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**“The matter that you read”:**

**Saxo Grammaticus as a Source for Shakespeare and a Resource for Teachers of *Hamlet***

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Some of the elements that make *Hamlet* appealing to both Shakespeare teachers and their students also make it difficult to discuss. Most of us feel instinctively drawn to the young Prince of Denmark—I recall being deeply in love with him as a young student and regretted that I could find no fellow-students like him. As a teacher, I found the play fascinating to teach precisely because the usual classroom terms such as “tragic flaw” seemed inadequate to explain him. While the other great tragedies present their own conundrums, readers can at least agree that, for example, Macbeth’s murder of Duncan is wrong. Hamlet’s failure to stab a praying man in the back is not nearly so easy to judge, hence the multiplicity of views about the nature of the hero and his dilemma. Some see Hamlet as “torn between the lower and higher ethic,”<sup>1</sup> while others are equally certain that “Shakespeare does not make Hamlet struggle with the inconsistency between a barbaric tribal code and the Christian code of morals in the matter of revenge.”<sup>2</sup> Some argue that the hero brings about his own downfall by failing (or at least hesitating) to do his duty as a Christian<sup>3</sup> or a son,<sup>4</sup> but others see him as “an almost perfectly good and noble man who is destroyed by a vastly more imperfect world.”<sup>5</sup> Of what kind of tragic hero can the latter be said? As Edward Ridsen has noted, *Hamlet* “cagily resists the patterns of tragedy,”<sup>6</sup> and does not yield to our standard set of picklocks.

A medievalist teaching Shakespeare has another, perhaps more effective, set of picklocks in the form of Shakespeare’s medieval source material. Particularly in the case of *Hamlet*, a look at the major source can be useful because that source is not a classical tragedy but a chronicle. Therefore, if we find, as some critics do, that Hamlet could not have avoided his disaster or even that the play “ends as happily as it possibly could,”<sup>7</sup> we can still make sense of it. While Shakespeare was not obliged to draw his characters and cultures the same as he found them in his source, neither was he obliged to change them just to meet our expectations of the tragic genre. In fact, teachers frequently observe to their classes that Shakespeare would have been astonished at the way we read his work today, i.e. that a teacher assigns them in printed form to a class who will take them home, read them silently, and be ready to discuss them in the terms provided by Aristotle, whether they seem to apply to what we see or not. For a class studying *Hamlet*, the source provides a complete, internally consistent cultural context that allows us to judge the hero in terms that fit the facts. It also includes short and highly entertaining stories of murder, debauchery, ghostly hauntings, and power struggles that our students are certain to enjoy.

Since the eighteenth century, scholars have realized that the Latin *Vita Amlethi* (Life of Hamlet) as recorded by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* around 1200 was the original source for the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Palfrey Utter, “In Defense of Hamlet,” *College English* 12, no. 3 (1950): 139.

<sup>2</sup> Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), 441.

<sup>3</sup> Miriam Joseph, “‘Hamlet,’ A Christian Tragedy,” *Studies in Philology* 59, no. 2 (1962): 119.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Jenkins, *Hamlet and Ophelia* (London: Oxford UP, 1963), 137; Gunnar Bokland, “Judgment in *Hamlet*,” in *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. Gerald W. Chapman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Preston Thomas Roberts, “Hamlet’s Moment of Truth,” *The Journal of Religion* 49, no. 4 (1969): 351.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Ridsen, *Shakespeare and the Problem Play: Complex Forms, Crossed Genres and Moral Quandaries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 145.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 158

plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.<sup>8</sup> Saxo drew on numerous earlier sources, including Roman chronicles such as Livy's, as well as written and oral tales of his native Denmark.<sup>9</sup> However, Saxo's version, published for the first time in Paris in 1514, was the source of the later versions and has been compared to Geoffrey of Monmouth's "priceless gift of Arthurian romance."<sup>10</sup> Copies of it were available in Shakespeare's England,<sup>11</sup> and the playwright could have consulted it directly. In fact, nobody disputes that his "small Latin" would have been more than equal to the task. Nevertheless, most critics are now convinced that Shakespeare did not encounter the tale directly from Saxo but via *Les Histoires Tragiques* by Francois de Belleforest.<sup>12</sup> Belleforest altered and expanded Saxo's work considerably, and the resulting version was evidently popular, as it was printed several times in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Many believe that Shakespeare's most immediate source was a now-lost play usually called the *Ur-Hamlet*.<sup>13</sup> This idea was introduced in the late eighteenth century by Edmund Malone<sup>14</sup> and has gained wide acceptance despite the lack of solid evidence.<sup>15</sup> Most who believe in the existence of such a play believe that the author was Thomas Kyd,<sup>16</sup> though a few contend that it was Shakespeare himself.<sup>17</sup> However, even if such a play did exist and was a source rather than a creation of Shakespeare's, it would presumably have derived from Belleforest.<sup>18</sup> Some critics have seen both Saxo and Belleforest in Shakespeare's version. For example, John Dover Wilson argued in 1934 that "some of the germinal phrases in Saxo, such as the description of Polonius's predecessor as 'praesumptione quam solertia abundantior' and of Gerutha after her shending as 'lacerata mater,' have no parallel in Belleforest."<sup>19</sup> However, most were convinced by Arthur P. Stabler's argument (made in a series of articles throughout the 1960s) that Shakespeare came by the Amleth/Hamlet story through Belleforest or at least an *Ur-Hamlet* derived from Belleforest and did not consult Saxo directly. Therefore, by 1973, Robert Cohen can declare that, "It is generally assumed that Shakespeare used the Belleforest as well as the 'Ur-Hamlet'"<sup>20</sup> without a mention of Saxo.

<sup>8</sup> See Lewis Theobald, *The Works of Shakespeare in Seven Volumes*, vol. 7 (London: A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, J. Tonson, F. Clay, W. Feales, and R. Wellington, 1733), 237.

<sup>9</sup> Israel Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet with an Essay on the Legend* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967), 15-36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>11</sup> Hilda Davidson, introduction to *Saxo Grammaticus: History of the Danes*, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 67; William F. Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet: A Translation, History, and Commentary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 67. For a more specific discussion of Saxo's reception in England, see Ethel Seaton, *Literary Relations of England and Scandinavia in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935).

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 7 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 10; Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet*, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Cay Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare: A Study of Englishmen's Knowledge of Denmark Towards the End of the Sixteenth Century With Special Reference to Hamlet*, vol. 1 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975), 16-17; Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, 67; Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Routledge, 1977), 158

<sup>14</sup> Malone, Edmond, *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, vol. 7 (London: H. Baldwin for J. Rivington and Sons, 1790), 337-8.

<sup>15</sup> Emma Smith, "Ghost Writing: *Hamlet* and the *Ur-Hamlet*," *The Renaissance Text: Theory, Editing, Textuality*, ed. Andrew Murphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 178.

<sup>16</sup> Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, 67; Margrethe Jolly, "Hamlet and the French Connection: The Relationship of Q1 and Q2 *Hamlet* and the Evidence of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*," *Parergon* 29, no. 1 (2012): 86; Julie Maxwell, "Counter-Reformation Versions of Saxo: A New Source for "Hamlet?" *Renaissance Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2004): 519; Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 383-431.

<sup>18</sup> Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), xvi.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Cohen, "Shakespeare's Sixteen-Year-Old Hamlet," *Educational Theater Journal* 25, no. 2 (1973): 186.

Dissenting voices, such as Cay Dollerup, have continued to point out that Saxo could have been the most important source at least for the *Ur-Hamlet*. In 1975, after what Hilda Davidson (in Peter Fisher's translation of Saxo) rightly calls "a full and cautious examination of the evidence,"<sup>21</sup> Dollerup concludes that "Saxo's influence must have been greater than is commonly assumed, and he, rather than Belleforest, may have been the primary source for the Elizabethan dramas."<sup>22</sup> He points to several passages in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that could have been influenced by Saxo, including the spy hiding behind the hangings, the potentially dangerous ghost, and the punning fake-madness of Hamlet's speech, among others.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, later critics have not taken Dollerup's work seriously, and in 2004, Julie Maxwell feels safe in saying "for certain" that "Shakespeare's version is manifestly closer to Belleforest's than to any other."<sup>24</sup> Both Maxwell and William Hansen acknowledge Dollerup's argument but seem to discount his conclusion because he fails to take account of Stabler's work.<sup>25</sup> In 2012, Margrethe Jolly simply declares in the course of giving background information that "both quartos derive ultimately from the French source."<sup>26</sup>

I would like to reopen the possibility that Shakespeare used Saxo directly because I find that critics (with the exception of Dollerup) have too often sought their evidence exclusively in the Amleth story and have therefore missed important evidence indicating Shakespeare's knowledge of Saxo. Dollerup may be easy to dismiss because he does not always take full account of his opposition (including Stabler). Sometimes, too, he commits the same faults as his opposition, as he often focuses too precisely on turns of phrase that could have come from many places, such as Old Hamlet's fighting the "sledded Polacks" on the ice and the Ghost's paleness.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, his idea of looking outside the Amleth story is sound, and if one takes it further, it provides strong evidence for Saxo as a direct and important source for Shakespeare.

Particularly, arguments that Shakespeare came by his *Hamlet* story exclusively via Belleforest tend to focus narrowly on a feature of the Amleth story. For example, Stabler disputes Kenneth Muir's statement that "in neither of these stories [Saxo or Belleforest] was there a ghost" (160), arguing that Shakespeare's ghost might have come from a couple of lines in Belleforest. In one, Amleth says his mother has acted without regard to "les ombres de Horvvendille"<sup>28</sup> ("the shade of Horvvendille").<sup>29</sup> In the other, he hopes his murderous uncle will tell his father in the underworld that his murder is avenged so that "son ombre s'appaise"<sup>30</sup> ("his ghost will be at peace").<sup>31</sup> Indefinite as these references are, Stabler notes that they are not to be found in Saxo's version and takes this absence as evidence that Shakespeare used Belleforest rather than Saxo. While this statement is true as far as it goes, Dollerup notes that Saxo's work contains several references to ghosts, including some that could have influenced Shakespeare. (A more detailed discussion of the ghosts will follow shortly.) They are not in the Amleth story, but we have no reason to believe that the Amleth story was

<sup>21</sup> Davidson, Introduction, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-40.

<sup>24</sup> Maxwell, "Counter-Reformation Versions of Saxo," 519.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 519; Hansen, *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, 177.

<sup>26</sup> Jolly, "Hamlet and the French Connection," 83.

<sup>27</sup> Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare*, 36-41.

<sup>28</sup> Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet*, 212. Belleforest quotations are from the edition of *Les Histoires Tragiques* in Gollancz, 164-311.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur P. Stabler, "King Hamlet's Ghost in Belleforest?" *PMLA* 77 (1962): 18. Translations are Stabler's.

<sup>30</sup> Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet*, 256.

<sup>31</sup> Stabler, "King," 19. See also Stabler, "Melancholy, Ambition, and Revenge in Belleforest's *Hamlet*," *PMLA* 81 (1966): 207-213.

circulating separately or that Shakespeare would have encountered it in isolation. In the absence of other evidence, it seems reasonable to suppose that a reader would start at the beginning. If Shakespeare did so with Saxo, he would have found a number of vividly-drawn ghosts with definite and memorable habits. And, as I shall show, ghosts are not all that might have caught his imagination. If we look not only at Hamlet's story but at Hamlet's Denmark, we find many features—including attitudes, beliefs, and expectations—that become easier to understand if we suppose the author's familiarity with Saxo's chronicle.

Perhaps the most controversial topic on which Saxo may shed light is the view of ghosts we find in *Hamlet*. Traditionally, Shakespeare critics have seen a connection between the nature of the Ghost and the question of whether Hamlet ought to avenge his father. The majority, who see the Ghost as either a good spirit or a soul in Purgatory, believe Hamlet ought to do as he says and is culpable for his slowness.<sup>32</sup> However, some critics, such as Eleanor Prosser, have argued the Ghost is the evil spirit Hamlet first fears he is and, what is more, succeeds in persuading the “spiritually vulnerable”<sup>33</sup> hero into imperiling his soul. Prosser's view was vigorously challenged by Kurt Eissler, who regards as “overeducated or obsessional” anyone who does not believe the Ghost is Hamlet's real father come back from Purgatory. However, Eissler can explain the conflict Hamlet feels about following the Ghost's command only by pronouncing him insane.<sup>34</sup> Eissler quotes Gunnar Boklund, who asserts that “Shakespeare does not concern himself with the question of whether blood-revenge is justified,”<sup>35</sup> presumably because the issue is not discussed explicitly in the text. While stopping short of declaring Hamlet insane, Boklund finds him “in the power of his emotions rather than of his thoughts.”<sup>36</sup> However, Eissler's reading is somewhat selective, as Boklund also believes that “the nature of the ghost remains ambiguous”<sup>37</sup> and leaves open the possibility that Hamlet “vaguely feels” the Ghost to be “an emissary of the devil.”<sup>38</sup> Fredson Bowers, on the other hand, finds that Hamlet's belief in the Ghost's honesty is so firm that it makes him Heaven's “scourge and minister.”<sup>39</sup> He delays only because he is “waiting on the expected opportunity which should be provided him” and is confused and depressed when Heaven fails to provide it.<sup>40</sup>

More recent critics, following the lead of Stephen Greenblatt, have regarded the conflict between the Ghost and Hamlet as a struggle between Catholic and Protestant, or more specifically between the medieval Catholic past and the Elizabethan Protestant present. This view builds on the much older one which holds that the Ghost is a spirit in Purgatory “in which many Englishmen still believed.”<sup>41</sup> He is being punished because he died without the sacraments (“unhous'led” and “unanel'd”) but is able to communicate with the living, as Catholic theologians such as Thomas

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Maurice Francis Egan, “The Ghost in Hamlet,” *The Ghost in Hamlet and Other Essays in Comparative Literature* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 43.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 127.

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Robert Eissler, *Discourse on Hamlet and Hamlet: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), 227.

<sup>35</sup> Gunnar Boklund, “Judgment in Hamlet,” *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. Gerald W. Chapman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 119-20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 3.4.174. All Shakespeare quotations are from this edition.

<sup>40</sup> Fredson Bowers, “Hamlet as Minister and Scourge,” *PMLA* 70 (1955): 745.

<sup>41</sup> Egan, “The Ghotst in Hamlet,” 18.

Moore believed souls in Purgatory could do.<sup>42</sup> Greenblatt, focusing on the contradiction between what many Englishmen still believed and what state-sanctioned theologians would have said, sees “a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, . . . haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost.”<sup>43</sup> Although “Hamlet does not know that Purgatory is a fiction,”<sup>44</sup> the Ghost’s position is intended to reveal the weaknesses and contradictions in the doctrine. For example, he laments about not receiving the sacraments but then demands that his son seek a very unchristian revenge.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Hamlet’s doubts about obeying him are the doubts of an Elizabethan Protestant about whether the Ghost can really be what he appears to be.<sup>46</sup>

All of these approaches have their weaknesses. While Prosser’s argument is not as weak as Eissel claims, it does require us to believe that *Hamlet* recounts the hero’s gradual succumbing to the temptations of the fiend and that the deaths of Polonius and of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are steps in the process. I cannot say that I see a Macbeth-like descent into Hell, where the hero learns to kill without remorse until “The very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand.”<sup>47</sup> Hamlet, after all, kills Polonius without even seeing him, imagining that he (hiding in the queen’s bedroom) is the king. Having done so, he says, “For this same lord I do repent; but Heaven hath pleas’d it so, / To punish me with this, and this with me.”<sup>48</sup> Then the trickery by which he has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed is so obviously an act of self-defense that it raises none of the moral questions that private vengeance raises. I see no reason they would be nearer his conscience if their deaths had occurred before that of Polonius. Nor is the argument that Hamlet is insane (or even controlled by emotion) much of an improvement. Admittedly, Hamlet’s shamming insanity does not preclude the idea that he is less stable than he thinks, and we all have our mental problems. One can always call literary characters (or, for that matter, real people) insane and thus relieve them of responsibility and us of the need to understand their reasons. But to do so robs the work of much of its meaning. The view that Hamlet sees himself as a Heaven’s scourge is certainly consistent with Hamlet’s stated belief that “I was born to set it right.”<sup>49</sup> It may even explain why Hamlet hesitates to kill the king while he is praying. Still, it is hard to believe that opportunities are as sorely lacking as Bowsen’s reading requires. If Claudius drinks as much as Hamlet says he does, and if Hamlet has access to him “When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage; / Or in th’ incestuous pleasure of his bed,”<sup>50</sup> then he must have missed several better opportunities. Hamlet certainly thinks he has delayed unnecessarily and scourges himself on that account more than once. The allegorical conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism may indeed be present, but if so, it works much better on the symbolic level than the literal. On the literal level, as Greenblatt acknowledges, “Hamlet does not know that Purgatory is a fiction,” and therefore the Ghost’s “reality is theatrical rather than theological.”<sup>51</sup> Here, Greenblatt is exploring the contradictions in *Hamlet*—what they suggest about Shakespeare’s transitional culture and conflicting attachments—not seeking to resolve them. However, a symbolic conflict cannot explain a literal dilemma unless the person experiencing the

<sup>42</sup> Mark Matheson, “Hamlet and ‘A Matter Tender and Dangerous,’” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1995): 384.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 240.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>46</sup> W. B. Worthen, “Recent Studies in Tudor and Stuart Drama,” *Studies in English Literature* 42, no. 2 (2002): 402.

<sup>47</sup> *Macbeth*, 4.1.147.

<sup>48</sup> *Hamlet*, 3.4.172-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.5.189-90.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.3.89-90.

<sup>51</sup> Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 253.

dilemma is, on some level, aware of the symbolic conflict. As Hamlet is not, Greenblatt's reading may well be workable, but it cannot stand on its own.

All of these readings fail to explain the literal facts of the play, and most of them conflate the question of whether Hamlet is obliged to seek revenge with the intentions of the Ghost, as Saxo would never have done. Let us therefore return to Saxo, whose history of Denmark contains numerous revenge stories. Clearly, Saxo was mindful of the duty to seek blood revenge, which Frederick York Powell calls "one of the strongest links of the family in archaic Teutonic society."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, most of the kings and princes in his history avenge their kinsmen immediately, vigorously, and without ceremony. However, Saxo tells more than one story of delayed revenge whose features readers of Shakespeare will find familiar. In the early years of Frothi III's kingship, too much peace begets idleness, and the ruling class becomes decadent, indulging in ever vice including drunkenness, lasciviousness (from orgies to rape), and general sadism because "[n]othing prolongs open sin as much as the postponement of due vengeance."<sup>53</sup> As a result, says Saxo, the King of Norway decides that Denmark is weak because "the Danes found their own king repugnant and longed for an opportunity to replace him."<sup>54</sup> He concludes that now would be a perfect time to invade. Based on this section, Saxo would have no trouble seeing the kind of rottenness Hamlet and his friends note in the state of Denmark as directly caused by delayed revenge. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, vengeance having been similarly delayed, the King of Norway's son, "Holding a weak supposal of our worth, / Or thinking by our late dear brother's death/Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,"<sup>55</sup> also threatens invasion, demanding the lands his father lost to the elder Hamlet.

Since Dollerup sees the story of Frothi's kingship as possibly influencing Shakespeare,<sup>56</sup> it is surprising that he finds no parallels in the Ingel story of the next book. When Frothi IV dies, his son Ingel hosts his father's killers in his own house and "thought it no blushing matter to repay wrongs with favours, nor considered his father's pitiful murder with any sigh of bitterness."<sup>57</sup> Saxo condemns Ingel, who "surrendered himself wholly to the baits of wanton extravagance,"<sup>58</sup> indulging so much in gluttony, drunkenness, and lechery that that his father's old retainer Starkather abandons him and seeks more vigorous employment with the Swedes.<sup>59</sup> Ingel continues to neglect his duties as a son and a king until Starkather returns to rebuke him for his laziness. The lecture, surprisingly, stirs Ingel to action:

Starkather prevailed so much that he struck out from the king's torpid, paralysed mind with the flintstone of his reprimand a blazing fire of resolution. At first Ingel's ears were deaf to the song, but soon he was moved by his guardian's more urgent exhortations and his spirit, late in the day, caught the heat of revenge...Bloodthirsty, ruthless, he bared his sword and leveled its point at the throats of Swerting's sons, whose palates he had been tickling with culinary delights. Speedily he carved them to pieces and bathed the table-ceremonies in

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<sup>52</sup> Frederick York Powell, introduction to *The Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Oliver Elton (New York: T.H. Smart, 1905), 14.

<sup>53</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus: History of the Danes*, trans. Peter Fisher, edition and commentary by Hilda Davidson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 5.121. All Saxo quotations are from this edition.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.122.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2.18-20.

<sup>56</sup> Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare*, 32-42.

<sup>57</sup> *Saxo*, 6.185.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.175.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.175.

blood; he severed the frail bond of their fellowship, exchanged shameful conviviality for extreme savagery and turned from hospitable to hostile, from the most groveling slave of luxury to the grimmest agent of retribution.

The energetic pleading had raised a spirit of ardour in the weak, pliant youth and, removing it from its hiding-place, so hammered out and refashioned his courage that due satisfaction was wreaked on the perpetrators of that grievous assassination. The young man's integrity had been in exile but had certainly not breathed its last; brought to light with the old man's assistance, it had the greatest effect because it had been so tardy, all the more spectacular when it replenished the goblets with blood instead of wine.<sup>60</sup>

The similarities between Ingel and Shakespeare's Hamlet may have escaped notice because of their superficial differences. Hamlet is not wallowing in lechery or drunkenness, though he complains that his father's slayer does. Nevertheless, the resemblance between the scene quoted above and the scene in which Hamlet, finally stirred out of his torpor and ready to take a savage revenge (which will be all the more impressive for its tardiness) should strike even the most casual reader of Shakespeare as familiar. After the ghost of an old man prompts Hamlet to seek revenge, he continues to indulge in books and plays, his preferred means of entertainment, and calls himself a "A rogue and peasant slave,"<sup>61</sup> as well as "a dull and muddy-mettl'd rascal" who "lack[s] gall/To make oppression bitter."<sup>62</sup> Later, when he has a good chance to strike and fails to do so (his ears deaf to the song), the Ghost revisits him "to whet thy almost blunted purpose."<sup>63</sup> Finally, of course, a last act of treachery prompts him to take decisive action, stabbing his father's slayer with the poisoned blade and forcing the poisoned cup between his teeth. In the end, both sons are praised elaborately for their valor and nobility. When Ingel finally takes his tardy revenge, Starkather says,

Farewell, King Ingel. Your soul, full of passion, has revealed  
its daring. Now the heart that reigns in your body  
has given its own sign; a deep determination  
was never away from your breast, although you kept quiet  
until the time came. Your courage makes reparation  
for the harm of delay and a strong fortitude redeems  
your flaccidity...  
Now therefore, Ingel, more than in times gone by  
you deserve to be named lord of Leire and Denmark.<sup>64</sup>

Hamlet, who is briefly King of Denmark, receives a briefer but equally loving farewell from his old friend Horatio: "Now cracks a noble heart. God night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."<sup>65</sup> Thus, even Hamlet's hesitation and eventual victory over himself are fully present in Saxo though not in the Amleth story.

While the parallel is not perfect because Ingel is prompted by a living man rather than a ghost to take his revenge, Saxo's history also contains the story of Hother, whose killing of Gunni "appeased

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.193-4.

<sup>61</sup> *Hamlet*, 2.2.550.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.2.567, 577-8.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.4.111.

<sup>64</sup> *Saxo*, 6.194-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Hamlet*, 5.2.359-60.



his foster-father's ghost."<sup>66</sup> Because Gunni had killed Gevar (Hother's foster-father) by burning him alive, Hother does the same to him. Thus, the Shakespeare story evokes the Saxo story of Hother in two ways. Both are acts of vengeance to appease a ghost, and both are executed by the same method as the original murder—in Hother's case burning, in Hamlet's case poison.

Elsewhere in his *History of Denmark*, Saxo writes even more explicitly of ghosts. In the preface, he describes a forbidding world of ice and volcanoes and a glacier that “dashes into the rocky coast,” after which “the cliffs can be heard re-echoing, as though a din of voices were roaring in weird cacophony from the deep. Hence a belief that wicked souls condemned to a torture of intense cold are paying their penalty there.”<sup>67</sup> Dollerup is one of the few to connect this place with the prison-house to which Hamlet's father is condemned.<sup>68</sup> From Saxo's prison-house, those who died “with all [their] crimes broad blown, as flush as May”<sup>69</sup> can be heard by the living. Later, when warned not to fight with a certain giant, a warrior says his comrade will “add him [the giant] to the shades.”<sup>70</sup> The idea that killing someone is to make a ghost (a shade) of him is, of course, used later by Shakespeare when Hamlet's friends try to dissuade him from following the Ghost, and he threatens, “I'll make a ghost of him that lets me” (1.5.85).

The possibility that injustice would cause these angry ghosts to harry the living is expressed by princess Svanhvita. Grieving to see Ragnar and Thorald oppressed by their stepfather the king, she declares (in part),

Evil spirits make war, an unholy mob, given  
to wicked strife, battles in the open...  
A savage choir of specters hurtle along the wind  
raising their deafening howl to the stars.  
Satyrs and fauns, horned and hoofed, with wrathful  
gaze fight alongside the ghosts.<sup>71</sup>

Yet another scene mentioning ghosts may provide a precedent for the poisoned-wine scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When Hagbarth is condemned to death for slaying the two brothers of his beloved (albeit in battle), the queen taunts him:

Now arrogant Hagbarth,  
judged fit to die by the whole  
assembly, put this horn  
goblet to your mouth  
and taste its thirst-dispelling  
liquor. Repress your fears,  
now that you are facing  
the last hour of life,  
and sip this mortal cup  
with bold lips, so that

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<sup>66</sup> *Saxo*, 3.79.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare*, 43-5.

<sup>69</sup> *Hamlet*, 3.3.81.

<sup>70</sup> *Saxo*, 1.18.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.43.

its draught may steer you to  
the underworld regions.<sup>72</sup>

Hagbarth replies defiantly:

I shall take hold of this final cup,  
my last drink, with the very hand  
which did away with your twin sons.  
I shall not visit the unearthly country  
and its fierce ghosts, unavenged. It was  
my effort that accomplished their defeat  
and locked them in infernal caverns.

After continuing to taunt the queen over her slain sons, “he flung back the cup at the queen and drenched her face in a spray of wine.”<sup>73</sup> The wine does not appear to be poisoned, but in this exchange, it clearly represents mortality.

As to the behavior of ghosts, Saxo puts his most bone-chilling description in the mouth of Asmund, who consents to be buried along with his companion Asvith but soon regrets his decision. Having escaped from the barrow, he tells the story of Asvith’s coming back to life in the night:

Why are you dismayed to view me so bereft of colour? How  
can any man who lives with dead men not grow somewhat faded there?  
Every dwelling in the world is wretched for one in loneliness;  
unhappy are they whom Fate has robbed of the help of men.  
This ancient hollow cavern and the shadows of empty night  
have snatched away the pleasure of my eyes and of my heart;  
foul earth, the decaying barrow and an overwhelming tide  
of dirt have diminished the handsomeness of my youthful face,  
sapped the powerful strength I often once exercised.  
Beyond all this I have struggled against a phantom’s energy,  
wrestled with grievous strain and immense peril. Asvith  
returned from the other world with ghostly violence; his gashing  
nails attacked me, renewing fierce battle after his death.<sup>74</sup>

Dollerup identifies this passage as a possible influence on Shakespeare and rightly points out Horatio’s description of the Ghost as “pale”<sup>75</sup> but surprisingly does not notice Ophelia’s description of Hamlet, who has seen the Ghost, as “Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other, / And with a look so piteous to purport / As if he had come out of hell / To speak of horrors.”<sup>76</sup> Of course, Hamlet has already announced his intention to sham madness, but changing the color of one’s complexion would require some remarkable skill. For Saxo, the spirits of the dead can rise, but as Asmund’s story shows, they are angry and dangerous. They attack even those they loved most in

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.216.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.216.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.151.

<sup>75</sup> *Hamlet*, 1.2.231; Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare*, 41.

<sup>76</sup> *Hamlet*, 2.1.78-81.

life. Shakespeare's Horatio seems to take this view of risen spirits, as he fears that the Ghost will draw Hamlet:

...to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,  
And there assume some other horrible form,  
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason  
And draw you into madness."<sup>77</sup>

It is also worth noting in Hamlet's defense that not all spirits in Saxo are honest: some do deceive mortals for the purpose of tormenting them. After Balder fails in his attempt to kill Hother and steal Nanna, he is "incessantly tormented at night by phantoms which mimicked the shape of Nanna."<sup>78</sup> Yet another reference in Saxo to dead men coming back as ghosts occurs when Hild is said to have "yearned so ardently for her husband that she conjured up the spirits of the dead men at night."<sup>79</sup> In light of Asmund's experience, she is taking a terrible risk.

However, the Ghost in Shakespeare's Hamlet, could very well be "an honest ghost"<sup>80</sup> and yet have evil intentions. The anger of Saxo's ghosts does not prevent them from speaking the truth or even speaking prophecy. For example, a dead man forced by magic spells to speak at his own funeral, intones:

Let the one who summoned me, a spirit from the underworld, dragged me from the infernal depths, be cursed and perish miserably...  
For a black, pestilent whirlwind, monster-created,  
will thrust its pressure hard upon your vitals,  
and a hand will sweep you by force snatching your body,  
tearing and cutting your limbs with cruel talon.  
Only you, Hading, will survive with your life;  
the lower kingdom will snatch your ghost away,  
nor your heavy spirit travel to the nether waters.  
But the woman, weighted down by her own offence, will  
placate my ashes, soon become ashes herself,  
for causing the backward return of my wretched shade.<sup>81</sup>

The woman responsible does not survive the next scene, and the "hand" of vengeance turns out not to be metaphorical: she is torn apart by a supernatural "hand of enormous magnitude."<sup>82</sup> This combination of honesty and malice fits the Ghost in *Hamlet* very well. He may indeed tell young Hamlet the truth, but it does not follow that he aims for the good of either his son or his country. Clearly, he has been murdered. Saxo would recognize him as an angry, unquiet spirit whose aim is to hurt the living.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 1.5.70-74.

<sup>78</sup> *Saxo*, 3.73.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 5.149.

<sup>80</sup> *Hamlet*, 1.5.138.

<sup>81</sup> *Saxo*, 1.24.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 1.24.

As to the royal succession, if Shakespeare read Saxo from the beginning, Hamlet's statement that Claudius "Popp'd in between th' election and my hopes"<sup>83</sup> is easily intelligible and is clearly related to his anger at his mother's hasty marriage. Critics have, of course, recognized "the elective nature of the monarchy"<sup>84</sup> in Hamlet's Denmark. Yet Stabler, still restricting himself to the Amleth story, is forced to infer this cultural fact from the speech Amleth gives (in both Saxo and Belleforest) after he avenges his father and wants to make a case for his own election as King of Denmark.<sup>85</sup> However, in Saxo's history of Denmark, Shakespeare would have read about the custom of electing the king, who would be a close relative (by blood or marriage) of the preceding king but not necessarily a son. For example, in the first book, we learn that "it was our forbears' custom to proclaim their votes while standing on stones fixed in the ground, as though to augur the durability of their action through the firmness of the rocks beneath them. On the death of his father Humbli was elected by this new method."<sup>86</sup> Stabler rightly surmises that Feng (Claudius), although presumably elected, is nevertheless a usurper because he prevented Amleth from becoming king, i.e. popped between the election and his hopes. However, on this issue also, Stabler focuses on a single line in the Belleforest version that is not in the Saxo version, and this line causes him to draw a wrong conclusion. In this line, Amleth resolves to avenge his father as soon as he "venoit a perfection d'aage" ("attained man's estate"). Stabler concludes that Feng prevents Amleth from becoming king because he kills his father while Amleth is still a minor and "therefore, at the moment, ineligible."<sup>87</sup> However, in Saxo, minors are not ineligible for the kingship. For example, "After Fridlef's death the seven-year-old son Frothi took his throne at the concerted wish of the Danish people. Everyone held Fridlef's name and memory in such high esteem that the sovereignty was handed on to this very young representative of his line."<sup>88</sup> So Amleth, even if he is a minor, could still be elected. The age of Shakespeare's Hamlet is another controversial matter, and some have argued that he is as young as sixteen,<sup>89</sup> a possibility that would fit several of the facts (i.e. his being a student and unmarried) much better than the usual reading, which takes the Gravedigger literally and makes him thirty. Be that as it may, by Danish law and custom, he is not ineligible for the election.

What Feng/Claudius does to establish his claim to the kingship is, of course, to marry the queen. While neither Saxo nor Belleforest mentions this motive for marriage in the Amleth story, if we look elsewhere in Saxo's chronicle, we find that marriage to the queen (or princess) gives even a man without royal blood at least an argument for the kingship. Some husbands even commit or attempt regicide for this very reason. For example, Ulvhild urges her husband, "a commoner, Guthorm,"<sup>90</sup> to kill her father, King Hading, because she "preferred to be looked upon as a queen, not a mere princess."<sup>91</sup> Apparently, marriage to the king's daughter would give this commoner a chance for the kingship if the current king were out of the way. Hading detects the treachery and survives the encounter, but later we find Ulvhild married to Ubbi, who, with or without her urging, "traded on his wife's noble rank and took the kingdom into his own possession."<sup>92</sup> Given this pattern, Saxo does not have to explain to his readers why Feng would be eager to marry Gerutha (Gertrude) and

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<sup>83</sup> *Hamlet*, 5.2.65.

<sup>84</sup> David Ward, "The King and 'Hamlet,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (92): 286.

<sup>85</sup> Arthur P. Stabler, "Elective Monarchy in the Sources of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Philology* 62, no. 5 (1965): 656.

<sup>86</sup> *Saxo*, 1.14.

<sup>87</sup> Stabler, "Elective," 658; italics in the original.

<sup>88</sup> *Saxo*, 5.118.

<sup>89</sup> Cohen, "Shakespeare's Sixteen-Year-Old Hamlet," 117.

<sup>90</sup> *Saxo*, 1.34.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.34.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.45.

why this marriage would pop him between the election and young Amleth's hopes. Obviously, Shakespeare is under no obligation to follow Saxo in this or any other matter. But he chooses not only to include Hamlet's complaint about the election, but also to place his Hamlet at a far-away university at the time King Hamlet is killed. Although Hamlet is clearly back in Denmark by the time of their marriage, in the time news took to travel from Elsinore to Wittenberg and Hamlet to return, Claudius would have had time to make his case with the thanes as well as Gertrude. But he would have had to make haste. This concern, as Isaac Asimov suggests, may explain why everyone at the Danish court is so anxious for Hamlet to put off his mourning: although he may have no way of knowing what Claudius did to his father, if he is not content with the present state of affairs, he may still challenge Claudius' claim to the kingship.<sup>93</sup>

Too often, critics miss these obvious explanations because we conduct interpretive criticism separately from source study. Part of the reason is practical: a critic has enough to do showing that a particular work was a source for another without also showing how the existence of the source should affect the way we read the work. Furthermore, an author has a right to interpret his source material any way he chooses, and we rightly assume that the demands of his own cultural context (his audience, his patron, his competition) will weigh more heavily than the concerns of his source. Finally, the narrow specialties of literary scholars make the connections between works of different eras difficult to see. Shakespeare and his medieval sources are simply studied by different people, and Shakespeare scholars tend to see those sources as quarries for characters, images, plotlines, and dialogues without taking full note of the world they create and how that world might illuminate the world of a Shakespeare play. However, Shakespeare's ability to create (or recreate) a context and invite us to judge his characters in their own terms is noted in nearly every Shakespeare class, where instructors routinely point out that his view of suicide may depend upon whether one is reading *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar*. While Saxo's history is far from Shakespeare's only source, and the playwright had a perfect right to change and reinterpret his sources for his own context, we do not deepen our understanding of his work by ignoring what may have been his most important source.

For Shakespeare teachers, a knowledge of Saxo which we can share with our students makes the difficult task of explaining *Hamlet* much easier. We are no longer forced to choose between Hamlet and his father and can accept the angry ghost for what he is without accepting his timetable or reconciling his demands with the Christian cosmology. Furthermore, instead of assuming the hero has a tragic flaw and staggering through endless critical disputes to decide what it is, we can regard Hamlet's vengeance as all the grander for his having awaited the perfect moment. (The perfection of the moment is easy to establish, given the public revelation of Claudius' latest murder plot.) Ridsen has usefully observed that nearly all of Shakespeare's plays are problem plays—the challenge is figuring out “what problems he wanted us to think about.”<sup>94</sup> As often happens, Polonius leads us to an answer far beyond his wisdom by asking “What is the matter, my lord?”<sup>95</sup> When Hamlet interprets “matter” as “dispute,” Polonius clarifies with “the matter that you read, my lord.”<sup>96</sup> Providing our students with the matter Shakespeare read helps us resolve many of the other matters we face as students and teachers of *Hamlet*.

<sup>93</sup> Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*, vol. 2 (New York: NY Wing, 1993), 95.

<sup>94</sup> Ridsen, *Shakespeare and the Problem Play*, 2.

<sup>95</sup> *Hamlet*, 2.2.193.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.2.195.