

Michael Taylor

The Case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

A seemingly irresistible, infinitely augmentable theatrical tradition has established Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a shifty couple, remote and sinister (though a touch comic), avid in their pursuit of the nasty business of sounding Hamlet's stops, driving him into a toil and plucking out the heart of his mystery. In all the productions of *Hamlet* I've seen, the scorn in which Hamlet holds his erstwhile friends (difficult though it is for us to believe that they could ever have been his friends) has been more than justified by the way they move and speak on stage, each every sycophantic inch a king's agent. In recent years, the unattractiveness of their personalities has frequently been increased by suggestions in the theatre that the one plays Summoner to the other's Pardoner, this latest unfair development an over-reaction to the indisputable fact of their inseparableness. We never see Rosencrantz without Guildenstern, Guildenstern without Rosencrantz.

Despite the obvious opportunism of this most recent turn of the theatrical screw, such an extreme distortion of their relationship is based on something Shakespeare may well have intended as at least potentially comic. Even though they say nothing either amusing in itself (except for some smutty badinage with Hamlet about fortune's private parts) or that might be the cause of amusement in others, their "perpetual twoness," as Susan Snyder observes in a recent book, seems to illustrate a basic conception of comedy which sees "human beings submerging their individuality in mechanical repetition" as a defining feature.¹ A good example of this submergence occurs when we first meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2 where Guildenstern slavishly copies the syntax and sentiments of Rosencrantz in the latter's response to the King's avuncular greeting. Rosencrantz commends what he construes as the royal couple's tact and good manners:

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)²

When it is Guildenstern's turn to speak he cleaves literally and figuratively to Rosencrantz's line:

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)

Small wonder, then, that an inspired interpretation in the theatre of the royal thanks which follow often has the King confused over identity: his "Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern" (2.2.32-33) is gently corrected by the Queen's "Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz" (2.2.33-34). And yet, despite this comic manifestation of their indistinguishability, an enterprising director might also notice that Rosencrantz does not actually say, though he doubtless implies, that he and his friend will do the King's bidding. It is left to Guildenstern to make their position crystal clear, so that the "But" which begins his half of their parallel utterance could well be accompanied by some indication on his part—an impatient or long-suffering sigh, for example—that he is aware of the inadequacy of Rosencrantz's initial response.

So, while it may be true to say that Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's perpetual twoness is intrinsically comic, there is nothing in the lines themselves that they and the royal couple exchange here which insists on the kind of interpretation often given them in the theatre. In the text the Queen simply echoes the King's gracious thanks, a Guildenstern to his Rosencrantz, bestowing, in her usual placatory, tender-hearted manner, the same admiring epithet on Rosencrantz that the King has bestowed on Guildenstern. To see a confusion of identities on the King's part or to perceive a comic tension between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may well be the result of mere theatrical improvisations designed to give comic resonance to a not particularly inspired piece of dialogue. Throughout the play, as a matter of fact, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak a resolutely sober language, innocent of the wit or foolishness that helps to define other comic pairings in Shakespeare—Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch, Iago and Roderigo, Stephano and Trincolo—and innocent, too, of the perceptible Machiavellian overtones of the perpetual twoness of Sicinius and Brutus in *Coriolanus*. Not that we have to look beyond the confines of *Hamlet* for foolish figures sardonically treated, or for self-revealing Machiavels, even though they do not come in twos. The egotistical, courtly absurdities of Osric's speech, for example, speak for themselves: we do

not need either the first quarto's elucidation of him in the *Dramatis Personae* as "a Bragart Gentleman" or Harold Jenkins' in the recent, long-awaited New Arden edition as "a foppish courtier" for us to be able to know exactly what kind of person he is. What he says could only be said by a foppish braggart. What Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *say* seems to me to be sayable by a whole range of Shakespeare's characters from the loyal royal advisers in the History plays to Iago to Horatio, even, should slightly different circumstances have led him. (We might consider in this context Horatio's remark to the Queen about the necessity to deal with Ophelia: " 'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (4.5.14-15). Is he merely trying to protect Hamlet here, or is this the remark of the typical, common-place, prudential courtier, one rather like Rosencrantz or Guildenstern?) And the King, himself, in those guilt-ridden soliloquies—not very different in this regard from Hamlet's—reveals the full extent of his corrupt and tortured nature. Soliloquies are, of course, logically as well as emotionally impossible for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Not for them," in Susan Snyder's words, "the torments of plural consciousness, the fear of subjective distortion" (pp. 113-14). We have to wait for Tom Stoppard for this development.

Editorial treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern more subtly reinforces the traditional stage presentation of their characters. For instance, despite the lack of Stage Directions in the first and second quartos and the 1623 Folio during the conversation between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet in Act 2, Scene 2,³ all the editions I've consulted since and including the Globe insert an "*aside to Guildenstern*" at 2.2.228 where Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern "What say you?" in response to Hamlet's appeal that they be "even and direct" with him. Such a question could be frank, straight-forward and manly—even and direct—were it asked with no concern for Hamlet's listening presence; as it is, Rosencrantz's need for a private communication at this point merely emphasises the familiar furtiveness and pusillanimity that most critics and editors believe to be essential aspects of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's natures. I am not claiming that the insertion of an aside here is necessarily mistaken; but it inevitably colours the character of the exchange, and does so usually to the disadvantage of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz's aside is followed by one from Hamlet, in most editions: "Nay, then, I have an eye of you" (2.2.287), he says, a remark that seems to invite side-of-the-mouth delivery. Curiously enough, in the New Arden edition, Jenkins provides the "*aside to Guildenstern*" but omits Hamlet's. Why, one wonders. The only explanation I can think of—considering how contemptuous the thrust of Hamlet's remark—is that

Jenkins has embraced the traditional view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to such an extent that Rosencrantz's weak-minded hesitation must be matched by Hamlet's impudently frank, aristocratic disdain for the feelings of those he now considers to be beneath contempt. Hamlet knows not seems.⁴

The theatrical, editorial and critical slant in the treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is so overwhelmingly censorious that it must come from a more persuasive authority than mere stage tradition. Neither the perpetual twoness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern nor the blandness of what they say can account for such wholehearted, universal opprobrium. That persuasive authority is, of course, Hamlet himself whose soul, as he tells us, can unerringly distinguish its election among men. He knows a hawk from a handsaw. That Horatio, Hamlet's elected confidante, is no handsaw can freely be acknowledged, although, given the difficulty of charting the play's perilous moral waters, we may not be quite so enthusiastic as Hamlet is about someone who has been "As one in suffering all that suffers nothing" (3.2.63), who takes "Fortune's buffets and rewards" with "equal thanks" (3.2.64-65). But if Horatio is arguably no handsaw it is certain that Ophelia is not one. The wind must have been blowing strongly from the north during the scene where Hamlet castigates Ophelia for the rankness of her nature; and his misogynistic view is hardly mitigated by his willingness to see himself in an equally absurd extreme misanthropic light, accusing himself "of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me" (3.1.123-24).

L.C. Knights's suggestion in 1961 that we should be busy "questioning the perceiver"⁵ of Hamlet's world—namely Hamlet himself—rather than putting our trust uncritically in Hamlet's jeremiads against the corrupt practices and representatives of that world—has been so enthusiastically embraced by critics over the last two decades that the traditional romantic view of Hamlet as the legitimately alienated intellectual is now in danger of disappearing altogether, to be replaced by variations of an equally romantic perception which emphasises what is now considered to be Hamlet's almost satanic depravity. In an article entitled "Hamlet and Providence," for example, William Hamilton⁶ argues that Hamlet's excessive cynicism may well be as much the result of his having attended too many early morning lectures by Luther in the University of Wittenburg as of his having brooded obsessively over the excessive cynicism (in Hamlet's view) of Gertrude's remarriage. Hamilton goes on to characterize Hamlet as a "genuinely evil man" (p. 195), callous, corrupt, cruel, whose strictures against woman's frailty are prurient in the manner of "many moralistic crusaders against the flesh before and after him" (p. 198). Oddly

enough, this extreme devaluation of Hamlet's character has not sparked a correspondingly widespread re-evaluation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: their reputation has not risen at the decline of his; in the general censure they retain their classification as handsaws.

And yet we interpret their obnoxiousness solely through the perceiver's contempt for them. How problematic this form of communication can be is illustrated in that early scene where Hamlet tells us—probably in an aside—that he has an eye of them. He then says: "If you love me, hold not off" (2.2.287-88), to which Guildenstern, holding not at all off, replies: "My lord, we were sent for" (2.2.289). Such frankness incites Hamlet to let his sour and impressive prose disquisition on man as the quintessence of dust in a pestilential congregation of vapours. The piece ends in a curious exchange with Rosencrantz: "Man delights not me," says Hamlet, "nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so" (2.2.305-306), at which Rosencrantz demurs: "My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts" (2.2.307-08). Are we supposed to think that there was such stuff in his thoughts? Or is Shakespeare at this point providing us with an heuristic exchange designed to reveal Hamlet's fragile state of mind, in which he is quick to take offence, quick to misinterpret? I think it reasonably clear that we are intended to see that there was no such stuff in Rosencrantz's thoughts, and that the true explanation for his smiling in the way that he does is the one he gives in response to Hamlet's further probing:

HAMLET Why did ye laugh then, when I said 'Man delights not me'?
ROSENCRANTZ To think, my lord, if you delight not in man, what lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you. We coted them on the way, and hither are they coming to offer you service. (2.2.308-13)

In the theatre, a sophisticated actor could no doubt convey the impression that Rosencrantz's explanation for his enigmatic smile was the ruse of a resourceful Machiavel, but the fact that the players do exist and were coted on the way by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern make such an interpretation perverse. It is also no more than appropriate that Hamlet should suspect Rosencrantz of sniggering lubriciously, especially in the light of his melancholy comments on man's dusty insignificance. It was Hamlet, after all, who had invited Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to banter smuttily about the strumpet fortune, and his invitation for them to do so coupled with his mis-interpretation of Rosencrantz's smile is yet another manifestation in the play of his obsession with the vagaries of sex and fortune. If Rosencrantz *is* smiling at the discrepancy he perceives between Hamlet's apparent distaste for mankind and the enjoyment he will later experience from

the performance of his friends, the players, then we can only see his amusement, unlike Hamlet's, as benevolent and ingenuous.

The significant discrepancies in this scene between what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern actually say and do and how Hamlet perceives what they say and do establish a pattern to be repeated an act later (Act 3, Scene 2) where Guildenstern attempts to drive Hamlet into a toil (or so Hamlet believes) but is instead driven into his embarrassment over the recorder. This odd exchange is bracketed by the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago" on the one side and Hamlet's brief soliloquy " 'Tis now the very witching time of night' (3.2.373) on the other: the first helps to explain Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's new sense of urgency, the second focuses on Hamlet's concern for the hectic in the blood, his climbing sorrow. All editions of *Hamlet*, stretching back to the 1623 Folio, specify Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the Stage Direction listing the main characters in the court audience of "The Murder of Gonzago" though they do not speak during its performance. What they see played out before them—on and off the stage—must only confirm in their minds the justice of the King's fears for the safety of his person in the face of Hamlet's increasingly erratic behaviour. The King's sudden flight from the performance occurs in the middle of Hamlet's excited interpretation of the action, "You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife" (3.2.253-54). Why Claudius should be so "strucken" here hardly needs the weight of commentary: but what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern see in their innocence is the murder of a king by his ambitious nephew, Lucianus (as Hamlet himself insists on pointing out), to gain his estate and his wife. To gain his wife! This is an aspect of Hamlet's "turbulent and dangerous lunacy" (3.1.4) certain to appal the minds of the free.

Stiffened, then, by having witnessed this manic, subversive display, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern re-enter in a much more determined, authoritative manner than hitherto. We cannot imagine Osric delivering Guildenstern's rebuke, "Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame, and start not so wildly from my affair" (3.2.295-96), even though Hamlet starts much more wildly from Osric's affair than from Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's. "I commend my duty to your lordship" (5.2.174) is Osric's parting shot after having been mauled wittily by Hamlet. Guildenstern stands on his dignity: "Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed" (3.2.301-02); he requires a "wholesome answer" (3.2.303) and if he fails to get one Hamlet's "pardon and my return shall be the end of my business" (3.2.303). He defends himself as Kent and Cordelia defend themselves: "if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly" (3.2.334-35), to which

Hamlet replies mysteriously "I do not well understand that" (3.2.336). Presumably Hamlet does not mean that he cannot comprehend what Guildenstern is saying but that he cannot understand how love can possibly make someone unmannerly—a strange observation from one about to cleft his mother's heart in twain for the love he bears her.

If the performance of Hamlet's play serves to stiffen Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's resolve, Hamlet's soliloquy which closes the scene provides further evidence of the fragile hold he has over his emotions. He first unpacks his heart with the rant of the revenger:

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. (3.2.373-77)⁷

Acting on him cathartically, these fierce words remind Hamlet that he must not harm his mother: he will speak daggers to her (as he has been doing to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) but will use none. This troubled soliloquy is followed immediately by the King's interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in which Rosencrantz, in particular, holds forth in sober bland verse, the verse of public statement, conciliar, sermonizing and gnomic, on the catastrophic consequences of majesty's cess:

The cess of majesty
Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
What's near it with it; or 'tis a massy wheel
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoined, which when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boist'rous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan. (3.3.15-23)⁸

This speech does not seem to me to be one of those frequent outbursts in Shakespeare which—speaking to transcendental issues—transcend the natures of the characters who speak them as, for example, is once or twice the case with Polonius: Rosencrantz's dignified cadences are of a piece with everything else he says and does in the play, and everything Guildenstern says and does, for that matter. One of the functions therefore of this cluster of events, "The Murder of Gonzago," Hamlet's soliloquy and Rosencrantz's expression of concern for the safety of the commonweal is to weaken even further the credibility of Hamlet's accusations against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the recorder scene. In other words, not only do they say nothing there which does not demonstrate a stern sobriety of mind and

dedication of purpose, but their baffled conversation with Hamlet occurs in a sequence designed to make his criticism of them seem spiteful and unlikely, the product of a disturbed imagination encountering the determination of model civil servants intent on doing their distasteful duty.

Model civil servants are not normally the stuff of tragedy, especially of Renaissance tragedy, unless we can see plays like *Coriolanus* in those terms. In an age, though, that finds the tragic experience most typically in the deaths of salesmen, one might expect the casual executions of minor functionaries like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to touch a nerve. They clearly did so with Stoppard, whose *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* may well best express our time's charitable obsession with the fates of baser natures. Yet there is a moment in the last act of *Hamlet* where an unexpected nerve seems fleetingly exposed. Delighted by his own cleverness, Hamlet has just spiritedly recounted to Horatio his hoisting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with their own petards, "Not shriving time allowed" (5.2.47). His flamboyant, cruel narration prompts Horatio to a comment—"So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't" (5.2.56)—whose mildness nonetheless stings Hamlet:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment.
They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites. (5.2.57-62)

We can agree to some extent with some of this. It may be true that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not near Hamlet's conscience (though they ought to be), and it is certainly true that it is dangerous for lesser mortals to come between mighty opposites. It is not true that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern made love to their employment though virtually every production has them doing so. The casual, disdainful, aristocratic dismissal on Hamlet's part of any possible concern for the moral status of his actions in their regard is part of Shakespeare's general presentation of him as a mighty opposite who has more in him of Macbeth than Othello. His version of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is therefore a distorted one, and it would be interesting to see productions of *Hamlet*, other than Stoppard's, that encouraged them to be their true, bewildered, dignified selves.

NOTES

1. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 113. The notion is Bergson's.
2. Quotations from Shakespeare are from *William Shakespeare The Complete Works*, edited by Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).
3. Not too much should be made of this in itself. There are no *Asides* marked anywhere in any of these editions.
4. Although Harold Jenkins dutifully notes in the next act that Kittredge's observation that Hamlet's remark about playing the recorder (it is "as easy as lying" [3.2.343]) is proverbial, he feels compelled to add, "The casual allusion may be more effective than a direct accusation" (*Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare [London: Methuen, 1982] p. 309). In what way effective? When have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ever lied?
5. *An Approach to Hamlet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 35.
6. *Christian Scholar* 47 (1964), 193-207.
7. Harold Jenkins comments justly: "The new resolution that comes to Hamlet when the Ghost's story is confirmed reveals not so much an acceptance of duty as an exultation in hate, vindictiveness, blood lust. In this mood the hero comes closest to the villain he would damn" (*Hamlet*, p. 512).
8. Jenkins quotes from Bacon's essay "Of Wisdom for a Man's Self": "Themselves are not only themselves, but their good and evil is at the peril of the public" (*Hamlet*, p. 312).