapped within the vessel or the freedom of finally not having the burden to make choices. Or, maybe it is simply non-existence, as Guil argues. But the inability of the two men to clearly communicate their ideas keeps them from gaining any meaning. They are left with an uncertainty so beyond their understanding or expectation that they cannot even speculate on its nature.

Another episode that highlights the vagaries of communication repeats twice in the play:

Guil: What's he [Hamlet] doing?

Ros: Talking

Guil: To himself?

Here, Ros makes to go check whether or not Hamlet is indeed talking to himself, but Guil cuts him off.

Guil: Is he alone?

Ros: No, he's with a soldier.

Guil: Then he's not talking to himself, is he?

Ros: Not *by* himself...(93)

Guil's assumption is that if there's someone else around, Hamlet's not talking to himself. But Ros makes the distinction that he could still be talking to himself, just with someone else around. It seems silly, but Ros' baseness actually seems more accurate than Guil's intelligent assumption. Ros sees that they cannot be certain of Hamlet's actions at a glance, but only upon inspection. This motif traces back to *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet cannot decide to avenge his father's murder by killing Claudius until he is certain of Claudius' guilt.

Uncertainty and the men's inability to act without direction is highlighted again by Guil's recurring puns on a line from the Our Father, "give us this day our daily bread." He replaces "bread" with a word that often rhymes with the last remark and also highlights the irony of their situation.

Ros: Consistency is all I ask!

Guil: Give us this day our daily mask (39).

After being bombarded by several characters and a confusing request by Claudius and Gertrude, who can't even get the men's names right, Ros is extremely frustrated and having trouble making sense. Guil's response is deeply ironic, a comment on the way other characters treat their identities as insignificant, and suggestive that maybe their relative identities are really inconsequential when they're together. He's basically saying, Who should I be today? That he

makes his statement in the form of a request to God is reflective of the pair's passivity. Instead of correcting other people, they let the mistakes slide so many times they start to question their own identities. Instead of actively taking on his role as Guildenstern, he asks a higher power to just provide him with an arbitrary identity for the day. He repeats his pun on the boat, anxious about what's in store for them and desperate for information:

Guil: All I ask is our common due!

Ros: For those in peril on the sea...

Guil: Give us this day our daily cue (102).

Again instead of taking the action he needs to, Guil sits back passively waiting for someone or something to give him a push, a sign. The men frequently waste time waiting around (at the castle, on the boat) for someone to tell them exactly what to do. Without direction, they often find themselves moving in circles or afraid to move at all. They overanalyze their situation to the point of immobility, highlighting the difficulty of making meaningful choices.

Guil: All right—you go that way, I'll go this way.

Ros: I've just thought. If we both go, he could come *here*. That would be stupid, wouldn't it?

Guil: All right—I'll stay, you go.

Ros: I've just thought [...] We ought to stick together; he might be violent.

(They stand still for a moment in their original positions)

Guil: Well, at least we're getting somewhere.

After crisscrossing up and down the stage several times, they end up in the same place they started, waiting—as usual—for something else to happen to them, instead of making something happen.

The disabling effect of uncertainty on Ros and Guil reflects a pronounced theme of *Hamlet*. Though Stoppard's play is written in a comedic style, tones of existentialism and considerations of chance bring up some of the same serious ideas. In *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil were two-dimensional, dispensable characters. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, they share the paralysis of uncertainty with Hamlet and suddenly become sympathetic individuals, as complex as Hamlet. Each man's occasionally brilliant philosophic speeches (which often go unnoticed by the other) reveal the weaknesses of humanity and limits of mortality—the tendency to expect order in a world clearly incomprehensible and unpredictable in many ways.

Like Ros and Guil, we wander our stages, trying to determine our identities and which way is east, how it all started and in some cases where we went wrong; some of us are painfully aware of our struggle and others of us blithely follow along. And at some point, with few of our questions answered or expectations met, we disappear from view. Left so dissatisfied, many of us would agree with Guil's anguished conclusion, "No—it is not enough. To be told so little—to such an end—and still, finally, to be denied an explanation" (122).