

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Satirizing the Lower Class

Sasha Burckhardt

IB Candidate Number: **xxxxxxxx**

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Supervisor: Laura Matheny

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Sasha Burckhardt

Text: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

IB English Language and Literature HL: Written Task Two Outline/Part One

Topic: Power and Privilege

Research Question: Which social groups are marginalized, excluded, or silenced within the text?

Thesis: In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare characterizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as foolish and insignificant to satirize lower-class members in the royal court, preventing them from being taken seriously by both the characters and the audience.

- I. Shakespeare uses crude diction within Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's dialogue to characterize them as lowly and pathetic, setting the stage for their failure as servants in the play.
 - a. "And here give up ourselves, in the full bent, / To lay our service freely at your feet" (Shakespeare II, ii, 30-31).
 - i. From Guildenstern's first lines in the play
 - ii. Automatically sets them up as inferior, servile men; the audience has no other understanding of their characters as of yet.
 - b. Guildenstern says, "Faith, her privates we" and Hamlet responds with, "In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true! She is a strumpet" (II, ii, 230-32).
 - i. The two speak in prose during their interaction with Hamlet, to emphasize their lowly role in social etiquette
 - ii. Shakespeare uses their sexual humor to characterize the two as crude and difficult to take seriously, emphasized for the audience by it being their first interaction with Hamlet.
- II. As Hamlet begins to descend into "madness", Shakespeare uses Hamlet's judgment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to characterize them as simple-minded pawns, satirizing the lower classes as foolish and weak.
 - a. The two claim they are there to visit Hamlet, and when Hamlet realizes almost immediately that they were sent as spies, they pretend that they don't know what he's talking about but ultimately fail to get anywhere (II, ii, 265-88).
 - i. Their sole purpose in the play as of yet was to spy on Hamlet, and they failed to do so within minutes of talking to him.
 - ii. Shakespeare is satirizing lower-class court members by characterizing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as pathetic and foolish, which ultimately tells the audience that people like them should not be taken seriously in society
 - b. "Take you me for a sponge, my lord?" and Hamlet responds, "Ay, sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards his authorities. But such officers do the King best service, in the end" (IV, ii, 14-16).
 - i. Even though by Act 4 Hamlet has been taken over by "madness", his figurative speech is still very honest and unforgiving.
 - ii. The analogy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as mindless sponges associates being a servant with not having free will. Shakespeare uses his protagonists' honest observations to satirize the lower classes.
 - iii. This characterizes lower classes as simple-minded to the audience and further marginalizes them in the context of the play.

- III. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die in Act V, none of Shakespeare's characters pay much homage to their names, characterizing the two as insignificant and satirizing lower-class court members as being unimportant.
- a. "Why, man, they did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience; their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow" (V, ii, 57-59).
 - i. Hamlet's response to their apparent doom is rather nonchalant and says it is just the way it has to be.
 - ii. Unlike Polonius' death, which is a factor in Ophelia's madness, and her death, which is a factor in Laertes' anger, the thought that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might die does not seem to bother anyone.
 - b. "Where should we have our thanks", to which Horatio responds, "Not from his mouth, / Had it the ability of life to thank you. / He never gave commandment for their death" (V, ii, 358-60).
 - i. When asked what should be done about their deaths, Horatio redirects the subject to the King's death, and the two are never mentioned again afterwards.
 - ii. Shakespeare uses this change of conversation to illustrate their insignificance among the characters in the play.
 - iii. This consequently satirizes their role among the audience as well, leaving Hamlet with a marginalizing tone against the lower classes.

Which social groups are marginalized, excluded, or silenced within the text?

Famous for its outlandish separation between classes, Elizabethan England was beginning to end right around the time of *Hamlet's* creation (Picard). William Shakespeare wrote many of his plays for the monarchy to enjoy, and as such much of his social commentary was skewed to an aristocratic angle (Dowden). In *Hamlet* in particular, the plot mainly follows Prince Hamlet as well as other members of the royal court. The most notable exceptions to the aristocratic cast are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a pair of servants who get pushed around to no avail throughout the play. Although there to provide humor, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also reflect marginalization between classes in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare characterizes the pair as foolish and insignificant to satirize lower-class members in the royal court, excluding them from being taken seriously by both the characters and the audience.

Using crude diction within Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's dialogue, Shakespeare characterizes them as lowly and pathetic, setting the stage for their satirical failure over the course of the play. Upon their arrival in Act II, Claudius introduces the pair as Hamlet's childhood friends. He does not say much about their personalities, until finally Guildenstern replies, "And here give up ourselves, in the full bent, / To lay our service freely at your feet" (Shakespeare II, ii, 30-31). A character's first lines in a play have a big impact on how the audience views them. Promising their service immediately sets them up as inferior, servile men; the audience has no other understanding of their characters as of yet. The king then sends them to siphon information from Hamlet. When the two find and greet him, Guildenstern says, "Faith, her privates we" and Hamlet responds with, "In the secret parts of Fortune? O, most true! She is a strumpet" (II, ii, 230-32). Even within a simple greeting, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use sexual humor—likening Fortune to a prostitute—which illustrates their crude and unruly nature. The two also speak in prose, which is a sign of lower social rank; they have no need for upper-

class etiquette. Shakespeare uses their early dialogue to characterize the two as crude and difficult to take seriously, which foreshadows their development as unsuccessful servants who matter little to anyone.

As Hamlet begins to descend into “madness”, Shakespeare uses Hamlet’s judgment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to characterize them as simple-minded pawns, satirizing the lower classes as foolish and weak. After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use sexual humor to greet Hamlet and get the information they need, they do not get very far. At first, Hamlet seems to be spewing nonsense, but when the two claim they are there to visit Hamlet, he realizes almost immediately that they were sent as spies and confronts them. They pretend that they don’t know what he’s talking about but ultimately submit and tell him, “My lord, we were sent for” (II, ii, 288). So far, their sole purpose in the play was to spy on Hamlet, but they failed to do so within minutes of finding him. Shakespeare is satirizing lower-class court members by characterizing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as pathetic and foolish, which tells the audience that their kind should not be taken seriously in society.

Much later in the play, in Act IV, a similar dynamic unfolds once more. Even though Hamlet appears to have lost his mind over the course of the play, he retains a biting sense of insight which often reveals itself through figurative language. After comparing them to sponges, Rosencrantz asks, “Take you me for a sponge, my lord?” to which Hamlet responds, “Ay, sir, that soaks up the King’s countenance, his rewards his authorities” (IV, ii, 14-16). The analogy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as mindless sponges associates being a servant with not having free will. Shakespeare uses his protagonists’ observations to characterize them as pushovers. This satirizes lower classes as simple-minded to the audience and further marginalizes them.

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die in Act V, none of Shakespeare’s characters pay much homage to their names, characterizing the two as insignificant and adding to the satire against lower members in the social hierarchy. After sending off Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet and Horatio have a brief word about the task ahead. Horatio brings up the pair, and

Hamlet responds, “Why, man, they did make love to this employment. / They are not near my conscience; their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow” (V, ii, 57-59). Hamlet’s response to their apparent doom is rather nonchalant—it is just the way it has to be in his eyes. Unlike Polonius’ death, which factors into Ophelia’s decline, and her death, which is a factor in Laertes’ anger, the thought that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern might die does not seem to bother anyone. When the ambassador informs Horatio of their deaths, asking, “Where should we have our thanks?” Horatio responds, “Not from his mouth, / Had it the ability of life to thank you. / He never gave commandment for their death” (V, ii, 358-60). He quickly redirects the subject to the King’s death, and the two are never mentioned again afterwards. Shakespeare uses this change of conversation to illustrate their insignificance among the characters in the play. This consequently satirizes their role to the audience as well, leaving *Hamlet* with a marginalizing tone against the lower classes.

As a biting form of satire, Shakespeare uses Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s insignificant roles in *Hamlet* to ridicule the serving class as simple-minded and unskilled, ultimately leaving the audience to view lower-ranked members of society as foolish pawns. Even though the pair have little impact on *Hamlet*’s plot, their significance as characters has many more implications about the play’s time period and Shakespeare’s tone. The play’s humor further marginalizes poorer folk by removing their dignity, which was not too surprising of a theme during a time like the Elizabethan era. Although marginalized, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern effectively added humor to *Hamlet* during its early performances and factored into its success today, now considered one of Shakespeare’s finest works.

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