Male Friendship in Hamlet (emagplus 74)

Katy Limmer explores the ways in which Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildernstern contribute to the theme of male friendship in *Hamlet*, analysing their roles in the light of contemporary models and attitudes.

Many critics and audiences have been shocked that the first victims of a cold-blooded murder plot that Hamlet carries out, are his former friends; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The modern tendency to play these two characters for laughs has probably added to the unease felt by many when Hamlet dismisses both the act and its moral consequences in a few words; 'They are not near my conscience'. But if we consider the importance of male friendship and loyalty in Renaissance England, and compare the representation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's false friendship to the true friendship shown to Hamlet by Horatio, we may be more aware of the seriousness with which their betrayal would have been felt by both Hamlet and the play's first audiences, and therefore the justness of their deaths.

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Renaissance Models of Friendship

Renaissance models of ideal friendship; amicitia perfecta, had their roots in the writings of classical authors such as Aristotle and Cicero. Their ideas circulated in a variety of ways, including through essays written by the humanist writers Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon. The key features of this ideal sees friendship as arising from a free

choice made between equals. The perfect male friendship is based on strong affection and is of such closeness that the friends appear to be one soul in two bodies. This ideal can only be achieved however when both men possess incorruptible virtue. There must also be a high level of similarity in character between the two friends, so much so that the perfect friend is often described in Renaissance literature as an alter ipse: another self.

Classical examples of passionate and loyal male friendships, such as, Alexander and Hephaestion, Achilles and Patroclus, and Damon and Pythia, were often used to exemplify such perfect friendships. Unsurprisingly, in such a patriarchal society, one moreover looking to the explicitly misogynistic classical world for its models, this kind of friendship was only believed to be possible between men, and was often contrasted favourably to the fickle and base nature of love for women. The language of amicitia perfecta may sound very similar to modern audiences to the language of romantic love, such as when Hamlet signs his letter to Horatio, 'He that though knowest thine.' The intensity of male friendship in the Renaissance explains how shocking and bitter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's betrayal of their friend would appear to a contemporary audience.

Insiders and Outsiders

One of the most important differences between Horatio and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is their respective relationship to the court of Elsinore. Unlike Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are firmly ensconced in the web of social and power relationships that exists at Elsinore. Their position as 'school-fellows' of Hamlet's may to a modern audience seem to give them an advantage

over Horatio, a more recent friend, but this actually suggests their membership of courtly relationships which, as we see throughout the play, are based on political and economic usefulness rather than virtue or compatibility. Significantly Horatio, rather than having been selected for the role of friend for Hamlet since birth, has been freely chosen by Hamlet himself as a mature adult. The clues in the text suggest that Hamlet only met Horatio at Wittenberg where they are both students, and that unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Horatio is not an insider at the Danish court. True friendship in the Renaissance ideal was understood to result from the free choice of an individual, as opposed to being a pre-existing family or political relationship. Hamlet emphasises this aspect of his friendship with Horatio in Act 3 Scene 2, describing how,

> *since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,*
> *And could of men distinguish her election,*

he had selected Horatio.

One Friend: Another Self

Another key distinction between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Horatio is the fact that the former come as a pair. This pairing has sometimes been seen as a dramatic weakness by critics, especially as they have often struggled to find anything in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's characterisation to distinguish between them. Many modern productions, unable to find a reason for having two such similar characters, often play this for humour, for example Claudius is often shown to get them

confused at their first meeting. If we consider their role in the play as offering a model of false friendship, however, the fact that there are two of them becomes both more understandable and more significant. A perfect friendship, like that between Horatio and Hamlet, is necessarily an exclusive relationship between two individuals. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot be true friends to Hamlet because there are two of them. Shakespeare made the false friends two characters on purpose, in order for them to represent the wider, but necessarily weaker, ties of political friendship.

As the model of perfect friendship was one soul in two bodies true friendship can only be exclusively between two individuals. Hamlet makes it clear that Horatio fulfils this role when he frequently suggests he and Horatio are the same person. When they meet in Act 1 Scene 1, for example, Hamlet emphasises their interchangeability when he says to him, ‘Horatio – or I do forget myself.’ Although this could be merely a polite expression, given how well Horatio fits the classical model of perfect friendship, and how much Hamlet likes playing with words, it is much more likely that it should be read literally; if I forget you I forget myself. Similarly when Horatio describes himself as Hamlet’s ‘poor servant’ Hamlet replies ‘I’ll change that name with you.’ Horatio is Hamlet’s alter ipse; his other self.

False Friendship

The values marking out perfect friendship were incorruptible virtue and candour, both of which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern lack. Their lack of candour is exposed at their first meeting with Hamlet, as even after Hamlet has appealed to them in the name of their friendship to be open with him,

But in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?

they dissemble and equivocate for four exchanges before admitting they were sent for by the king. This betrayal of one of the basic tenets of friendship justifies Hamlet's distrust and rejection of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their feigned friendship. Aristotle emphasised the incorruptible virtue of true friends but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's friendship is inspired more by Machiavellian realpolitik, where friendship is valued only as far as it offers economic and political usefulness. Hamlet's friendship is useful to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a way of gaining reward and status at court by serving Claudius. This is made quite explicit in Act 2 where they are offered a reward for spying on Hamlet by Gertrude,

Your visitation shall receive such thanks
As fits a king's remembrance.

They are frequently shown to be willing to exploit their history of friendship with Hamlet for this end. Rosencrantz, for example, explicitly appeals to the ties of love and loyalty that true friendship relies on in Act 3 Scene 2, 'My lord, you once did love me,' (Act 3 Scene 2 l.303.) in order to find the information that Claudius seeks.

I am more antique Roman than a Dane

That Horatio represents an ideal classical model of friendship is emphasised by his Latinate name, which contrasts to the very Danish sounding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He also follows a classical mode of life, being a philosopher and, specifically, a stoic. His friendship with Hamlet is based on his stoicism, as it is what attracted Hamlet to him in the first place, as Hamlet explains in Act 3 Scene 2,

> *Give me that man*
> *That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him*
> *In my heart's core, ay in my heart of heart.*

Horatio reflects classical models in other ways too. When Hamlet playfully addresses him as Damon at the end of Act 3 Scene 2 it is probably a reference to the legend of Damon and Pythias. In the legend Damon trusted his friend so much that he took his place as a condemned prisoner until Pythias could return and face his death sentence. Horatio's desire to commit suicide and join Hamlet in death at the play's denouement also reflects his classical virtues, as well as his perfect friendship for Hamlet. Suicide was not seen as a sin or a cowardly act in ancient Rome, but was often represented as a brave and principled stand against tyranny.

The amicitia perfecta between Hamlet and Horatio thus exposes the cynical and corrupted version of friendship offered by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet explicitly reminds them of their former friendship and its moral demands when they first meet referring to, 'the consonancy of our youth and the obligation of our ever preserved love,' (Act 2 Scene 2) but their friendship and their virtue have

been corrupted, like so much else at the Danish court, by the malign influence of Claudius. Horatio by contrast demonstrates his loyalty and virtue throughout the play by giving Hamlet constant support and preferring death to life without him at the end.