

The Hamlet Mythos

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ABSTRACT

In the twelfth century, an obscure historian named Saxo Grammaticus recounted the tale of “Amleth.” That Shakespeare later borrowed the idea for his Hamlet from Saxo is not in dispute. What is intriguing to scholars, however, is the origin of Saxo’s noble Dane. Thus the focus of my research is an investigation into whether Amleth is an actual historical figure or simply a literary construct. Histories and legends from various parts of Europe include characters with elements similar to Saxo’s protagonist; however, no one character embodies all the elements that form the essence of Amleth. After critical analysis of primary sources from Scandinavia, England, Ireland and the Mediterranean region, it is my conclusion that Amleth is an amalgamation of both history and legend—that the historical character of Anlaf Cuaran, tenth century Danish conqueror of parts of Britain and Ireland, begins to be associated with legendary figures from the classical world and, through Saxo, is reborn as Amleth, heroic Fool of Denmark. This research is important not only for illuminating the origins of the renowned dramatic figure, but also for its contributions to the historiography of medieval Europe.

INTRODUCTION

“To be, or not to be, that is the question...”¹

With this line, William Shakespeare immortalized a character whose life and death become consumed by vengeance for the death of his father. Despite voluminous texts attesting to *Hamlet’s* literary value, the Hamlet mythos (that is, the origin of the Hamlet character) remains enshrouded in mystery. The Hamlet of modern understanding is derived, of course, from Shakespeare, yet there was a character described much earlier in history bearing the slightly different name of Amleth. This proto-Hamlet was recorded in the twelfth century by a Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, in his history of Denmark, the *Gesta Danorum*. That Shakespeare later borrowed his idea for Hamlet from Saxo is not in question. What is intriguing, however, is the origin of Saxo’s noble Dane. Histories and legends from various parts of Europe include characters with elements similar to Saxo’s protagonist; however, no one character embodies all the elements that constitute the essence of Amleth.

Past research has primarily involved collecting these various tales and describing their similarities to each other and to Amleth. One of the earliest works, written in 1905, was an English translation of Saxo’s text by Sir Oliver Elton in his book, *The Nine Books of The Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*. In his work, Sir Oliver faithfully translates Saxo’s original Latin text, but he also provides an illuminating commentary where he discusses the potential similarities between Amleth and the Roman legend of Lucius Junius Brutus, first proconsul of Rome.²

Another author who followed Elton's example was Israel Gollancz in the mid-1920s. In his two works, *Hamlet in Iceland* and *The Sources of Hamlet*, Gollancz briefly mentions the Mediterranean tales that bear similarities to Amleth, but he also elaborates on the potential Scandinavian elements from Iceland and Denmark that appear in the tale of Amleth. His research does not reveal any hypothesis as to the origin of Amleth, but it does provide a solid platform from which to pursue additional research. Gollancz's work displays the evidence available by simply discussing the various stories and legends that contain analogues to Amleth, however vague the connection, thus allowing the reader to evaluate independently the information at hand.

One source that provided the framework for much of this research was a modern translation of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* by Peter Fisher. What makes this work so unique is that it is in a two-volume series--Volume One is the translated text by Peter Fisher and Volume Two is an annotated commentary on the text by Hilda Ellis Davidson. The translation was helpful as it provided a more readable rendition than Elton's rather archaic version, but the commentary volume was invaluable for its additional information on the text.

The most recent study, published in the mid-1980s, is by William Hansen, author of *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet: A Translation, History, and Commentary*. In this work, Hansen echoes Elton and Gollancz by presenting the text of Amleth and the texts of the classical sources. Hansen does, however, attempt to discover analogues to Amleth in stories from outside of Europe. Hansen fails to prove that these tales are, indeed, similar to Amleth. Furthermore, his evidence showing how these tales are connected to Amleth is non-existent.

Though this research is extremely helpful in providing an avenue of research for primary sources, it falls short of advancing any theory as to the origins of Amleth. Thus, my purpose is to develop a preliminary theory as to the original identity of Amleth and the role played by these various tales. After careful and thorough analysis of all the primary sources concerned, it is my conviction that the origins of Amleth do not come from one source, but that the character of Amleth is an amalgamation of both history and legend--that the historical character of Anlaf Cuaran, tenth century conqueror of parts of Britain and Ireland, begins to be associated with legendary figures from the classical world, and, through Saxo, is reborn as Amleth.

METHODOLOGY

Upon the discovery of Saxo's tale of Amleth and the secondary sources discussing the similar literary elements scattered throughout Europe, it became appropriate to borrow an idea from Shakespeare--that things are not always as they appear. The legend of Amleth may appear to be simply a Danish tale and the other stories are similar by mere coincidence, but all the literature is too similar to support such a conclusion. Therefore, the initial step in research was the assumption that the tale of Amleth was not lifted straight from Scandinavian sources, but that it was based upon earlier characters. The second assumption, perhaps naive and rather optimistic, was that an answer could be uncovered. These two assumptions provided the theoretical basis upon of this research.

The majority of the research involved critical analysis of all the primary sources related to the Hamlet Mythos. In order to locate the relevant texts, it was necessary to consult secondary sources, such as Gollancz, Elton, and Hansen, to see which tales had been collected in the past. These secondary sources provided a wide spectrum of primary texts that required analysis. The beguiling, and sometimes daunting, part was obtaining the elusive primary sources in order to evaluate their relevance and base similarity to Amleth.

Little mention is given to whether a tradition of an Amleth character was present in native Scandinavian literature as past researchers focus primarily on the tale of Brutus and the similar texts of other regions. As Saxo and his character of Amleth are both indigenously Danish, it was only logical to explore their native literature before accepting any ideas of transference from the Mediterranean. Research of Scandinavian literature included a large variety of histories, sagas, and poetry that were produced by medieval scholars. No conclusive evidence, however, was discovered of any literary tradition of the Amleth figure in Scandinavia. Once it became clear that the tale of Amleth was not comprised of Scandinavian elements, it was more feasible to accept the idea that this character was an amalgamation of tales from outside Scandinavia. Poring over the primary sources allowed the non-relevant material to be extracted to see which tales actually were related to Saxo's account. This process provided the material with which to construct an hypothesis concerning the origins of Amleth that was then cross-referenced with all of the secondary sources to insure its originality. With much satisfaction, it was determined that no one had reached this conclusion.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Of the sixteen books of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, the tale of Amleth is present in the latter half of Book Three and the first half of Book Four. It has been suggested that this division of the account is a reflection of two different characters due to conflicting personalities of the Amleth in Book Three and the Amleth in Book Four.³ Previous research, however, does not provide an explanation beyond simply identifying the difference. In conjunction with my theory concerning Amleth's origins, it is my conclusion that this division occurs because the character of Amleth can be divided into two different components based upon their origins--the Amleth in Book Three based on Roman legend, and the Amleth in Book Four based on the Viking Anlaf Cuaran.

AMLETH AND BRUTUS

The first half of the tale—that which comprises the latter half of Book Three--introduces us to Amleth, the son of a Danish nobleman named Orvendil. Amleth's father is murdered by his own brother, Fengi, in a jealous plot to usurp his brother's title, property, and wife, Gerutha, daughter of King Rørik of Denmark. To spare himself a similar death and provide a disguise that gives him protection to enact his revenge against his uncle, Amleth feigns insanity:

Every day he would stay near his mother's hearth, completely listless and unwashed, and would roll himself on the ground to give his person a coating of filth. His grimy complexion and the refuse smeared over his face grotesquely illustrated his lunacy. Everything he said was the raving of an idiot, everything he did smacked of deep lethargy.⁴

Fengi eventually becomes suspicious of his nephew's "insanity" and decides to have him killed regardless of his true mental state. Fearing the wrath of King Rørik for killing his grandson, Fengi exports Amleth to England to be executed by the English king. Amleth is sent away with two escorts who secretly carry an execution request to the king of England. The noble Fool outwits these gruesome plans by rewriting the letter so that it instead calls for the execution of his two companions and arranges his marriage to the British princess.⁵ Once Amleth and his companions reach England, they are welcomed by a banquet-and his compa-

trials are hanged the following day. To compensate for the deaths of his escorts, Amleth is given a quantity of gold, which he melts down and places into two hollow wooden rods so that he can secretly carry it back to Denmark without arousing Fengi's suspicions.⁶ Upon his return to Denmark, Amleth returns to his uncle's hall and avenges his father's murder by slaying Fengi.⁷ Then to appease the Danish people, as well as to explain his own actions, Amleth delivers a speech, quoted verbatim by Saxo, that explains the reasons for his "insanity" and recounts the evils of Fengi's villainous rise to power and tyranny.⁸

It is this character that parallels the classical tale of Lucius Junius Brutus, legendary first proconsul of Rome, which is chronicled by three different historians—Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Quintus Valerius Maximus—around the beginning of the first century A.D.⁹ The tale of Brutus is described by each historian in a very similar manner—except for a few minor details.

The first historian offering the most complete depiction of Brutus is Livy, in his *History of Rome*. Here, Lucius Junius Brutus is the son of Servius Tullius, the king of Rome. Like Amleth, Brutus' father is slain by his step-brother, Lucius Tarquinius, in a plot to usurp the kingship.¹⁰ Tarquinius conducts further massacres as a way to secure his throne by eliminating the number of Roman statesmen who could oppose him in the political forum.¹¹ Upon witnessing these brutal acts, Brutus realizes his fate should he put up resistance to Tarquinius' new regime. Brutus takes up the guise of the Fool to save his own life, and give himself a protected status from which to plan his revenge. Brutus is described as "a young man of a very different mind from that which he pretended to bear."¹² As part of his act, Brutus relinquishes his land holdings and property to Tarquinius and accepts the title *Brutus* meaning "dullard."¹³

Following Tarquinius' accession to power, a snake slithers out of a wooden pillar in the palace and causes immense fright over its ominous portent. Tarquinius sends two of his sons, Titus and Arruns, to Delphi to consult the oracle about the serpent. Brutus accompanies them as "more of a butt than as a comrade."¹⁴ On this journey, Brutus carries a "golden staff inclosed within one of cornel wood ... as a gift to Apollo, and a roundabout indication of his own character."¹⁵

The culmination occurs when a noblewoman, Lucretia, is raped by Sextus, son of Lucius Tarquinius. Following her ravishment, Lucretia calls for her father and husband, who bring Brutus along. Lucretia tells them of her rape and dishonor before committing suicide. Brutus throws off his guise of idiocy and utilizes the tragedy as an opportunity to rally the people of Rome against the Tarquins. In a speech to the Roman people, Brutus describes Tarquinius' evil deeds in his accession to power and the tyranny that follows under his regime. It is decided that the gates of Rome are to be eternally closed to Lucius Tarquinius, thus permanently ostracizing him.¹⁶

The tale told by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Roman Antiquities* is quite similar in certain aspects to that of Livy. Brutus' father is killed by Lucius Tarquinius, who again is Brutus' uncle. In this version, however, Brutus' father is not the king of Rome. He is simply a nobleman named Marcus Junius. Brutus' elder brother also is killed and Brutus feigns insanity to save himself and later enact revenge. The only other difference is that the trip to Delphi is instigated by a plague in Rome. From this point on, the tale is identical to that of Livy's.¹⁷

Quintus Valerius Maximus, in his *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, only mentions Brutus in passing. He states that Brutus' brother is killed by his uncle, Lucius Tarquinius, but there is no mention of his father being murdered. Because of these deaths, Brutus takes up the role of

the Fool to protect himself. The trip to Delphi, as well as Brutus' golden rods symbolizing his true, though enshrouded, nature, are also found in the tale.¹⁸

Though these tales vary in their details concerning Brutus' exploits, common themes exist in all three. First, members of Brutus' family are killed. Secondly, Brutus feigns insanity to save himself and facilitate revenge. Finally, Brutus is sent on a journey to Delphi with two companions followed by the appearance of the golden sticks surrounded by hollowed wood.

In comparing the stories of Amleth and Brutus, it is clear that the two stories are almost identical. Like Brutus, Amleth's father has been murdered by his own brother as part of a plot to usurp power. Both characters feign insanity to save themselves from the fate shared by their family members. In addition, both characters embark on a journey of some sort--Brutus to Delphi and Amleth to England--with two companions. It is within the context of this journey that the two golden rods encased in wood make their appearance. Both of these characters also enact their revenge and deliver speeches that recapitulate the evils of their usurping uncles.

What needs to be emphasized is that each of these themes by themselves do appear in other works of literature. The fact that these various conventions come together in the same way in two different times and places is crucial to the tale of Amleth. By themselves, the ideas of fratricide and feigned insanity are common conventions. It is their combination with a journey and the two golden rods that connects the stories of Brutus and Amleth. The presence of so many characteristics common to both stories suggests that the story of Amleth must have been borrowed, either consciously or unconsciously, by Scandinavian authors.

CLASSICAL LINKS

The pertinent question is how could a Roman tale manifest itself on the opposite end of the continent a millenium after it was conceived? It is known that Saxo did have a copy of Q. Valerius Maximus' text to provide him with direct knowledge of the legendary proconsul. Saxo's patron, Archbishop Absalon, possessed a codex of Q. Valerius Maximus that he loaned to Saxo for his writing of the *Gesta Danorum*. A clause in Absalon's will requests Saxo to return the copy of Valerius Maximus to Absalon's monastery at Soro.¹⁹

Besides this direct knowledge of the Brutus legend, there is a possibility of direct communication between the Mediterranean and Scandinavia through Eastern Europe. A group of Vikings (Varangians) began to conquer and colonize large sections of Eastern Europe around the middle of the ninth century. Supplying a link between Scandinavia and Constantinople, the Varangian presence facilitated a great deal of trade not only of material goods but of oral tales as well. Some of the Varangians became merchants and traders thus connecting these two cultures by employing a sea-trade route through the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and to Constantinople. As the Varangians proved to be a fierce fighting force, they became increasingly more involved with the Byzantine armies to the extent that they began to form an elite Varangian Guard to aid in the defense of Constantinople.²⁰ This theory does provide a physical and cultural link between these two peoples, but a theory of how it might relate to Amleth needs further research and development.

The use of classical themes, like the legend of Brutus, was not uncommon in medieval Europe. At the time, Latin was the universal language of the learned and was used for writing on all matters academic. It should come as no surprise to find medieval historians writing in Latin and employing Latin sources and themes in an attempt to glorify their nations.²¹ At the time of Saxo's writing, Denmark was becoming unified as a great nation under the direction

of two powerful figures--King Valdemar I and Archbishop Absalon.²² They commissioned Saxo to write a great history of Denmark. Having been trained at the University of Paris, Absalon saw how other nations, such as Britain and France, were writing their histories in grand chronicles. Denmark was now entering into European politics as a powerful player, and Absalon realized that it, too, must have a grand history, written in Latin, of which it could be proud.²³ In addition, it was quite commonplace for a great number of Danish scholars to study at the University of Paris. In fact, a Danish College for Scandinavian Students was established at the University of Paris in 1170.²⁴ From this, it can be surmised that if the codex of Q. Valerius Maximus was not a sufficient source for the legend of Brutus, other sources of information could be known through the ties to this illustrious university.

Biblical Insanity

Proof of this use of classical conventions in medieval writing can be shown by the presence of Mediterranean elements in the tale of Amleth. Besides Brutus' successful feigning of insanity, there is another parallel for this type of action in the *Bible*. Adopting the guise of insanity in order to save one's life can be found in the Old Testament, specifically I Samuel 21:12-15.²⁵ Here, David has been sent away from Israel and unknowingly makes his way to the land of King A'chish of Gath. In order to save himself from this terrible king, David changes his behavior and "feigned himself mad in their hands, and made marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard."²⁶ A'chish, upon seeing this, deems him harmless and has him released. This, in conjunction with the tale of Lucius Junius Brutus, indicates that the feigning of insanity to save one's own life was not an uncommon literary convention. As Saxo was commissioned by the church, if not a clergyman himself, it is plausible that he knew of this Biblical verse and realized, perhaps even emphasized, the similarity to Amleth.²⁷

Ptocholeon the Slave and the Prophetic Observations

In the tale of Amleth, the scene where he visits the court of the English king also has a Mediterranean analogue. Upon Amleth's arrival in England, the king holds a banquet in honor of his Danish guests, but Amleth refuses to partake in the food. When asked why, Amleth replies in prophetic utterances, making it seem as though he possesses a supernatural knowledge. Amleth states:

the bread was tainted with blood, the drink has the flavour of iron and the banquet meat was smothered in the odour of a corpse, as though it had been polluted by proximity to the stench of death. He added that the king had the eyes of a slave and that his queen had displayed three mannerisms of a maidservant,²⁸ aiming the real brunt of his criticism not so much at the dinner as its providers.²⁹

Naturally, the English court is insulted, but further investigation reveals that Amleth's observations are true. The wheat for the bread had been grown on the site of an ancient battle, the pig that was served had fed on a corpse, and the drink contained water from a well where several rusty swords were found. It is also revealed that the King's mother had an affair with a slave and the queen had once been a maidservant.³⁰

Such astounding abilities, as shown by Amleth, are exhibited in Mediterranean literature in a Byzantine poem concerning the slave Ptocholeon. In this poem, Ptocholeon exhibits

almost supernatural powers of observation when in the presence of Byzantine nobility. He states that the king is the son of a slave and his bride is born of servants. Upon further investigation, it is discovered that the utterances of Ptocholeon are absolutely true.³¹ In this case, the idea of astute powers of observation appear in both Scandinavian and Mediterranean literature.

AMLETH AND ANLAF CUARAN

Despite the existence of classical parallels, the tale of Amleth draws some of its content from indigenous history and literature--the exploits of the Danish Viking Anlaf Cuaran--to form the second half of Amleth's origins. In Book Four, Saxo continues the tale of Amleth, although most of the action occurs in the British Isles. Amleth returns to England to collect his English bride after avenging the death of his father. The King of England inquires after Fengi's health only to find that he's been murdered by his nephew out of vengeance. He is shocked and dismayed at this news because, unbeknownst to Amleth, he had an alliance of revenge with Fengi so that he is now required to kill Fengi's murderer, who just happens to be his new son-in-law. The king, now torn between the bonds of family and his loyalty to Fengi, decides to send Amleth to Scotland as a delegate to arrange a second marriage for the king to the princess of Scotland, Herminthrud. Unknown to Amleth, this is a plot to facilitate his "accidental" death, for Herminthrud has a reputation of killing all those who ask for her hand in marriage.³² Amleth outwits the king's vengeance by not only avoiding execution, but by marrying Herminthrud, forming an alliance with Scotland, and returning to England with an army of Danish and Scottish troops to become the new ruler of England. Upon his return to Denmark, though, Amleth is murdered by a rival noble. Herminthrud, despite her firm protestations of love and loyalty to Amleth, betrays him after his death by willfully marrying his vanquisher.³³

It is this half of the Amleth tale that can be found in actual historical records. *The Irish Annals of the Four Masters*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and a scattering of Scottish annals document, at least in part, the exploits of Anlaf Cuaran, whose life experiences closely resemble those of Amleth's later adventures. Little is known of Anlaf's life except that which is chronicled in these few medieval texts. Anlaf Cuaran is believed to be the same person as Anlaf Sitricson, otherwise known as Olaf Sitricson, whose father was Sitric, Danish ruler of Northumbria in England.³⁴ Upon the death of Anlaf's father in A.D. 926, Anlaf's uncle, Ethelstan, seized control of Northumbria, forcing Anlaf to flee for his life.³⁵ Anlaf spent part of his exile in Scotland, forged an alliance with the Scottish King, Constantin, and married his daughter.³⁶ Around A.D. 937, the Danes and Scots under the command of Anlaf and Constantin attempted to conquer Northumbria by fighting Ethelstan's army at a place known as Brunanburh. To their dismay, they were brutally beaten and barely escaped with their lives.³⁷ It was not until A.D. 949 that Anlaf finally was able to conquer Northumbria and become its ruler, as well as king of all the Danish Vikings in the British Isles.³⁸ Like Amleth, Anlaf made a journey from England (Northumbria) into Scotland where his eventual return to England conferred upon him the rulership of the land, albeit temporarily. Within four years, however, Anlaf was driven out of Northumbria by a Viking ruler from Norway known as Eric Blood-Axe.³⁹

Following his second defeat in Northumbria, Anlaf returned to his stronghold at Dublin where he forged an alliance with the Irishmen of Leinster under the leadership of Murchadh in an attempt to consolidate his power.⁴⁰ This alliance was further cemented by Anlaf's mar-

riage to Murchadh's daughter, Gormlaith. When Anlaf was killed at the battle of Tara, in A.D. 978, it was this same Gormlaith who married the man who killed him. Indeed, the following is said of Gormlaith:

Gormlaith, daughter of Murchadh, son of Finn, mother of the king of the foreigners, i.e. Sitric [Anlaf's son by Gormlaith]; Donnchadh, son of Brian, king of Munster; and Conchobar, son of Maeleachlainn, king of Teamhair [Tara], died. It was this Gormlaith that took three leaps of which was said:

Gormlaith took three leaps,
Which women shall never take [again],
A leap at Ath-Cliath, a leap at Teamhair,
A leap at Caiseal of the goblets overall⁴¹

The fact that both Amleth and Anlaf are sent into Scotland (for whatever reason) from England, return to England to become its ruler and are betrayed by their wives after death indicates that the life of Anlaf Cuaran is the kernel of truth with which the classical legend of Brutus blends to form the Hamlet Mythos.

AMLETH AND LOKI

In addition to history, though, Saxo employs native Scandinavian literature in the legend of Amleth. When Amleth feigns insanity, he not only acts foolishly, he takes on the mythical role of the trickster. Disguising his true nature with tricks, jokes, and clever phrases, Amleth appears witty and verbally playful in his efforts to play the part of the Fool. Amleth displays his affinity for riddles and riddling speech by responding to questions posed by courtiers with absolute truth phrased in such a way as not only to appear false and humorous to those around him, but to make him look stark, raving mad. In one scene, Amleth visits his mother's bedchamber with the intention of explaining his plot and feigned insanity. Fengi, however, has placed a spy underneath the bed in an attempt to expose Amleth's mental fraud. Upon discovering the spy, Amleth butchers his body and throws the pieces into the sewer to feed the pigs.⁴² When Fengi inquires after his spy, Amleth bluntly states "that the man had gone into the drain, tumbled down to the bottom and, buried under a heap of sewage, had been devoured by the pigs."⁴³ This statement elicited peals of laughter from his audience despite its truthfulness.⁴⁴

A second instance of Amleth's truth being mistaken for humor occurs when he returns from England. As Amleth arrives alone, the people at court inquire of his two companions. Amleth simply points to his two gold-filled wooden rods and states "'Here's one and that's the other.'"⁴⁵ The courtiers took this as a sign of Amleth's insane humor while, in reality, Amleth was telling the blatant truth since the gold was given to him by the English king as compensation for the deaths of his two escorts.⁴⁶

Fond of telling riddles in order to disguise his true nature, Amleth often does so at the expense of his murderous uncle, hinting at his future revenge. Before his trip to England, Amleth is out riding with an entourage of courtiers. The group comes upon a wolf and, as a joke, Amleth's companions tell him that it is a young colt. Amleth responds by saying "there were very few of that breed serving in Fengi's stables."⁴⁷ Despite his companions' joviality at this statement, Amleth meant it as a veiled insult at Fengi's war prowess. There is a tradition in Scandinavian society of great warriors who, because of their tremendous war prowess, are followed by wolves who feed on the corpses of the dead soldiers. Therefore, by remarking

that Fengi has few wolves in his stables, Amleth intimates that Fengi is a coward who achieves his status by underhanded treachery instead of honorable combat.⁴⁸

This theme of the clever trickster is prevalent in Scandinavian literature through the identity of Loki, the arch-trickster. Loki often plays tricks upon other deities and humans alike to the end result of fostering trouble for everyone. He exists to torment his fellow deities with clever insults at their expense.⁴⁹ In the poem *Lokasenna*, or “The Flyting of Loki,” as contained in *The Poetic Edda*, Loki bursts into a hall full of merrymaking deities and proceeds to insult them one at a time.⁵⁰ To the great warrior-god, Bragi, Loki says that he is afraid wherever battles are fought and runs in fear. Consequently, Bragi comes close to killing Loki with his bare hands.⁵¹ Completely unchecked, though, Loki taunts the great goddess Freya by calling her a harlot and saying there was not one man within the hall that she hadn’t “lured to love.”⁵²

THE PUZZLE OF “AMLOÐI”

In addition to the obvious trickster tradition in Scandinavian mythology, there is another, though infinitely more puzzling, factor that must be considered when discussing Scandinavian elements in the Amleth tale. A section of poetry, written by a ninth century poet named Sem Snæbjörn, briefly mentions a character named Amloði.⁵³ The problem with this fragment is that it is one of the only remaining copies of Snæbjörn’s writing--the rest has been lost to the ravages of time. This section has survived only because it was cited by the thirteenth century Norse historian, Snorri Sturlason, in his collection of Scandinavian folklore, *Edda*:

They say the nine-skerry-brides [daughters of the sea god] turn fast the most-hostile [sea] out beyond the land’s edge, they who long ago ground Hamlet’s [Amloði’s] meal.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to understand the context of this poem as there are very few sources in Scandinavian literature that mention such a figure. What can be understood is that there is some sort of relation between Amloði and the sea. Past that solitary fact, there exists only speculation.

HAVELOK THE DANE—THE LYNCHPIN BETWEEN ANLAF AND BRUTUS

If the tale of Amleth is a mixture of Scandinavian and Classical elements, where do these two traditions come together to form Amleth? Was there some sort of tale in Scandinavia with which the tale of Brutus could harmonize in order to create a new tale? The connection between Anlaf and Brutus may be provided by another aspect of the Viking Anlaf Cuaran--the Anglo-Norman tale of Havelok the Dane. Pre-dating Saxo by at least a half-century, the exploits of Havelok are chronicled in the *L’Estoire des Engleis* by Geffrei Gaimar around 1141.⁵⁵ It is generally accepted by historians that this tale is a romanticized version of Anlaf Cuaran.⁵⁶ Though the two names may not appear similar, it may help to understand the various creative spellings of Anlaf’s name throughout the Middle Ages--Amlaib, Avlaif, Abloc, and Habloc.⁵⁷

In the Anglo-Norman tale, Havelok’s father has died and the usurping Earl Godard ships Havelok off to England to live as a menial, completely ignorant of his noble heritage. Havelok becomes a kitchen servant to the English earl, Godrich. As an insult to his niece, Goldborough, a princess of England, Godrich marries her to the lowly servant Havelok.

Eventually, Havelok realizes his nobility and returns to Denmark to claim his throne from Godard. Upon prompting from Goldborough, Havelok then returns to England to acquire the territory that was stolen from her by Godrich. In the end, Havelok defeats and kills Godrich to become the king of England and Denmark.⁵⁸

As one can see, Havelok does bear a resemblance to Amleth and Brutus. Since Denmark had close ties, both politically and culturally, with Britain, it is possible that this story was known to Saxo. These three tales deal with a noble figure whose position has been lowered by a father's death. Therefore, it is possible that the tale of Havelok coalesced with the legend of Brutus to create Amleth.

Thus, because of the presence of a similar plot in Mediterranean and Scandinavian literary traditions, it is my conclusion that the Amleth of Saxo Grammaticus is based, in part, on the historical characters of Brutus and Anlaf Cuaran. That classical ideas filtered into Scandinavia to become integrated with the tale of Havelok and Anlaf indicates that the character of Amleth is not just a mythological character without a grain of truth, but a mixture of both an actual historical and legendary character.

LIMITATIONS/FUTURE RESEARCH

It has been my goal through this research to provide a more thorough understanding of the use of classical literature and its role in medieval historiography as it applies to the tale of Amleth. The realization of the extent to which medieval historians used or did not use their classical predecessors' material allows for a more complete understanding of the literature.

Although my research has contributed to our knowledge of Amleth's origins, this project is but a starting point and is by no means conclusive. With the time restraints of this project, it would be impossible to do all of the research I feel is necessary to answer fully the conundrum of Amleth's origins. I have but scratched the surface of the Hamlet Mythos.

With this in mind, I intend to continue this research at the graduate level in order to produce a conclusive study. Such study would provide a wider selection of primary texts, as well as actual documents, to be used at my disposal and employed in further research. Further research to be carried out should include a more in-depth historical and literary analysis of all the relevant primary sources in their original languages. Before any further research is attempted, it will be necessary to study the primary languages in which these texts are written, in particular Latin and Old Norse. A closer analysis of the Roman legend of Brutus could provide more information concerning Amleth's classical half, perhaps leading to another elusive historical figure. In addition, the tale of Havelok warrants more research. If this is indeed the bridge between Anlaf and Brutus, it would be useful to understand what might have motivated the author of Havelok, as well as possible literary influences, to create his Danish protagonist. Most importantly, though, an in-depth analysis of oral transmission and modification of tales over time and space would be a valuable addition to explain the various plot permutations from region to region.

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