

## “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Fortune’s Privates”

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern”: the dactylic equality of these two names suggests their interchangeableness, also emphasized by the identifiably “Danish” character of each—in fact, the only Danish names in *Hamlet*. As Symons (1890) informs us, “two young Danish nobleman of the names of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were students at Padua in Shakespeare’s time; the former in 1587-9, the latter in 1603 (CN 1021).”<sup>1</sup>

Like Polonius, but ineffectual in their own separate ways, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hang around the edges of scenes, *hic et ubique*, as just before and just after the “closet scene” (3.4), but unlike the old counselor, they have few ideas of their own and are entirely the king’s creatures, glad to earn his promised “reward[s]” and thereby revealing as much about the king as about Hamlet or themselves. Friends in seeming only, they counterpoint Horatio’s true friendship. Like Ophelia, they have a posthumous life of mention in the play, illuminating the quality of Hamlet’s “conscience” regarding their deaths and thus heightening the play’s central issue of revenge and justice.

Rosencrantz means “crown of roses” and Guildenstern “star of gold,” hinting of great prospects ahead, but when, in Act IV, on their way to England, Hamlet exchanges their names for his, the thematic reversal of hunter and prey is fatal to them. Their shared fate confirms the interchangeability of their names and characters throughout, from the initial play on their identities when they first appear at court—and Claudius either mis-identifies the two or else dismisses them with less than appropriate courtesy to each, which Gertrude promptly steps in to set right. The name repetitions and corrections invite audiences both to conflate the two characters and to distinguish between them. On stage, though, a performance choice must be made: their costumes must make them either distinct or identical-looking. But they seem to be a social afterthought in the court of Denmark. Evidently neither of them has attended either the funeral or the wedding nor was deemed important enough for their absence to be remarked on. Thus, another costuming possibility is that they are distinct-looking but indistinguishable “schoolfellows,” i.e., types of buddies who “hang out together” with never any thoughts of their own to distinguish them, though they may be short-and-tall, fat-and-skinny, etc.<sup>2</sup>

The paradoxical two-oneness or one-twoness of the characters is first reified in literary tradition as Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister quarrels with his friend Serlo while

casting *Hamlet* for Wilhelm's theater group. Wilhelm resists Serlo's decision to fuse the two into one character, arguing that

[T]he creepiness, the bowing and scraping, the approving, flattering and insinuating, their adroitness and strutting, wholeness and emptiness, their utter roguery, their ineptness—how could all this portrayed by one person? There should be at least a dozen of them, if that were feasible. For they are not just something in society, they are society, and Shakespeare was very modest and wise to give us only two such representatives. (CN1021)

Indeed, it is hard to reconcile the iconic afterlife of the identically ill-fated Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with their actual delineations as separate characters in the texts of *Hamlet*. To what degree is each character shaped by a discernable personality instead of by their association with the “team” Rosencrantz & Guildenstern? Marvin Rosenberg recounts an anecdote that sheds light on this question. He talks of the radically different performance approaches of John Gielgud, who directed the 1964 production of *Hamlet* (starring Richard Burton), and of Ian Redfield, who played Guildenstern, asking Gielgud for advice about his “motivation.” Gielgud was annoyed: “[C]haracters like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern . . . are not developed individually, but can be turned into effective cameos . . . .” Gielgud recounts being “attacked after every rehearsal by desperate actors asking ‘What is this character *about*?’ I fear that, in the end, my ill-tempered reply would be ‘It’s about being a good feed for Hamlet’” (Rosenberg 87).

Both Gielgud and Redfield are right: Gielgud's instinct comes from critical moments in the triad's interactions that are crucial to Shakespeare's full portrait of Hamlet when Hamlet engages with them as a pair—though he also does so individually and separately (as he does, for example, with the “pair” Claudius and Gertrude); and though they often act and even say things in concert as a team ganging up against Hamlet, there are important differences in each character that any actor or actor-reader<sup>3</sup> must come to grips with, since Shakespeare always managed to humanize, individualize even his most stereotypical minor characters.

In performance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can also add to the play's considerable substratum of comedy: Perhaps these two are the yin and yang of compliant mediocrity and ineptitude abetting villainy, perhaps one is ambitiously on the make, the other unimaginatively, unquestioningly dutiful to authority. One might descry such patterns of paired types in the Plautine mode, as for example, a Desperate Slave and Parasite pairing or its innumerable later variations, as in *Commedia dell'arte*, by then familiar to the English through travelling troupes in England and abroad. Both characters' comic potential as an individuated comic

duo also has, however, an individualized “punch” line: later in the play Hamlet sets up separate, sequential verbal traps for them—one the trap of the recorder-player and the other that of the “sponge.”

Of the two it is Rosencrantz whom most critics see as a gentler man, a more accomplished courtier, and thus a more sympathetic character than the closed-mouthed Guildenstern. Generally, he is addressed before Guildenstern. Like Polonius, Rosencrantz is a foil to Hamlet in his talkativeness and eager interest in the players and in the aesthetics of theatrical practice, and he draws the prince into an extended, deliberately digressive conversation about the “little Yases” and their role on the London stage. By contrast, the taciturn Guildenstern has been seen as the “heavy,” the one who carries the authority endowed by the king’s favor: Marvin Rosenberg, for example, finds Guildenstern “aggressive,” citing his preference for “But,” which “is a favorite weapon for overriders,” and the fact that he “asks pointed questions” and “even takes it upon himself, after *The Mousetrap*, to teach Hamlet manners” (p. 373).<sup>4</sup>

Other critics have seen Guildenstern as the lightweight, as, for example, Elze (1857): “Rosencranz acting generally as the spokesman and Guyldensterne merely as his subordinate companion, not to say his attendant” (CN 1336, and see also N. 16 below). As so often is the case with Shakespeare’s characters, much depends on whether the actor playing Guildenstern spins his tight-lipped quality as unimaginative self-assurance, as meekness or pseudo-meekness, or as something entirely different—as a kind of furtive wariness of the oft wild and whirling prince.

What is certainly clear about both of them is that they are none-too-bright. When Claudius first debriefs them, they have failed to glean any information about the cause of Hamlet’s “madness,” though Hamlet has been quite obvious about the fact that his madness is put on. Whether because they are full of themselves and their mission or because they are merely rubes deaf to irony, sarcasm or any form of double meaning, their initial dialogue with Hamlet suggests the reason for their feebleness as spies. The fact that such a consummate politician as Claudius would employ them as agents seems odd, but Gertrude, concerned for her son’s mental state, obviously has played a key part in their initial selection.

Textually, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not introduced until 2.2. where they are set in place to be “used,” since Claudius has failed to learn what’s at the bottom of Hamlet’s antic behavior. Given Polonius’s spying on his daughter, then on his son, then on Hamlet through Ophelia’s report to her father, the atmosphere of eavesdropping and surveillance is thick.

It would seem that before Claudius hears Polonius’s theory of Hamlet’s behavior,

he has already summoned Hamlet's "schoolfellows" to court, quickly articulating (without their demur) his supposition that they have "heard of Hamlet's transformation" and asking them not simply to "draw him on to pleasure" but to "gather / So much as from occasion you may glean" and (in the quartos ) to find out "Whether ought to vs vnknowne afflicts him thus" (TLN1036+1). The queen seems to rely on Hamlet's reported talk of the two men, school-friends from early days rather than friends from Wittenberg. (Later on Hamlet welcomes them back not to Denmark but to Elsinore.)<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Horatio, neither character comes across as at all learned or scholarly. Yet the queen further adds that she is sure "two men there are not living/ To whom he more adheres" (TLN1040-1), which suggests that she may be thinking of them as friends of his childhood, or perhaps that she is just flattering them to further their interest in finding out what's wrong with her son. In any case, however, to the naïve hearer who takes this motherly assessment at face value, it sounds like Hamlet will now have other friends besides Horatio who will be on his side. She promises rich rewards for their help.

Our first impression of these two characters is that they are indeed both empty and "sponge-like" in "soaking up" the language and tenor of whoever is speaking to them. Rosencrantz is the first to reply to the king's request, which he does with elaborate sycophancy:

Both your Majesties  
Might, by the sovereign power you have of us  
Put your dread pleasures more into command  
Than to entreaty. (TLN1046-9)

Guildestern immediately follows this up with his own metrically similar quatrain, diplomatically yoking together "service" and "commandment" with "freely" and "full bent" in a way that not only amplifies Rosencrantz's antithesis ("command," "entreaty") but echoes Claudius's prior oxymorons in 1.2:

But we both obey,  
And here give up ourselves, in the full bent,  
To lay our service freely at your feet,  
To be commanded. (TLN1050-3)<sup>6</sup>

The king thanks Rosencrantz and Guildestern and the queen inverts the order of names in her next line, "Thanks Guildestern, and gentle {Rosencraus} <Rosencrantz>" (TLN1055). MacDonald (ed. 1885) rhetorically queries "Is there not tact intended in the queen's reversal of her husband's arrangement of the two

names—that each might have precedence, and neither take offence?” (CN1055). The two gentlemen’s eagerness to be of use to a king whose guilt has been revealed should by now raise questions about them; as Rosenberg observed in various productions, the promise of the king and queen’s favor may also prompt subtle games of oneupsmanship in the two fellows.<sup>7</sup> More of Claudius’s intelligence-gathering occurs between this and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s second appearance in this long scene.

The background of incessant information-gathering and Hamlet’s already-growing impatience sets the stage for 2.2, the major scene between Hamlet and his two friends. We can safely invoke Dover Wilson’s reading of this scene as one of several key scenes which tell us what *Hamlet/Hamlet* is all about (CN 624-887).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are likely to enter projecting a confident or even benevolent meddlesomeness in helping their poor wayward friend; they are on a mission that leads high on Fortune’s wheel, yet being conscious of Hamlet’s “madness,” they are necessarily wary of their approach to him. Rosenberg points out that “The approach of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Hamlet echoes that of Horatio and the sentinels. Hamlet is deeply self-involved: the newcomers are hesitant about intruding” (405). Yet here Shakespeare has taken pains to establish that their “visitation” is not of their own “free inclining” or occurring out of direct concern for their friend and that whatever happens will be reported back. Because they are conscious that Hamlet might see through their sudden overtures of friendship, they are likely to project in one way or another that they are straining to give off just the right tone of nonchalance and indulge in just the right kind of banter.

Their first greeting makes this clear. Guildenstern speaks first. Hamlet is his “honored lord” and Rosencrantz’s “most dear lord,” and Hamlet greets them first together as “My excellent good friends” (TLN1269), then individually. They take pains to present themselves as casual, as indeed, “the indifferent children of the earth” (TLN1272). Corson (1874) glosses “indifferent” as “middling” (CN1270-71). As in the prior scene, Guildenstern follows up Rosencrantz’s verbal gambit: “Happy in that we are not over-happy/ On Fortune’s cap [lap] we are not the very button” (TLN1273-4). This seems disingenuous, since Claudius and Gertrude have certainly set them high up in expectations. Guildenstern has casually struck the pair’s major theme of fortune, crucial to what they themselves are up to in seeking out the prince, and it is unlikely that Hamlet will not catch on to this and be the very reason that he reverts to their metaphor: the zenith of fortune (the “very button” on her cap) is counterbalanced by Hamlet’s query (“Nor the soles of her shoe?” TLN1275) in a line that proves prophetic.<sup>8</sup> Hamlet banters, “then you liue

about her wast, or in the middle of her {fauours.} <fauour?" (TLN 1277-8). The plural Quarto variant, "favours,"<sup>9</sup> better sets up Guildenstern's bawdy riposte, "Faith, her privates we" and Hamlet's pun, "In the secret parts of Fortune? O most true, she is a strumpet" (TLN1277-8). MacDonald (1885) reminds us that in the flavor of such badinage—"this and all like utterances of Hamlet," we see what it is that lies gnawing at the heart." Hamlet has affirmed that his friends lie in the "secret parts of fortune," and later their bawdy allegory will reverberate in his bitter observation "They did make love to their employment" (TLN3560).

When Hamlet shifts from the chit-chat about Fortune to get down to the point with "What news?" Rosencrantz evades Hamlet's directness with a clumsy attempt at wit: "None, my lord, but <that> that the worlds growne honest" (TLN 1282-3). Not only are the reverberations of "honest" loathsome to Hamlet, given the tenor of this word in his prior exchange with Polonius, but as Wilson reminds us, "this is [H]ardly a tactful remark to the dispossessed heir of Denmark; it arrests his attention and leads him (in the Folio version) to 'question more in particular'" (TLN 1282-3) concerning the awful, prison-like nature of Denmark. Though it might have been dangerous to keep these quarto lines "with a Danish queen on the throne" (Wilson CN1285-1316), Shakespeare probably thought, according to Cappell (CN1286) that "'twas proper the discourse should be lengthen'd before Hamlet's suspicion breaks out in the question about the cause of these gentlemen's coming: he entertain'd it at seeing them, turns the discourse upon Denmark (46, 2.) in order to sift them" (CN1285-1316). Discontinuities in Q2 suggest cutting and stitching to accommodate the omission, showing that "This passage must therefore have been part of the original text" (Jenkins, CN1285-1316).

In both versions but especially in the uncut Folio, the Fortune metaphor continues to resonate till Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's last onstage appearance. But here it also leads to Hamlet's sardonic question "What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune that she sends you to prison hither?" Guildenstern's response denies the charge; "Prison?" he asks, possibly innocently: "The feeling of being in prison was a recognized symptom of melancholy" (Jenkins, p. 250). But another possibility is that the word and its nearly seditious protest against the king and kingdom jars Guildenstern into the realization that the game he is playing is more dangerous than he thought. Thus, he may well be stonewalling, yet in echoing the loaded word, he anticipates the linguistic patterns of villains such as Iago and Edmund, buying time and allowing the other speaker to build a snare for himself. But Hamlet is one step ahead of him and, after he re-asserts that "Denmark's a prison," Rosencrantz has no follow-up except to dispute with him. "We think not so, my lord." That effectively ends the interrogation, as

Hamlet answers with the commonplace that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (TLN1295-6)<sup>10</sup> and a simple reaffirmation of his opinion: “To me it is a prison” (TLN1296-7).

If it was for Guildenstern to introduce the notion of Lady Fortune, it is now for Rosencrantz to link that image with the theme of ambition: “Why then your Ambition makes it one: ‘tis too narrow for your mind” (TLN 1298-9). MacDonald (ed. 1885) makes a political connection, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are “feeling after the cause of Hamlet’s strangeness, and following the readiest suggestion, that of chagrin at missing the succession” (CN1299). Here we see the pair add their own voluntary contribution to Claudius’s plan, in the provocative assertion that Hamlet is suffering from thwarted ambition, thus adding gratuitous injury to the injury they do to Hamlet by spying on him in the name of friendship.<sup>11</sup>

Having established a workable mode of discourse with the prince, they now seem to be comfortable with whatever discomfiting remarks Hamlet may make. To Hamlet’s poetic musing, “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself king of infinite space; were it not that I haue bad dreames” (TLN 254-6), Guildenstern supplies, “Which dreames indeed are Ambition: for the very substance of the Ambitious, is merely the shadow of a Dreame” (TLN257-9),<sup>12</sup> and Rosencrantz that he considers “ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow’s shadow”(TLN1309-12). Hamlet’s metaphysical frisson vis-a-vis “infinite space” calls forth from his friends nothing but an attempt to engage Hamlet further in the kind of “paradoxical reasoning in which the wits of Shakespeare’s time delighted” (Kliman and Lake [2008] p. 54 N. 270-2710). Hamlet, however, draws their disputation out to the absurd conclusion that a monarch is but a beggar’s shadow (TLN1309-10).<sup>13</sup>

Hamlet’s final barb here suggests that he has seen through his friends and is ready to dismiss them: “Shall we to the court, for by my fey, I cannot reason.”<sup>14</sup> Allied to the dig at Claudius is a dig at the courtly language of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Wilson glosses the line as follows: “[T]his sort of hair-splitting would do well enough at court, but is no pastime for sensible persons” (Wilson [ed. 1934] CN1309-10). They have now been put on notice that they will have to do better if they do not want to return to the king empty-handed.

Both courtiers, trying to avoid the implied dismissal and save their mission from abject failure then eagerly offer to “wait upon” Hamlet who, no longer in doubt about their motives, refuses their service with terms of even more unimpeachable courtesy (“honest,” “friendship”) and apparent candor (“beggary”), while

pronouncing those words with outright sarcasm as he segues into the first of several traps toward which he drives them: “[F]or, to speak to you like an honest man, I am most dreadfully attended. But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?” (TLN 1316-7).

Rosencrantz is no match for Hamlet’s sudden direct question; he answers disingenuously, desiring, perhaps, to look as though his answer is honest: “To visit you, my lord; no other occasion” (TLN1318). This is too much for Hamlet, who switches back to what Magreta de Grazia sees as a clownish, antic mode of the “beggar theme”<sup>15</sup> and proclaims himself “even poor in thanks” (a response which contrasts with the Queen’s promise that they will be rewarded “as fits a king’s remembrance” [TLN1657]). This is followed by the sardonic “my thanks are too dear a halfpenny.” Wilson comments, “He can only afford a ha’p’orth of thanks, and yet even that is overpayment, since what they give in exchange is worth nothing” (CN1320-1 Wilson, ed. 1934). “Poor in thanks” extends the play-long theme of economic deprivation (discussed in J. Anthony Burton’s “An Unrecognized Theme in Hamlet: Lost Inheritance and Claudius’s Marriage to Gertrude” [see “*Hamlet* Criticism”]), while it also apparently reinforces Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s conclusion that Hamlet suffers from thwarted ambition. The same trope allows Hamlet to speak his own truth and reinforces the courtiers’ mistaken view of the prince’s dissatisfaction.

But Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not to be let off the hook so easily: Shakespeare has designed this scene to allow us to see them squirm for quite a while. Hamlet’s importunity seems naked, and is designed to catch any hesitation to come clean: “Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, deal justly with me. Come, come. Nay, speak” (TLN 1322-3).

Both are unable to mask their embarrassment: “[T]here is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to color” Hamlet tells them [TLN1326-7]. The pair’s terse evasions are laid bare: “What should we say, my lord?” (TLN1324), queries Guildenstern, and Rosencrantz asks, “To what end, my lord?” (TLN1330); some 15 lines of dialogue intervene between Hamlet’s first question and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s answer. In these lines, Hamlet continues to “conjure” them: “by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancie of | our youth, by the obligation of our euer preserued loue; | and by what more deare a better proposer {can} <could> charge | you withall, bee euen and direct with me whether you were sent for” (TLN1331-35).

Commentators make much of Hamlet’s “rights of our fellowship,” for it once again



suggests a warm prior friendship and recalls the queen's reassurances to the pair that Hamlet continues to hold them in high regard. The repeated entreaties in 1322-2, "Come, {come,} deal justly with me. Come, come, nay, speak" are particularly resonant and echo in Act V during Hamlet and Horatio's moral assessment of his treatment of them. MacDonald (ed. 1885) emphasizes Hamlet's "direct appeal to their old friendship for plain dealing" and "affords them every chance of acting truly –conjuring them to honesty—giving them a push towards repentance" (CN1330-1).

But to this supplication, they can only muster a wavering aside "What say you?" (Rosencrantz to Guildenstern in the Folio and vice versa in Q2<sup>16</sup>). Hamlet catches them, of course, and pounces on them with a severe warning—"Nay then, I have an eye of you" and a final earnest conjuration—"If you love me, hold not off" (TLN1336). The one-sentence admission, "My lord, we were sent for" (TLN1337-8), might be thought to suggest that he has won them to his side. Whether or not Hamlet thinks so, their begrudging honesty elicits one of the most profoundly thoughtful and self-searching passages in all of the play—Hamlet's "anticipation" of their mission and confession of his own cast of mind.

That monologue is cut off by Hamlet's notice that Rosencrantz is "smiling," at best an unsympathetic response to his soul-searching and one which suggests Rosencrantz's underlying affiliation with Claudius. Hamlet's beautiful and deeply theological passage is almost certainly over the heads and beyond any prior considerations by these two; if they listen gape-mouthed and uncomprehending, the "smile" may serve as a stage direction for their attempts to mask a total lack of comprehension with at least some show of courteous attention. Rather than being won over, Rosencrantz seems merely embarrassed by Hamlet's confidence and eager to change the subject. He denies the imputation that Hamlet's delight in "woman" was the cause of his having smiled. He must wonder if his smile has unwittingly conveyed a strain of mockery, or perhaps he over-smiles deliberately to seize upon an excuse to change the subject by cutting Hamlet off. Likely, too, he is embarrassed by revelations that still do not provide him with the information he seeks and quickly maneuvers onto more comfortable ground with his announcement of the players' arrival.<sup>17</sup> Seguing out of the dangerous territory of Hamlet's mental/psychic life, and probably oblivious to the possibility that Hamlet's unburdening might be a prologue to precisely what Claudius has sent him to discover, he nevertheless hits upon a masterful stroke, for Hamlet begins to barrage him with questions about the fortunes of theatrical troupes since he has been away at Wittenberg. Rosencrantz is now in his element, bringing Hamlet up to speed, but ironically while he thinks he is on safe ground, Hamlet is able to

probe deeper and go on to spin his own allegory of characters such as “the adventurous knight,” “the lover,” “the humorous man,” “the clown,” and “the lady,”<sup>18</sup> groping his way toward *The Mousetrap*. Rosencrantz’s discussion (in the Folio) of the players’ situation, their residency and enforced traveling (in much less secure conditions than that of a settled troupe), their competition with the children’s troupe all allow him to join Hamlet in critical mockery. He speculates about the boys’ future once their voices have cracked, at which point “they must become common players...and may well blame their authors for having put into their mouths satirical attacks on their own succession” (Bernice W. Kliman and James Lake, N. 362-5, p. 17). If Rosencrantz has not succeeded in finding out more than he already knows of Hamlet’s melancholy and he and Guildenstern have failed to protect “the king’s secrecy,” he must still feel some triumph achieving at least partial satisfaction of the king’s errand by having “drawn” Hamlet “on to pleasures.”

But the savor of satisfaction is to be short-lived. It soon appears that he and Rosencrantz are unable to follow Hamlet’s shifts of mood and though the prince strings them along for a time, they are unaware that they are being played with. Rather oddly at this juncture, Hamlet now welcomes them to Elsinore, and he seems to apologize to them for appearing to extend a more elaborate courtesy to the players than he has to them. “The verb ‘comply’ in the difficult line, ‘let mee comply with you in this garb,’” as Collier (ed. 1859) explains “is used in the sense of compliment: strictly it means to bend or yield” (CN1419). In a disorienting shift into what sounds like mad ranting, Hamlet makes an open dig at his “vncler-father” and “avnt mother” (TLN1422-3), warning his interlocutors that he is “but mad north-northwest” (TLN1425). Further disarming them just before dropping them, Hamlet invites them to make fun of Polonius with them, anticipating the old man’s news about the actors. As usual, they are eager to fall in with any game afoot. When Hamlet declares that the “great baby” Polonius is “not yet out of his swaddling clouts” (TLN1431), Rosencrantz rejoins that “he’s the second time come to them; for they say an old man is twice a child” (TLN1443-4). They remain silently on stage all during the rest of the scene with the players and Polonius. Just before Hamlet’s “O, what a rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy, after warning the players not to mock the old counselor, Hamlet dismisses them with “My good friends, I’ll leave you till night. You are welcome to Elsinore<sup>19</sup>” (TLN1585-86), a reminder to the audience that they have not been there during the momentous events of the funeral and wedding. This is the last time they are in his presence without bumping up against the prince’s open hostility.

When they report back to the king as Act III opens, we see them at work at false

report, fanning the king's panic about Hamlet's behavior. Claudius's charge that Hamlet "puts on this confusion" morphs into an accusation of "dangerous lunacy" a mere two lines later. To de-fuse Claudius's displeasure at their failure to sift the prince, Guildenstern apes the technique of the king and also exaggerates Hamlet's supposedly mad condition. All Rosencrantz can manage here is to deny that he has learned anything about Hamlet's motive. He does, however, supply the ludicrously self-evident answer that Hamlet "feels himself distracted" (shades of Polonius's belabored conclusion that he is "mad"). Their responses omit any mention of Hamlet's poetic, very rational and powerful speech of 2.2; Guildenstern accuses Hamlet of "forcing...his disposition" and Rosencrantz lies about Hamlet's being "niggard of question" (TLN1661), emphasizing Hamlet's unwillingness to speak of the cause rather than his own failure of interrogation. Guildenstern has no such delicacy and takes the king's hints further, reporting a "crafty," stubborn, and aloof Hamlet who refused to open up to them: "Nor do we find him forward to be sounded/ But with a crafty madness keeps aloof/ When we would bring him on to some confession of his true state" (TLN2563). Perhaps to compensate for their failure to discover Hamlet's motives, Rosencrantz answers the king and queen's further questions by emphasizing their "success" in telling him about the players and the fact that "there did seem in him a kind of joy/ to hear it" (TLN1653). He agrees, too, to the king's final request of them to "give him a further edge/ And drive his purpose on to these delights" (TLN1675-6).

When we next see the pair after Hamlet and Horatio have celebrated the effects of the Play-Within-the-Play, Guildenstern ceremoniously requests that Hamlet "vouchsafe a word" with him; he conveys that the king is "in his retirement, marvelous distempered" (TLN1675) and that the Queen's has sent for him. But where in their prior scene with Hamlet in Act 2, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were eager to engage in expansive-if-labored punning and repartee, now they seek to get right down to business and are blatantly incapable of understanding Hamlet's overly-literal responses to their questions. In short, they become Polonius-like in their obtuseness. Though they finally grasp that he is displeased with them, they seem to take Hamlet's hostility as a sign of his unhinged state. Horatio has no exit in this scene and in some productions attempts to shield his friend while also waiting for the "recorders" that Hamlet calls for in line 2164.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the dialogue crackles. Guildenstern's report of the king's "distemper" elicits "With drink?" Guildenstern's correction, "No my Lord, <rather> with choler" (TLN2174) elicits Hamlet's suggestion that Guildenstern should "signify this to the doctor: for for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more choler" (TLN2178). Guildenstern either doesn't understand Hamlet's irony or can't be bothered to hear it, attuned as he is to higher

command. He becomes stern with Hamlet, lecturing him to “put [his] discourse into some frame” and demanding a “wholesome answer” to his mother’s entreaties (TLN2192). Rosencrantz now goes to work in a similar though softer vein, taking up the Queen’s cause and desires and emphasizing Gertrude’s “amazement and admiration.”

Their habit of not-listening to Hamlet and clinging to their investigative mission might be a defensive reaction to Hamlet’s hostility or to what Jenkins (1982) calls the “deliberate distancing tactic” in Hamlet’s “first use of the royal we: in ‘We shall obey, were she ten times our mother’”(CN2204); Kittredge (1939) sees “Hamlet’s intentional use of the royal we” as an attempt to revert to the norm of the theme of their former discourse, “a way of remind[ing] Rosencrantz of the idea that his madness sprang from thwarted ambition, and he accordingly makes one more attempt to induce him to reveal the cause of his insanity” (CN2204). However, “Have you any further trade with us” is nakedly, provocatively dismissive—the word “trade” a calculated put-down which is also a bull’s eye summation of what his friends are and have been up to. Even that insult does not work. Still undeterred, Rosencrantz tries another approach, echoing Hamlet’s earlier tack, reminding Hamlet “My lord, you once did love me” (TLN2205). Rosencrantz continues to style his readiness to pounce in the fiction of solicitude.

This insistence perturbs Hamlet, who responds by affirming that he still loves them but swears his love by “these pickers and stealers” (TLN2206), words from a prayer (from *The Book of Common Prayer*) to “keep my hands from picking and stealing” (Jenkins CN2206). Hamlet is delving beneath their mines, as he is now thinking upon the possible actions of fingers, a short leap to their playing upon a pipe. Rosencrantz falls back on his mystification: “Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend” (TLN2208-2210). Wilson (ed. 1934) reads this line as a threat of incarceration, meaning “your reticence may lead to your being shut up like a madman” (CN2208-9), but if so, Hamlet is uncowed. His sarcastic reply, “I lack advancement” (TLN1877) stymies his friends again, though its pun is clear: Deighton (ed. 1891) calls attention to Guildenstern’s misprision: “[T]hough Hamlet is not here speaking of his promotion to the crown, yet when Guildenstern takes him to be doing so, he keeps up the delusion” (CN1877). Moreover, Hamlet avoids an answer by throwing the question back on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s own declared suppositions, i.e., “You know what you think about me! You’ve said it: I’m ambitious!”

After their eager reversion to the ambition theme, Hamlet's responses become curt and dismissive or are ostentatiously "wide of the mark": He is clearly putting them both men on guard. Clarke and Clarke (ed. 1868) see Hamlet as being highly explicit about the game the three of them are playing when he further asks them, "Why you goe about to recouer the wind of mee, as if you | would driue me into a toyle?" (TLN 2215-18). Here Hamlet continues the hunting metaphors that parallel Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's image of coming alongside the actors and accusing them of trying to herd him into a corner, to be taken by their master. Guildenstern does not address Hamlet's accusation, yet he still manages to sound one final hypocritical note in response: "O my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly" (TLN2216-18).

If ever Sir John Gielgud was right about Guildenstern's (and Rosencrantz's) function of being nothing more than "a good feed for Hamlet," it is epitomized in the hypocrisy of this line. Guildenstern's profession of love after Hamlet has just openly accused them of hunting him on behalf of some undisclosed master is what drives Hamlet to abandon any further pretense at courtesy and friendship. From the first, critics have praised lines 2221-42, Hamlet's verbal trap of the "recorders" into which he lures Guildenstern, to whom his entire wrath is directed here.<sup>21</sup> The earliest commentator (Gentleman, ed. 1773) finds this "a masterly turn of satire on court spies and a fine rebuff to the mean ready agents of power."<sup>22</sup> Richardson (1780, 129-30) affirms,

No scene was ever better imagined than that where Rosincrantz and Guildenstern accost the Prince: the creatures of Claudius, and, instigated by the Queen, they are employed as spies upon Hamlet. . . . ; he confounds them, by shewing them he had penetrated their design, and overwhelms them with the supercilious dignity of his displeasure. (CN2221-2)

Thompson and Taylor remind us of the powerful political resonances in Communist Russia of Hamlet's trap of the recorders: "This was for Grigori Kozintsev, director of the 1964 Russian film version, 'the most important passage in the tragedy' defining the ultimate inability of the state and its informers to penetrate the mystery of the individual (quoted by Dawson 187-8)" (CN2221-42). Coming shortly after Guildenstern's lying profession of love in TLN2216-18, his forthright admissions—"I know no touch of it" (TLN 2232-3) leads to Hamlet's "'tis as easie as lying" (TLN2228), and his condescending attempt to placate Hamlet that "of these cannot I commaund to any vttrance | of harmonie, I haue not the skill" (CN 2232-3) leads to Hamlet's bitterest reproaches:

Why looke you now how vnwoorthy a thing

you make of me, you would play vpon mee, you would  
seeme to know my stops, you would plucke out the hart  
of my mistery, you would sound mee from my lowest  
note to <the top of> my compasse, and there is much  
sique excellent voyce in this little organ, yet cannot you make it {speak,  
s'bloud}  
<Why > do you think <that> I am easier to be  
plaid on then a pipe, call mee what instrument you wil,  
though you <can> fret me {not}, you cannot play vpon me.  
God | blesse you sir.” (TLN 2234-43)

Miles (1870, p. 51) comments that “a dead friendship is rapidly developing into an active hatred. Throughout the interview, Hamlet preserves a frozen calm which they can neither penetrate nor disturb, though all the while his blood is boiling.” Concerning Hamlet’s expletive (“s’bloud,” TLN 2240) Kittredge (ed. 1939,) states that “This oath is rapped out with startling unexpectedness and almost makes Guildenstern jump” (CN2240). Thompson and Taylor (ed. 2006) point out that “Some performers break the recorder in rage at this point (CN2240), and that

The non-sequitur “God | blesse you sir’ is presumably addressed to Polonius, although in all three texts he enters after these words have been spoken. If they are addressed to Guildenstern, they may be pronounced as a sarcastic dismissal, or as part of Hamlet’s generally manic behavior. Jenkins raises but rejects the suggestion that they are addressed to a player as Hamlet returns the recorder. (CN2242-3).

The question of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s exit from this interchange remains unresolved, as does the unspeaking but implied presence of Horatio throughout, and the stage directions are muddy. All four characters seem to be on stage when Polonius comes to summon Hamlet to Gertrude’s presence. Wilson (ed. 1934) infers that “Leave me Friends” is ‘[a]ddressed to Hor. and the Players. Q2 and F1 give no ‘exeunt’ for Ros. and Guild” (CN 2258). However, if “Leave me” is read as an implied stage direction for someone to “leave,” the absence of printed stage direction isn’t surprising.

Equally conjectural is Thompson and Taylor’s gloss (though it is also the most synoptic):

Q2 has an 'Exit' for Hamlet at the end of the scene but no exit direction for any of the others; F has an 'exit' for Polonius after his line 'I will say so.' It seems logical in both texts that not only Polonius but also Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should obey Hamlet's instruction, *Leave me, friends*, and that he should be alone onstage for his final speech. Q1's [stage directions] are the fullest here with an 'Exit' for Rosencrantz and Gilderstone before the entry of Corambis, an 'exit' for Corambis after 'Very like a whale', and an 'exit' for Horatio after he and Hamlet have bidden each other goodnight; Q1 is the only text to pay any attention to Horatio or give him any dialogue after the equivalent of the entry of the others at 287. (CN2258)

Rosenberg discusses various stagings leading up to their exit:

In one spectacular tradition, Hamlet has in the spies' faces snapped the record in half. . . and thrown the pieces away, or at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or at a wall, or to the musicians. . . . Barrault "actually did knock their heads together—an omen of things to come for them" . . . . Keach saw them off with a sardonic sour note on his pipe. . . . [Polonius] has bumped into the exiting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. (p.617)

Rosenberg further assumes that Hamlet's blessing is addressed to Polonius, rather than to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "[H]e has welcomed the sight of Polonius as a way of getting rid of the spies (God bless *you*)," and he mentions Booth's response to his friends' exit: "[T]here is such scorn of this miserable, dishonest, luxurious court, there is such despair of a noble nature set upon by ignoble natures, there is such impatience of this last crafty, unscrupulous, lying courtier, that the grace is speech is more bitter than a curse" (p. 617). Certainly, "friends" is now a loaded word, and we see that immediately right after Hamlet's interchange with Polonius, they go straight to the king armed with the information that he will indeed meet with his mother.

Act 3, scene 3 opens with the stage direction "Enter King, {Rosencraus} <Rosencrantz>, and Guildenstern" (TLN2271). In the prior scene, just before he attempts to pray for forgiveness, we see a king who has been shaken mightily ("marvelous distempered") though not publically exposed as yet; thus as Claudius enters he is already busy setting up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as his unquestioning agents in a defensive scheme to send them both off to England to accompany Hamlet. The plan Claudius plots here fleshes out his general idea expressed to Polonius (before the play-within) that Hamlet's madness would be best cured with a sea-change. Though in Shakespeare's sources, the courtiers know the king plans to kill Hamlet, in this scene and others in which the "England" plot

is refined, most commentators acknowledge that the two characters are ignorant instruments who do not suspect Claudius of his brother's murder or of Claudius's plan to dispatch his nephew. Claudius may, Rosenberg suggests, "magnify his need for help; because his first words suggests that he feels he is in danger from Hamlet—and that the Danish monarchy is as well" (624). This becomes the king's official story, and as usual Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can be counted on to amplify it.

The first phrase Claudius uses in 3.3, "I like him not" (TLN2272), is frequently understood as more a general statement about Hamlet's behavior than a statement of personal antipathy, for, as Klein (1982) argues, "such a hostile remark would not fit the role of the anxious prince and (step)father, which Claudius has throughout adopted" (CN2272). But by now it is perfectly clear that neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern is likely to register objections to anything the king has to say and that Claudius need not worry about being on his guard with them.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Guildenstern "gilds" the danger theme, declaring, "a holy and religious feere it is To keepe those many many bodies safe That liue and feede vpon your Maiestie"(CN2280-9).<sup>24</sup> Rosencrantz's language then adds to the sacral construction of Claudius's kingship with phrases like "the cesse of magestie,"<sup>25</sup> kingship being "Fixt on the somnet of the highest mount." Spencer (ed. 1980) points out the dramatic irony: "This view of kingship, although put into the mouths of the ingratiating Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, was the orthodox Elizabethan one. Its expression here shows the dangerous position into which Hamlet has got himself: his enemies now have political morality on their side and he has offended against it." And the lines make it clear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are "his enemies" in their unquestioning alliance with the king. The king's closing instructions enjoin them to "arm" themselves and assures them "we will fetters put / {about} <upon> this fear/ Which now goes too free-footed (TLN 2298-99)." They exit, assuring him of their haste to do so. Indeed they clamor to add their own "provisions" to fit themselves out for the voyage, preparing the way for Hamlet's mention in the next (Quarto) scene of the "engineer hoist with his own petard."

In 3.4, Hamlet's discussion of these "friends" with the queen in her closet creates plot inconsistencies, since he refers to his voyage to England in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a plan which is only vaguely formed as yet, which he hasn't been privy to in any case, and which the king announces to him only one scene later and solely in the Quarto version.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Hamlet's lines to his mother in 3.4 remind the queen about his departure, and speak to her of the behavior he plans to adopt toward these two "adders fang'd":



Ham. I must to England, you knowe that.  
 {Ger.} <Qu.> Alack I had forgot.  
 Tis so concluded on.  
 { Ham. Ther's letters seald, and my two Schoolefellowes,}  
 {Whom I will trust as I will Adders fang'd,}  
 {They beare the mandat, they must sweep my way}  
 {And marshall me to knauery: let it worke,}  
 {For tis the sport to haue the enginer}  
 {Hoist with his owne petar, an't shall goe hard}  
 {But I will delue one yard belowe their mines,}  
 {And blowe them at the Moone: ô tis most sweete}  
 {When in one line two crafts directly meete,} (2576-7;2577+1-9)

There is a good deal of critical disparagement of these lines peculiar to the Quarto, which seem to suggest that Hamlet is already making plans to rid himself of his friends. Indeed, commentators on these lines anticipate the widely varying responses to Hamlet's last dealings with his false friends. EDWARDS (ed. 1985) succinctly summarizes the problems inherent in Q and F versions, arguing that the lines' elimination suggests authorial revision:

These nine lines are not found in F. It is argued in the Introduction . . . that their removal is part of a revision by Shakespeare of the later part of the play. (1) Hamlet's plan to postpone his revenge, it is suggested, seemed too definite; (2) Hamlet has had no way of learning of the king's plan to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with him to England; (3) the determination to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern does not accord with [5.2.4-11 (3505-10)] (CN2577+1)

Recent editors play down the contradictions. Klein (ed. 1984) sees here not inconsistency but a growing distrust which "will cause Hamlet's restlessness on board ship" (2577+2). Thompson and Taylor also do not particularly see a problem. They (ed. 2006) argue that Hamlet seems merely "to be resolving to outwit them here, not specifically to kill them" (CN2577). Nevertheless, they also see merit in leaving mention of the plot against Hamlet till later on, adding that "Edwards and Hibbard agree that the omission adds to the suspense in F" and note that [i]n the Kozintsev film, this part of the speech is moved to the later point where Hamlet's description of his outwitting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (5.2.1-53 [3500-56]) is dramatized" (CN2577+1-2577+9).

The act/scene division (4.1) created by Q2's stage direction is also intensely problematic; the Folio, as Thompson and Taylor explain, not only "makes clear the continuity of the action" but "also cuts out the awkward entry of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern," who in Q2 "are dismissed by the queen a mere three lines later" and called back again right after Claudius and Gertrude's private conference informing the king that Hamlet has killed Polonius (CN2582). However, Jenkins defends their earlier entry and dismissal in Q2: "Their appearance with the King here, though silent and but momentary (and accordingly dropped from F), is dramatically very pointed—after the stress just laid [3.4.202-210 (2577+1-2577+9)] on their role as Hamlet's escort" (CN2586-+1). Claudius having decided in the queen's presence that Hamlet must be sent away immediately, the courtiers are *hic et ubique*, entering again when the King calls on Guildenstern. Klein (ed. 1984) comments, "In answer to this call both appear (in Q2 and in F1)—a remarkable manifestation of their quasi-identity. At the same time it is perhaps an indication of a slight differentiation that at this juncture the King automatically calls out the name of [Guildenstern], the one who is somewhat stronger and more determined" [CN 2620]. Here the king tells them of Polonius's murder, orders the pair to seek out Hamlet, joining with others who can give "some further ayde" (TLN 2621), discover where he has "dreg'd" Polonius's body (2623), and "bring the body "Into the Chappell (TLN2625).

We next see Hamlet commenting on his own success in having "safely stowed" the body (TLN2631), and ridiculing the anticipated pursuit of his friends: "O, here they come," accompanied, in the SD, by "others." On cue and without ceremony, Rosencrantz immediately demands to know what Hamlet has done with the body. He ignores Hamlet's poetic "Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin," and even less ceremoniously demands, "Tell us where 'tis, that we may take it thence and bear it to the chapel" (TLN2637).

Rosencrantz's roughness and menace surface in Act 4, scene 2, wherein any pretense at friendship is dropped. His naked demand, "Tell us," provokes more clownish quarrels, and the game of hide-and-seek is afoot, leading very directly to an antic Hamlet's second verbal trap for Rosencrantz, corresponding to his earlier recorder trap for Guildenstern. After denying that he can keep Rosencrantz's "counsel and not [his] own," Hamlet springs the "sponge" simile: this time with no gradual lead-in. Rosencrantz may be angered, but his responding question also suggests an inability to grasp the metaphor (or, perhaps, that he is once again simply taking refuge in incredulity, being unable to think of a rhetorical counter-move in a timely way): "Take you me for a sponge, my lord?" Hamlet spells out

his metaphor in the most insulting terms:

I sir, that sokes vp the Kings countenaunce, his | rewards, his authorities, but  
such Officers doe the King | best seruice in the end, he keeps them like an  
{apple} <Ape> in | the corner of his iaw, first mouth'd to be last swallowed,  
| when hee needs what you haue gleand, it is but squeeasing you, and sponge  
you shall be dry againe. (TLN 2645-50)

Rosencrantz clings to his claim of ignorance, “I understand you not” and then merely repeats in blunt terms what he said in 2637: “My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the king” (CN 2656-7). Hamlet’s final quibble in the scene, “The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—“ similarly elicits aping, this time from Guildenstern, who imitates both Rosencrantz’s stance of incomprehension and Hamlet’s words: “A thing my lord?” (TLN2658), setting up Hamlet’s conclusion: “of nothing” (TLN 2659). Having been especially “good feeds” for Hamlet in this scene, in the Folio version, they bring out the zany humor of the prince’s “Hide fox and all after.” As Hibbard (1987) comments: “Occurring in F only, these words, referring to the boys’ game of ‘fox and hounds’ (*OED fox sb.* 16d), have often been regarded as an actor’s interpolation. Yet they do give the scene a lively ending that is in keeping with Hamlet’s *O, here they come* (l. 3) and with the ‘savage comic humour’ that is so characteristic of this scene and of the scene that follows.

In 4.3, the next scene of Claudius’s and his lackeys’ counterplotting, Claudius confronts Hamlet about the body of Polonius. This scene opens with a stage direction that has been strongly debated: in the Folio version the king enters solo and in the Quarto version with “two or three” attendants. It is clear that Claudius is trying to gain public justification for his strong-armed treatment of Hamlet, but for once, he does not seem to summon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern immediately; rather he speaks to “attendants.” Klein (1984) insists that Claudius’s first lines in this scene are addressed to “new hearers” to emphasize the publicizing of Hamlet’s madness. She explains the corrosive irony of the king’s now telling “his councilors,” “How dangerous is it that this man goes loose” (TLN 2663):

In these words there lives abysmal irony: no-one in this present audience can even guess how dangerous Hamlet’s freedom and presence are—not for the court and the country, but for Claudius, the murderer who has been recognized as such by his nephew (CN2663).

There is, in any case, a redundancy in what Claudius says here (either in soliloquy or to some other courtiers) and what he addresses to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a few lines later. Thompson & Taylor (ed. 2006) summarize the issues and the critical debate as to whether or not “two or three” attendants hear the king’s words: “F’s [stage direction] turns the King’s first speech into a soliloquy, a change deplored by Edwards and Klein but approved by Hibbard. Gurr and Ichikawa (145-6) look at the economics of staging the scene and suggest that

a large body of support for the oppressed king ought to have been essential’ here, but the numbers available may have been curtailed by the need for the appearance of Fortinbras’s army in 4.4. It is not clear who Q2’s ‘two or three’ should be: presumable the *wisest friends* of 4.1.38 [2626] and people in whom the King feels he can confide his *desperate* plans for dealing with Hamlet. The King is notably less explicit in this speech than when he is definitely alone at the end of the scene. (CN2662-72)

But whether he speaks alone or with his “attendants,”<sup>27</sup> what the king says makes it clear that he is crafting an official story as well as a plot to “use” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern once again to deal with a Hamlet who is “mad,” dangerous to his safety, and—worse still—“lou’d of the distracted multitude” (TLN2665). This newly-mentioned facet of Hamlet’s character clarifies the urgency of the use Claudius now intends to make of his two schoolfellows.

On entering, Rosencrantz is compelled once again to admit a failure. Though unsuccessful in finding out where Hamlet has hidden Polonius’s body, he offers the consolation that Hamlet is “Without . . . guarded to know your pleasure” (TLN 2677-8). The Folio line —“Ho, Guildenstern. Bring in my lord” (TLN 2680) and subsequent S.D. “*Enter Hamlet and Guildenstern*” (TLN2681) make it clear that it is Guildenstern who is doing the guarding, whether or not this line is staged to make Hamlet look like a prisoner.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still onstage to hear the exchange between Claudius and Hamlet, including the scalding insults to the king and Claudius’s directions for haste aboard as well as Claudius’s command-cum-description that “Th’associates [i.e., Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] tend” (TLN2706). Corson (1874) comments on the ominous nature of this urgent instruction, preferring the Folio variant of line 2706: Th’associats tend, and euey thing {is} <at> bent”: “[A]t bent’ is the more forcible, expressing, as it does, the *suspended* readiness indicated by what precedes, ‘the bark is ready,’ ‘the wind at help,’ ‘th’associates tend’”(CN2706). Spencer (ed. 1980) similarly glosses “bent” as “prepared (like a

drawn bow)” (CN2706). Though for once not specifically named, “Th’associats” are fatally joined to their prince.

After Hamlet exits, the king gives them final instructions: “Delay it not, Ile haue him hence to night,” he tells them, assuring them, “Away, for euery thing is seald and done” (TLN2721). Kittredge claims (though others don’t necessarily agree) that the word “seald” implies that the “mandate” and the “commission” are two separate things: “This sealed mandate to the English king is quite distinct from the ‘commission’ given to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern [3.3.3 (2274)]. . . . [i]ts contents are secret. Their commission gives them custody of the mandate and of Hamlet and directs them to deliver it and him. They are ignorant of its contents” (CN2729), which goes directly to their exoneration.

The only further glimpse we get of the courtiers alive occurs in the stage direction of the Quarto scene when they are accompanying Hamlet to the ship ({Enter Hamlet, Rosencraus, &c.} 2743+1) and, after Hamlet converses with Fortinbras’s Captain, in the line in which Rosencrantz urges him away “Wil’t please you goe my Lord? (TLN 2743+24).

Nevertheless, as we have amply seen, these “associates” have been carefully whittled down. As accomplices, they have provided Claudius with practice for the much more difficult “use” he will make of their dramatic foil, the hothead Laertes—one who will need much more crafty manipulation than that of the pair to whom Claudius has, he thinks, treacherously committed the “especial safety” of Prince Hamlet.

Hamlet himself now being absent from the stage until Act 5, we hear nothing further of his attendants until 4.6, when Horatio’s letter informs Hamlet, “*Rosencraus* | and *Guyldensterne* hold theyr course for *England*, of them | I haue much to tell thee” (TLN 2999-3000). Verity (ed. 1904) comments that “hold theyr course” is “a designedly innocent phrase, lest the letter should fall into wrong hands; but one can imagine from V.2.38-61 how Hamlet relished the euphemism.” The rest of their story waits until 5.1 to be told.

The time gap between our last vision of these two men alive and our learning of their fate—which comes about through Hamlet’s letters to and conversation with Horatio—creates uncertainty about how ultimately they are to be judged. Commentators are quite divided about the manner in which Hamlet consigns his friends to their deaths; they are also divided about the retrospective judgment Hamlet passes on his own behavior and thus, by implication, about the courtier’s

posthumous role in the play.

Many defend Hamlet: Stubbs (1736) claims, “Their Punishment was just, because they had devoted themselves to the Service of the Usurper in whatever he should command, as appears in several Passages” (CN3501ff). Malone (1790) also takes Hamlet’s side. Looking at the “Hyst. Of Hamblet” he concludes,

Shakspeare, who has followed the story pretty closely, probably meant to describe their representatives, Rosencrants and Guildenstern, as equally guilty; as confederating with the king to deprive Hamlet of his life. So that his procuring their execution, though certainly not absolutely necessary to his own safety, does not appear to have been a wanton and unprovoked cruelty.

Steevens (1805) concludes that Hamlet’s behavior “is not conformable to the principles professed by Christians . . . Hamlet is exhibited, not as a pattern of Christian orthodoxy but as a young man, frail and passionate,” so that “a jury of candid poets, I believe, would acquit the hero of this play . . . upon his own words and conduct” (CN3548-9). Pye (1807) tells us, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are “creatures of the king, purposely employed to betray Hamlet, their friend and fellow students. . . .” CN3503-4).

Coleridge (1803) mentions as partially extenuating Hamlet’s behavior the excitement of his narration of events to Horatio: “Here the events, with the circumstances of time and place, are all stated with equal compression and rapidity, not one introduced which could have been omitted without injury to the intelligibility of the whole process” (CN3503).

Along similar lines, Hazlitt (1817) draws a parallel between the blundering rashness of Hamlet’s murder of Polonius and his treatment of his friends: “He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again, where he alters the letters which Rosencraus and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death” (CN3533-38).

Marshall (1875), looking back at earlier criticism, concedes the innocence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but writes at great length since he cannot ultimately condemn Hamlet completely in view of the delineated characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “It is useless to deny that in the play of ‘Hamlet there is not one line which can be fairly said to prove that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew what were the contents of the packet committed to their care” yet

“Hamlet declares—’They are not near my conscience;’ because he considers that by laying themselves out to serve the King’s ends from the very first moment they arrived at Court; by their lack of frankness towards him, their old schoolfellow, at their first meeting; by their steadily blinding their eyes to the state of affairs at Court, and by denying to the griefs of their friend any sympathy; by readily accepting the theory of his madness without trying to account for his melancholy and retirement from Court in any other manner; by accepting an embassy which their own common sense must have told them could not mean any good to Hamlet, they had been so false to the duties of friendship and to the honour of gentlemen, that they deserved the death of traitors. . . . [Hamlet] loved good for its own sake, not for what could be got by it; and in his indignation at the despicable weakness of these two courtiers, in the scorn which felt for their time-serving cowardice, he allowed himself to be hurried into the commission of an act of cruelty, because, at the time, it wore an appearance of an exquisitely ironical punishment. (CN3548-49).

Not satisfied with the lukewarm exonerations of most earlier critics, Lytton Strachey is Hamlet’s most ardent defender at this juncture in the play. For him, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have consented

to be employed by him [Claudius] in any way he pleases, against Hamlet . . . . If indeed Hamlet had been able to foresee the consequences of meeting the pirate next day, he might have saved his own life, and yet spared those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but this he could not do, and therefore acted as he did in mere self-defence. But something more than his own preservation is at stake: Hamlet is the representative and avenger of the rights of the crown and laws of Denmark, outraged by a murderer and a usurper. . . . It is Hamlet’s duty to avenge the crown and laws of Denmark by putting the tyrant to death; and if as a means to that end he has to sacrifice also the base instruments of the tyrant’s will, he is justified in doing it. In time of war the most just and humane general hangs or shoots, without hesitation or remorse, spies and deserters, for whose offences a civilian could hardly find punishment light enough: and we never doubt but that he is quite right.”

On the other hand, the play’s denouement concerning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern raises serious questions in the mind of many commentators about Hamlet’s stature as a hero. Stevens (1793) in no uncertain terms condemns

Shakespeare's design here: "His negligence of poetick justice is notorious; . . . in the tragedy before us, their deaths appear both wanton and unprovoked" (CN3501ff.)

Wade (1855), too, is emphatic. He argues that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are "mere ignorant tools of the Arch-Murderer" and that Hamlet's planned "'practical joke' [is] at once childish and cruel, of tricking poor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern . . . into the death intended for himself . . . . The shrinker from a dread work of earnest, is a first-rate hand at a serious practical joke; He eschews the Royal feast of vengeance, to 'prey on garbage' of mere highway-murder" (CN 2577+1-2577+9). Oxon (1881) concurs about the courtiers' ignorance, though he goes easier on Hamlet: "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew nothing of the contents of the original letter, or they would at once have returned on losing Hamlet. Of the contents of the forged letter they were also ignorant, or they would never have gone to England. Hamlet probably inherited this love of conspiracy. He positively revels in plots and counterplots" (CN2577+1-2577+9).

Lewes (1843) objects, "Is not this eminently the cunning trick of a madman doubling on his keepers? They were his friends—innocent of any plot against him yet he coolly forges the order for their death!" (CN3548-9).

What most outrages critics against Hamlet here is his boasting that he left "no shriving time allowed" (TLN3549) for either of his friends. Schlegel (1808) accuses Hamlet of a "malicious joy, when he has succeeded in getting rid of his enemies" (TLN3549).

Gervinius fulminates:

These friends "fell into the same pit which was dug for Hamlet, but not by them. They 'go to't?' asks his Horatio in reproachful surprise. But he lightly disregards this emotion of conscience; to dig a mine and prepare a trip suit his nature better than the direct open deed; his ever ingenious head had alone to act here; to plant a countermine is to him as easy as a clever idea; he rejoices inconsiderably and maliciously in these arts, praises himself for the quickness of his thought and the rapidity of its accomplishment, and sophisticatedly sees God's help in the prosperous success—he who would not see the many distinct intimations which pointed out to him his duty of revenge! thus then at last he himself reaches the same point of malice and cunning as his uncle, whose misdeeds he was called upon to revenge" (CN3512ff).



Our consideration of this critical dispute is best drawn to a close by examining the positions of two contemporary commentators, both of whom agree that the questions these courtiers' deaths raise about Hamlet's intentions and character go well beyond the norms of any notion of tragic *hamartia*, problematizing Hamlet's status as tragic hero.

Andrews (ed. 1989) tells us,

We must remember that at the time Hamlet wrote this death order he was assuming that he would arrive in England with his former schoolmates; he would thus have wanted them silenced before they could say anything that would jeopardize the Prince's own life. Even so, however, the harshness of Hamlet's sentence (going beyond that of even so evil a character as Claudius in its explicit call for what the Prince assumes will be the damnation of his victims) is surely designed by the playwright to give the audience pause." (CN3549)

J. Anthony Burton puts a similar judgment in admirably simplest terms:

Even from the Protestant standpoint that shriving doesn't accomplish anything, Hamlet's unnecessary addition to what a simple deletion to the commission would have accomplished puts him in the same position as all his other "innocent" victims, who became morally culpable and earned their fates by adding their own clever inventions to what was required of them. So this last embellishment makes Hamlet truly the mirror of everyone else's cause, not in respect of motive but of culpability. (Personal Communication, 12, 1, 2013).

Despite the temptation to attribute real evil to spies who "did make love" to their evil employment, their culpability is not clear-cut. The manner in which these two characters die thus places a heavy burden on audiences in their assessment of the character of Hamlet, also making it unlikely that Horatio will be able to perfect his last labor of love as Hamlet's "true" friend, i.e., the unenviable task of sorting out the "accidentall iudgements, casuall slaughters, Of {deaths} <death's> put on by cunning, and {for no} <forc'd> cause And in this vpsshot, purposes mistooke, Falne on th'inuenter's heads" (TLN3876-80). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's inclusion in Hamlet's tale makes it a story not only of "mighty opposites" but of what Wordsworth might call "The still, sad music of humanity." To tell Hamlet's story truthfully is to tell his false friends' story truthfully as well, holding up to nature a

profound mirror of all-too-human frailty that is more universal than we like to acknowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Symons (1890) also tells us that “a Danish courtier or ambassador of the name of Rosencrantz is reported to have attended the coronation of James I” (CN1021).

<sup>2</sup> This third approach and its costuming ramifications was suggested in conversation by my friend and colleague Sandra Boynton, who has directed the play at Schenectady County Community College.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Rosenberg’s concept that readers are actor/readers or actors/readers/directors is especially apt for his volume *The Masks of Hamlet*, to which this essay on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is particularly indebted.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg mentions a striking production in which it is Guildenstern and not Rosencrantz who bears the king’s medallion (373-374).

<sup>5</sup> Trench (1913, p. 101 n. 1) comments: “It is certainly not suggested in this play that they were fetched from Wittenberg, or from abroad at all. It is to Elsinoure, not to Denmark, that Hamlet welcomes them thrice” (CN2417). Burton comments that [i]t seems their call to court is dizzyingly unexpected to them, while their awkward lack of subtlety bespeaks ignorance of upwardly mobile behavior” and that Gertrude’s “conciliatory words are always the opposite of truth. It only adds to their portrayal as none-too-bright, that they accept her description without surprise” (Personal communication, Dec. 8, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike the unwilling Reynaldo, who questions Polonius’s motives for sending him to seek out Laertes, both young men begin enthusiastically.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenberg discusses productions in which one of the two wears the king’s medallion or “conspicuous red ribbons . . .” and that “Guildenstern may well have furnish himself with one, and earned in advance Claudius’ approval—one up on Rosencrantz (p. 374).

<sup>8</sup> There is much discussion of the For|tunes {lap} <Cap> (TLN1273), with Symons (1890) arguing that the Quarto’s “lap” is “a misprint for Cap, as the Ff. spell it, with an initial capital” (CN 1273). Elze further points out that “cap” makes sense, since it is “the uppermost part of the cap, in contrast to the soles as the nethermost part of dress” (qtd. in Symons CN 1273-4); Rosenberg, by contrast, reminds us that “‘lap’ would begin the sexual allusions that follow” (p. 409).

<sup>9</sup> Corson (1874) reminds us that the singular Folio variant, “‘favour,” is used equivocally in the sense of ‘face,’ ‘countenance,’ for which the plural ‘favours’ could not be used, and in the sense of ‘propitiousness’”(CN 1277).

<sup>10</sup> Jenkins (ed. 1982) informs us: “This common reflection was probably given currency by Montaigne’s essay. ‘That the taste of goods or evils doth greatly depend on the opinion we have of them’ (I. 40). See it also in Spenser, *FQ*, VI. ix. 30, ‘It is the mind, that maketh good or ill, That maketh wretch or happy’; Donne, *The Progress of the Soul*, ll. 518-20; Robt. Johnson, *Essays* (1601, BIV), ‘All worldly happiness hath his being only by opinion’; etc. See also Tilley M 254. It is clear from the contexts that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ here are not a matter of ethics: the inference that Hamlet maintains that there are no ethical absolutes (Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*, p. 75) is false” (CN1295-6).

<sup>11</sup> J. Anthony Burton finds that this gratuitous invention as most validating Hamlet’s own assessment that they did “make love to their employment” and thus “incur for themselves a moral culpability which brings them together with all the other more and less “innocent” victims of the strife between mighty opposites, within the scope of Horatio’s closing description of “forc’d causes. . .fall’n upon th’inventors heads” (Personal communication, December 16, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Johnson (ed. 1765) comments: “*Shakespeare* has accidentally inverted an expression of *Pindar*, that the state of humanity is *skias onar*, the *dream* of a *shadow*. [Pythian Odes, 8. 95]” (CN1304-5), but Neil (ed. 1877) points to other contexts and to Davies’ Englishing of Pindar: “Here Shakespeare plays with a commonplace of Greek poetry popular in his day, found in the *Agamemnon* of *Æschylus*, 839, and in Pindar’s *Pythian Odes*, viii, 136, and Englished by Sir John Davies, thus: ‘Man’s life is but a dream, yea, less than so, The shadow of a dream.’”

<sup>13</sup> Anticipating Hamlet’s dialogue with Claudius about how “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.”

<sup>14</sup> Subbarau glosses Hamlet’s dismissive line brilliantly: “The ostensible meaning is — Shall we make a move towards the Court of the King, for I am tired of this quibbling and cannot continue it? The hidden meaning is — Let us go to the Court of the King and verify the truth of this paradox (viz., that monarchs are but beggar’s shadows) by a look at the beggar’s shadow seated on the throne, for indeed I cannot demonstrate it by reasoning. The insinuation is that they can readily see the *King* Claudius is but the shadow of the *beggar* Hamlet” (CN1311-12).

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<sup>15</sup> Hamlet's reversion to the theme of beggary with his court friend is a subject Margreta de Grazia expands upon convincingly. See especially p. 139, where she connects this theme with the conventions of the stage clown. "By convention, he speaks out of need....Typically he complains about the bad terms of his service." This "dreadfully attended" motif and the motif of beggar de Grazia connects with later expressions of "his own discontent," some direct and some indirect, and gives as examples "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth" (2.2.295-6) . . . , an unfed capon, a starving horse, "a rogue and peasant slave" (2.2.543) etc. (*Hamlet without Hamlet* p. 139)

<sup>16</sup> Elze (ed. 1882) comments: "In Q1 these words [*"What say you?"*] are given to Guyldensterne, whereas the confession *My lord, we were sent for* is put in the mouth of Rosencrans. This distribution of the speeches seems indeed to be well adapted to the characters of the speakers, Rosencrans acting generally as the spokesman and Guyldensterne merely as his subordinate companion, not to say his attendant (see § 164). Least of all does Guyldensterne seem to be sufficiently important to be appealed to by Rosencrans for a decisive vote, and Rosencrans, on the other hand, is nowhere at a loss what to say. A similar relation as that which subsists between Rosencrans and Guyldensterne is assigned to Marcellus and Bernardo, and to the two ambassadors Voltimand and Cornelius by the poet. The only time that Guyldensterne ventures on an independent discourse, is in § 132, and then he asks for express permission to speak, and shows himself so little equal to the task, that Rosencrans has to come to his aid and replace him."

<sup>17</sup> Symons 1890) notes about "We coted them on the way" that "*To cote* is . . . not simply to overtake, but to overpass; to outstrip. . . . Going beyond is the essential point, the term being usually applied under circumstances where overtaking is impossible — to dogs who start together and run abreast until the cote takes place. So Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, having coted the players in their way, reach the palace first, and have been for some time in conversation with Hamlet before the strolling company arrives."

<sup>18</sup> See Subbarau's comments about which characters these represent in Hamlet's allegory (CN1366-72).

<sup>19</sup> There is an interesting verbal parallel to Othello after first formal "welcome, sir, to Cyprus" and then the sardonically disparaging "You are welcome sir, to Cyprus—goats and monkeys," i.e., you can have the damn place.

<sup>20</sup> There is a conflict in the Q2 and the F as far as where precisely they enter, which Wilson (1934, rpt. 1963, 2:184) glosses as follows: ". . . I think the direction in Q2 has been displaced, though hardly any editor seems to have noticed it. F1 gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern their re-entry before [3.2.292 (2164)], after the play scene in 3.2, and the position is most apt since it explains Hamlet's laugh and also his calling for the recorders, as he turns his back upon the spies and deliberately ignores them. That Q2 prints the entry after [3.2.295 (2167)], i.e. at the end of Hamlet's speech, is due, I suggest to the fact that [3.2.291 (2163)] is the last on a page, so that the stage direction had to be carried over not only on to another page but into another printer's forme, where it was not unnaturally inserted immediately before Guildenstern's first speech. This explanation is borne out by the entry for Hamlet and Horatio in [5.1.56 (3245)], where Q2 postpones the SD for four lines for exactly the same reason" (2167+1).

<sup>21</sup> Variations in speech attributions add to staging ambiguities. Commentators refer to Q1, in which the dialogue is divided between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but as Tschischwitz (ed. 1869) points out, ["Q1 has Rosencraft take part in this dialogue. Meanwhile the challenge can be directed at only *one* person, since the answer is finally, *these cannot I command, I have not the skill*. If Rosencrantz took part, the phrase *nor I neither* or something similar would have to follow. Some critics have therefor applied the words *To withdraw with you*, 360, to Guildenstern only, with whom Hamlet walked toward the back of the stage."]

<sup>22</sup> A great deal of commentary is devoted to literal explanations of the musical terms of Hamlet's trap, such as "fret", as in the gloss of Staunton (ed. 1860): "An obvious quibble on fret, the stop or key of a musical instrument, and the same word in its ordinary sense of vex, irritate, &c."

<sup>23</sup> Even if he is still being cautious with them, his consummate role-playing is not inconsistent with diction that gives away the underlying truth of his personal antipathy, as Claudius's "use" in his phrase "the need we have to use you" (TLN1023) gives him away in his first dealings with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

<sup>24</sup> Andrews (ed. 1993) comments: "Guildenstern's imagery is interesting. It hints at a kind of cannibalism, and it suggests that the King's subjects are a 'Convocation of politic Worms' [4.3.21 (2686)]. It also suggests a perversion of the Communion service instituted at the Last Supper. See Matthew 26:26, where we read that 'Jesus took the bread, and when he had blessed, he brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat: this is my body.' See the note to [3.2.94-5 (1949-50)]" (CN2282).

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<sup>25</sup>] Thompson & Taylor (ed. 2006) suggest the political resonance of Rosencrantz's diction: "cessation or decease of royalty. Given the age of Elizabeth I and her unwillingness to name an heir, this must have been a topical issue when *Hamlet* was written" (CN2288).

<sup>26</sup> Rosenberg (p. 717) suggests stagings that indicate a dozen or so ways in which Hamlet could have found out, including, for example, his having eavesdropped on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the king "just before he prays," or taken Polonius's copy of the "commission" out of the dead man's pocket.

<sup>27</sup> Kliman and Lake, in a performance note to their edition, note that "When counselors are present in a scene, he [Claudius] behaves kindly toward Hamlet, but alone with his flatterers, he can show his cruelty—as does Branagh's King" (p. 108).

## SELECTED COMMENTARY NOTES ON ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

**Capell** (1774-79?) [concerning "Denmark's a prison"]: "Towards the end of this page, (l. 30) begins a very large addition, the extent of which may be seen in the '*V. R.*:' The occasion of it seems to have been,— an opinion in the Poet, that 'twas proper the discourse should be lengthen'd before Hamlet's suspicion breaks out in the question about the cause of these gentlemen's coming: he entertain'd it at seeing them, turns the discourse upon Denmark, (46, 2.) in order to sift them, and the answers he gets from them settle him in the thought he had harbour'd, and bring on the question." [CN 1285-6]

**Malone** (1780): "*The Hystorie of Hamlet* . . . furnished our author with the scheme of sending the prince to England. . . . From this narrative it appears that the faithful ministers of Fengon were not unacquainted with the import of the letters they bore. Shakspeare, who has followed the story pretty closely, probably meant to describe their representatives, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as equally guilty; as confederating with the king to deprive Hamlet of his life. So that his procuring their execution, though certainly not absolutely necessary to his own safety, does not appear to have been a wanton and unprovoked cruelty . . . ." [CN 3503ff]

**Goethe** (1796): "What these two men are and what they do, cannot be embodied in one and the same person. It is in such details that Shakespeare reveals his greatness. The creepiness, the bowing and scraping, the approving, flattering and insinuating, their adroitness and strutting, wholeness and emptiness, their utter roguery, their ineptness—how could all this portrayed by one person? There should be at least a dozen of them, if that were feasible. For they are not just something in society, they are society, and Shakespeare was very modest and wise to give us only two such representatives. Also I need them as a pair, so that in my version they will contrast with the one, good, honest Horatio." [CN1021]

**Pye** (1807): "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are "creatures of the king, purposely employed to betray Hamlet, their friend and fellow students . . . ." [CN3503-4]

**Schlegel** (1808): "[W]e evidently perceive in him a malicious joy, when he has succeeded in getting rid of his enemies, more through necessity and accident, which alone are able to impel him to quick and decisive measures, than by the merit of his own courage, as he himself

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confesses after the murder of Polonius, and with respect to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.” [CN3549]

**Ulrici** (1846): “Still less does Hamlet’s character exhibit, as Schlegel thinks, a malignant pleasure in inflicting pain . . . [If Hamlet] does not express a very deep regret for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—those false and good-for-nothing tools of his worthless uncle—yet, in all this, there is nothing of malignity.” [CN2413-5]

**Strachey** (1848): “We see that Hamlet knows as much as we do (though probably not more) as to the extent to which the two courtiers are aware of the King’s schemes, and we may safely assume that he is as able as we are to draw inferences from the facts. He then (like ourselves) is aware that his old schoolfellows have lost all personal regard for him, and have devoted themselves to obtain the King’s favour by servilely adopting and justifying his dislike to Hamlet, as far as he avows it, and by consenting to be employed by him in any way he pleases, against Hamlet. The King . . . sends him[Hamlet] as a prisoner to England, with sealed instructions respecting the disposal of him, to the ruler of that country, who will certainly obey implicitly, as he is the lately conquered and humble tributary of Denmark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern readily accept the charge of the prisoner, and of the instructions, which they cannot doubt affect his liberty, if not his life, and are prepared to do their part zealously, whatever it may prove to be. . . . It is Hamlet’s duty to avenge the crown and laws of Denmark by putting the tyrant to death; and if as a means to that end he has to sacrifice also the base instruments of the tyrant’s will, he is justified in doing it.” [CN3561-5]

**Wade** (1855): “[Hamlet] very shrewdly and correctly suspects, that the real intention of the king is to get him killed out of the Royal way; but far from this prospect of his own personal danger driving him at once to the fulfillment of his enjoined mission of vengeance, he very quietly submits to his uncle’s decree of exile, amusing himself with the thought, at once childish and cruel, of tricking poor Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—the mere ignorant tools of the Arch-Murderer—into the death intended for himself. The shrinker from a dread work of earnest, is a first-rate hand at a serious practical joke; and to that, indeed, he sweeps. . . . He eschews the Royal feast of vengeance, to ‘prey on garbage’ of mere highway-murder.” [CN2577+1-2577+9]

**Miles** (1870): "What perfect nerve, what ready wit, what jubilant power, in sitting calmly down and writing fairly out that earnest conjuration from the king. Nor is that earnest conjuration dictated by malice against his former friends, but purely in self defense. It is the only second hope of which he can count; for if the chances of the sea prevent the contemplated rescue, he is infallibly lost without that earnest conjuration.

“The whole ‘rash’ undertaking is a supplemented plot; a reserved escape; an ‘indiscretion’ only meant to serve in case his dear plot should pall. For, two days old at sea without sign of the friendly pirate, it was not unnatural that his fears should forget his manners. Besides, there was more than a chance, in the event of his escape, of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern returning to Denmark, as they should have done, instead of keeping on to England. What determined them to ‘hold their course,’ could only have been either the fear of facing their royal master after Hamlet’s escape, or an absurd supposal that Hamlet would follow them, if released, rather than

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risk a return to Elsinore. Be that s it may, Hamlet’s measures are strictly defensive and strictly justifiable; their doom is exclusively the richly earned result of their own obtrusiveness and folly. Horatio’s ignorance of the capture is no argument against its being premeditated. It would have been very unlike Hamlet, either to compromise his friend, who remained at Court in service of the king, or to extend his secret needlessly.” [CN3532-49]

**Hudson** (1872): “[Hamlet] knows, or at least fully believes, that Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are privy and consenting to the hideous machination against himself: </p. 292> <p. 293> [cites 3560-62]. It is moreover quite certain that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are at least the *willing* tools of Claudius, caring nothing for the moral complexion of their service, so they may have the honour and profit of serving him. So that here, again, I may fitly quote Professor Werder: “The baseness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is their ruin: they promenade, so to speak, in the sphere of a fate which involves damnation, without scenting or wishing to scent the sulphur. Where such a king bears rule, his servants are always exposed to the very worst that can befall; and at any moment their ruin may come through circumstances and causes from which nothing may seem more remote than the catastrophe. Whoever serves such a king, and, without any misgiving of his crime, serves him with ready zeal, upon him Hell has a claim; and, if that claim be made good, he has no right to complain.—These are things in which Shakespeare knows no jesting, because he is so great an expounder of the Law, the Divine Law; and he holds to it as no second poet has done.” [CN3560-62]

**Marshall** (1875): “It is useless to deny that in the play of ‘Hamlet there is not one line which can be fairly said to prove that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew what were the contents of the packet committed to their care . . . . Hamlet declares—‘They are not near my conscience;’ because he considers that by laying themselves out to serve the King’s ends from the very first moment they arrived at Court; by their lack of frankness towards him, their old schoolfellow, at their first meeting; by their steadily blinding their eyes to the state of affairs at Court, and by denying to the griefs of their friend any sympathy; by readily accepting the theory of his madness without trying to account for his melancholy and retirement from Court in any other manner; by accepting an embassy which their own common sense must have told them could not mean any good to Hamlet, they had been so false to the duties of friendship and to the honour of gentlemen, that they deserved the death of traitors. . . . [Hamlet] loved good for its own sake, not for what could be got by it; and in his indignation at the despicable weakness of these two courtiers, in the scorn which felt for their time-serving cowardice, he allowed himself to be hurried into the commission of an act of cruelty, because, at the time, it wore an appearance of an exquisitely ironical punishment.” [CN3548-49]

**Oxon** (1881): “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew nothing of the contents of the original letter, or they would at once have returned on losing Hamlet. Of the contents of the forged letter they were also ignorant, or they would never have gone to England. Hamlet probably inherited this love of conspiracy. He positively revels in plots and counterplots.” [CN2577+1-2577+9]

**Elze** (1882): “In QA these words are given to Guyldensterne, whereas the confession My lord, we were sent for is put in the mouth of Rosencrans. This distribution of the speeches seems

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indeed to be well adapted to the characters of the speakers, Rosencrans acting generally as the spokesman and Guyldensterne merely as his subordinate companion, not to say his attendant (see § 164). Least of all does Guyldensterne seem to be sufficiently important to be appealed to by Rosencrans for a decisive vote, and Rosencrans, on the other hand, is nowhere at a loss what to say. A similar relation as that which subsists between Rosencrans and Guyldensterne is assigned to Marcellus and Bernardo, and to the two ambassadors Voltimand and Cornelius by the poet. The only time that Guyldensterne ventures on an independent discourse, is in § 132, and then he asks for express permission to speak, and shows himself so little equal to the task, that Rosencrans has to come to his aid and replace him” [CN1336].

**Werder** (1907) “When, however, he made the thrust through the tapestry, Hamlet committed a grave error, causing the death of Polonius. The destruction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was also the disastrous consequence of the same error.” [CN404-8]

**Wilson** (1934) [on Guildenstern’s comment that the “world’s grown honest”]: “Hardly a tactful remark to the dispossessed heir of Denmark; it arrests his attention and leads him to ‘question more in particular’” [CN1282-3].

**Wilson** (1934): “No one seems hitherto to have observed the significance of this talk about Ham.’s ambition, continued for 14 lines, and then abruptly broken off by Ham. The two ‘friends’ acting on the K’s suggestion are probing Ham. to ‘gather so much as from occasion’ they may glean [(1036)]of what is in his mind. Ham. refuses to be drawn; but he has seen the point, and makes use of it later. To the Eliz. ‘ambition’ (v. G.) meant the ostentation of glory as will as the desire for it.” [CN1298]

**Rossiter** (1961): [Concerning Polonius’s spying on Laertes] Everything here is under-hand, meanly self-interested nothing is frank or generous. It is also undignified, not great evil; and often ridiculous, as in Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Osric” (CN890-967).

**Andrews** (1989): “We must remember that at the time Hamlet wrote this death order he was assuming that he would arrive in England with his former schoolmates; he would thus have wanted them silenced before they could say anything that would jeopardize the Prince’s own life. Even so, however, the harshness of Hamlet’s sentence (going beyond that of even so evil a character as Claudius in its explicit call for what the Prince assumes will be the damnation of his victims is surely designed by the playwright to give the audience pause.” [CN3549]

**Andrews** (1993): “Guildenstern’s imagery is interesting. It hints at a kind of cannibalism, and it suggests that the King’s subjects are a ‘Convocation of politic Worms’ [4.3.21 (2686)]. It also suggests a perversion of the Communion service instituted at the Last Supper. See Matthew 26:26, where we read that ‘Jesus took the bread, and when he had blessed, he brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat: this is my body.’ See the note to [3.2.94-5 (1949-50)]” (CN2282).

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**Rosenberg** (1993): “The approach of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Hamlet echoes that of Horatio and the sentinels. Hamlet is deeply self-involved: the newcomers are hesitant about intruding” (p.405).

**Thompson and Taylor** (2006): Q2 has an '*Exit*' for Hamlet at the end of the scene but no exit direction for any of the others; F has an '*exit*' for Polonius after his line 'I will say so.' It seems logical in both texts that not only Polonius but also Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should obey Hamlet's instruction, *Leave me, friends*, and that he should be alone onstage for his final speech. Q1's [stage directions] are the fullest here with an '*Exit*' for Rosencrantz and Gilderstone before the entry of Corambis, an '*exit*' for Corambis after 'Very like a whale', and an '*exit*' for Horatio after he and Hamlet have bidden each other goodnight; Q1 is the only text to pay any attention to Horatio or give him any dialogue after the equivalent of the entry of the others at 287.” [CN2258]

**Thompson and Taylor** (2006): “not in F. Edwards argues that this passage was cut by Shakespeare as part of a revision of the later part of the play; he claims that 'the determination to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern does not accord with 5.2.6-11 [3505-11]' (where events are vaguely attributed to *a divinity*), but Hamlet seems to be resolving to outwit them here, not specifically to kill them. Edwards and Hibbard agree that the omission adds to the suspense in F. In the Kozintsev film, this part of the speech is moved to the later point where Hamlet's description of his outwitting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (5.2.1-53 [3500-56]) is dramatized.” [CN2577+1-9]

**Laury Magnus**