

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Found: Five Seconds of Laurence Olivier's Film of *Hamlet*

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Abstract

There is an often-repeated legend that Laurence Olivier and co-screenwriter Alan Dent left Rosencrantz and Guildenstern out of their 1948 film version of *Hamlet*. While this is true for most intents and purposes, in fact two unnamed characters with no lines take their place in one scene of the film, a fact that has not been previously noticed. This note establishes why so many have claimed that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are absent from the film, presents evidence that either they, or nameless substitutes for them, do appear in the persons of these two characters, and suggests that the claim that the characters were cut needs to be qualified.

One of the most pervasive myths in Shakespeare films is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not appear in Laurence Olivier's 1948 film version of *Hamlet*.¹ After all, Olivier himself said twice that they do not. The first time was when he wrote, "[We] have taken out altogether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (Olivier 1948, 11-12). He said it again when discussing cuts to the play almost forty years later: "Of course we missed . . . some of our favorite characters, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who enrich the four-and-a-half hour pattern of the play which I was changing to the tighter pattern of a two-and-a-half hour film" (Olivier 1986, 292). The first of these quotations was printed in a book created to publicize the film. There were two other publications created for the same purpose, and both substantiate Olivier's statement. A souvenir program sold to moviegoers in the U.S. describes some of the trims made for the film, saying, in part, that "Olivier's cuts in his film production are more radical than is usual. Important characters such as Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern were eliminated" ("Putting Hamlet on Celluloid," 2-3). The strongest statement occurs in a third publication, an edition of the play that indicates the cuts made for the film, supplemented by three essays by people involved in the production and thirty-eight photographs and production illustrations. One essay, about the excisions to Shakespeare's text, is by Alan Dent who, in consultation with Olivier, cut the play down to size. Dent first notes several minor characters that

were cut, then adds that other characters lost "include, more sensationally, Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern," and finally, asks and answers his own rhetorical question, "Why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? They went at the very outset because there just had to be one whacking great cut . . . if the film were not to run to the impracticable length of three hours or more. The cut was not done unhesitantly. No Hamlet who ever existed would willingly choose to deprive himself of the magnificent opportunities for mockery that these two false friends give him." Most of a page is devoted to explaining this elective surgery (Dent 1948).²

Given that these insiders state so forcefully that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were cut in the script stage, one can hardly blame Shakespeare film scholars and others for believing it. No less than Bernice W. Kliman, one of the founders of Shakespeare film studies, writes that "Olivier's omission of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reduces the constraints on Hamlet's behavior" (Kliman 1988, 29). Performance critics also believe that these characters were excised. Michael Cohen writes, "Olivier cut the parts of Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern completely" (Cohen, 6). Olivier biographies and studies of his work repeat the claim. Donald Spoto, for instance, writes that Olivier omits several characters, "among them Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (Spoto 1992, 207). I examined forty-seven Shakespeare film books. The fifteen that address these cuts agree that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not in the film. I examined fourteen editions of *Hamlet* and books about the play with sections on *Hamlet* films. The six that address these cuts agree that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not in the film. I examined fifteen biographies of Olivier and books about his work. The six that discuss these cuts agree that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not in the film. No book examined says otherwise. H. R. Coursen sums it up when he observes that "Probably the most famous example of editing" "is the Olivier film . . . and its deletion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (Coursen 2002, 143).

Despite this scholarly consensus, however, it seems that Olivier did not remove Rosencrantz and Guildenstern altogether from his film of *Hamlet*. In what corresponds to 4.3.59-60 of the play, two characters fill their place. The King holds out a document and says, "Away, for everything is seal'd and done / That else leans on th' affair. Pray you make haste." At that, his courtiers file out and two men step in from off camera, entering the left of the frame (figure 1). Claudius hands them the document (figure 2), and they turn to exit the right side of the frame. Their screen time is five seconds, and they have no lines. They simply take the letter and go. Those who know the play realize that the document is the death order, instructing the King of England to execute Hamlet upon his arrival. While the document is not described in 4.3, Hamlet explains it and two other off-stage plot points to Horatio in 5.2.12-62, saying that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carried papers

from Claudius instructing that Hamlet be executed. Hamlet discovers this document and forges a replacement ordering the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.³

Are these characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Comments by Olivier and Dent, who made the film, and others less close to the production use language that indicates the complete absence of Hamlet's false friends, and certainly these two actors speak none of Rosencrantz's or Guildenstern's lines, Claudius does not confuse their names, they do not spy on Hamlet, nor do they refuse to play a recorder or try to get to the heart of Hamlet's mystery. In the most significant sense, they are not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Another approach, however, is to say that in the film, Claudius gives to "two courtiers" the document that in the play, he gives to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Olivier could have had Claudius give the document to one courtier, or three. Nothing except that original presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern demands that they be two. If the courtiers are not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then they stand-in for them, silently filling their space in this scene. We can call these characters pretty much anything: Stan and Ollie, Hope and Crosby, or simply "two courtiers," but by making them two Olivier seems to give a nod to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by having these two do what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do at this moment in the story.

This is not a great and significant discovery. It probably will not overturn interpretations of the film or open new ways of understanding it. We might, though, amend our language a little when writing about the film. It is probably not correct to continue saying that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are cut from the film. We should acknowledge instead that their place is for five seconds filled by these two courtiers.

Notes

1. My thanks to Douglas Lanier for helping me solve the problem of including screen captures from a DVD and for his encouraging comments about a late draft of this note. Thanks also to Bernice W. Kliman for helpful comments on the same draft. Quotations and citations from the play are taken from the Arden 2 *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins.
2. The pages of this book are not numbered. The quotations are taken from the fourth and fifth pages of Dent's essay.
3. Claudius gives the document to them at one 1:41:19-22, or just under a minute before the end of Chapter 20 on the Criterion Collection, region one DVD.

References

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