

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

W. S. Gilbert

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A Tragic Episode, in Three Tabloids, founded on an Old Danish Legend

FIRST TABLEAU

Interior of KING CLAUDIUS' palace. CLAUDIUS discovered seated in a gloomy attitude. QUEEN GERTRUDE on a stool at his feet, consoling him.

QUEEN Nay, be not sad, my lord!

CLAUDIUS

Sad, loved Queen?

If by an effort of the will I could
Annul the ever-present Past -- disperse
The gaunt and gloomy ghosts of bygone deeds,
Or bind them with imperishable chains
In caverns of the past incarcerate,
Then could I smile again -- but not till then!

QUEEN Oh, my dear lord!

If aught there be that gives thy soul unrest,

CLAUDIUS

Tell it to me.

Well loved and faithful wife,

Tender companion of my faltering life,
Yes, I can trust thee! Listen, then, to me:
Many years since -- when but a headstrong lad --

QUEEN (Interested)

I wrote a five-act tragedy.

Indeed?

CLAUDIUS

QUEEN

A play, writ by a king --

And such a King!

CLAUDIUS Finds ready market. It was read at once,
But ere 'twas read, accepted. Then the Press
Teemed with porpentous import. Elsinore
Was duly placarded by willing hands;
We know that walls have ears -- I gave them tongues --

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

And they were eloquent with promises.
The day approached — all Denmark stood agape.
Arrangements were devised at once by which
Seats might be booked a twelvemonth in advance.

QUEEN

The first night came.

And did the play succeed?

CLAUDIUS

QUEEN

In one sense, yes.

Oh, I was sure of it!

CLAUDIUS A farce was given to play the people in —
My tragedy succeeded that. That's all!

QUEEN

CLAUDIUS

And how long did it run?

About ten minutes.

Ere the first act had traced one-half its course
The curtain fell, never to rise again!

QUEEN

CLAUDIUS

And did the people hiss?

No -- worse than that --

They laughed. Sick with the shame that covered me,
I knelt down, palsied, in my private box,
And prayed the hearsed and catacombed dead
Might quit their vaults and claim me for their own!

QUEEN Was it, my lord, so very, very bad?

CLAUDIUS Not to deceive my trusting Queen, it was.

QUEEN And when the play failed, didst thou take no steps

FIRST TABLEAU

CLAUDIUS

To set thyself right with the world?

I did.

The acts were five — though by five acts too long,
I wrote an Act by way of epilogue —
An act by which the penalty of death
Was meted out to all who sneered at it.
The play was not good — but the punishment
Of those that laughed at it was capital.

QUEEN Think on't no more, my lord. Now mark me well:

To cheer our son, whose solitary tastes
And tendency to long soliloquy
Have much alarmed us, I, unknown to thee,
Have sent for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern —
Two merry knaves, kin to Polonius,
Who will devise such revels in our Court —
Such antic schemes of harmless merriment —
As shall abstract his meditative mind
From sad employment. Claudius, who can tell
But that they may divert my lord as well?

Enter GUILDENSTERN.

GUILDENSTERN

Ah, they are here!

My homage to the Queen!

Enter ROSENCRANTZ.

ROSENCRANTZ (Kneeling) In hot obedience to the Royal 'hest
We have arrived, prepared to do our best.

QUEEN We welcome you to Court. Our Chamberlain
Shall see that you are suitably deposed.
Here is his daughter. She will hear your will
And see that it receives fair countenance.

Exeunt KING and QUEEN, lovingly. Enter OPHELIA.

FIRST TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

ROSENCRANTZ

OPHELIA (Delighted and surprised)

Ophelia! (Both embrace her)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern!

This meeting likes me much. We have not met

ROSENCRANTZ

Since we were babies!

The Queen hath summoned us,

And I have come in a half-hearted hope
That I may claim once more my baby-love!

OPHELIA

ROSENCRANTZ

Alas, I am betrothed!

Betrothed? To whom?

OPHELIA

ROSENCRANTZ

To Hamlet!

Oh, incomprehensible!

OPHELIA (Demurely)

Thou lovest Hamlet?

Nay, I said not so—

GUILDENSTERN

I said we were betrothed.

And what's he like?

OPHELIA Alike for no two seasons at a time.

Sometimes he's tall — sometimes he's very short —

FIRST TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Now with black hair --- now with a flaxen wig ---
Sometimes with an English accent --- then a French ---
Then English with a strong provincial "burr."
Once an American, and once a Jew ---
But Danish never, take him how you will!
And strange to say, whate'er his tongue may be,
Whether he's dark or flaxen --- English --- French ---
Though we're in Denmark, A.D. ten--six--two--
He always dresses as King James the First!

GUILDENSTERN

Oh, he is surely mad!

OPHELIA

Well, there again

Opinion is divided. Some men hold
That he's the sanest, far, of all sane men ---
Some that he's really sane, but shamming mad ---
Some that he's really mad, but shamming sane ---
Some that he will be mad, some that he was
Some that he couldn't be. But on the whole
(As far as I can make out what they mean)
The favourite theory's somewhat like this:
Hamlet is idiotically sane
With lucid intervals of lunacy

ROSENCRANTZ We must devise some plan to stop this match!

GUILDENSTERN Stay! Many years ago, King Claudius
Was guilty of a five act tragedy.
The play was damned, and none may mention it
Under the pain of death. We might contrive
To make him play this piece before the King,

ROSENCRANTZ

And take the consequence.

Impossible!

OPHELIA

For every copy was destroyed.

But one ---

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

OPHELIA

My father's!

ROSENCRANTZ

Eh?

OPHELIA

In his capacity

As our Lord Chamberlain* he has one copy. I
This night, when all the Court is drowned in sleep,
Will creep with stealthy foot into his den
And there abstract the precious manuscript!

*(ALL bow reverentially at mention of this functionary)

GUILDENSTERN The plan is well conceived! But take good heed,

OPHELIA

Your father may detect you.

Oh dear, no.

My father spends his long official days
In reading all the rubbishing new plays.
From ten to four at work he may be found:
And then — my father sleeps exceeding sound!

(Picture. OPHELIA, ROSENCRANTZ, and GUILDENSTERN, grouped.)

SECOND TABLEAU

Enter QUEEN, meeting ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN.

QUEEN Have you as yet planned aught that may relieve
Our poor afflicted son's despondency?

ROSENCRANTZ Madam, we've lost no time. Already we
Are getting up some Court theatricals
In which the prince will play a leading part.

QUEEN That's well-bethought -- it will divert his mind.

ROSENCRANTZ

But soft -- he comes.

How gloomily he stalks,

Starts -- looks around -- then, as if reassured,
Rumples his hair and rolls his glassy eyes!

QUEEN (Appalled) That means -- he's going to soliloquize!
Prevent this, gentlemen, by any means!

GUILDENSTERN

QUEEN

We will, but how?

Anticipate his points,

And follow out his argument for him;
Thus will you cut the ground from 'neath his feet

ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN

And leave him naught to say.

We will! We will! (They kneel)

QUEEN A mother's blessing be upon you, sirs! (Exit)

ROSENCRANTZ (Both rising) Now, Guildenstern, apply thee to this task.

Music. Enter HAMLET. He stalks to chair, throws himself into it.

HAMLET

To be -- or not to be!

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Yes, that's the question ---

Whether he's bravest who will cut his throat

GUILDENSTERN

Rather than suffer all ---

Or suffer all

Rather than cut his throat?

HAMLET (Annoyed at interruption, says, "Go away --- go away," then resumes)

To die --- to sleep ---

ROSENCRANTZ It's nothing more --- Death is but sleep spun out ---

(ROSENCRANTZ offers him a dagger)

GUILDENSTERN

Why hesitate?

The only question is

Between the choice of deaths, which death to choose.

(GUILDENSTERN offers a revolver)

HAMLET (In great terror) Do take those dreadful things away. They make

My blood run cold. Go away --- go away!

They turn aside. HAMLET continues.

ROSENCRANTZ

To sleep, perchance to ---

Dream.

That's very true. I never dream myself.

But Guildenstern dreams all night long out loud.

GUILDENSTERN (Coming down and kneeling)

With blushes, sir, I do confess it true!

HAMLET This question, gentlemen, concerns me not.

(Resumes) For who would bear the whips and scorns of time ---

SECOND TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

ROSENCRANTZ (As if guessing a riddle) Who'd bear the whips and scorns? Now let me see.

GUILDENSTERN (Same business)

Who'd bear them, eh?

Who'd bear the scorns of time?

ROSENCRANTZ (Correcting him)

GUILDENSTERN

The whips and scorns

The whips and scorns, of course.

(HAMLET about to protest) (GUILDENSTERN continues)

Don't tell us — let us guess — the whips of time?

HAMLET Oh, sirs, this interruption likes us not.

ROSENCRANTZ

I pray you give it up.

My lord, we do

We cannot tell who bears those whips and scorns.

HAMLET (Not heeding them, resumes) But that the dread of something after death —

ROSENCRANTZ That's true — post mortem and the coroner —

Felo-de-se — cross roads at twelve p.m. —

And then the forfeited life policy —

HAMLET (really angry)

Exceedingly unpleasant.

Gentlemen,

It must be patent to the merest dunce

Three persons can't soliloquize at once!

HAMLET retires and throws himself on dais, as if buried in soliloquy. Enter OPHELIA, white with terror, holding a heavy manuscript.

OPHELIA

ROSENCRANTZ

OPHELIA (In stage whisper)

Rosencrantz!

Well?

I've found the manuscript,

But never put me to such work again!

ROSENCRANTZ Why, what has happened that you tremble so?

OPHELIA Last night I stole down from my room alone

And sought my father's den. I entered it!

The clock struck twelve, and then — oh, horrible!

From chest and cabinet there issued forth

The mouldy spectres of five thousand plays,

All dead and gone — and many of them damned!

I shook with horror! They encompassed me,

Chattering forth the scenes and parts of scenes

Which my poor father wisely had cut out.

Oh, horrible — oh, 'twas most horrible! (Covering her face)

ROSENCRANTZ

OPHELIA (Severely)

What was't they uttered?

I decline to say.

The more I heard the more convinced was I

My father acted most judiciously;

ROSENCRANTZ

Let that suffice thee.

Give me, then, the play,

OPHELIA (Crossing to him)

And I'll submit it to the Prince.

But stay,

Do not appear to urge him — hold him back,

Or he'll decline to play the piece — I know him.

HAMLET Why what's that? (Rises and comes down.)

SECOND TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

GUILDENSTERN We have been looking through some dozen plays
To find one suited to our company.
This is, my lord, a five-act tragedy.
'Tis called "Gonzago" --- but it will not serve ---

HAMLET
'Tis very long.

Is there a part for me?

OPHELIA There is, my lord, a most important part ---
A mad Archbishop who becomes a Jew

HAMLET
To spite his diocese.

That's very good!

ROSENCRANTZ (Turning over the pages) Here you go mad --- and then soliloquize;
Here you are the same again --- and then you don't;
Then, later on, you stab your aunt, because ---
Well, I can't tell you why you stab your aunt,

HAMLET
But still --- you stab her.

That is quite enough.

ROSENCRANTZ Then you become the leader of a troop
Of Greek banditti --- and soliloquize ---
After a long and undisturbed career
Of murder (tempered by soliloquy)
You see the sin and folly of your ways
And offer to resume your diocese;
But, just too late --- for, terrible to tell,
As you're repenting (in soliloquy)
The Bench of Bishops seize you unawares
And blow you from a gun!

During this **HAMLET** has acted in pantimome the scenes described

HAMLET (Excitedly) That's excellent.
That's very good indeed --- we'll play this piece!

(Taking manuscript from **ROSENCRANTZ**)

OPHELIA But, pray consider --- all the other parts

SECOND TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

HAMLET

Are insignificant.

What matters that?

ROSENCRANTZ

We'll play this piece.

The plot's impossible,

And all the dialogue bombastic stuff.

HAMLET I tell you, sir, that we will play this piece.

Bestir yourselves about it, and engage

All the most fairly famed tragedians

To play the small parts -- as tragedians should.

A mad Archbishop! Yes, that's very good!

(Picture. HAMLET, reading the ms. with limelight on him. ROSENCRANTZ at entrance, OPHELIA at entrance.)

THIRD TABLEAU

March. Enter procession.

The KING sits, the QUEEN on his left, OPHELIA on his right, ROSENCRANTZ stands above her, GUILDENSTERN and POLONIUS behind the KING and QUEEN; the COURTIERs right and left.

QUEEN A fair good morrow to you, Rosencrantz.

How march the Royal revels?

ROSENCRANTZ Lamely, madam, lamely, like a one-legged duck. The Prince has discovered a strange play. He hath called it, "A right Reckoning Long Delayed."

CLAUDIUS And of what fashion is the Prince's play?

ROSENCRANTZ 'Tis an excellent poor tragedy, my lord -- a thing of shreds and patches welded into a form that hath mass without consistency, like an ill-built villa.

QUEEN But sir, you should have used your best endeavours
To wean his phantasy from such a play.

ROSENCRANTZ Madam, I did, and with some success, for he now seeth the absurdity of its tragical catastrophes, and laughs at it as freely as we do. So, albeit, the poor author had hoped to have drawn tears of sympathy, the Prince has resolved to present it as a piece of pompous folly intended to excite no loftier emotion than laughter and surprise. Here comes the Royal Tragedian with his troop.

Enter HAMLET and PLAYERS

HAMLET Good morrow, sir. This is our company of players. They have come to town to do honour and add completeness to our revels.

CLAUDIUS Good sirs, we welcome you to Elsinore.
Prepare you now -- we are agog to taste
This intellectual treat in store for us.

HAMLET We are ready, sir. But, before we begin, I would speak a word to you who are to play this piece. I have chosen this play in the face of sturdy opposition from my well-esteemed friends, who were for playing a piece with less bombastic fury and more frolic. (Addresses KING)
But I have thought this a fit play to be presented by reason of that very pedantical bombast and windy obtrusive rhetorick that they do rightly despise. For I hold that there is no such antick fellow as your bombastical hero who doth so earnestly spout forth his folly as to make his hearers believe that he in unconscious of all incongruity; whereas, he who doth so mark, label,

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

and underscore his antick speeches as to show that he is alive to their absurdity seemeth to utter them under protest, and to take part with his audience against himself. (Turning to PLAYERS) For which reason, I pray you, let there be no huge red noses, nor extravagant monstrous wigs, nor coarse men garbed as women, in this comi–tragedy; for such things are as much as to say, "I am a comick fellow — I pray you laugh at me, and hold what I say to be cleverly ridiculous." Such labelling of humour is an impertinence to your audience, for it seemeth to imply that they are unable to recognize a joke unless it be pointed out to them. I pray you avoid it.

Slight applause which HAMLET acknowledges

FIRST PLAYER Sir, we are beholden to you for your good counsels. But we would urge upon your consideration that we are accomplished players, who have spent many years in learning our profession; and we would venture to suggest that it would better befit your lordship to confine yourself to such matters as your lordship may be likely to understand. We, on our part, may have our own ideas as to the duties of heirs–apparent; but it would ill become us to air them before your lordship, who may be reasonably supposed to understand such matters more perfectly than your very humble servants.

ALL applaud vigorously. HAMLET about to explode in anger. KING interrupts him. HAMLET thinks better of it and angrily beckons PLAYERS to follow him. He and they exeunt.

CLAUDIUS Come, let us take our places. Gather round
That all may see this fooling. Here's a chair
In which I shall find room to roll about
When laughter takes possession of my soul.
Now we are ready.

Enter on platform a loving couple. Applause.

SHE

HE

Shouldst thou prove faithless?

If I do

Then let the world forget to woo (Kneeling)
The mountaintops bow down in fears,
The midday sun dissolve in tears,
And outraged nature, pale and bent,
Fall prostrate in bewilderment!

ALL titter through this — breaking into a laugh at the end, the KING enjoying it more than anyone.

OPHELIA Truly, sir, I hope he will prove faithful, lest we should all be involved in this catastrophe!

THIRD TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

CLAUDIUS (Laughing) Much, indeed, depends upon his constancy. I am sure he hath all our prayers, gentlemen!
(To ROSENCRANTZ) Is this play well known?

ROSENCRANTZ (Advancing) It is not, my lord. (Turns back to OPHELIA)

CLAUDIUS Ha! I seem to have met with these lines before. Go on.

SHE Hark, dost thou hear those trumpets and those drums?
Thy hated rival, stern Gonzago, comes!

Exeunt loving COUPLE. Laughter, as before.

QUEEN And wherefore cometh Gonzago?

ROSENCRANTZ He cometh here to woo!

QUEEN Cannot he woo without an orchestra at his elbow? A fico for such wooing, say I!

CLAUDIUS (Rather alarmed, aside to ROSENCRANTZ) Who is Gonzago?

ROSENCRANTZ He's a mad Archbishop of Elsinore. 'Tis a most ridiculous and mirthful character -- and the more so for that the poor author had hoped to have appalled you with his tragical end.

ROSENCRANTZ returns to OPHELIA. During this, the KING has shown that he has recognized his tragedy. He is horrified at discovery.

Enter HAMLET as Archbishop, with a robe and mitre. ALL laugh and applaud except the KING, who is miserable.

HAMLET Free from the cares of Church and State,
I come to wreak my love and hate.
Love whirls me to the lofty skies --
Hate drags me where dark Pluto lies!

ALL laugh except KING.

QUEEN Marry, but he must have a nice time of it between them!
Oh, sir, this passeth the bounds of ridicule, and to think that these lines were to have drawn our tears!

OPHELIA Truly, mine eyes run with tears, but they are begotten of laughter.

HAMLET Gently, gently. Spare your ridicule, lest you have none left for the later scenes. The tragedy is full of such windy fooling. You shall hear more anon. There are five acts of this!

ALL groan. HAMLET resumes.
For two great ends I daily fume --

THIRD TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

The altar and the deadly tomb.
How can I live in such a state
And hold my Arch–Episcopate?

ROSENCRANTZ (Exhausted with laughter) Oh, my lord — I pray you end this,
or I shall die with laughter!

QUEEN (Ditto) Did mortal ever hear such metrical folly! Stop it,
my good lord, or I shall assuredly do myself some injury.

OPHELIA (Ditto) Oh, sir, prythee have mercy on us — we have laughed till
we can laugh no more!

HAMLET The drollest scene is coming now. Listen.

CLAUDIUS (Rises)

(ALL start.)

Stop!

Stop, I say — cast off those mummeries!

HAMLET (Takes off robes)
Come hither, Hamlet!

Why, what ails you, sir?

CLAUDIUS (With suppressed fury)

HAMLET
Knowst thou who wrote this play?

Not I, indeed

CLAUDIUS
Nor do I care to know!

I wrote this play —

To mention it is death, by Denmark's law!

QUEEN (Kneeling) Oh, spare him, for he is mine only child!

CLAUDIUS Both shall together perish!

THIRD TABLEAU

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

CLAUDIUS draw dagger. **QUEEN** endeavours to restrain him.

HAMLET (On his knees) Hold thine hand!
I can't bear death — I'm a philosopher!

CLAUDIUS That's true. But how shall we dispose of him?

ALL puzzled.

OPHELIA (Suddenly) A thought!
There is a certain isle beyond the sea
Where dwell a cultured race — compared with whom
We are but poor brain-blind barbarians;
'Tis known as Engle-land. Oh, send him there!
If but the half of what I've heard of them be true
They will enshrine him on their great good hearts,
And men will rise or sink in good esteem
According as they worship him, or slight him!

CLAUDIUS Well, we're dull dogs in Denmark. It may be
That we've misjudged him. If such a race there be —
(There may be — I am not a well-read man)
They're welcome to his philosophic brain —
So, Hamlet, get thee gone — and don't come back again!

CLAUDIUS crosses to right. **HAMLET**, who is delighted at the suggestion, crosses to **QUEEN** and embraces her. He then embraces **OPHELIA**, who receives his kiss with marked coldness. Then he turns up onto platform and strikes an attitude, exclaiming, "To Engle-land!" At the same moment, **ROSENCRANTZ** embraces **OPHELIA**. Picture.