

# Fate and Metatheatre

in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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When Sarah Newman enrolled in English 4204: Plays about Playing in the fall of 2014, I knew she would do excellent work. She had studied Shakespeare with me earlier, so my expectations were based on what I knew about her academic excellence. What I didn't quite predict is the way in which Sarah would emerge as an intellectual leader in a group of very fine students indeed. Members of Plays about Playing were able to attend the Lion's Den Theatre production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and to pose a few questions for the director after the show. I remember Sarah's joy at this event, and the alacrity with which she took the risk of asking (I believe) the first question. I didn't know then, of course, that she would choose to write about *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and some of its uncanny linkages with *The Spanish Tragedy* in her term paper, a revised version of which you are able to read here. I will not try to summarize her argument, except to say that she claims to discover that "the looming fatality present in works of metatheatre does not change over time" (5). And if you think it would be difficult to convince you to endorse this claim, all I can say is watch Sarah do it.

—Dr. Ronald Huebert

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**B**oth Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* explore the concepts of destiny and determinism, bringing into question whether or not the characters exhibit any form of free will. Though history separates these two plays, they are linked by their usage of metatheatre. Metatheatre can be described as

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theatre that reflects within itself on its own boundaries as an art form [...] this metatheatricality encompasses depictions of the processes of spectatorship, of performing identities conscious of both their fictions and audience [...] this means theatre about theatre. (Watson 13-14)

As soon as these plays employ metatheatrical techniques they opt for a certain kind of fatality. Characters in both plays become increasingly aware of the predetermined nature of their ends. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, revenge is fated. Characters are morally, religiously, and socially obligated to avenge the deaths of their family members. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the titular characters exhibit some form of awareness that leads them to question their lack of autonomy. They are ultimately submissive to their fates. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, similar to the characters in *The Spanish Tragedy*, are nothing more than actors in a play, following a script. The undeniable contrivance of these plays and the fact that they are theatrical works signifies that each of the characters is merely following a script, leading towards revenge or death, that he or she is fated to fulfill.

Despite the characters' lack of knowledge regarding the role of determinism in *The Spanish Tragedy*, each of their end points have been clearly drawn, and revenge fated well before the events in the play occur. In the Elizabethan period, a strong tradition developed for the moral obligation of blood relations to avenge the deaths of ancestors and relatives; revenge was a necessary form of punishment. Effectively, in that era, "the right to revenge was no longer a matter of choice but a binding [moral] obligation. Who offends a single member of the family now offends all" (Bowers 4). Therefore, the play depicts a "sense of a fate suffered rather than chosen" (Long 179).

These characters have no choice but to be implicated in the revenge plot. Though they can make mundane daily decisions along their journeys, Balthazar, Bel-Imperia and particularly Hieronimo do not have the freewill to alter their fated deaths. This limited autonomy is nothing more than the illusion of freewill because, ultimately, strong ethical ties and the Elizabethan familial institution supersede upholding the law.

Revenge is especially fated for Hieronimo in particular, as he represents the moral obligation of seeking vengeance for the murder of his son, Horatio. *The Spanish Tragedy* focuses on “the sacred duty of [a] father to avenge the murder of his son” (Bowers 65). Hieronimo thus represents “the Elizabethan [who] had a strong native tradition of blood-revenge behind him” (38). Despite the fact that Hieronimo believes he is autonomously electing to enact revenge on his son’s murderers, he is merely fulfilling his duty as an Elizabethan father, and therefore, his role as a character in Revenge’s plot. When he first discovers his son’s body, he grieves:

Seest thou this handkercher besmear’d with blood?  
 It shall not from me till I take revenge:  
 Seest thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh?  
 I’ll not entomb them till I have reveng’d. (Kyd  
 2.5.114-17)

Firstly, it must be noted that Hieronimo laments that Horatio has been “ill pluck’d before [his] time” (2.5.109). Yet, this was exactly when Horatio was fated to die in order to set Hieronimo’s revenge into motion and therefore carry out the larger plan of vengeance observed by characters Revenge and Andrea. Hieronimo has a compulsory obligation to avenge his son’s death, which makes his actions foreseeably fated on personal and societal levels. Hieronimo receives a letter written in Bel-

Imperia's own blood telling him that he must "revenge [himself] on Balthazar and him / For these were they that murdered [his] son. / Hieronimo revenge Horatio's death" (3.2.28–30). Hieronimo learns of the involvement of Lorenzo and Balthazar in Horatio's murder, and he is compelled to act. Because of the obligation to avenge blood relations, Revenge is certain that Hieronimo will enact justice for his son.

The fate of revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy* originates not merely from human vengeance but rather from a deity. The events represent the "Christian doctrine that all revenge must be left to God" (Bowers 87). Revenge represents a facet of a god that each of the characters is subject to. There is a fundamental tension of Christian humanism in this play between the Christian notion of divine providence and the role of fate, embodied in the role of Revenge. Zackariah Long suggests, "the major characters all think they inhabit a Christian universe; however, the frame narrative of the play reveals that its protagonist is guided toward vengeance by a daemonic force named Revenge who hails from a classical underworld" (155). Revenge is a god-like figure; he is able to prophesize actions, and when he foresees an event, it occurs without fail. Revenge is aware of the fates of all the characters, who are simply actors in a play. Revenge thus represents the ultimate power of vengeance and control as a replacement of a true Christian god in this play.

The figure of Revenge represents metatheatrical awareness in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Although he is still a character in the play and does not necessarily have complete agency, he is aware of the unchanging nature of fate. He relaxes as the revenge planned for Horatio and Andrea's deaths is fulfilled, and his lack of action displays his knowledge that the revenge will be carried out. In his

first lines in the play, Revenge prophesizes that Andrea will see vengeance on the man who killed him:

Then know Andrea that thou art arriv'd  
Where thou shalt see the author of thy death  
Don Balthazar the Prince of Portingale,  
Depriv'd of life by Bel-Impera:  
Here sit we down to see the mystery. (Kyd 1.1.86-90)

Early in the play, Revenge is privy to information about the fates of various characters. He has read this script before, and he simply wants to watch the events unfold. He reassures Andrea countless times that everything will go according to plan:

Be still Andrea ere we go from hence  
I'll turn their friendship into fell despite  
Their love to mortal hate, their day to night  
Their hope into despair, their peace to war  
Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery. (1.5.5-9)

On a separate occasion, Revenge reminds Andrea once more that everything will progress seamlessly: "Be still, and ere I lead thee from this place, / I'll show thee Balthazar in heavy case" (2.5.10-11). Revenge is not worried because he knows no one can escape their predestined deaths.

Like he had already seen a movie or play, Revenge knows what will happen before it occurs. He can even fall asleep during the action and still reassure Andrea that everything will go according to plan:

GHOST. Revenge awake...  
REVENGE. Content thyself Andrea, though I sleep,  
Yet is my mood soliciting their souls,  
Sufficeth thee that poor Hieronimo  
Cannot forget his son Horatio...  
Behold Andrea for an instance how

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Revenge hath slept, and then imagine thou,  
What 'tis to be subject to destiny. (3.15.7-26)

As aforementioned, Revenge establishes in this passage that he is indeed aware of the fact that Hieronimo cannot "forget his son Horatio" (3.15.20). Without acting himself, he knows every action in the play is "subject to destiny" (3.15.26), and that he, nor any other character, can rewrite the revenge script.

Although there is no revenge plot in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, fate is central to the work in relation to death. The looming fatality present in works of metatheatre does not change over time. Stoppard is still working with and thinking through Elizabethan fatality in connection to fatality in his contemporary society. Similarly to *The Spanish Tragedy*, it appears as if the titular characters in this play are meant to die. The title provides a sense of inevitability to audiences who are made aware that things cannot possibly end positively for the characters. As Helene Keysar-Franke argues, "Stoppard knows from the first moment where he wants his characters [...] to go [...] His control [over the action] even before the opening lines, with the title itself" is made blatantly clear (87). The main question, then, is when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find out that they are destined to die, or if they know from the start. Rosencrantz, in the final pages of the play, realizes that others knew they were fated to die from the outset. He laments: "They had it in for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning" (Stoppard 3.114). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become aware of the fact that determinism is at work in this play. They acknowledge that their deaths are fated and that "the end is set before [they] begin: 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends...'" (Hamlet, V.2.10). In acknowledging this, [they know] that they must

and will fulfill the deaths planned for them" (Keyssar-Franke 95-96). Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are suspended in space and time until they are summoned - simply waiting to be called on for their next scene. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stand in for Sisyphus in the Greek myth, as their places within the play parallel the meaningless act of pushing a boulder up a hill, watching it roll down and repeating this for eternity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are merely pushing around their own boulders, journeying between events, until they meet the deaths planned for them.

Similar to characters in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not have any real control. Although they can make decisions that move them from scene to scene, they do not have any agency that would allow them to change their final fates. Upon reading King Claudius' letter, which "explains everything" (Stoppard 3.97), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find out that upon landing in Denmark, Hamlet will have his head cut off. Guildenstern rationalizes that Hamlet "is a man, he is mortal, death comes to us all, etcetera, and consequently he would have died anyway, sooner or later" (3.101). Guildenstern is aware of the concept of fate and admits that even if they were to intervene and save Hamlet, he too has a predetermined time on earth and their own actions would not prolong his demise. There are "wheels within wheels" and these two "little men" cannot "interfere with the design of fate" so they believe themselves to "be well advised to leave well alone" (3.102). By rationalizing to remain in the plot in which they are implicated instead of changing the letter, the characters are acknowledging their lack of autonomy in the script.

In the final lines of the play, Guildenstern emphasizes the characters in the play have no autonomy. He questions whether or not there ever really was a time in which either

he or Rosencrantz could have made their own decisions and exacted control over their own lives. Guildenstern recalls: "Our names shouted in a certain dawn... a message... a summons... there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said - no. But somehow we missed it..." (3.117). Guildenstern questions whether or not the two titular characters ever had a role in their own development and progression throughout the text or if their fates were sealed from the very beginning. Keyssar-Franke asserts, "what they should be striving for, is freedom of will. What Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover [...] is that they are not free [...] they therefore cannot escape death" (87). Guildenstern constantly searches for larger meaning throughout the play and ultimately, in his final lines, he effectively comes to terms with the fact no matter what he chooses to do, he will die. He is nothing more than a character in a predetermined course of actions. As the title suggests, the two men were set to die from the onset, and in these final moments, Guildenstern meets his imminent death.

Throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the character of the Player has metatheatrical authority. The Player treats death far more flippantly than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do. He consistently refers to the mechanisms of death, especially for players, rather than the emotion related with it. The more desperate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become throughout the play's progression, the more confident the Player becomes. It seems as if he has come to accept his fate as impending and unchangeable. He is not wholly aware of whether or not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die but merely senses the precarious nature of their anxiety and constant concern with death. The Player remarks, "In our experience, most things end in death" (3.114). While Revenge prophesizes the vengeance plot in *The Spanish*



*Tragedy*, the Player knows the characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are players doing the bidding of destiny.

The technique of a play within a play is not employed coincidentally in *The Spanish Tragedy*; the specific example of Hieronimo's production is representative of the fatality that epitomizes the play's nature as metatheatre. The play Hieronimo proposes to put on with Bel-Imperia, Balthazar and Lorenzo is one he wrote as a student many years before. Hieronimo tells his acquaintances that:

When I was young I gave my mind,  
And plied myself to fruitless poetry...  
When in Toledo there I studied,  
It was my chance to write a tragedy. (Kyd 4.1.71-78)

Though a last minute creation of a play could also embody destiny, the fact that this play was written a long time prior to the murders suggests that this revenge plot has been fated well in advance. It is not simply by chance that Hieronimo had written this play, as it was destined to be of use to him later in life, destined by the playwright who created Hieronimo's character in the first place. Hieronimo is simply an "actor in this tragedy" (4.4.147), a continuous performance that will be "starting up again" as it must "revive to please tomorrow's audience" (4.4.82).

Similar to Hieronimo's bleak, cyclical fate, in the final scenes of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* Guildenstern seems to both rationalize and accept his finitude. He ultimately realizes that his reality is purely theatre. He accepts the fact that he has no possibility for agency and that death as disappearance is upon him. In his final lines, Guildenstern says: "Rosen - ? Guil - ?... Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you - " (Stoppard 3.117). The language in this passage is reminiscent of spectacle and theatricality. Guildenstern

acknowledges that he is an actor in a play and that this play will be acted out in exactly the same way each time it is put on. Neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern will ever get a chance to change their fate. The hope of knowing better next time is a nod to the next show but also an understanding that the ending will always be the same for them, as they are fated to die. They are in a play that will simply be played over and over again. The characters all share in one crucial limitation: they must necessarily follow scripts, making them destined for certain ends.

Both plays in question use metatheatre to alert audiences and characters they are plays rather than real life. Richard Hornby suggests that metatheatre is “playacting within a play” (508). This emphasizes that every character is predestined and every event is scripted by playwrights. Essentially, characters “allow the puppet-master to manipulate them” (Tandello 37). Keyssar-Franke suggests that the characters

go through the motions of waiting to play their parts  
[...] If they have a primary desire it is to escape death;  
if they have an antagonist, it is one of whom they are  
not fully conscious, the playwright or the ‘director’ of  
that which forces or allows them to play their roles.  
(87)

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Revenge and Andrea sit on the side “and serve for Chorus in this tragedy” (Kyd 1.1.91) by providing commentary on the events they are observing and thus highlighting that they are watching a play unfold. As characters themselves, their scripts have already been completed, and all they can do is watch and comment. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the characters emphasize that everything they do is theatre and that their lives are nothing more than scenes in a play. The Player refers to the title characters as “fellow artists”

(Stoppard 1.13), suggesting that they are just actors following a script. The characters in both plays are just members of a production; thus their fates are determined from the onset.

In conclusion, though the figures of Revenge and the Player in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, respectively, seem to be completely aware and even somewhat in control of the action going on in the play, the employment of metatheatre suggests that the ultimate God is the playwright. On some level, the characters in *The Spanish Tragedy* are subject to the God-like figure of Revenge, and in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* it seems as if God is completely missing or wholly external to the play. Ultimately all of the characters, including Revenge, are at the mercy of the playwright. This is true for both plays. The authors of metatheatrical plays thus exhibit a godlike control over the actors. The playwrights have a direct role and force in the plays as dictators of fate. Stoppard and Kyd are the ones who have freewill and who make decisions for the characters. The Player provides insight for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that also applies to *The Spanish Tragedy*. He explains that: "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" (Stoppard 72). This is the essential view of fate in these works: the characters are players in a play, puppets for the ideas of playwrights, and "as characters they cannot escape the playwright's plot" (Keyssar-Franke 96). They are simply "servants of that script" (Keyssar-Franke 87). The characters in both of these plays do not have freewill to change their fates. They must simply carry out the actions set out for them in the script until they reach their final scene, and in the cases of these two plays, this means death.

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