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## Good Heavens! A play in two acts

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Excerpts from *Good Heavens!*, a play in two acts  
The tale of two great minds with an astronomical legacy  
By Daniel Repp

Summary: *Good Heavens!* follows the partnership and rivalry between astronomers Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe at the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Kepler is a brilliant theorist determined to discover divine order in the universe, while Tycho is a master observer set on proving his incorrect model of the solar system. Hypatia of Alexandria and Guillaume le Gentil, two astronomers from other periods in history, serve as the narrators of the story and play the characters around Kepler and Tycho.

**From the end of Act I**

HYPATIA

We take you now to Prague, Bohemia on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1601.

*Lights up on a vacant dining table.*

GUILLAUME

Peter Vok Ursinus Rozmberk—

*HYPATIA takes on the role of Rozmberk and sits at the head of the table.*

ROZMBERK/HYPATIA

Present!

GUILLAUME

—is hosting a dinner at his palace, just next door to Emperor Rudolf.

ROZMBERK

This meal will be to die for!

GUILLAUME

In attendance at this dinner are Tycho and his dear friend, Councilor Minckwicz

*GUILLAUME takes on the role of MINCKWICZ as TYCHO enters.*

TYCHO

These horoscopes Rudolf has been demanding are driving me mad!

MINCKWICZ

How will we tell the difference in you?

TYCHO

No, I mean it! I have far better things to do than figure out what the planets have to say about his chances of being assassinated.

ROZMBERK

Minckwicz, Tycho, come join us at the table! What's this I hear about assassination attempts?

TYCHO

Nothing which lies outside the realm of paranoia.

MINCKWICZ

A realm you're familiar with, if your obsession with Ursus is any indication.

TYCHO

The man is a threat to my very legacy!

ROZMBERK

The man is dead.

TYCHO

And all the harder to kill because of it. I am not going to let him be remembered for my model of the heavens.

ROZMBERK

He won't be.

TYCHO

I have Kepler working on a refutation of his claims on my work.

MINCKWICZ

Another one? Ragging on the deceased, this time?

TYCHO

It is the only way to have the last word.

MINCKWICZ

Is Kepler up to the task?

TYCHO

He is exceptionally bright. Except that he thinks the planets go around the sun.

MINCKWICZ

So do you.

TYCHO

Most of them, yes. But the sun itself—

ROZMBERK

Don't let Minckwicz provoke you. Come sit.

*TYCHO and MINCKWICZ sit. As soon as TYCHO makes contact with the seat, he freezes, and GUILLAUME and HYPATIA break out of character.*

GUILLAUME

He sits!

HYPATIA

The trap is sprung.

GUILLAUME

His fate is set.

HYPATIA

This chair will consign Tycho, with Ursus, to the grave.

GUILLAUME

And, with Ursus, to the hosts of astronomers refuted by the methodical mind of Kepler.

HYPATIA & GUILLAUME

He sits!

*TYCHO unfreezes, and HYPATIA and GUILLAUME resume their roles as ROZMBERK and MINCKWICZ, respectively.*

TYCHO

Peter, have you heard the story about my ill-fated elk?

ROZMBERK

I certainly haven't.

MINCKWICZ

It's a solemn story.

TYCHO

Indeed. Ten years ago, I had my niece's husband look after an elk I had gotten for my animal collection. She was a well-behaved creature, but perhaps took after me too well. One day, she found her way up to the room where the beer was stored. After drinking more than her fill, she took a tumble down the stairs. Bam!

*TYCHO bangs the table for emphasis, and his golden nose falls off.*

MINCKWICZ

Tycho!

TYCHO

That's alright.

*TYCHO takes a container of paste out of his pocket, rubs it on the back of the golden nose, and reattaches it to his face.*

It happens sometimes. Anyway, the poor elk broke its leg and died shortly after.

ROZMBERK

Oh dear.

TYCHO

Such are the dangers of excessive indulgence in alcohol. Speaking of which, is that a bottle of wine I see?

*HYPATIA and GUILLAUME come out of character as TYCHO continues to silently engage in the dinner.*

HYPATIA

The dinner continues.

GUILLAUME

More guests.

HYPATIA

Small talk.

GUILLAUME

Savory meats.

HYPATIA

Fine drink.

GUILLAUME

The very picture of noble society which Tycho scorned...

HYPATIA

...but never abandoned.

GUILLAUME

At one point in his life, his salary amounted to one percent of Denmark's revenue.

HYPATIA

But you can't take it with you.

*HYPATIA and GUILLAUME resume their roles as ROZMBERK and MINCKWICZ, respectively. TYCHO shifts in his seat and grunts in discomfort.*

What's wrong?  
MINCKWICZ

I need to relieve myself.  
TYCHO

Of what?  
MINCKWICZ

Of pee. I need to pee.  
TYCHO

It would be incredibly disrespectful to get up before the host.  
MINCKWICZ

I'm aware.  
TYCHO

Do you think you can hold it?  
MINCKWICZ

Yes. I will be fine.  
TYCHO

Tycho?  
ROZMBERK

*TYCHO sits up straight, then winces in pain.*

Yes?  
TYCHO

Didn't you lose your nose in a duel?  
ROZMBERK

That is correct.  
TYCHO

That's what I thought. My wife was wondering.  
ROZMBERK

TYCHO

Ah.

MINCKWICZ  
(*Aside to TYCHO*)

It's okay. He's almost finished with his chicken.

*ROZMBERK mimes eating a piece of chicken, savoring each bite. It takes a long time. Perhaps he then licks his fingers, wipes them with a napkin, lets out a satisfied sigh, etc. Whatever can be done to draw out TYCHO's agony. Finally, ROZMBERK is about to rise, but then...*

ROZMBERK

Ooh! Dessert is on its way.

TYCHO

Son of a—

*HYPATIA and GUILLAUME come out of character. The scene shifts as they narrate.*

GUILLAUME

Tycho would have no relief that night.

HYPATIA

In either sense of the word.

GUILLAUME

Not even after he returned home.

*TYCHO stands with his back to the audience, attempting to relieve himself.*

TYCHO

It's no use!

*We are now in TYCHO's bedroom. TYCHO lies down on the bed.*

HYPATIA

Holding it in at dinner had done his bladder no service. For five sleepless days and nights, he cannot pee.

GUILLAUME

With intense pain, he manages to get a little out, but it's still mostly blocked. (*To HYPATIA*) Is that too much information?

HYPATIA

We astronomers care about all the data.

TYCHO

*Ne frustra vixisse videar. Ne frustra vixisse videar. Ne frustra vixisse videar.*

*TYCHO continues to repeat this phrase in a whisper.*

HYPATIA

Many come to visit Tycho in his suffering.

GUILLAUME

His family, of course.

HYPATIA

And also his best assistant.

*KEPLER enters.*

TYCHO

Kepler.

KEPLER

I am here. Are you?

TYCHO

Where else would I be?

KEPLER

You have been delirious for days. I was not sure you would be *here* here.

TYCHO

I am. Unfortunately.

KEPLER

I have been praying for you constantly.

TYCHO

Kepler, I need you to carry on my work.

KEPLER

You can carry it on.

TYCHO

I think this is it for me. But you are my brightest student.

KEPLER

You flatter me.

TYCHO

No flattery. You are the one who can prove it to the world.



The Tychonic system?  
KEPLER

Yes!  
TYCHO

I...I will continue your work.  
KEPLER

I know you favor Copernicus.  
TYCHO

It is hard to tell for certain. I have only just begun to see your data.  
KEPLER

I could not trust you. You and Ursus...  
TYCHO

Stop fighting dead men's battles!  
KEPLER

I will, soon. But I hope you won't.  
TYCHO

Thank you for taking me in. For everything.  
KEPLER

I did do quite a lot for you.  
TYCHO

Yes.  
KEPLER

Think about that when choosing a model to publish.  
TYCHO

Okay.  
KEPLER

Okay what?  
TYCHO

I am not going to argue with you in this state.  
KEPLER

TYCHO

You can speak your mind. Dying men get plenty of sympathy already.

KEPLER

I cannot promise to support your model. I will have to align with whatever the data shows.

TYCHO

Oh.

KEPLER

I am sorry.

TYCHO

I should have gone for the sympathy.

*TYCHO has a fit of pain.*

KEPLER

Let me bring your family in.

TYCHO

*Ne frustra vixisse videar. Ne frustra vixisse videar.*

TYCHO

*Ne frustra vixisse videar.*

KEPLER (*translating*)

Let me not seem to have lived in vain.

*KEPLER exits. GUILLAUME speaks over TYCHO as a memory of MINCKWICZ.*

MINCKWICZ

It would be incredibly disrespectful to get up before the host.

TYCHO

So trivial an offense.

*Lights fade on TYCHO as he dies.*

GUILLAUME

So trivial an offense indeed! It is astounding how often astronomers are thwarted by the smallest of matters. Rocking ships, cloudy skies...Why, in my journeys I—

HYPATIA

Guillaume!

GUILLAUME

Yes?

Tycho just died.

HYPATIA

Of course. I apologize.

GUILLAUME

Show a little respect.

HYPATIA

Shall we have a moment of silence?

GUILLAUME

Let's take fifteen minutes.

HYPATIA

For silence?

GUILLAUME

For intermission.

HYPATIA

Ah, yes! Tycho's death makes for a compelling cliffhanger. What will happen next?

GUILLAUME

That, and the audience could probably use a bathroom break. We just saw what happens if you try to hold it in.

HYPATIA

You die!

GUILLAUME

Not the most tactful way of putting it, but I can't fault your accuracy.

HYPATIA

So please, everyone, take advantage of the intermission.

GUILLAUME  
*(To audience)*

You saw what's at stake. Don't be a hero.

HYPATIA

**From the end of Act II**

TYCHO

To think, things looked so bright for Kepler when he wrote *New Astronomy*.

*Lights suddenly up on KEPLER working in his study. TYCHO makes a startled noise as KEPLER speaks.*

KEPLER

Let us consider how the Earth would appear in the sky from Mars.

GUILLAUME

Oh yeah—when you reference something here, it can show up in front of you.

HYPATIA

Takes some getting used to.

KEPLER

Let us consider how the Earth would appear in the sky from Mars.

TYCHO

So now we are back at him writing *New Astronomy*?

HYPATIA

So it seems.

KEPLER

As the sun orbits the Earth along with Mars, you can see that Earth would move at different speeds over time. In other words, Earth appears to move just like a planet.

TYCHO

What?!

*TYCHO glares at HYPATIA and GUILLAUME, then begins reading through the copy of New Astronomy.*

The rascal! He assumed the Earth was fixed to argue that it moves.

GUILLAUME

He's a clever writer.

TYCHO

Clever? He is devious and deceitful!

GUILLAUME

It's a fairly common rhetorical device—

TYCHO

You made it sound like Tegnagel made sure Kepler published my model.

GUILLAUME

We didn't want to upset you.

TYCHO

Kepler downplayed my achievements based on the advantages I got by being born into nobility. Yet even with all my advantages, this feeble nobody gets to come out ahead?

GUILLAUME

If you think about it, being raised in nobility was sort of your downfall, with the whole staying seated during dinner thing.

TYCHO

That ungrateful—I'm going to give him a piece of my mind.

*TYCHO begins to approach KEPLER.*

HYPATIA

You want to play a character in Kepler's history?

TYCHO

No, I want to talk to him as me, from now.

GUILLAUME

You can't do that. (*To HYPATIA*) Can he do that?

HYPATIA

Tycho, we need to be objective narrators here. We're not supposed to intervene!

*TYCHO leans over KEPLER's desk.*

He's intervening.

TYCHO

Kepler!

*TYCHO pushes the paper KEPLER is working on to the floor. KEPLER is confused, but picks it up and returns to work.*

Look at me!

*TYCHO pushes it off again, and KEPLER again picks it up and continues working. Then, TYCHO picks up the paper and holds it in the air. KEPLER is disturbed.*

TYCHO

Hey, it's Tycho! Remember, the man that made you?

*KEPLER notices TYCHO for the first time and freaks out. He prays.*

KEPLER

Holy father, protect me from this spirit I see before me.

TYCHO

Stop that. I'm not a ghost.

*He considers, then turns to HYPATIA and GUILLAUME.*

Am I a ghost?

*They give him a look or gesture of "This one's on you."*

It doesn't matter. What matters is that you are abusing my data.

KEPLER

I need to get more sleep. This is why I don't do observations.

TYCHO

You're not hallucinating. And no, you don't do observations, so stop taking advantage of mine.

KEPLER

My goal has always been to uncover the divine order of the universe. Do we not share that goal?

TYCHO

Where's the divine order in an Earth that whirls around the sun like the lights in the sky? The Earth is solid and sluggish and—

KEPLER

I understand your desire to keep a fixed Earth. I wanted so desperately to prove the perfection in God's creation. I once thought he built the universe based on shapes, and for a time I thought he built it using music, as if the planets themselves were a chord struck to sing his praise. But I have found we cannot even keep our heavenly circles.

TYCHO

I am aware. You settled on ellipses.

KEPLER

Yes! It is not the craftsmanship I expected from God, but it is beautiful craftsmanship nonetheless.

TYCHO

How is it beautiful if it suggests, against all common sense, an Earth that moves?

KEPLER

Because it is true.

TYCHO

And you think people will remember you for these ellipses?

KEPLER

If they remember the ellipses, they are free to forget me.

TYCHO

Either way, they will forget me!

KEPLER

The only entity the heavens should glorify is God.

TYCHO

Am I wrong to want some legacy for my decades of work?

KEPLER

You sound like Ursus. All he cared about was fame.

TYCHO

You cannot compare us! He was a thief; I was an innovator. My model was beautiful.

KEPLER

But it was not true.

*This stings TYCHO. He rips the page he stole from KEPLER.*

I worked hard on that!

TYCHO

So did I. Yet you have dismissed me with ease.

*TYCHO begins to gather papers off KEPLER's desk. KEPLER notices and begins to gather papers as well to salvage them. They continue to speak as each tries to claim the majority of the work.*

KEPLER

I depend on you! Your tables are the scales on which I weigh the universe against my models.

TYCHO

And so your work rises to the top.

KEPLER

But only once it has bowed to yours.

*TYCHO and KEPLER now each have half of the pages.*

TYCHO

What would you do if I destroyed all of this?

KEPLER

I would write it again.

TYCHO

All of it?

KEPLER

Yes. It would give me a chance to check the math.

*TYCHO moves as if to rip the pages. KEPLER jumps forward to stop him.*

TYCHO

I knew you were bluffing.

KEPLER

I will rewrite it! I would just rather not. I hope you are bluffing.

TYCHO

You are going to run this *New Astronomy* book by Tengenel, yes?

KEPLER

Yes. I will have to include a preface by him in my book warning readers not to trust my model.

TYCHO

Good! Then somebody will look ridiculous to future generations.

KEPLER

Yes, somebody will.

*TYCHO considers. He turns towards GUILLAUME and HYPATIA, who are still unseen by KEPLER.*

TYCHO

The world never embraces the Tychonic model.

HYPATIA

No.

TYCHO

My life's work, forgotten.



KEPLER

No, Tycho. Your life's work, immortalized.

*TYCHO regards KEPLER.*

TYCHO

You asked me once to stop fighting dead men's battles.

*TYCHO moves to KEPLER's desk.*

Consider this my surrender.

GUILLAUME

*(To HYPATIA)*

Is he going to give Kepler his nose?

HYPATIA

What?

*TYCHO returns KEPLER's papers to his desk.*

GUILLAUME

Oh, I get it.

KEPLER

Thank you.

TYCHO

Thank you. I suppose you only get to be right if you can admit when you are wrong.

*TYCHO returns to the narrators as KEPLER returns to his work.  
HYPATIA nudges GUILLAUME, who addresses the audience.*

GUILLAUME

Kepler's laws of planetary motion would prove indispensable.

HYPATIA

They were used by Isaac Newton to develop a theory of gravity.

GUILLAUME

They were used by NASA to send spacecraft to every planet.

TYCHO

And they will be used by future generations in ways we never thought of.

HYPATIA  
*(To TYCHO)*

Are you on the team now?

TYCHO

I think we have a story worth telling.

HYPATIA  
*(To audience)*

Goodnight, everyone.

GUILLAUME

May you have clear skies...

TYCHO

And clear consciences.

*The lights fade except on KEPLER. Then, blackout.*